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Migration and partisan identification as British Unionists or Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The notion that mobility weakens collective norms and increases tolerance has a long pedigree in sociology. In this article, we examine the association of migration with partisan identification as British Unionists or Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland, a region where the overlap of opposing religious and national identities is reflected in the residential segregation of its population. In representative samples of the population, we find that Irish Nationalist identification among Catholics and British Unionist identification among Protestants was lower among people not born in Northern Ireland and return migrants from beyond the British Isles. Having lived in the Republic was associated with more Nationalist identification among Catholics but less Unionist identification among Protestants and others. Moreover, having lapsed from the family religion is associated with decreased partisan identification. While international migration has in many countries led to increased tensions, conflict and the ascendance of exclusionary national populist movements, our results thus suggest that mobility beyond the British Isles has contributed to less nation–state conflict in Northern Ireland.

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Introduction

The theoretical expectation that mobility weakens collective norms and increases tolerance towards social and cultural diversity has a long pedigree in sociology. For Tönnies (1887: 173), modern society was exemplified by the '… traveller without a home, familiar with foreign arts and customs, but with no love and devotion to those of any particular country … changing his character and attitudes (beliefs and opinions) like fashions in clothing, as he crosses from one district to another'. Similarly, for Simmel (1908: 146), the stranger '…is a freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice; he assesses them against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety, or precedent'. Focusing more directly on migration flows, Durkheim (1893) argued that as populations are mingled, their original differences and traditions are weakened or lost. Those who have left their own people are free to form their own ideas and sentiments, further contributing to the weaker, more tolerant, and more pragmatic form of 'organic' solidarity in modern societies based on a complex division of labour.

Contemporary literature has similarly emphasised the potentially transformative effects of mobilities on individual identities and social life. In his discussion of 'liquid modernity', Bauman for instance argued that community attachments have lost much of their past intensity and that identities have become a process of continuous renegotiation. 'The old-style jealous and monopoly-seeking "integrative communities" have been relegated and are now to be found mostly, perhaps even exclusively, at the lower rungs of the sociocultural ladder' (Bauman, 2011: 434). Appadurai (1990) more darkly warns that while global flows of people, money, technology, information, and ideas around the world have expanded horizons of fantasy and hope, they have also contributed to the proliferation of micro identities that can also lead to brutal separatism, majoritarianism and atrocities.

Migration and other forms of geographical mobility have been associated with a cosmopolitan appreciation of social, cultural and embodied differences, a willingness to seek a common ground for peaceful coexistence and a critical stance towards the supremacy of nation and state (e.g. Beck, 2000; Fozdar and Woodward 2021; Held, 2003; Kuruoğlu and Woodward, 2021; Salazar, 2021). This may however involve complex and reciprocal effects between cosmopolitanism and mobility. While mobility may thus lead to increased cosmopolitanism through exposure to cultural diversity, cosmopolitan attitudes and values may also in turn increase the propensity for mobility (Salazar, 2021; Wee and Yeoh, 2021).

The resurgence of nationalism and the ascendance of right-wing populist movements around the world can in part be seen as political reactions to perceived economic and cultural threats of globalisation and associated mobilities (Delanty, 2021; Goodhart, 2017; Inglis, 2021). While support for right-wing populist causes tends to be patterned by various background factors such as age, gender, education, occupation, and income (Langenkamp and Bienstman, 2022), prior migration has been found to be independently correlated with attitudes that can be associated with a more cosmopolitan outlook. Recent research has for instance shown that geographical immobility was significantly associated with voting to leave the European Union (EU) in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Lee et al., 2018; Shuttleworth et al., 2021) and less tolerance towards immigrants in rural Iceland (Bjarnason et al., 2019).

Prior research has however not examined the role mobility may have in reducing partisan conflict over nation and state. In this article, we focus specifically on the association between prior experiences of migration and partisan identification as British Unionists or Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland. After briefly reviewing the literature on nation–states and national identity in the context of Northern Ireland, we specify our theoretically grounded expectations of the effects of migration on such partisan identification and test those expectations in a representative sample of residents of Northern Ireland. Finally, we discuss our findings in the context of the broader theoretical issues at stake and suggest possible avenues for future research.

Nation–state identity and partisan conflict in Northern Ireland

Despite the importance of nations and nation–states for individual identities, societies, and international relations in an increasingly globalised world, such concepts continue to defy coherent definitions (Chernilo, 2020; Hobsbawm, 1994; Leddy-Owen, 2020). Ideas about nationhood can alternatively be based on history, ethnicity, religion, language, customs, geographical proximity and/or shared civic values (e.g. Finell and Liebkind, 2010; Poole, 1999; Smith, 1991). Indeed, the ambiguity surrounding the 'true' nature of nations may have enabled their political and cultural dominance around the world (Chernilo, 2020). The nation–state is of particular importance in this respect as the organisational structure that legitimises or de-legitimises claims to nationhood, provides the legal and executive framework of law and order, social welfare and civil rights within its borders and represents the sovereign nation in the international context (Chernilo, 2020; Leddy-Owen, 2020).

However, the truly coextensive nation–state incorporating only one nation and the whole of that nation is exceedingly rare if existent at all (Walby, 2003). There are frequently two or more groups with different ideas about nationhood within the territory of a single state and state borders may often split the same 'nation' between two or more states. As Appadurai (1990) has graphically noted, the conflict and violence associated with national identities are frequently associated with the attempts of nations and states to 'cannibalise one another' as nations seek to capture state power, and states seek to monopolise ideas about nationhood.

In 20th-century Europe, the historical trauma of ethnic cleansing, genocide and the total war was crucial to the project of establishing the EU and the ensuing softening of national borders in Europe (Dinan, 2014). The freedom of movement within the EU added yet another layer of complexity to the disarray of nations and nation–states, in particular the strong flow of unskilled and semi-skilled workers from Eastern to Western Europe and the dispersion of economic and political refugees across the continent (Geddes et al., 2020). The influx of Central and Eastern European as well as non-European immigrants has in turn led to increased perceptions of threat and more negative attitudes towards immigration in Western Europe (Jeannet, 2020).

While the free flow of people between nation–states has in many cases led to tensions, conflicts and the ascendance of nationalism and right-wing populist movements, there is limited evidence of increased exposure to ethnic diversity leading to negative outcomes on the individual level. On the contrary, ethnic diversity and low levels of residential segregation have been found to be associated with increased contact between ethnic groups in daily life (Huijts et al., 2014) and more positive attitudes towards immigrants among natives (Kawalerowicz, 2021).

In some cases, increased international migration and ethnic diversity may even have eased nationalist tensions and entrenched conflicts within nation–states. It is for instance widely acknowledged that freedom of movement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was a crucial aspect of bringing decades of sectarian violence to an end (e.g. Coakley, 2018; McCall, 2018; Murphy, 2021). Less attention has however been given to the potential of migration softening the entrenched historical conflict between predominantly Protestant British Unionists and predominantly Catholic Irish Nationalists.

Nation–states are generally based on a taken-for-granted banal or low-intensity nationalism of national symbols, language use, and everyday patterns of inclusion and exclusion rather than aggressive or violent displays of nationalism (Billig, 1995; Malešević, 2010). In the case of Northern Ireland, however, the hoisting of national flags, the painting of kerbs and lampposts and marching in remembrance of historical events within each community also serve as constant and polarising irritants to the other community. Indeed, studies of national identifications in Northern Ireland have noted their relatively 'hot', proactive and assertive qualities as opposed to the more 'banal' passive and incidental identities of those living on the other side of the borders (Stevenson and Muldoon, 2010). As a result, a stronger British identity has been noted among Northern Ireland's Unionist population than for instance among their English and Scottish counterparts (Shirlow and McGovern, 1997).

Historically, the mutually exclusive nation-building projects of the *Republic of Ireland* and the *United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland* and the perceived marginalisation of the Catholic minority generated substantial conflict between the two national groupings in the state of Northern Ireland, culminating in 'The Troubles' that claimed over 3500 lives in the second half of the 20th century (Sutton, 1994).

The Troubles formally ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement, based on power sharing between British Unionists and Irish Nationalists, cross-community involvement, and mutual consent on major societal issues (Hughes and Donnelly, 2003). While bringing a welcome end to decades of sectarian violence, the principles of power sharing also institutionalised two mutually exclusive imagined communities of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006). The imagery of the 'two communities' of Protestant British Unionists and Catholic Irish Nationalists is continuously reproduced and reinforced by political rhetoric, media depictions and popular culture.

While this division remains durable and still of relevance, it also gives rise to major oversimplification. Even though the political system in Northern Ireland remains dominated by British Unionist and Irish Nationalist parties, cross-community parties doubled their share of the Assembly vote from 7% in 2003 to 16% in 2017 and quadrupled their share in Westminster votes from 4% in 2001 to 18% in 2019 (Hayward 2020). Furthermore, while there appears to be limited support for an independent state of Northern Ireland, 21% of the population nevertheless declared an exclusively Northern Irish national identity in the 2011 Census, as opposed to 40% declaring an exclusively British national identity and 25% declaring an exclusively Irish national identity (Tonge and Gomez, 2015).

As Coakley (2007) points out in his analysis of the 1999 Northern Irish Life and Times survey, even though most Protestants and Catholics strongly identified with their traditional national categories, a majority of both groups also identified to some degree with the cross-community label of being Northern Irish. Furthermore, national identification as British, Irish or Northern Irish appeared to be highly contextual according to the audience to which such an identification was claimed. When asked what nationality they would claim if asked on a holiday abroad, Protestants were much less likely to identify as British and much more likely to identify as Northern Irish, in particular, if vacationing in England or the Republic of Ireland (Coakley, 2007). In contrast, Catholics were equally likely to claim Irish nationality when vacationing in England as at home. They were however much less likely to do so on vacation in the Republic of Ireland and much more likely to identify as Irish when vacationing in Spain.

It is however important to note that identifying as a British Unionist or Irish Nationalist goes well beyond individual national or nation–state identities in the political context of Northern Ireland. Such partisan positions have deep roots in the troubled and often violent history of Northern Ireland and ultimately involve a demand for the other side to finally capitulate in a zero-sum conflict over nationality and statehood. A decline in such partisan identification does thus not necessarily imply the abandonment of national identities but perhaps rather a more reflexive and cosmopolitan view of the association between nationality and statehood (Inglis, 2021).

In this article, we will examine the association of migration and such partisan identification as British Unionists and Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland. For much of the 20th century, more people left Northern Ireland than returned (Russell, 2016). This was partly due to civil conflict in the 1970s and 1980s but also attributable to the weakness of the Northern Ireland economy and population growth. The out-migration of both Protestants and Catholics weary of 'The Troubles' as well as low levels of in-migration likely contributed to the razor-sharp sectarian division of the two communities. The cessation of sectarian violence may conversely have led to increased return migration of people less invested in the conflict. In addition, the freedom of movement within the EU has substantially increased the size of the immigrant population with little vested interest in the complex and often violent history of Northern Ireland while facing their own problems with ethnic prejudice and 'sectarianism as racism' (McKee, 2016).

Expected patterns of partisan identifications in Northern Ireland

We strongly expect British Unionists to be largely drawn from Protestant communities and Irish Nationalists to be largely drawn from Catholic communities. We also expect greater partisan support

among respondents who are older, male, less educated, work in blue-collar jobs, are religious and live in segregated Catholic or Protestant areas.

Beyond these background characteristics, we expect prior migration experiences to be associated with partisan identification. Specifically, we expect

–those who have stayed in the same community for decades to be more partisan,
–those who were born outside of Northern Ireland to be less partisan,
–those who have lived outside the British Isles to be less partisan,
–Protestants who have lived elsewhere in Britain and Catholics who have lived in the Republic of Ireland are more partisan, and
–Protestants who have lived in the Republic of Ireland and Catholics who have lived elsewhere in Britain are less partisan.

It should be emphasised that cross-sectional data allow us to establish patterns of partisan identification by prior migration experiences but not to tease out potential underlying causal mechanisms. There are strong theoretical reasons to expect migration experiences to contribute to a cosmopolitan appreciation of diversity, willingness to seek peaceful coexistence and a critical stance towards nation and state, but strong selection effects are also to be expected. Those who are deeply invested in the sectarian conflict may be less likely to consider leaving Northern Ireland and those who do leave may be likely to move to a place within the nation–state consistent with their national identity.

Data and methods

The data used for the analysis are from the annual *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey of social attitudes conducted by Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster (Devine, 2018). The data are obtained through random samples of households and face-to-face interviews with household members aged 18 or older. The response rate exceeds 50% annually although with year-on-year variations and the number of observations normally is around 1200. The variables that we use in the analysis have appeared consistently throughout the lifetime of the survey and we pool the 2017 and 2018 results to increase the number of available cases.

In this study, we control for several background variables that might be associated with partisan identification, including gender, age, living in a rural community, marital status, education, and occupation. Details for these background variables can be found in the NILT (2022) questionnaires.

The NILT survey includes the question 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?' *Strength of identification* was measured by one item 'Would you call yourself a very strong, fairly strong or not very strong [unionist/nationalist]?'

Family religion was gauged from responses to the question 'In what religion, if any, were you brought up?' Those who indicated that they were neither brought up as Catholics nor Protestants were defined as 'Other families', including those who indicated that they had been brought up in other religions or in no religion.

Lapsed from family religion is based on the contrast between the above measure of family religion and responses to the question "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?" Those who did not currently identify with their family religion were defined as having lapsed from that religion. About 11% of the respondents raised Catholic and 19% of the respondents raised Protestant are considered to have lapsed from their family religion by this measure. For confidentiality reasons, the available data do not allow us to identify the small number of respondents who have lapsed from other religions.

In the public discourse, it is frequently assumed that the Protestants in Northern Ireland are predominantly British Unionists and Catholics are predominantly Irish Nationalists. However, as shown in Table 1, only 47% of the respondents raised Catholics identified as Irish nationalists and 57% of the respondents raised Protestants identified as British Unionists. The converse was very rare with only 2% of those raised Catholics identifying as British Unionists and 1% of those raised Protestants

identifying as Irish Nationalists. A minority of those from other religious backgrounds reported such partisan identities but of those who did, 19% identified as British Unionists and only 3% as Irish Nationalists.

Table 1 furthermore shows that only 29% of those raised Catholic and 38% of those raised Protestant indicated fairly or very strong partisan identification. Among Other respondents, 13% identified fairly or very strongly as either *British Unionists* or *Irish Nationalists*.

Residential segregation indicates the self-reported composition of residential areas. About half the respondents raised Catholic or Protestant lived in areas that were predominantly inhabited by people of the same denomination, while only 7% of those raised Catholics lived in predominantly Protestant areas and only 2% of those raised Protestants lived in predominantly Catholic areas. Those from Other families were much more likely to live in mixed areas or to be unsure of the composition of the area. They were also more likely than Protestants to live in Catholic areas (6% vs. 2%) and much more likely than Catholics to live in Protestant areas (33% vs. 7%).

Table 1. Background, prior mobility and partisan identification in Northern Ireland by family religion, *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) surveys in 2017 and 2018 (proportions within each group).

	Catholic family	Protestant family	Other family	All respondents
Background				
Male	.43	.44	.48	.44
Age group				
– 18–24 years old	.10	.8	.21	.10
– 25–34 years old	.16	.11	.21	.14
– 35–44 years old	.18	.13	.23	.16
– 45–54 years old	.21	.17	.18	.19
– 55–64 years old	.16	.20	.11	.17
– 65 or older	.18	.31	.06	.23
Rural	.34	.37	.28	.35
Married	.51	.56	.44	.53
University degree	.27	.25	.25	.26
White-collar job	.46	.50	.40	.47
Lapsed from religion	.11	.19	—	.14
Residential segregation				
Mainly Catholic area	.52	.02	.06	.23
Mainly Protestant area	.07	.50	.33	.30
Mixed area or unsure	.41	.48	.61	.47
Prior mobility				
Stayers	.54	.59	.27	.53
Born outside Northern Ireland	.18	.12	.34	.17
Lived outside Northern Ireland	.31	.26	.47	.30
– Lived elsewhere in Britain	.14	.18	.25	.17
– Lived in the Republic of Ireland	.07	.02	.03	.04
– Lived outside the British Isles	.16	.10	.27	.14
Partisan identification				
British Unionist identification	.02	.57	.19	.29
Irish Nationalist identification	.47	.01	.03	.20
Strength of identification				
Very strong	.10	.14	.04	.11
Fairly strong	.19	.24	.09	.20
Not very strong	.18	.19	.09	.17
N (unweighted)	994	1162	248	2404
N (weighted)	1023	1128	253	2404

We define *Stayers* as those who have lived for more than 20 years in their current community. More than half of those raised Catholic and Protestant were stayers by this definition, while the same is true of just over a quarter of other respondents.

About 18% of those raised Catholics, 12% of those raised Protestants and 34% of other respondents were born outside of Northern Ireland. This group may include respondents born to parents from Northern Ireland living abroad, but also immigrants from other parts of Britain, the Republic of Ireland, or from countries farther from the conflict in Northern Ireland such as Poland or other eastern European countries. As these sub-groups cannot be separated, this born category includes both the children of return migrants and immigrants from elsewhere.

The NILT surveys furthermore distinguish between those who have lived for at least six continuous months elsewhere in Britain, in the Republic of Ireland or outside the British Isles. Overall, respondents were most likely to have lived elsewhere in Britain and least likely to have lived in the Republic of Ireland, although those who were raised Catholic were almost equally likely to have lived elsewhere in Britain and beyond the British Isles.

Results

Graphical representations of bivariate results

Graphical representations are used to show bivariate relationships in the data. Figures 1 and 2 show the percentages of respondents raised Protestants that describe themselves as British Unionists and respondents raised Catholics who describe themselves as Irish Nationalists. In the case of respondents who indicate that their family of origin was neither Protestant nor Catholic, the figures show the percentage identifying as either Unionists or Nationalists.

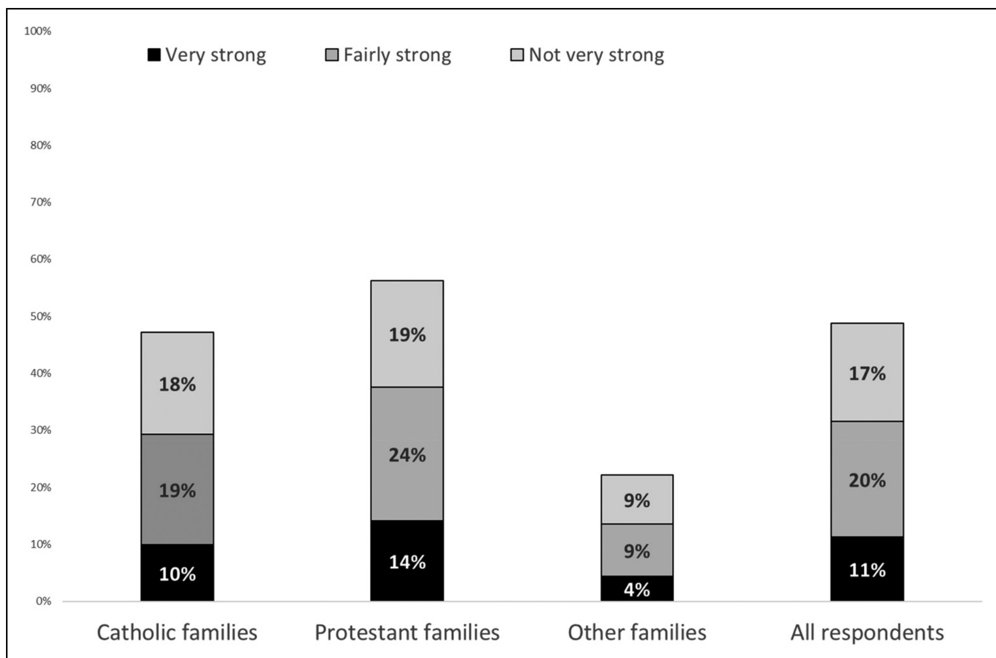

Figure 1. Partisan identification among respondents from Catholic, Protestant or other family backgrounds.

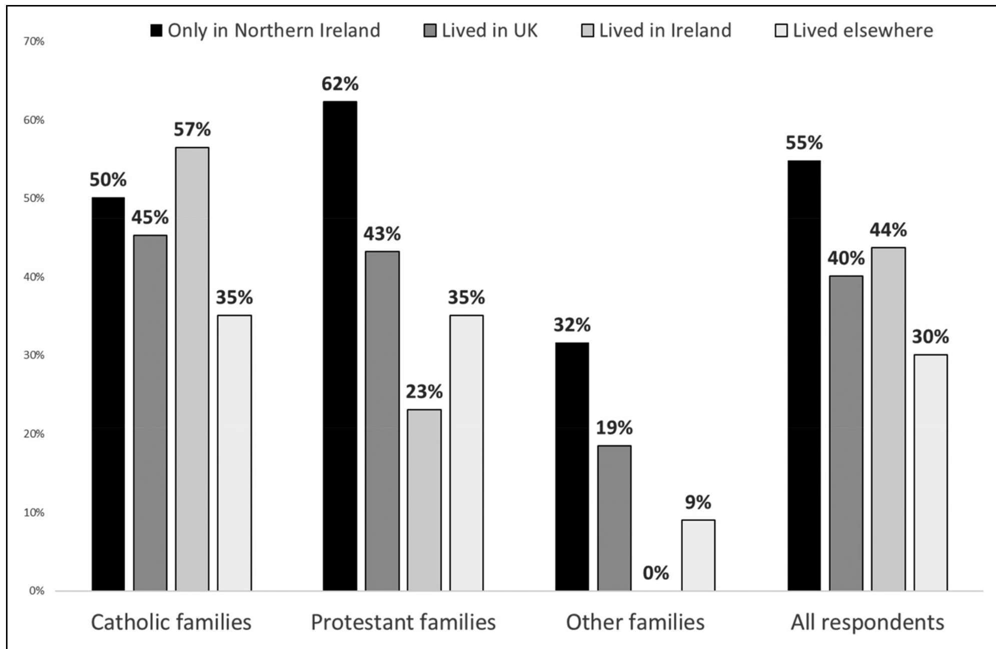

Figure 2. Partisan identification among respondents from Catholic, Protestant or other backgrounds by prior mobility.

Figure 1 shows that partisan identification is significantly firmer among those raised Protestants than Catholics (χ^2: 20.4(3), $p < .001$). Among those raised Protestants, 14% reported a very strong and 24% fairly strong partisan identification, compared to 10% and 19% among those raised Catholics.

Those from 'other' families are, unsurprisingly, less likely to identify either as Unionists or as Nationalists. Overall, only 19% of this group identifies as Unionists and 3% Nationalists. Such identifications are very strong among only 4% and fairly strong among 9% of those who were neither raised in Protestant nor Catholic families.

Figure 2 shows the bivariate association between past migration experiences and partisan identification by religious background. Among all three groups, those who have never left Northern Ireland are more likely to embrace partisan identification. This is true of Protestants (χ^2: 40.4(1), $p < .001$), Catholics (χ^2: 6.3(1), $p < .01$) and Others (χ^2: 14.3(1), $p < .001$). Conversely, the likelihood of such identification is significantly less among Protestants (χ^2: 23.4(1), $p < .001$), Catholics (χ^2: 12.4(1), $p < .01$) and Others (χ^2: 9.6(1), $p < .001$) who have lived outside Ireland or Britain. Interestingly, Protestants are also less likely to identify as Unionists if they have lived elsewhere in the UK (χ^2: 18.8(1), $p < .001$) or in the Republic of Ireland (χ^2: 12.3(1), $p < .001$), but such patterns are not found for Catholics or Others.

While these bivariate results are illustrative of the overall patterns of partisan identification by prior migration experiences, they may be confounded by various other factors associated with both constructs. We therefore now turn to multivariate analysis.

Multivariate results

Table 2 shows the results of binomial regression analyses of partisan identification based on the dichotomy between those reporting partisan identification and others (1 = nationalist/unionist identification, 0 = other). The results are presented in terms of odds ratios relative to a reference category. Values greater than one indicate a positive association, values less than one indicate a negative association.

The first column shows the bivariate association between predictors and the outcome of partisan identification. The second column (Model 1) shows the influence of indicators of socio-demographic and religious background on such identification. The third column (Model 2) shows the influence of indicators of geographical mobility on such identification. Finally, the fourth column (Model 3) incorporates three interaction terms. All interactions between gender and age were estimated but the only statistically significant results for young males are reported. The interaction between being raised Protestants and having lived elsewhere in Britain and between being raised Catholics and having lived in the Republic of Ireland was estimated to test the expectation that such experiences reinforced partisan identification as a British Unionist or Irish Nationalist

Some, but not all, of the socio-demographic background factors are found to have the expected association with partisan identification. Such identification is thus found to be significantly higher among males than females and significantly higher among those 65 or older than in any other age group.

Table 2. Binomial logistic regression of background variables and prior migration experiences on partisan identification as British Unionist or Irish Nationalist (odds ratio).

	Bivariate	Model 1 Background	Model 2 Migration	Model 3 Interactions
Constant	—	1.71	2.34	2.28
Data collection 2018	0.81*	.80**	.80*	.79*
Socio-demographic background				
Male	1.34***	1.51***	1.51***	1.42***
Age group				
– 18–24 years old	.35***	.47***	.50***	.33***
– 25–34 years old	.41***	.56***	.56***	.56***
– 35–44 years old	.39***	.54***	.57***	.56***
– 45–54 years old	.53***	.65***	.68**	.67**
– 55–64 years old	.57***	.64***	.62***	.61***
– 65 or older **(contrast)**	**(1.00)**	**(1.00)**	**(1.00)**	**(1.00)**
Rural	.95	.82	.89	.89
Married	1.02	.95	1.06	1.06
University degree	.79**	.88	1.06	1.09
White-collar job	1.05	1.00	1.01	1.00
Religious background				
– Catholic families **(contrast)**		**(1.00)**	**(1.00)**	**(1.00)**
– Protestant families	1.41***	1.46***	1.52***	1.71***
– Other families	.29***	.28***	.37***	.37***
Lapsed from family religion	.44***	.34***	.37***	.37***
Mixed residential area	0.39***	—	.41***	0.40***
More than 20 years in the community	2.06***	—	1.19	1.17
Born outside North Ireland	.28***	—	.45***	.45***
Lived elsewhere				
– Never lived elsewhere **(contrast)**			**(1.00)**	**(1.00)**
– Lived elsewhere in the UK	.64***	—	.83	1.01
– Lived in the Republic of Ireland	.88	—	1.30	.29***
– Lived outside the British Isles	.40***	—	.70*	.70*
Interactions				
Male × 18–24 years old	—	—	—	2.37***
Protestant × Lived elsewhere in the UK	—	—	—	.69
Catholic × Lived in the Republic of Ireland	—	—	—	7.88***
Cox & Snell R^2	—	*.10*	*.17*	*.18*
Nagelkerke R^2	—	*.14*	*.23*	*.24*

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

There is also a statistically significant interaction between being male and belonging to the 18 to 24 years old age group, indicating that young males are equally likely as those 65 years or older to report partisan identification.

We did not find significant differences in partisan identification between urban and rural respondents, those who were married or single, or people in white-collar or blue-collar jobs. We did find those with a university degree to be significantly less likely to hold such identities than those with other types of education, but this difference became non-significant when other background factors were controlled.

Net of other factors, respondents raised *Protestant* reported significantly greater partisan identification than those raised *Catholic* (odds ratio (OR): 1.46–1.71 across models), while those raised in *Other families* reported significantly lower levels of such identification (OR: 0.28–0.37 across models) than those in the contrast group of Catholic families. Furthermore, those who did not personally identify with the religion in which they were raised (lapsed from family religion) were substantially less likely to identify as either British Unionists or Irish Nationalists (OR: 0.34–0.37 across models).

Respondents who lived in mixed residential areas were substantially less likely to report partisan identification than respondents in predominantly Catholic or Protestant areas by a factor of about 0.40. This corresponds to respondents in segregated areas being approximately 2.5 as likely as those in mixed areas to report such identification (1.00/0.40). This difference is not affected by other predictors in the models.

On the bivariate level, we also find *Stayers* who had lived more than 20 years in the community to be twice as likely as other respondents to report partisan identification. In the multivariate models, this pattern was however fully explained by living in a mixed area.

We also find those who were born outside Northern Ireland to be half as likely to report such identities (OR: 0.45). It should, however, be noted that our measures do not distinguish between those born abroad to parents of Northern Ireland origin and could thus be considered ‘semi-return’ migrants and ‘true immigrants’ who do not have any family ties with Northern Ireland.

Net of these factors, respondents who have lived outside of the British Isles are substantially less likely to report partisan identification. Compared to those who have never lived elsewhere than in Northern Ireland, respondents who had lived outside the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland were less likely to identify as Unionist/Nationalist by a factor of .70. In other words, those who have never lived elsewhere are 1.43 times as likely (1.00/0.70) as those who have lived outside the British Isles to report such identification.

The findings with regard to having lived elsewhere in the British Isles are somewhat more mixed. At the bivariate level, those who have lived elsewhere in the UK are significantly less likely to report partisan identification than those who have never lived outside of Northern Ireland. This difference is however rendered non-significant in the multivariate models, both in general and for respondents from Protestant families. The earlier finding of less partisan identification among Protestants who had lived elsewhere in Britain does thus not hold in the multivariate model.

Having lived in the Republic of Ireland is however associated with an almost eight-fold increase in partisan identification among respondents raised Catholic (OR: 7.88). Among those who were not raised Catholic, having lived in the Republic of Ireland is in contrast associated with a decrease by a factor of 0.29.

Discussion

The notion that mobility disrupts established normative, political, and social structures draws on a long and venerable tradition of social theory from Tönnies (1887), Durkheim (1893) and Simmel (1908) to Appadurai (1990), Bauman (2011) and Urry (2000). The perceived economic and cultural threats associated with mobilities can be a major source of conflict (e.g. Delanty, 2021; Goodhart, 2017; Inglis, 2021), but our findings suggest that in-migration and return migration may also have a calming effect in areas of entrenched conflict by disrupting a ‘deep cleavage along one axis’ (Coser, 1956).

In Northern Ireland, politics, ethnicity, language, and even types of sport align almost perfectly with the conflicting national identities and mutually exclusive nation–state identifications of two communities characterised by endogamy and residential segregation (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1998; Whyte, 1991).

Our findings show that well over half of those raised Protestants identified as British Unionists and almost half of those raised Catholics identified as Irish Nationalists, with very few instances of people holding partisan identities contrary to their religious background.

Males and those over the age of 64 were significantly more likely to report such partisan identification, perhaps reflecting generations that lived through the height of 'The Troubles' in the early 1970s. It is however noteworthy that young males are equally likely as those over 64 to report partisan loyalties as this 'new generation of young men have grown up in a society with a reconstituted police force, sustained paramilitary ceasefires and increased community cohesion' (Walsh and Schubotz, 2020: 650). Given the propensity of young men for interpersonal violence, this may perhaps raise the spectre of renewed sectarian violence in the future.

Our findings also more directly highlight the potentially calming effects of increased religious diversity and growing secularism on the division between British Unionists and Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland. We thus find that less than a quarter of those who were neither raised Protestant nor Catholic reported such partisan identification, in most cases British Unionist identification. To the extent that religious denominations are simply a marker of cultural and political differences, personal religious beliefs might be expected to be immaterial. We nevertheless find those who have lapsed from their family religion much less likely to identify as either British Unionists or Irish Nationalists.

There are several possible explanations for this pattern. First, religious belief may to some extent be intertwined with political attitudes and there may thus be a direct relationship between individual religious beliefs and partisan identification with nation–states. Second, it is possible that lapsing from the faith of the family involves weaker ties to the family and the community and is thus indirectly associated with a weakening of associated political attitudes. Finally, it is possible that the causality is reversed and that a rejection of the conflict itself may lead people to renounce the religion in which they were raised. Future research should further explore these alternative mechanisms.

We also found greater partisan sentiments in residentially segregated Protestant and Catholic areas. Despite characterisations of urban working-class areas as hotbeds of sectarian violence (e.g. Shirlow and McGovern, 1997; Whyte, 1991) there were no statistically significant differences in partisan identification by education, occupation or rurality in the multivariate models. While further research is needed, it is possible that increased education and social mobility along with the evolution of the peace process and the dominance of the more politically radical Sinn Fein and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) have resulted in a more even spread of oppositional politics across the socio-economic spectrum.

Prior research has shown some dilution of political and partisan loyalties and an increase in mid-ground political affiliation in Northern Ireland in recent years (Hayward, 2020; Tonge and Gomez, 2015). While the cross-sectional design of our study does not allow us to establish causality, the overall pattern of findings strongly supports the contention that migration has played a role in softening the entrenched historical conflict between predominantly Protestant British Unionists and predominantly Catholic Irish Nationalists.

Consistent with our expectations and prior research (Bjarnason et al., 2019; Goodhart, 2017; Lee et al., 2018; Shuttleworth et al., 2021), we found those who have stayed in the same community for more than 20 years are more likely to report partisan identification. However, this pattern disappeared once other factors were controlled in the multivariate models. The bivariate association between residential stability and partisan identification thus seems to be attributable to greater residential stability in predominantly Protestant and Catholic areas and long-distance migration.

As expected, we found those who were born outside of Northern Ireland to be significantly less likely to identify as British Unionists or Irish Nationalists. This is consistent with the contention that immigration has blurred the age-old line of conflict between the Protestant and Catholic communities and diminished the historical, political and cultural connotations of religious identification in Northern Ireland. High in-migration from countries such as Poland and Lithuania has for instance inevitable contributed to the growing number of Catholics in Northern Ireland but may not have contributed to increased support for Irish Nationalism with its historical ties to Irish Catholicism. At the same time, immigrants

may experience racial and ethnic prejudice from both the Catholic and the Protestant communities (Hayes and Dowds, 2006; McKee, 2016) and may experience their own exclusion from the sectarian conflict as a specific form of marginalisation.

Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to disaggregate this group by ethnicity or nationality. Some of these respondents may identify strongly with nation–states other than British or Irish while others may be more interested in the quality of life in Northern Ireland than issues of governance (Polkowski, 2017). In other cases, the children of return-migrant families may produce their own grounded interpretations of place embeddedness (Ní Laoire, 2020) at odds with the entrenched conflict. Further research should explore further the ways different types of in-migrants relate and position themselves towards the centuries-old conflict in Northern Ireland.

Controlling for being born outside of Northern Ireland, we find those who have lived outside of the British Isles for at least six continuous months much less likely to report partisan identification. In line with our expectations, we also find a strong interaction between religious background and the association between partisan identification and having lived in the Republic of Ireland for at least six continuous months. We find respondents from Catholic families who had lived in the Republic of Ireland to be much more likely to be Irish Nationalists and respondents from Protestant families with such experiences to be much less likely to be British Unionists.

These findings generally support our argument regarding the potentially contextual effects of migration on partisan identification. Living beyond the British Isles may provide crucial distance from the context of 'hot' conflict in Northern Ireland (Stevenson and Muldoon, 2010) and contribute to a more cosmopolitan appreciation of diversity, willingness to seek peaceful coexistence and a critical stance towards the supremacy of nation and state (e.g. Beck, 2000; Fozdar & Woodward 2021; Held, 2003; Kuruoğlu & Woodward, 2021; Salazar, 2021). The experience of daily life in the Republic of Ireland may in contrast reinforce the Irish identity and aspirations for Irish reunification among Catholics while allaying sectarian fears and uncertainties among Protestants.

However, there are also compelling reasons to expect selection effects in such migration experiences. Dissatisfaction with the political climate is for instance an important motivator of intra-European migration (Bygnes and Flipo, 2017). In the context of Northern Ireland, people more deeply invested in the sectarian conflict are more likely to want to stay and fight for their respective causes while those weary of the conflict may be more likely to have left the region, at least temporarily (Trew, 2010). This may also have a historical dimension where the peace process may have encouraged the return of those driven out of Northern Ireland by 'The Troubles'. Strongly Irish Nationalist Catholics could also most certainly be expected to be more likely to want to live in the Republic of Ireland for at least a while, and strongly British Unionists Protestants could most certainly be expected to be less likely to do so. A longitudinal design or qualitative research might help to disentangle this and determine if such patterns are due to selection effects or actual changes in nation–state identification.

Interestingly, we do not find an interaction between religious background and the association between partisan identification and having lived elsewhere in Britain. It is possible that moving within the British nation–state simply does not challenge nation–state identification in the same way as moving across national borders. Simply put, British Unionists may be equally satisfied, and Irish Nationalists may be equally dissatisfied living elsewhere in the British state. It is also possible that the large diasporas of both Protestant and Catholic migrants from Northern Ireland in Britain provide buffers that help sustains the belief systems of segregated Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. Further research should further explore such potentially buffering effects of diasporas on the effects of migration experiences on attitudes.

Conclusion

In sum, our work offers an insight into the complex, multi-level and multidimensional relationship between spatial (im)mobility and strength of oppositional political sentiment in Northern Ireland. It builds upon previous work attesting to the general liberalising effects of mobility on intergroup attitudes,

illustrating that this can pertain even within the context of an intractable entrenched ethno-political division. Given the large-scale shifts in spatial mobility over the past few decades, it holds some promise for the reduction of sectarian opposition in Northern Ireland and may partly explain the recent shift towards more centrist politics in the region. However, it also points to the need to consider the many factors which shape these effects, from the personal and family histories of those individuals who stay, leave, and return to their locales, to the ways in which the national and state contexts of their destinations serve to enhance or diminish their traditional loyalties.

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