

# IRISH UNIFICATION AFTER BREXIT

## OLD AND NEW POLITICAL IDENTITIES?

Patrick Diamond & Barry Colfer

**T**HIS essay addresses the prospects for Irish unity against the backdrop of shifting political identities in Northern Ireland (NI) following the UK's vote to leave the European Union. Not surprisingly, given that a majority of NI citizens voted to stay in the EU, speculation about Irish unity has grown since 2016. Many commentators argue that the likelihood of an affirmative border poll has increased since the UK's withdrawal. Yet, while momentum towards unification has been stirred by the geopolitical shock of Brexit, Irish unity is often depicted as an inexorable process driven by structural forces that accumulated over several decades. A significant factor in the discussion is the demographic transformation in NI's population given the decline in those identifying as Protestant/unionist eroding unionism's electoral

dominance. Another key shift is the improvement in the long-term economic performance of the Republic of Ireland (ROI) that makes the objective of an all-Ireland polity more plausible.

Nevertheless, the essay directly challenges the inevitability of unification on the island of Ireland. Significant resistance to Irish unity on both sides of the border has continued, despite Brexit. Hostility towards unification within the unionist community has not abated since the 2016 referendum. Less appreciated is the fact that while there is support for the principle of Irish unity among ROI voters, disquiet remains about the compromises that the accommodation of more than a million unionists and the NI public sector would entail in a united Ireland. Put simply, while the prospect of Irish

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*Irish unification: not yet a done deal*

unity receives support from a majority of the ROI's citizens, putative compromises around the flag, anthem, currency and military posture of a united Ireland remain highly contentious and are still underexplored in national political debate.

**F**urthermore, there is support among a section of the NI electorate that traditionally identifies as 'nationalist' for remaining within the UK, over 20 years after the signing of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA). Moreover, the outcome of a border poll in NI will be shaped in no small part by the critical mass of NI voters who do not

principally identify as either 'nationalist' or 'unionist'. The culmination of the peace process with the signing of the 1998 B/GFA ending the period of conflict known as 'the Troubles' has hastened the emergence of a 'third' bloc that identifies with neither of the dominant ethnonationalist categories that previously shaped NI's society. That makes the outcome of any future referendum on Irish unity highly contingent.

The uncertainty about a border poll is compounded by considerable ambiguity that persists over what the 'unification' of the island of Ireland would practically entail. While it might be assumed

that unification necessitates the integration of the ROI and NI into a single all-Ireland polity, the precise form a unified Irish state would take remains highly contested, particularly given the need to accommodate unionism within the novel political dispensation. The future status of the NI Assembly, the capacity of the ROI to fund NI's public services (particularly the National Health Service), and the manner in which unionists would be represented in the Houses of the Oireachtas (or whatever parliamentary system is envisaged to govern the unified Irish state) are among the critical issues underexplored in debate on both sides of the border.

This article maintains that the future constitutional status of NI will be settled by the unfolding dynamic between 'old' and 'new' political identities, especially in NI, as well as by economic and political considerations in the ROI. Within the terms of the 'old' political identities in NI, electoral and constitutional outcomes were traditionally determined by competition between two monolithic ethno-cultural blocs: nationalism (alongside republicanism) and unionism (alongside loyalism). Nationalism and unionism continued to shape the 'two

communities model' of consociational governance codified in the B/GFA.

The paradox, however, is that since the B/GFA was negotiated, 'new' political identities have been gaining ground, shaped by the growth of a diverse electoral grouping that no longer

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primarily categorizes itself as nationalist or unionist. These voters have multifaceted social and political identities, increasingly resorting to alternative forms of civic activity and representation. Many within that grouping articulate frustration at the stagnant nature of party politics in NI, which remains

overwhelmingly defined by sectarian divisions. As Coulter, Shirlow, Gilmarin, and Hayward note in *Northern Ireland: a generation after Good Friday: Lost futures and new horizons in the 'long peace'* (2021), their interests and identities 'are rarely reflected in mainstream political culture,' owing to the persistence of a party system centered on narrow ethno-cultural identities underwritten by the B/GFA. In the ROI, meanwhile, the traditional duopoly of the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties, the political heirs of the country's civil war fought over one hundred years ago, has fractured. The electoral landscape is ever more fragmented. Consequently,

parliamentary politics in the ROI is now dominated by three main blocs: Sinn Féin, the former political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), alongside Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

In this context, despite increasing diversity in politics on both sides of the border on the island of Ireland, Brexit risks recreating 'a stark binary choice between two apparently mutually exclusive options,' as defined by Feargal Cochrane in his 2013 book *Northern Ireland: The Fragile Peace*. The 2016 referendum compelled voters to choose between 'leaving' the EU and 'remaining.' A constitutional referendum on the future status of NI similarly directs voters in NI to make an explicit choice between joining the ROI or staying within the United Kingdom's Union, undercutting the strategic ambiguity that lies at the heart of the B/GFA. It is likely that those who primarily identify as neither nationalist nor unionist will be unwilling to alter the constitutional status of NI if such a decision undermines the fragile accord established by the 1998 Agreement.

#### **BORDERS AND IDENTITIES AFTER BREXIT**

This article draws on two key concepts to analyze NI's constitutional future: borders and identities. According to Beatrix Campbell, the B/GFA was a seminal agreement since—as she elaborates in her 2008

book *Agreement! The state, conflict and change in Northern Ireland*—it transcended traditional concepts of borders, nations, states, and sovereignty, serving to hasten the pluralization of political identities in NI. The Agreement acknowledged:

The birth right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland.

As Cathy Gormley-Heenan and Arthur Aughey explain in their 2017 article *Northern Ireland and Brexit: three effects on 'the border in the mind'*, the historic achievement of the B/GFA was that, for unionists, it normalized the position of NI within the UK; for nationalists, the Agreement essentially took the border out of the island of Ireland. The political commentator, Fintan O'Toole, has written that the Agreement overturned long-held assumptions about Irish national identity. The B/GFA acknowledged that national identity is malleable and everchanging. Moreover, national identity can be chosen rather than inherited through an ethnic or religious bloodline. As such, identities in NI are

contingent and alterable. Similarly, for Benedict Anderson, national identities are constructed by the language and symbols of ‘imagined communities.’

On the one hand, the B/GFA is interpreted as reimagining ethno-cultural identities while delinking them from territory and the nation-state.

The Agreement acknowledged the existence of multiple, overlapping national and political identities in NI. The aim was to hasten reconciliation of the conflict created by contestation over borders and identities. As a consequence, the categories that comprise the ‘two communities’ model of NI politics, nationalism and unionism, are interpreted as increasingly ‘empty signifiers.’ In particular according to the most recent census, fewer citizens in NI now practice as Catholics or Protestants, weakening the religious dimension of the historical conflict.

On the other hand, the ‘constructive ambiguity’ inherent in the B/GFA and the interpretation of national identity as heterogeneous (that is, ‘new’ NI politics) stands in conflict with the emphasis on fixed communal identities that justified the consociational logic of the B/GFA (that is, ‘old’ NI politics). In her 2019 research paper “The Brexit crisis, Ireland and British-Irish relations:

Europeanisation and/or de-Europeanisation?” M. C. Murphy underlines that after 1998, NI experienced a ‘negative peace’ following 30 years of hostilities costing over 3,500 lives. While political violence decreased dramatically, polarization between communities persisted. Although unionism and nationalism

are conceived as ‘imagined communities,’ these identities are hard-wired into the B/GFA. The purpose of the institutions bequeathed by the Agreement was to enable the two communities in NI’s divided society to co-exist. As such, the B/GFA reiterated that, “members of the [Northern Ireland] Assembly will register a designation of identity—Nationalist, Unionist or other—for the purposes of measuring cross-community support.” The Agreement largely succeeded in bringing an end to the killing, but produced a fragile accord reflected in the instability of the devolved institutions that were invariably suspended or collapsed altogether on various occasions.

Thus, the B/GFA was an elegant and supremely pragmatic device that delivered immediate results, while in turn producing new problems. NI politics after the Agreement was shaped by the imperative of maintaining the precarious balance between unionism and nationalism in NI, rather than facilitating the emergence of

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new post-conflict forms of political identity. In fact, despite conceiving identity as fluid and alterable, the B/GFA reinforced the prolongation of unionism and nationalism as opposing and fixed identities.

In the opinion of Joanne McEvoy, the ‘two communities’ model of NI politics has inevitably undermined the process of cultivating multiple, overlapping identities, as she notes in her 2008 book *The Politics of Northern Ireland*. This binary structure was entrenched within the terms of NI’s constitutional settlement, reinforcing the ‘old’ politics of ethno-cultural

identification. A referendum on Irish unification will be played out within the context of this dynamic between growing fluidity and electoral de-alignment alongside the persistence of the ‘two communities’ structure of NI society and politics.

**THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON IRISH UNITY**

Without question, the ‘hard’ Brexit pursued by recent UK governments has served to bolster pro-Irish unity opinion in NI. The 2016 referendum has undermined the political cohesion of the Union across Great Britain (GB), not least in Scotland. A majority of voters in London also voted Remain. In the aftermath of the plebiscite, the

then leader of Sinn Féin in the NI Executive and Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, insisted a border poll was now a ‘democratic imperative’ given that 56 percent of NI’s citizens had voted to

remain in the EU. The administration of Boris Johnson pursued a model of Brexit centered on maximizing regulatory divergence from the EU to enhance parliamentary sovereignty and strengthen the UK economy’s competitiveness. Given the disruption to trade and the economy created by Brexit, the devolved governments disagreed with the direction of

travel, but largely felt ignored. The consequence has been deteriorating inter-governmental relationships within the UK, which imposes further strains on the Union. As such, the debate about Irish unification has acquired renewed momentum since the referendum. The NI Protocol (NIP) negotiated by the EU authorities and the UK government (annexed to the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA), which defines the terms of trade between the EU and UK post-Brexit), avoids the imposition of a hard border on the island of Ireland, but has merely amplified and deepened political instability in NI. In brokering a solution, both the UK government and the EU negotiators were prepared

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to acknowledge NI's unique status. The provisions of the NIP ensure that NI effectively retains full access to the EU single market for goods, preventing the reinstallation of a border with customs infrastructure on the Irish border.

As such, NI must comply with current and future regulatory changes in the single market. Compliance is overseen by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) alongside the European Commission. While NI's unique position may create economic opportunities, and the NIP provides temporary resolution

of the border issue, many unionists remain vehemently opposed, as the arrangement weakens NI's economic and regulatory ties to the UK. Since the NIP came into effect, checks on the movement of food and animal products between GB and NI were suspended amid unionist opposition. This hostility was fueled by opposition to the introduction of a 'border in the Irish sea' that creates further barriers between GB and NI than existed prior to Brexit and the introduction of the TCA/NIP.

The question of NI's constitutional status bedeviled the entire Brexit negotiations (from 2016 to 2020). The former Permanent Secretary of the

(now defunct) Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), Philip Rycroft, claimed that former Prime Minister Theresa May, only woke up to the NI border question after her infamous Lancaster House speech where she imposed red lines on the negotiations. Rycroft reflected: "It took the Prime

Minister a long time [...] to work out just how fundamental this was for the [UK] Union." Her successor as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was determined to deliver Brexit and viewed a border in the Irish Sea as a price worth paying to reclaim national sovereignty. Yet, the Protocol has been plagued by ongoing disputes and tensions. In March 2021, the UK government unilaterally extended the grace period for goods moving between NI and GB, precipitating a hostile reaction from the EU. In spring 2021, the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, claimed the EU was "negotiating with a partner it cannot trust."

Moreover, the unique arrangements for NI under the TCA are destabilizing the entire UK polity. Under the NIP, one of the UK's four nations is closer to the EU for trade in goods than the other three, an anomaly that undermines the constitutional integrity of the UK. Despite the UK's withdrawal from the EU, NI is still

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governed by EU rules and procedures on the single market over which it has no direct influence. Despite its limitations, the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, has called for a similar arrangement that would see Scotland remain part of the single market post-Brexit. Meanwhile, the UK government tabled legislation in the summer of 2022 that sought to overturn parts of the NIP, asserting that the NIP undermined the B/GFA by sowing discord within the unionist community. It was striking that the UK government was pursuing changes to the NIP unilaterally rather than within the terms of the TCAs dispute resolution mechanism. Given that the Brexit settlement is far from resolved and political instability is pervasive, the question of NI's constitutional future remains wide open. According to influential commentators, a border poll followed by Irish unification is now significantly more likely than it was before the 2016 referendum.

Consequently, as the debate about the unification of the island of Ireland gathers pace, political tensions have grown. Sinn Féin is now firmly established as the main opposition party (and "government in waiting") in the ROI. The party continues to advance in NI, winning the most votes in the 2022 Assembly elections—the first time a nationalist party topped the poll since the NI Assembly's formation. Sinn Féin's election manifesto includes

a commitment to hold a vote on unification, even though it is up to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to call a border poll. The B/GFA states that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can call a border poll "if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland." In practice though, while remaining vocal regarding its united Ireland ambitions, Sinn Féin on both sides of the border now focusses on the 'bread and butter issues' of jobs, the rising cost of living and housing, having made significant electoral gains in recent years. Political unionism, in contrast, has been in turmoil. Disagreement over the NIP led the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to remove its leader, Arlene Foster, in April 2021, while her hardline successor, Edwin Poots, resigned after only 21 days, to be replaced by Jeffrey Donaldson. Foster remarked that the imposition of a border in the Irish Sea was a 'blood red line' that was non-negotiable for unionists, representing an existential threat to their territorial and national identity. As such, Brexit has further undermined the pluralistic dimension of the B/GFA, inflicting a major shock on the institutions and processes underpinning NI's politics and on Irish-UK relations in general. That instability defines the context in which the conduct of a border poll would unfold.

## THE CONDUCT OF A BORDER POLL

Under the terms of the B/GFA, the decision on whether to hold a referendum remains at the discretion of the UK's Secretary of State for NI. For a ballot to take place, there must be concrete evidence of majority support for unification. Were a border poll to be held, it is anticipated that a referendum would also take place in the ROI, although that is not stipulated in the 1998 Agreement.

In 2017, the Irish Parliament commissioned a report entitled “Brexit and the Future of Ireland: Uniting Ireland and its People in Peace and Prosperity,” which reviewed the options for a unity poll. In 2020, Taoiseach Micheál Martin advocated a ‘shared island’ formula to promote north-south cooperation. In so doing, he questioned the viability of moving quickly towards a single Irish polity. While €500 million was committed to cross-border projects under the initiative, Martin argued that more progress should be made in entrenching the B/GFA and the devolved institutions before a border poll was contemplated.

Two prospective models for Irish unification have been widely canvassed. The first is an ‘integrated united Ireland’ where NI is assimilated into a unitary constitutional Irish state. The second formula brings NI into sovereign Irish territory in what would be a federal or confederal polity, preserving the power sharing

institutions established under the B/GFA. Another less widely canvassed option is to reconstitute NI as an independent state, maintaining links to the UK (through Commonwealth membership) and the ROI (through EU membership).

Attitudes towards Irish unity in the ROI have inevitably been shaped by the robust performance of the economy since the 1990s. Ireland was depicted as a “Celtic Tiger” that gained comparative advantage in high-value services. EU membership led to a shift in the Irish economy, from reliance on agriculture, to hi-tech industries and global exports. Today, the economy is viewed as world leading in the fields of data services and pharmaceuticals. Ultimately, the ROI's economic base has been transformed since joining the EEC in 1973 alongside the UK and Denmark. The Irish economy grew rapidly at an average rate of 9.4 percent between 1995 and 2000. From 1987 to 2007, Irish GDP increased by 229 percent. The country's economy was dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI) through American multinational corporations (MNCs). According to the Irish Industrial Development Agency, having bounced back from the financial crisis, in 2019 employment in the MNC sector reached a record 245,096—more than 10 percent of total employment.

Following EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, Ireland, Sweden, and the UK were the only countries

not to introduce restrictions on inward migration from the new member states. In 1987, net migration into Ireland stood at -43,900, but peaked at over 104,000 in 2007 following the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement rounds. Aside from a period of net emigration between 2010-2014, following the financial crisis and EU/ECB/IMF ‘Troika’ bailout, net migration into Ireland has remained positive, even in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, in 2022 the population of the ROI exceeded 5 million for the first time since 1851. In the past, it was claimed that unification was untenable since the ROI could never absorb the structural costs of NI, including the rate of long-term unemployment, a larger public sector, and entrenched deprivation. However, Ireland's relative economic success since the 1990s has redefined the terms of debate. Economic prosperity has unquestionably strengthened the cause of Irish unity.

Diarmaid Ferriter rightly points out in his 2019 book *The Border: The Legacy of a Century of Anglo-Irish Politics* that demographic transformation will play a significant role in any future border poll. The Catholic com-

munity (a crude shorthand for the population that identifies as nationalist) now exceeds numerically the Protestant/unionist community, as confirmed in the latest census. The school-age population is gradually becoming more ‘Catholic,’ confirming the demographic transition that is underway. Given differences in the birth rate, the trend is hardly surprising. As Ferriter further points out, it has long been assumed that a Catholic majority creates inexorable momentum in favor of Irish unification.

Meanwhile, deteriorating relations between London and Dublin undermine the B/GFA and provide a further

pretext for Irish unity. Following the UK's departure from the EU, the crucial formal—and, as importantly, informal—exchanges that contributed towards the normalization of Irish-UK relations from the 1970s have dissipated. Throughout the Troubles, such contacts were vital in forging cooperation that culminated in the 1998 Agreement. Since the UK's acrimonious and protracted withdrawal from the EU, there has been a widely acknowledged depletion of trust in Irish/UK relations.

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**VOTER OPINION ON IRISH UNITY**

Nevertheless, this essay insists that the road to Irish unity is fraught with uncertainty and contingency. It is naïve to claim that Brexit is a ‘one-way street’ to a united Ireland. While support for the Union of Great Britain and NI has declined in some quarters, there has been no significant increase in the number of NI voters who favor unification with the ROI since the 2016 referendum.

This is hardly surprising. There is a risk of overstating Brexit’s significance in territorial politics. The referendum had relatively low salience in NI. Turnout was 62.7 percent. While 55.8 percent support for Remain was decisive, it was lower than other Remain-supporting parts of the UK, notably Scotland (62 percent) and London (59.9 percent). In NI, on the face of it, the ethno-cultural divide was clearly reflected in voter choice: for example, 85 percent of those identifying as Catholic voted to stay in the EU, yet only 60 percent of those identifying as Protestant supported Leave—far from an overwhelming majority. Sinn Féin and the DUP adopted opposing positions during the referendum campaign, but the DUP was an outlier among unionist parties. It was the only party with Westminster representation to

explicitly favor Leave other than the UK Independence Party (UKIP). While DUP politicians alleged that Europeanisation disproportionately benefitted nationalists, many unionists nevertheless supported staying in the EU.

Evidence from voter opinion surveys in both NI and the ROI indicates that the outcome of any plebiscite on Irish unity remains indeterminate. In the ROI, 54 percent of voters support the ‘long-term goal of Irish unity’ compared to only 25 percent in NI. However, in the early 2000s, support for Irish unity in the Republic stood at 70 percent. A poll for the *Irish Times* in

2021 found that 62 percent of voters in the ROI would vote in favor of a united Ireland; 16 per cent would vote against. Yet, while ROI’s citizens notionally support unification, they may be less willing to accept the compromises a united Ireland inevitably entails. For instance, 79 percent oppose cuts in public spending to provide additional economic support to NI. Supporting NI after unification would cost the ROI an estimated €13-14 billion per annum. More than 70 percent of respondents in the ROI opposed the introduction of a new flag and joining the Commonwealth, measures that could provide reassurance to

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unionists. Closer ties to the UK were only endorsed by 47 percent of ROI voters (and opposed by 42 percent). In its Editorial from December 2021, the *Irish Times* concluded that support for Irish unity is shallow:

Taken in the round, the responses in this poll indicate that the professed desire of the people of the Republic for a united Ireland does not run particularly deep when set against some of the practical issues that could be required to make it possible. That is something that politicians in both parts of the island should take into account in any debate about a Border poll.

Historically in NI itself, unionist support for staying in the UK has been stronger than nationalist support for unification. Remarkably, even a fifth of Sinn Féin voters say they do not support Irish unity. Ipsos MORI recently found that only 42.6 percent of self-identified Catholics in NI would vote for Irish unity. As assessed by John Gerry and other authors, in a 2020 paper entitled “The future of Northern Ireland: border anxieties and support for Irish reunification under varieties of UK exit,” 21 percent of NI voters favor Irish unity, while 50 percent want to remain in the UK—findings that have been corroborated elsewhere. The NI Life and Times surveys conducted by Queen’s University, Belfast, show support for reunification consistently at around 20 percent.

Not surprisingly, economic and social issues, including the weakness of the Irish healthcare system and the size and cost of NI’s public sector, are at least as decisive as ethno-cultural identification. Residents in NI benefited from the development of the post-1945 UK welfare state. It is estimated that around 25 percent of NI’s GDP is currently dependent on transfers from the UK Treasury. According to the data presented in a 2018 report by John Garry and others entitled “Northern Ireland and the UK’s Exit from the EU,” although the peace process led to improvements, the NI economy remains “under-developed” while the rate of inward investment since the B/GFA was signed has been disappointing. ROI taxpayers would be required to support NI’s ailing postindustrial economy. Moreover, the ROI is not a member of NATO, while many NI unionists identify strongly with the UK armed forces. The prospective status of the monarchy, the national currency, the flag, and the foreign policy of a unified Irish polity would feature prominently in the debate about Irish unity preceding any border poll.

A further sign of weakness in the prospect of unification is that nationalist parties (Sinn Féin and the SDLP) have never won more than 40 percent of first preference votes in any NI election. In the 2022 Assembly elections, the nationalist parties achieved

38.1 percent compared to 41.8 percent for the combined total of the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). More recent polls confirm that, while there is support for a border poll, a majority in NI favor remaining in the UK. A survey by Liverpool University/ESRC found that 29 percent would vote for a united Ireland “tomorrow,” while 52 percent would vote against it. Excluding the “don’t knows,” 65 percent favored the Union, while 35 percent support Irish unity.

The current devolution settlement is still the ‘preferred form of governance’ in NI. Research shows that 42 percent would like devolved institutions to have greater control over tax, welfare benefits, and immigration policies. Voters who identify as ‘Catholic/nationalist’ are particularly supportive of the devolution settlement, many of whom want the Assembly to gain further competencies through which NI might strengthen its ties to the EU. Only 16 percent support the limited devolution currently available, while 10 percent prefer direct rule from Westminster. Two-thirds believe that the B/GFA is still the ‘best basis’ for governing NI. Moreover, as cited in the Irish times article of December 2021 entitled “Majority of people in North would vote to remain in UK in referendum—survey,” voters remain nervous about the prospect of a border poll:

They tended to think that a referendum would be divisive, re-awakening tensions rather than resolving them, and that a return to violence would be more than likely [...] Voters as a whole were more likely to think that prices, housing costs, tax rates, and unemployment would be higher in a united Ireland than that they would be lower, while public spending and welfare benefits were more likely to be lower.

As such, the political situation in NI remains delicately balanced.

#### NI’S ALTERED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Meanwhile, the underlying structure of NI politics is shifting. It is evident that Catholics and Protestants do not vote exclusively for nationalist or unionist parties. Ethno-cultural status does not pre-determine views of Irish unity or of remaining in the UK. More fundamentally, the political identity and voter group in NI that is growing most rapidly consists of those who identify as ‘neither’ Protestant nor Catholic, rising from 6 to 17 percent since 1990 (particularly among 18-30 year-olds). Since the B/GFA was signed and despite its consociational ‘two communities’ logic, there has been significant pluralization of political identities.

Of course, the traditional voting blocs of ‘unionist’ and ‘nationalist’ persist. Whilst the support for unionist parties has remained largely intact since

the 1990s, voting for nationalist parties declined before 2016, but recovered somewhat in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Moreover, rising support for the Alliance Party does not necessarily indicate a breakdown of ethno-cultural cleavages. As noted by Coulter and others in *Northern Ireland: A Generation After Good Friday* (2021), the Alliance seeks to straddle traditional ethno-nationalist distinctions and hence presupposes their continued existence.

At the same time, the evidence suggests that the party system is becoming noticeably more fragmented in NI, partly as a consequence of the single transferable vote (STV) system used in elections, alongside broader patterns of social change. Support for non-nationalist and unionist parties since the late 1990s has risen, particularly for the Alliance Party, the Greens and the leftist PBP party. However, while support for leftist and Green parties in NI has grown, their overall vote share remains low: around 3 percent in the 2022 Assembly elections. Voting for non-nationalist and unionist parties—other than the Alliance Party—peaked in 2016 and has oscillated ever since. The impact of these shifts on the debate about Irish unification is likely to be significant.

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Similar political instability is emerging in the ROI. Ireland has experienced the shattering of the century-old duopoly that defined Irish politics, given the relative decline of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the electoral advance of Sinn Féin. The election of smaller parties and independents in national and local politics, encouraged by the country’s proportional electoral system, aids this fragmentation. For the first time, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael govern together in coalition with the Greens. Sinn Féin is emerging as a third force

in the politics of the ROI. Sinn Féin came first in the popular vote in the 2020 general election with 24.5 percent, winning 37 seats in the Dáil, narrowly ahead of the two previously dominant parties, although some distance short of the eighty seats required for a governing majority. While coalitions are a longstanding part of Irish politics, it will be increasingly difficult to ensure stable governing arrangements. Traditional political identities and alignments are in flux in the ROI.

#### THE GOOD FRIDAY ANNIVERSARY

April 2023 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the B/GFA. While all sides claim their intention has been to make the Agreement work, the founding purpose

of the B/GFA has been severely tested. A permanent end to sectarian violence cannot be taken for granted. In this context, a border poll on Irish unification, in the absence of effective dialogue across communities on the island of Ireland, risks undermining the principle of consent that lies at the core of the Agreement.

It is apparent that nationalism and unionism are identities in transition. Nationalism is confronting its relationship with the ROI, which has been transformed into a relatively prosperous, multicultural society at the heart of Europe over the last 50 years. As observed by Brendan O’Leary in his 2018 paper “The Twilight of the United Kingdom & Tíocfaidh ár lá: Twenty Years after the Good Friday Agreement,” many citizens in the ROI have doubts about Irish unification, even if they remain emotionally sympathetic. Meanwhile, evolving conceptions of Britishness are compelling unionism to revisit its longstanding attachment to the UK. A resurgence of English nationalism, in particular, raises questions about the commitment of Westminster’s governing class to the aspirations of the unionist community.

Above all, increasing numbers of NI voters identify with neither ethno-cultural category at the core of the community politics model enshrined in

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the B/GFA. The dynamic of NI politics is shaped by the tension between ‘old’ and ‘new’ political identities. It is non-aligned voters that are most likely to determine the final outcome of any plebiscite on Irish unification. These voters typically support parties such as the Alliance. They want politicians to confront hard

questions about how the identity and traditions of those living in NI should be accommodated within an integrated polity spanning the island of Ireland. The voters see considerable potential in the current devolution settlement, even if they are willing to weigh up carefully the prospective case for unification.

In that light, Irish unity is by no means an inevitable outcome in resolving the post-Brexit constitutional status of NI. The debate in NI politics will continue to revolve around the binary choice between remaining part of the UK or achieving a united Ireland. Even so, the prospect of a third option involving an independent NI state warrants serious attention from both scholars and policy makers in the context of growing political fluidity and pluralization. This essay makes clear that to be viable while maintaining peace and stability on the island of Ireland, an independent NI would at the very least require the revival of the power-sharing institutions and intergovernmental bodies bequeathed by the settlement enshrined in the B/GFA. ●