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Front and centre? Northern Irish electoral behaviour in the age of Brexit

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ABSTRACT

In post-conflict societies, traumatic experiences can have a profound effect on electoral behaviour. In Northern Ireland, Westminster elections between 2001 and 2017 were marked by the rise of hardline parties, but the 2019 election saw a significant shift towards the centre. The centre ground vote soared, resulting in the lowest level of political polarisation since the early 2000s. What are the factors underlying this transition to a moderate vote? Drawing on public opinion surveys and electoral data, we find that Brexit played a crucial role in incentivising voters to support parties prioritising non-sectarian constitutional interests. The findings suggest that voters employ party competition as a balancing mechanism. Our article contributes to the understanding of how individuals in post-conflict societies navigate the complex relationship between violence, politics, and peacebuilding.

KEYWORDS Brexit; centrism; Northern Ireland; voter behaviour

Introduction

This article offers a new interpretation of the 2019 Westminster election results in Northern Ireland in view of the competing theories examining the effects of violence on electoral behaviour. Whereas some scholars (see for example Bauer et al., 2016; Blattman, 2009; Voors et al., 2012) contend that violence may encourage engaging in peace negotiations and making concessions, others (see for example Beber, Roessler, & Scacco, 2014; Berrebi & Klor, 2008; Hadzic, Carlson, & Tavits, 2017) argue that violence can deepen polarisation and sustain conflict. Violence may also lead to abstention from voting (Alacevich & Zejcirovic, 2020; Bratton, 2008; Collier & Vicente, 2014; Garry, 2016). The article brings together empirical evidence from survey data and electoral results to support our claim that in Northern Ireland, a region subjected to 'one of the most lethal episodes of contention in post-war Western Europe' (Bosi & De Fazio, 2017, p. 11), voters employ party competition as a balancing mechanism to offset the risk of violence.

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Northern Irish society is typically portrayed as deeply divided. In recent decades, members of its two ethno-religious communities have tended to support hardline parties on opposite ends of the political spectrum (DUP, Sinn Féin), with a minority voting for centre ground parties, here defined as including the UUP, SDLP, Greens, and non-sectarian, cross-community Alliance (McNicholl, 2019). Taking note of these circumstances, the 2019 Westminster election saw a remarkable shift in voting patterns. The vote share of the polar ends dropped by over 12%, whereas Alliance more than doubled its share, reaching a historic high of nearly 17%. Other centre ground parties netted a 4.5% increase (Audickas, Cracknell, & Loft, 2020). Overall, the centre ground collectively received 43.6% of the vote. This departure from the polarised voting patterns of the past two decades raises the question of what drove voters to the centre in 2019.

We argue that the relatively peaceful, post-1998 atmosphere in the region had weakened past allegiances and fostered changes in religious affiliation, national identity, and constitutional preference. This led to the emergence of a group we term the 'unaffiliated', who, along with the moderates in the region, constitute the 'pragmatists'. These individuals prioritise future stability and the preservation of the Good Friday Agreement. Brexit reinvigorated the discussion on Northern Ireland's constitutional status, resulting in changes in voting preferences. The looming threat of renewed violence prompted pragmatic voters to back centre ground parties as a balancing mechanism for de-escalation.

Drawing on multiple opinion surveys conducted between 1998 and 2019 and data from Westminster elections,¹ we show that many voters came to view Brexit as the most important political issue, particularly in relation to the potential infrastructure at the Irish border and the associated risk of violence. The years leading up to the 2019 election had been marked by a rise in paramilitary violence, culminating in several appalling incidents in 2019, and increasing pessimism about social cohesion in the region. Consequently, many pragmatic voters, who were concerned about the constitutional status quo, felt impelled to vote, resulting in a shift towards centre ground parties that were seen as better suited to defend non-sectarian constitutional interests. These findings have implications for the understanding of the relationship between violence and electoral behaviour in societies previously subjected to violence. In Northern Ireland, the stakes are high for the lives and security of over 1.8 million people, as well as their relationships with other nations in the British Isles and continental Europe.

The rest of the article consists of four parts. First, we review the competing theoretical explanations for the effects of violence on electoral behaviour and address the variation in nuance needed to establish the perspective of this article. Second, we present our case study and arguments. Third, we describe

our empirical analyses. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of our findings for the study of electoral behaviour.

Violence and electoral behaviour: accounts and unanswered questions

How does violence affect electoral behaviour? The literature offers several contrasting yet equally compelling accounts of these concepts and how they interact. Resorting to aggression to achieve domestic political goals is a common practice, with many societies having lived for decades under a threat of violent outbreaks and atrocities. Valuable insights can be derived through an examination of the effects of these politically motivated acts on voters. Such causal mechanisms have been debated in the literature, with three distinct approaches predominating.

One strand of literature contends that exposure to violence fosters extremism and polarisation. Thus, Hadzic et al. (2017) argue that individuals exposed to ethnic violence identify more strongly with their co-ethnics and are more distrustful of others, and as a consequence, view ethnically polarised parties as the most attractive agents of political representation. A connection has been made between enhanced threat perceptions stemming from such exposure and a disinclination towards compromise (Canetti, Hall, Rapaport, & Wayne, 2013). Beber et al. (2014) suggest that exposure to violence can increase support for secession because individuals refuse to live with out-group members in an ethnically heterogeneous state. According to Lupu and Peisakhin (2017), ethnic parochialism resulting from exposure to extreme violence passes down to future generations. Yakter and Harsgor (2022), likewise focusing on temporality, find that although violence does negatively affect attitudes in non-extreme cases, it triggers short-lived reactions.

According to the second strand of literature, exposure to violence promotes social cohesion and reconciliatory approaches. Bauer et al. (2016) find that individuals who have lived through a war tend to be more cooperative, and that such experiences tend to increase social and political engagement. Thus, these individuals are more involved within their communities and vote at a greater rate than their non-affected counterparts. Similarly, Voors et al. (2012) conclude that war experiences contribute to a rise in altruism. Hazlett (2020) observes that, on average, civilians who have been subjected to violence are more likely to be supportive of peace and may thus be instrumental in facilitating it. Blattman (2009) demonstrates that exposure to violence may result in positive political engagement and support for democratic institutions and processes inclusive of all members of society.

A third strand of the literature suggests that exposure to violence can result in voter alienation. Bratton (2008) observes that violence has a

detrimental effect on electoral engagement by eroding people's trust in the democratic process. Collier and Vicente (2014) reach a similar conclusion, asserting that intimidation decreases voter turnout. Alacevich and Zejcirovic (2020) demonstrate that violence not only lowers voter turnout but also has enduring effects for up to two decades after conflict cessation. Alternatively, Garry (2016) deduces that voter turnout may decrease due to individuals' reluctance to associate themselves with political parties aligned with either side of the conflict.

How does the *threat* of violence affect electoral behaviour in societies previously subjected to violence? This nuance is of particular importance, as it is not only in the immediate aftermath of an attack or conflict that individuals might be affected – they may also behave differently *anticipating* a threat. This is due to individuals already subjected to violence having a better understanding of the enormous costs associated with conflict. Haunted by memories of their losses, they realise the hopelessness of war and opt for a prospect of peace (Hazlett, 2020). Moreover, civilians who live in close proximity to conflict zones rally for peace to a greater extent than their remote compatriots. Reducing violence is their top priority, and they are prepared to make considerable concessions to achieve this goal (Tellez, 2019). The anxiety often shared by these individuals significantly lowers the impact of partisanship and increases the primacy of policy positions (Ladd & Lenz, 2008). Their turnout is likewise expected to increase (Robbins, Hunter, & Murray, 2013).

Previous research on the electoral consequences of threat has tended to focus on right-wing support (Berrebi & Klor, 2006, 2008; Getmansky & Zeitzoff, 2014; Lindén, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2018; Marcus, Valentino, Vasilopoulos, & Foucault, 2019), with no conclusive results; reviewing past research on the threat of terrorism, for example, Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014, p. 589) observe that the threat 'might increase, decrease, or have no effect on electoral support for right-wing parties'. Some evidence exists regarding centrist party support (see for example Hunter, Robbins, Ginn, & Hutton, 2019), but it is limited. Northern Ireland presents an appropriate case study because of the prolonged exposure to terrorism and the looming threat that remains. This case study presents an opportunity to investigate how voting for centrist parties may not just serve as a way to penalise either right-wing or left-wing incumbents (Hunter et al., 2019), but an actual political imperative.

Brexit as a trigger of change in Northern Ireland: our argument

We submit that recent fluctuations in electoral behaviour in Northern Ireland constitute voters' response to the volatile reality they are experiencing due to Brexit. Concerned about a possible recurrence of violence, voters rallied in support for centre ground parties in the Commons, which they believe can

better safeguard non-sectarian constitutional interests. We contend that this shift is anchored in identarian transformations the electorate had undergone in years preceding the 2019 election. These notions are developed further in the following chapters of this article.

The hardships of the Troubles divided people in Northern Ireland into two communities, defined by two separate composites of religious affiliation, national identity, and constitutional preference. This development aligns with the literature showing that exposure to extreme violence causes individuals to identify more strongly with members of their own group and to become more hostile towards the out-group, resulting in increased societal polarisation (Hadzic et al., 2017).

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement presented a constitutional resolution to Northern Ireland's predicament. Except for isolated violent incidents, Northern Ireland has remained peaceful for over two decades. This tranquil reality had acted as a hotbed for significant identarian changes, to the extent many people started reconsidering their outlook on religious affiliation, national identity, and constitutional preference, resulting in the creation of a segment of the population who are less committed to the region's traditional social structures. Such traits are more commonly identified in younger cohorts, although they are spread across all of them (Hayward & McManus, 2019).

These identarian changes are put to the test on account of Brexit, as Britain's disengagement from the EU forces Northern Ireland to redefine its relationship with both Britain and Ireland. Many people are still able to recall lucid visions of life under the Troubles, acknowledging a return to violence as one of Brexit's likeliest implications (Hayward, 2018). Such a prognosis feeds into a threat mindset characteristic of people in Northern Ireland, such that many anticipate widespread paramilitary violence in the wake of non-consensual changes made to the region's constitutional status (Garry, McNicholl, O'Leary, & Pow, 2018).

The literature demonstrates that individuals living in conflict zones tend to be occupied mainly with devising strategies to ensure de-escalation (Tellez, 2019). People in Northern Ireland are no exception in this regard. Fully cognizant of the heavy costs conflict is fraught with, they are eager to nip this eventuality in the bud. In recent years, they had witnessed more frequent constitutionally motivated paramilitary violence than in the preceding decade (Independent Reporting Commission, 2019; PSNI, 2020). Hence, we assert that the process experienced by the electorate, culminating in the 2019 election, had changed their behaviours with a view of stabilising the situation.

Our premise is that the pragmatic share of the electorate had been growing consistently since 1998, but this change did not have a significant electoral effect sooner for two reasons: (1) some individuals were reluctant to vote because they wanted to distance themselves politically from the

conflict (Garry, 2016); (2) others were willing to support hardline parties to serve competing ethnonational interests. Since the institutional framework of power-sharing dilutes the impact of individual votes in policy formation, voters tend to compensate by supporting parties whose positions differ from their own and are often ever more extreme (Kedar, 2005). This observation aligns with the study by Mitchell, Evans, and O'Leary (2009), indicating that although most voters agree on the importance of preserving the peace process, they simultaneously desire a strong advocate to safeguard their ethnonational interests. This was evident, for instance, amongst Unionists, who sought to counter Nationalist overrepresentation in the police and civil service, as well as Republican paramilitaries being granted early release from prison and positions in government (Murphy & Evershed, 2020). We argue that Brexit has rendered this calculus unfeasible by propelling non-sectarian constitutional interests to the forefront.

Thus, we expect pragmatists to strive to achieve equilibrium through party competition that aligns with the region's constitutional circumstances. In times of constitutional stability, regional politics takes on a zero-sum dynamic, encouraging backing for hardline parties aimed at restricting opponents' concessions. Conversely, in periods of perceived constitutional decline, voters adopt a non-zero-sum view of politics and prioritise non-sectarian concerns, driving them to favour centre ground parties that seek de-escalation.

This view of politics hinges on concerns over hardline parties' policies that are at odds with preserving Good Friday's achievements. Some of those who have traditionally voted for Sinn Féin will no longer be able to condone the party's abstentionist policy in the Commons, relinquishing any formal input on Brexit. On the other hand, some of those who used to vote for the DUP will be repelled by its harsh stance vis-à-vis Brexit and the machinations enabled by the 2017 confidence-and-supply agreement with the Conservatives (Hayward, 2018). During these trying times, both of these parties will have proved suboptimal as agents of representation, whilst centre ground parties will have come to be regarded as a choice more congruent with pragmatic agendas.

Thus, we argue that the transition from violence to peace in Northern Ireland had not only enhanced regional security but also established a valuable new order. These gains, however, remain vulnerable to a consequential disruption of the constitutional status quo, as exemplified by the recent implications of Brexit. Given the high stakes, voters had thronged to the polls to make their voices heard. Their newfound priorities, anchored in pragmatism rather than identarian rigidity, are drastically changing the political landscape.

In analysing the relationship between the prevailing political uncertainty, brought on by Brexit and manifested in violence, and electoral behaviour, we

follow a two-pronged approach. First, utilising survey data, we gauge longitudinal changes in identitarian attitudes and perceptions regarding electoral issues, Brexit, violence, and the peace process. Second, we interpret data from 13 Westminster elections in Northern Ireland (1974–2019). Together, these data span the pre-devolution phase, as well as both pre- and post-Brexit periods.

Findings and analysis

We contend that the post-Brexit political climate in the region is to a large extent a product of a chronic threat mindset that was triggered by Brexit and that prompted the pragmatic share of the electorate to go into survival mode, as it were. Consequently, pragmatic voters employed two primary balancing mechanisms: increasing their political participation and changing their voting preference.

The electorate in Northern Ireland have traditionally been segmented based on characteristics running alongside three correlated axes: religious affiliation, national identity, and constitutional preference. Namely, Catholics tend to be Irish and Nationalists, aspiring to unify with the neighbouring Republic of Ireland, whereas Protestants are mostly British and Unionists, seeking to maintain the connection with Great Britain. This, however, was not always the case.

Notable surveys (Moxon-Browne, 1991; Rose, 1971; Whyte, 1990) carried out before and during the Troubles, painted a picture of diverse national identities. In 1968, as many as 20% of both Catholics and Protestants identified as British and Irish, respectively. By 1989, these figures would drop to 6% of Catholics and 3% of Protestants, and 68% of the latter would come to identify as British. However, people (25% of Catholics and 16% of Protestants) also started showing signs of embracing a Northern Irish identity, first introduced in surveys in the late 1980s. This identity, indicating ‘more conciliatory attitudes towards out-group members and higher levels of inter-group contact’ (McNicholl & Stevenson, 2019, p. 490), was perhaps the harbinger of some common ground.

The notion that there is in fact a ‘large and growing reservoir of the ideologically detached’ (Tonge, 2020a, p. 464) in Northern Ireland has surfaced before, but it has mainly been ascribed to constitutional preference. We suggest that this notion should be incorporated into a more widely defined ‘unaffiliated’ disposition that rejects some Northern Irish dogmas. This premise is based on the observation that in the years following 1998, people in Northern Ireland have increasingly shown willingness to reconsider not only their constitutional preference, but also their religious affiliation and national identity.

As [Figure 1](#) indicates, today there are more people than in 1998 who refuse to adopt a binary constitutional stance, go beyond the dichotomous British/

Irish labelling by choosing to adopt the Northern Irish identity and reject religion. The share of people who say they are neither Unionist nor Nationalist or identify as Northern Irish rose, respectively, from 33% and 23% in 1998–1939% and 27% in 2019. These are noteworthy shifts in and of themselves. However, the most noticeable increase occurred in the proportion of areligious people. In 2019, 20% reported professing no religion, up from just 9% in 1998. This statistic is incredibly significant in a land where almost every person (96%) was raised either Protestant or Catholic (Todd, 2010), and where religion is a good predictor of political beliefs (McNicholl, 2019). Free from such constraints, more people in Northern Ireland can explore new political positions and agendas.

Over the years, voters in Northern Ireland had been concerned mainly with macro-economics and healthcare-related issues. In 2015, ‘NHS’ (21.6%) and ‘employment’ (12%) were the two most important issues (Tonge, 2016). In 2017, ‘Brexit’ led in order of importance (15.6%), with ‘economy’ (13.4%) and ‘NHS’ (12.8%) in tow (Tonge, 2019). It was in 2019 that ‘Brexit’ (22.8%) gained a clear pre-eminence over other issues, with ‘NHS’ (22.3%) a close second (Tonge, 2020b). It is obvious that people in Northern Ireland assign Brexit great weight in formulating decisions, but with Brexit being such an overarching issue, it is the way voters are interpreting it that is of particular interest.

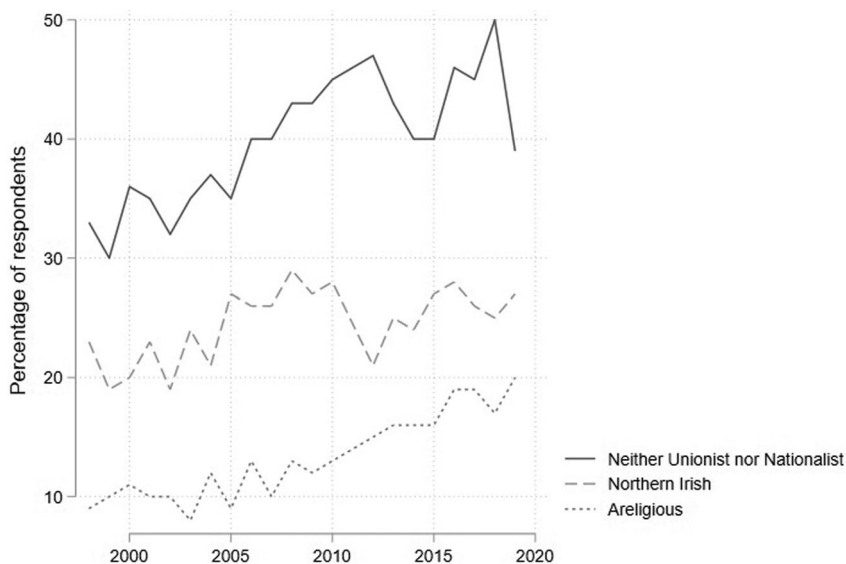


Figure 1. Identarian changes in Northern Ireland. Source: NILTS. Note: This figure is a compilation of the response categories from three different self-report survey items regarding religious affiliation, national identity, and constitutional preference. The vertical axis indicates concurrence with one of the three answers in the legend.

Northern Irish threat mindset and electoral behaviour

Whilst the UK and EU had gone to great lengths to reassure border residents that they would not have to deal with a hard border following Brexit, surveys found that public debate had promoted a different prognosis. Concerns had been raised that a hard border would have serious ramifications for the peace process. Forty-two percent of border residents focused on these concerns when discussing Brexit. Roughly one third of them regarded violence and terrorism as plausible consequences (Hayward, 2018). Many residents beyond the border region were certain that protests against the introduction of border checks would quickly turn violent (Garry et al., 2018).

Were these concerns warranted in view of recent changes on the ground? Overall, the past decade can be described as relatively peaceful, with paramilitary violence ebbing. This downward trend, however, stalled between October 2018 and September 2019. Attacks had become more brazen, for example, with the detonation of a car bomb near the Bishop Street Courthouse in January 2019, the murder of journalist Lyra McKee in April 2019, and the attempted murder of a police officer in June 2019 (Independent Reporting Commission, 2019). Furthermore, a close look at figures in police reports relating to fatalities, as well as the number of kilograms of explosives and rounds of ammunition seized, reveals they had all peaked around the time of the EU referendum (PSNI, 2020). These data are perfectly in keeping with people's expectation that Brexit would spur the mobilisation of negative elements.

Disproportionate media coverage of paramilitary violence could also have reinforced said expectation (Glassner, 2004; Mueller, 2005). For example, when reporting on the 2018 Londonderry riots, major publications incorporated menacing strings: 'worst riots in years', 'worst nights ... in decades', 'worst street disturbances ... in years', and 'worst nights of violence ... for years' (BBC, 2018; Drury, 2018; O'Neil, 2018; The Economist, 2018). In the months leading up to the 2019 Westminster election, the media ran multiple stories covering various age groups in Northern Ireland sharing their concerns and anxieties at the bloody prospect of a Brexit-induced rift in the region (see for example Corse & Hannon, 2019; Kirka, 2019; Neely, 2019). Finally, shortly before the election, Channel 4 News interviewed a member of the New IRA in a television first (Channel 4, 2019). Viewers and readers alike were inundated with intense messages, instilling the belief that future attacks are likely and triggering concerns (Fischhoff, Gonzalez, Small, & Lerner, 2003).

The fear of escalation, which is evident in surveys, coupled with exposure to actual violence or to a compounded media image of violent incidents, nourishes a threat mindset that is all too familiar to people in Northern

Ireland. This threat mindset is likewise reflected in opinion polls, when looking at questions concerning the social fabric. During the two periods in which violence peaked in the years following Good Friday, 1998–2002² and 2010–2013³, feelings about Protestant–Catholic relations were quite pessimistic, but they improved considerably in the peaceful intervals (Figure 2). After the 2016 referendum, however, things took a sharp turn for the worse again, such that 2019 marked the worst relations as of 2002. In addition, from 2016–2019, support for the removal of Peace Lines – brick walls separating Protestant neighbourhoods from Catholic ones – in the future dropped from 39% to 29%. This indicates that people in Northern Ireland do not feel safe enough to fully integrate their neighbourhoods.

How did the threat mindset set off by Brexit affect people's electoral behaviour? Indications can be found in two significant spheres: political participation and voting preference. Two noteworthy developments occurred in terms of political participation. Firstly, the 2019 Westminster election was marked by record-breaking turnout rates amongst non-aligned and socially progressive people in Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2020; Tonge, 2020b). Secondly, more people appear to be heedful of political affairs than ever before. Looking at the top reasons cited for not having voted in the last three Westminster elections (Tonge, 2016, 2019, 2020b), the ratio of

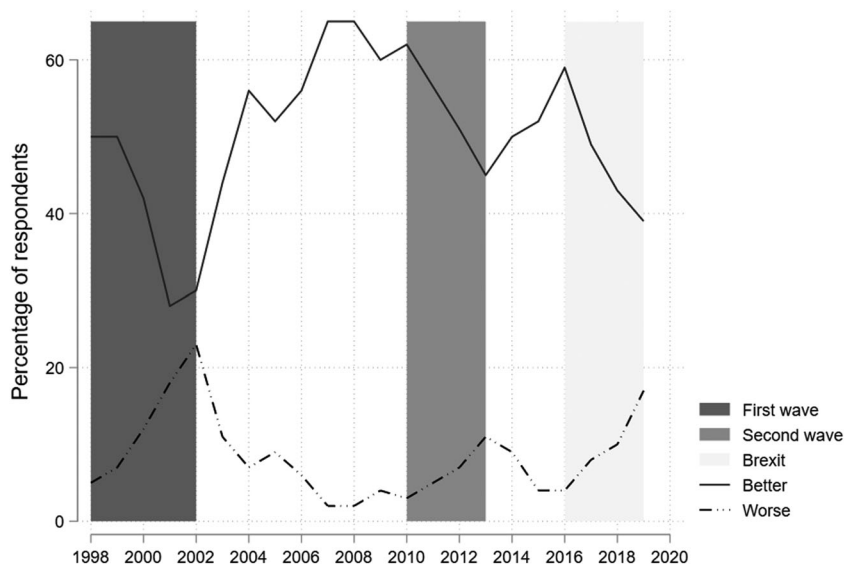


Figure 2. 'Are relations between Protestants and Catholics better or worse than they were 5 years ago?' Source: NILTS.

respondents not interested in politics went down from 13% in 2015 to just 6.9% in 2019. At the same time, the ratio of those who did not know enough about politics, thereby indicating at least a partial attempt to engage with it, more than doubled. And finally, fewer respondents reported forgetting to vote or being too busy.

In terms of voter behaviour, in the 2019 Westminster election, the hardline parties lost a combined total of 12.1% of their vote shares. Not at all surprising, as people trusted the DUP and Sinn Féin the least to adequately represent them during Brexit negotiations (Garry et al., 2018). Voters had been resentful of the former's exploitation of the 2017 confidence-and-supply agreement with the Conservatives and the latter's steadfast abstentionist policy in the Commons (Hayward, 2018; Maskey, 2018). And so, after consistently increasing its vote share in the preceding Westminster elections (Audickas et al., 2020), the party experienced a massive drop in 2019. People in Northern Ireland felt as though they 'do not have pragmatic leaders in public office, only ideologists and opportunists' (Hayward, 2018, p. 54). Consequently, many voters shifted their support to the centre ground parties. Together, these parties grossed 43.6% of the vote. Since 2005, Westminster elections in Northern Ireland have been more polarised, with more people voting for hardline parties (Figure 3). 2019, however, had yielded the least polarised result since the early 2000s.

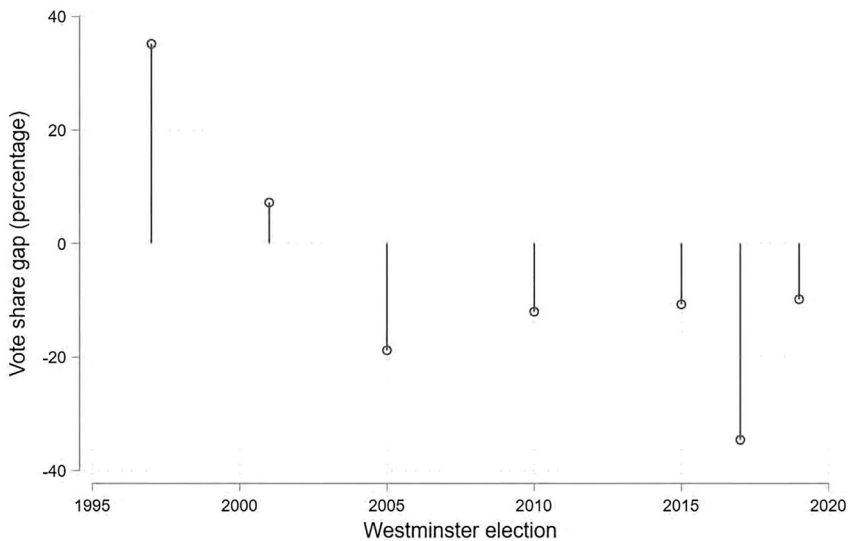


Figure 3. Vote share gap between hardline and centre ground parties. Source: UK Election Statistics: 1918–2019 – A Century of Elections. Note: The gap is calculated by subtracting the vote share of hardline parties from that of the centre ground parties. A positive value denotes a gap in favour of centre ground parties.

Alliance and the centre ground: voters and motivations

The literature indicates that the base of support for the centre ground may be difficult to pinpoint exactly. Studies indicate that inclusive identities that are formed in post-conflict societies can be associated with a propensity towards centre ground voting. For example, Protestants and Catholics who identify as Northern Irish are more likely to favour Alliance over the DUP or Sinn Féin. However, support for Alliance is generally more pronounced amongst moderate Protestants, whereas moderate Catholics are more likely to gravitate towards the SDLP (McNicholl, 2019).

An analysis of Alliance's 2019 votes reveals an extremely diverse background of voters (Figure 4). Eliminating non-responses, 40.1% of the votes came from 2017 Alliance voters, whereas 30.4% of them came from former hardline part voters. Roughly 12% came from former other centre ground party voters. A further 12.6% of the votes came from people who did not vote at all in 2017. Overall, Alliance received almost 60% of its votes from people who had not voted for it in a general election in at least four years. These patterns are indicative of a three-dimensional diffusion of votes to Alliance: from the hardline extremes, from the perimeter of the centre ground, and from outside the system. Evidently, Alliance formed the nexus for all walks of Northern Irish society in 2019.

Evaluating the motivations for voting for Alliance is key to understanding how it is viewed by a significant portion of voters. When asked in 2017 what best represented their motivation for voting for the party, 83% responded

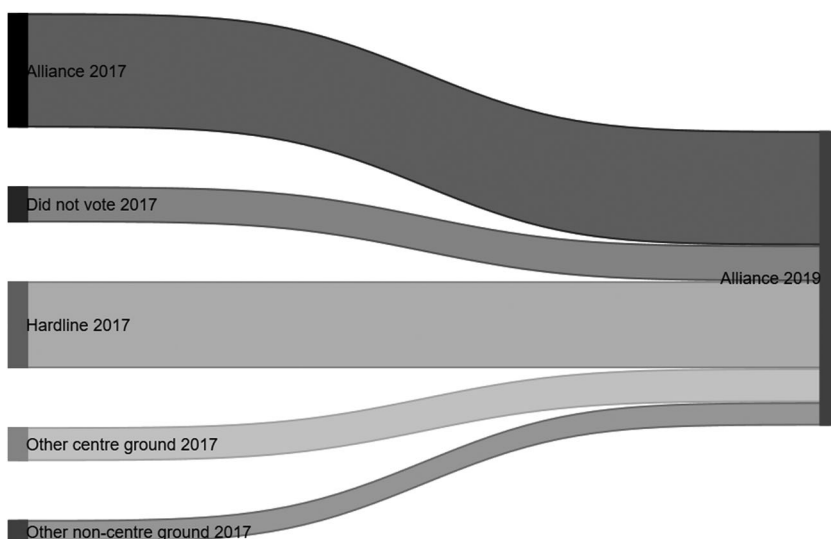


Figure 4. Source of Alliance votes in 2019. Source: NIGES 2019.

that they genuinely supported it, whereas just 13% voted for it tactically to prevent another party from winning (Tonge, 2019). When asked in 2019, 27% of respondents indicated they had voted tactically (Tonge, 2020b); more than a quarter of the votes for Alliance in 2019 were cast by people who voted for it tactically, and not out of genuine support for the party. Nearly 49% of them had been former hardline party voters.

What are some other instances in Alliance's electoral history where this tactic might have played a part? Apart from the most recent triumph in 2019, Alliance had experienced two more tipping points in Westminster elections (Audickas et al., 2020). The first came in 1979, when Northern Ireland was under direct rule from Westminster. Shortly before the election, republican paramilitaries went on a bloody killing spree. Within a span of just nine days, they assassinated Richard Sykes, British Ambassador to the Netherlands, and on the same day detonated 24 bombs across Northern Ireland. They later assassinated Airey Neave, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Margaret Thatcher's campaign manager. Alliance's vote share reached 11.9%, its best outcome hitherto. In the tumultuous decades of the 1980s and 1990s, marked by persistent violence, there was a decline in Alliance's vote share, but it consistently maintained a vote share of 8% or higher (Audickas et al., 2020). The second tipping point was in the 2001 Westminster election, the one following the signing of Good Friday and restoration of devolved government. Alliance's vote share dropped from 8% to 3.6%, a near worst outcome yet.

It seems that Alliance's electoral fortunes are linked to the political volatility and the consequent severity of the threat mindset amongst the population. When the constitutional horizon is clear and violence is kept in check, as in 2001, Alliance incurs electoral losses and its influence wanes. When the constitutional future seems vague and paramilitaries appear to be instigating more violent incidents, as in 1979 (and to a similar extent, in the 1980s and 1990s) and 2019, Alliance garners a considerable number of votes. Thus, voters utilise Alliance as a means for diverting power away from forces attempting to capitalise on the precariousness of the constitutional balance in the region.

An alternative explanation for Alliance's strong performance in the 2019 Westminster election could be its leader's popularity. Naomi Long was particularly favoured amongst the five main Northern Ireland party leaders (Tonge, 2020a). However, Long has been party leader since 2016, seemingly having no significant influence over the party's standing in the 2017 Westminster election. During that election Alliance garnered less than 65,000 votes, failing to secure any seats. This outcome was considerably less favourable than the 2017 Stormont election, which took place merely three months earlier and saw Alliance winning over 72,000 votes. Hence, it appears that the party leader's popularity did not primarily account for Alliance's 2019 performance.

Pragmatism and the concern for constitutional balance

A more complete picture of the circumstances in Northern Ireland can now be compiled. In the past, any Northerner, whether dogmatically or pragmatically driven, would optimally choose a party that could win them more concessions in the Assembly and the Commons in the short term. But when the 2019 election revealed the precariousness of Northern Ireland's constitutional status, the spectre that Good Friday had helped to subdue a few decades earlier reappeared in full force.

The momentousness of Good Friday as the foundation for a new life in Northern Ireland is widely acknowledged. It was supported in a designated referendum on an 81.1% turnout by 71.1% of voters in 1998 (Hayes & McAllister, 2001), notwithstanding a disparity between both communities: Catholics (94%) favoured it far more than Protestants (55%) did (ARK, 1999), due to the former having more to gain politically, legally and economically than the latter (O'Leary, 1999). The Agreement continues to elicit strong support from an overwhelming majority of the people in Northern Ireland. More than 65% of respondents feel it has been implemented as promised (Dyrstad, Bakke, & Binningsbø, 2021), and 68% agree that Good Friday is the desirable basis for governing Northern Ireland. The latter statement was supported by 76% of Catholics and 67% of Protestants (ARK, 2019), demonstrating a move closer towards a relative consensus after early Protestant discontent (Dixon, 2008).

This consensus did not carry over to the EU referendum, in which 80% of Catholics voted to remain in the EU, as opposed to just 40% of Protestants (ARK, 2016). However, many people in Northern Ireland can appreciate the practical value of the current constitutional order, recognising that it needs to be upheld for the sake of non-sectarian interests. The ones to uphold it are the pragmatists. This Northern Irish variety of pragmatism comprises two strands.

The first strand includes the unaffiliated. They are a somewhat amorphous group, although broadly they can be said to be neither Unionist nor Nationalist (commonly referred to in the literature as 'non-aligned'), to identify as Northern Irish, or to be areligious. They may exhibit all three attributes together, but not necessarily. Up until the 2019 Westminster election, this group had typically abstained from voting and displayed little political interest or motivation. This was perhaps their attempt to distance themselves from the politics of the conflict in the region (Garry, 2016). However, as the implications of Brexit for the region became more apparent, it piqued the interest of these individuals in politics (Tonge, 2016, 2019, 2020b), and consequently, spurred their motivation to vote.

Those who did not vote in 2017, many of them unaffiliated, showed more support for centre ground (48.2%) than for hardline parties (35.4%) in 2019.

The highest vote share was amassed by Alliance (24.1%). Yet, perplexingly, the same number of 2017 non-voters cast ballots for the DUP (Tonge, 2020b), a party whose actions have arguably been the most detrimental to the constitutional order in Northern Ireland. An explanation why younger cohorts might be attracted to hardline parties has been put forth before (Tilley & Evans, 2011), but it predates Brexit. Further discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this article.

The second strand of Northern Irish pragmatism is home to the moderates. These include people who fit the conventional identarian profile and define themselves along the Protestant/British/Unionist and Catholic/Irish/Nationalist axis. They have always been more politically active than the unaffiliated and tended to vote for the UUP, SDLP, and Alliance. Despite their moderate disposition, some had previously voted for the DUP and Sinn Féin, aiming to maximise their gains by supporting a hardline party capable of acting as a better guarantor of their ethnonational interests within a power-sharing system that has already minimised the risk of such a vote (Kedar, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2009; Murphy & Evershed, 2020). However, with Brexit, this option ceased to be viable for them.

After living in an active threat mindset for most of the second half of the twentieth century, Northern Irish society transitioned to a more peaceful mode, during which people could explore their identities unfettered by dogma. Brexit aroused that threat mindset yet again, but at a time when many voters no longer felt bound by traditional social structures and recognised the importance of holding on to the status quo. They expressed themselves through increasing political participation and by rallying around centre ground parties.

Discussion and conclusions

Using the conflict in Northern Ireland as a case study, this article has examined how electoral behaviour in societies previously subjected to violence can be affected by the threat of renewed violence. We have shown how the threat mindset set off by Brexit influenced the pragmatic share of the electorate and contributed to the outcome of the 2019 Westminster election. How does the case of Northern Ireland fit into the bigger picture described in the literature?

Previous studies have approached the electoral effects of exposure to violence from a homogenous perspective. This article aims to promote a heterogenous perspective, suggesting that individuals employ party competition as a tool to offset the risk of violence (by voting for centre ground parties) or control the concessions gained by the opposing side (by voting for hardline parties), depending on the circumstances. Thus, their voter behaviour is *context-driven*.

In the event that there is no agreement in place to monitor the volatile situation or if the prospect of such an agreement is uncertain, a balancing mechanism is set off: turnout is high, and support for hardline parties generally decreases. This phenomenon was evident during the Troubles, when most Protestants and Catholics consistently voted for the more moderate parties that represented their constitutional aspirations. Additionally, there was a noteworthy level of support for Alliance, which maintained a vote share of 8% or higher throughout the second and third decades of the Troubles. A different balancing mechanism is activated when such an agreement is in place and remains intact, even in the face of ongoing violence: turnout is low, and support for hardline parties increases. This pattern persisted throughout the waves of violence in 1998–2002 and 2010–2013, and even in 2002–2007, when the UK government had to exercise direct rule.

One potential criticism of our findings is that some of the Brexit period coincided with the political vacuum created by the suspension of the Executive, and therefore it is not possible to extrapolate Brexit as a single contributing factor to the significant increase in centre ground vote share in the 2019 Westminster election. However, no such increase was recorded in the Stormont elections of 2003 and 2007, which were both held after violent episodes at the time of an Executive suspension.

Voters in Northern Ireland act according to their threat mindset, which depends on the perceived risk to the existence and integrity of the constitutional compromise in the region. Whilst the devolved institutions are undoubtedly important to people on principle (Tonge, 2020a), their convening seems to have no bearing on voter behaviour in the region. It is Good Friday itself, in its role as facilitator of peaceful Unionist-Nationalist co-existence, that is vital. The four provisions of which people show the strongest approval are not related to the devolved institutions (Dyrstad et al., 2021). Three of them – decommissioning paramilitary arms, normalising border security arrangements and requiring a majority decision to decide Northern Ireland's constitutional future – directly impact the security situation in the region. Brexit undermines Good Friday's role and therefore resurrects voting patterns prevalent during the Troubles.

One would be cautious to extrapolate from a single case. Nonetheless, our findings make a helpful contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of the reconstruction of the political system in societies previously subjected to violence. This contribution centres on the notion that voters calibrate their vote choice to align with their perception of the peace process's integrity. When they perceive stability, regional politics appears as a zero-sum game, prompting support for hardline parties to limit to the other side's concessions. Conversely, during perceived deterioration, voters prioritise non-sectarian interests like security and well-being, leading them to vote for more moderate parties to de-escalate and ensure stability. These patterns reveal

that voters utilise party competition strategically to optimise their outcomes in any given scenario. As their threat mindset takes over, their focus shifts towards mitigating the risk.

Notes

1. Although Stormont elections, as well as other regional political occurrences, are indeed referenced in the article where appropriate, the focus is the Northern Irish centre ground in Westminster elections.
2. This first wave of violence includes the Drumcree conflict (1998-2000), 2001 South Armagh attacks, July 2001 Belfast riots, November 2001 Belfast riots, May 2002 Belfast riots, and 2002 Short Strand clashes.
3. This second wave of violence includes the 2010 Northern Ireland riots, 2011 Northern Ireland riots, 2012 North Belfast riots, and 2013 Belfast riots.

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