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Title	The political impact of secularisation in Northern Ireland
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Publication date	2004
Conference details	Revised version of a paper presented at Institute for British structures, new beliefs: religion, community and politics in University College Dublin, 15 May 2003.
Series	IBIS Working Papers; 36
Publisher	University College Dublin. Institute for British-Irish Studies
Link to online version	http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/wp2004/36/36_hm.pdf
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2263

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SECULARISATION IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

Bernadette C Hayes and Ian McAllister

IBIS working paper no. 36

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Working Papers in British-Irish Studies
No. 36, 2004

**Institute for British-Irish Studies
University College Dublin**

IBIS working papers
No. 36, 2004

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ISSN 1649-0304

ABSTRACT

THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF SECULARISATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Northern Ireland conflict has traditionally been characterized as a sectarian conflict between two monolithic religious communities, Protestant and Catholic. As a result, little attention has been devoted to the social and political differences stemming from other forms of religious identification, notably religious independents, or those who claim no religious affiliation. Using the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, this paper provides the most recent empirical evidence to challenge this conventional wisdom. The results suggest the existence of a small but significant group of religious independents that not only differ from the two communities in relation to their socio-demographic background but also in terms of their pragmatism on the constitutional issue. However, independents also eschew electoral politics, suggesting that until genuinely non-confessional parties emerge to represent their views, their potential to ameliorate the conflict will remain immobilised.

Publication information

Revised version of a paper presented at Institute for British-Irish Studies Conference "Old structures, new beliefs: religion, community and politics in contemporary Ireland," University College Dublin, 15 May 2003.

Acknowledgement. Our thanks to Dr Claire Mitchell who convened the conference as well as to conference participants for their helpful comments; the usual disclaimer applies. This paper was written while Bernadette Hayes was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research, Queen's University Belfast.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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Ian McAllister is a professor of political science in the Research School of Social Sciences at The Australian National University. His research interests are in the areas of comparative political behaviour, political parties, voters and electoral systems. Recent research includes studies of Australian political parties and political behaviour; Russian electoral behaviour and democratisation; and political behaviour and violence in Northern Ireland.

THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF SECULARISATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Bernadette C Hayes and Ian McAllister

INTRODUCTION

For most of the twentieth century, popular perceptions, academic writing and government policy have all coincided in agreeing that the Northern Ireland conflict is, in essence, a sectarian conflict between two monolithic religious communities, Protestant and Catholic. Evidence in support of this observation comes from the census, where every census conducted up to 1981 has shown that more than nine out of ten Northern Ireland residents have identified with either the Catholic Church or with one of the many Protestant denominations (see Hayes and McAllister, 1995). In the 1951 census alone, 99.4 per cent of the population classified themselves as either Protestant or Catholic. Other evidence to support the proposition is the religious beliefs of some unionist leaders, such as Ian Paisley (see Bruce, 1986; Macclver, 1989; Cooke, 1996), which it is argued forms an implicitly religious dimension to the problem.

In recent years, however, this traditional religious interpretation of the Northern Ireland conflict has been questioned. In extensive surveys of the literature, Hickey (1984) and Whyte (1990) find little evidence that religion plays any role in shaping the conflict, other than to provide convenient identifying labels for the protagonists. According to some, the problem is essentially that it involves a territorial conflict (see, for example, Rose, 1971), which others have observed elements of class, nationalism and ethnicity along with territorial conflict (Wright, 1987; Fulton, 1988; Ruane and Todd, 1996; Evans and Duffy, 1997). At the level of public opinion, survey-based studies have concluded that religious beliefs and behaviour play little role in shaping political attitudes towards the conflict (McAllister, 1982).

The major empirical evidence against the traditional religious interpretation is the emergence over the past decade of a small group of avowedly secular individuals. Labels to identify such diverse groups are always problematic, but they are best described as religious independents (Hayes and McAllister, 1995). Whatever their label, such individuals now constitute about one in every ten of the Northern Ireland population. Given the established strong correlation between religious affiliation and political attitudes and electoral outcomes in Northern Ireland (Breen and Hayes, 1997; Evans and Sinnott, 1999; Hayes and McAllister, 2001a), such a long-term trend inevitably has important political repercussions. In this paper, we examine the extent of secularisation, and its consequences for political attitudes and behaviour. The data come mainly from the 2002 Life and Times Survey, a nationally representative survey of adult public opinion,¹ but in order to follow the longer-term

¹ For a detailed discussion of the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, see <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>.

trends, we also make use of a range of other nationally representative surveys, which have been conducted in Northern Ireland since 1968.

THE EXTENT OF SECULARISATION

Measuring the extent of secularisation in Northern Ireland presents a variety of difficulties. The most obvious is the differing definition used in the census. Writing in the first sociological study of Northern Ireland in 1962, Barritt and Carter (1962:19) noted that the religion question in the 1951 census recorded only 221 freethinkers and 64 atheists, amounting to 0.02 per cent of the total population. In addition, a further 5,865 (0.04 per cent) did not state their religion.² Since then, there has been a large increase in the proportions not providing a religious affiliation in the census. However, at least part of this increase is attributable to the fact that, from the 1971 census onwards, the religion question has been voluntary, a change that was initiated to encourage maximum compliance and to ensure the overall reliability of the census. The net result was that the “non-stated” proportion of the population rose from 2.0 per cent of the population in 1961 to 9.4 per cent in 1971, peaking at 18.5 per cent in 1981.

The introduction of a separate category for religious independents (“nones”) in the 1991 census meant that the “not stated” figure declined to 7.3 per cent, as compared to 3.7 per cent who specially claimed no religious affiliation. More recent census data, which included a separate question asking individuals whether or not they had a religious affiliation, confirms this growth in the proportion of independents at the expense of the non-stated category.³ In 2001, or when the most recent census was undertaken in Northern Ireland, whereas the proportion of individuals who explicitly claimed no religious affiliation was 9.7 per cent, the equivalent proportion for the “not stated” was just 4.2 per cent. Thus, for these two census periods at least, there is now some empirical evidence to suggest that if individuals are allowed to choose between not volunteering any religious affiliation and explicitly stating that they have no religion, the formal disavowal of a religious identity is, by far, the dominant outcome.

Because of the absence of census figures prior to 1991, however, using survey results to identify religious independents still represents a more reliable method of assessing their size and distribution within the population. These results suggest that at least one-third of those traditionally included in the “non-stated” category in the census are in fact independents, belatedly following the secularising trend that began in many advanced industrial societies in the late 1960s (see Roof and McKinney, 1989; Davie, 1994; Hout and Fisher, 2002).

² In the 1981 census, the proportions increased, with a total of 1,171 describing themselves as agnostic, 730 as atheists and 94 as freethinkers.

³ The specific question asked was: “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?”. The response categories were “yes” and “no”.

Table 1: Religious identification in Northern Ireland, 2002

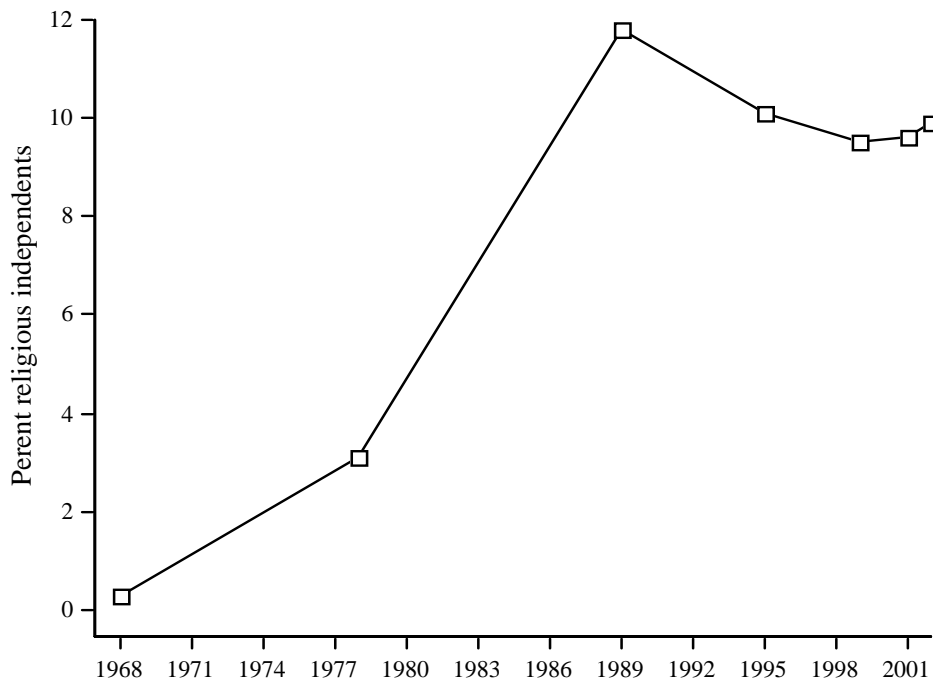
Group	per cent
Catholic	41.0
Liberal Protestant	40.2
(Anglican/Church of Ireland)	(15.8)
(Presbyterian)	(21.7)
(Methodist)	(2.4)
(URC/Congregational)	(0.3)
Fundamentalist Protestant	3.7
(Baptist)	(0.9)
(Free Presbyterian)	(1.1)
(Brethern)	(0.6)
(Other)	(1.1)
Other	3.7
(Protestant – no denomination)	(2.4)
(Christian – no denomination)	(1.3)
Non-Christian	0.6
Not stated	1.0
Independent	9.9
Total	100.0
No. of cases	1,800

Note: question: Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If yes, which?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2002.

Furthermore, survey data collected in 2002 and reported in Table 1 show that these religious independents constituted 10 per cent of the adult population, an identical figure to their calculated proportion of the total population in the 2001 census. More importantly, at 10 per cent of the adult population, religious independents are now twice as large as all of the main fundamentalist Protestant denominations combined, and the fourth single largest group within the population, after Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians, respectively.

The survey data also allows us with more precision than the census to estimate when this secularising trend took place. Figure 1 suggests that the growth in religious independents took place between 1978 and 1989, when they increased in size from 3 per cent of the adult population to 12 per cent, with a slight decline thereafter. This period, during the late 1970s, corresponds to the expansion of higher education in Northern Ireland, particularly among the Catholic population as well as the individuals from working-class backgrounds (see Osborne et al., 1983; O'Connor, 1993). In fact, estimated age participation rates (APR) during the 1970s suggest that not only did overall student numbers entering university increase by approximately 45 per cent between 1973 and 1979, but whereas participation rates among Protestants grew by about 39 per cent the equivalent increase in Catholic numbers, albeit from a much lower base, was nearly double this amount at 71 per cent (see Osborne et al., 1983: 185).

Figure 1: The growth of religious independents, 1968-2002

Sources: Loyalty Survey, 1968, Social Attitudes Survey, 1978, Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1989, 1995 and 1999; Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, 2001 and 2002.

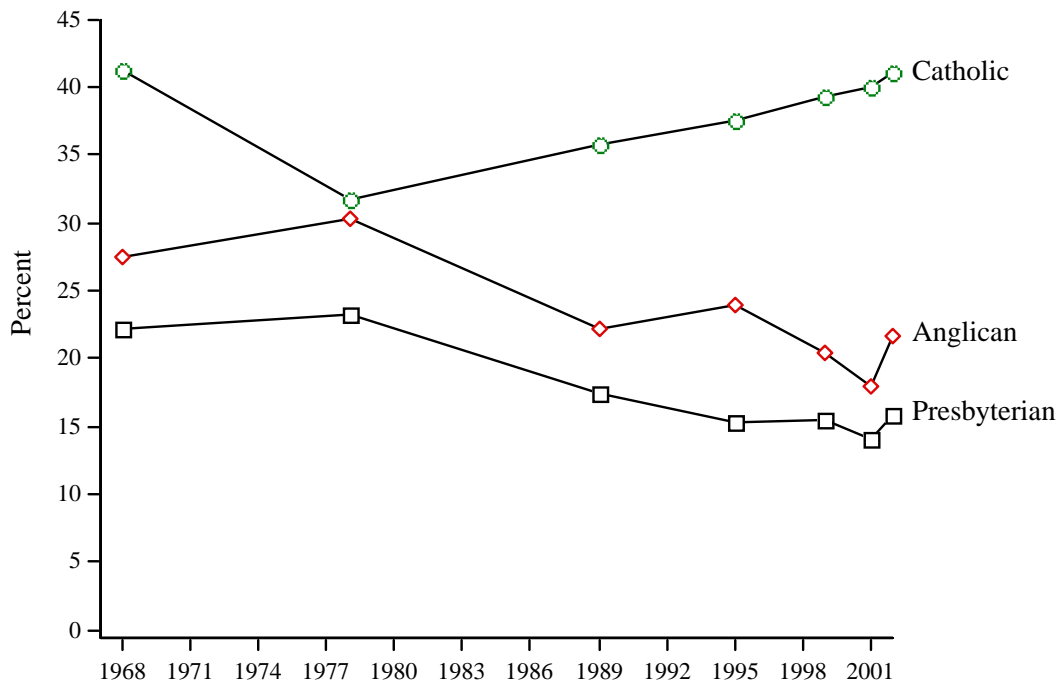
It is this factor—or the secularising tendencies linked to the experience of obtaining a third level education—which we suggest explains the growth of religious independents during this period.⁴

EXPLAINING SECULARISATION

What are the religious origins of religious independents? Sociologists of religion have pointed to two potential sources. The first source is those religious groups—mainly Protestant—which emphasize voluntary membership, accept secularisation and demand relatively low commitment from their members. It is argued that these groups are the ones that are most likely to loose support when religion is less popular (see Iannaccone, 1994). By contrast, traditional secularisation theorists argue that the growth in religious independents is just as (or even more likely) to emerge at the expense of fundamentalist religious groups (see Dobbelaere, 1987). The empirical evidence suggests that while all religious groups have suffered a net loss that has benefited independents, there has been a tendency for the liberal Protestant churches to experience a disproportionate level of defection (see, for example, Hadaway and Marler, 1993; Brinkerhoff and Mackie, 1993; Breen and Hayes, 1996).

⁴ See Roof and McKinney (1989: 65-66) for a comprehensive account of this issue.

Figure 2: The decline of Anglicans and Presbyterians, 1968-2002



Sources: Loyalty Survey, 1968, Social Attitudes Survey, 1978, Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1989, 1995 and 1999; Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, 2001 and 2002.

We can test these hypotheses about the sources of religious independence in Northern Ireland in two ways. The first is to examine the changing sizes of the religious groups. Fortunately, the existence of consistent, cross-time data in Northern Ireland allows us to see, at the aggregate level, the changing sizes of the various religious groups. Figure 2 shows the proportions of Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians in the adult population since 1968. In the earliest period, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Catholics declined by around 10 per cent, while the proportions of Anglicans and Presbyterians increased slightly.⁵ However, during the period when religious independents increased most significantly in size—the 1980s—the proportion of Catholics grew, while the proportions of Anglicans and Presbyterians declined, by about the same amount. The data suggests, then, that independents are disproportionately drawn from the liberal Protestant churches.

The second means of ascertaining the origins of Independents is to examine childhood religion. Fortunately, the 2002 survey contained a question on the respondent's childhood religious identification,⁶ which enables us to assess what religious groups are suffering the greatest defections to the religious independents. Although some caution is required because of the small numbers involved, the results suggest, once again, that the Protestant denominations have suffered more defections than the Catholic Church (see Table 2).

⁵ The decline in the proportion of Catholics is almost certainly due to their greater tendency to not answer the religion question, as evident in the 1971 census (Boyle and Hadden, 1994).

⁶ The exact question was: "In what religion, if any, were you brought up? What was your family's religion?"

Table 2: Childhood and current religious identification in Northern Ireland, 2002

Childhood religious identification	Current religious identification:						(N)
	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Anglican</i>	<i>Presby- terian</i>	<i>Fundamen- talist Prot.</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Independ- ent</i>	
Catholic	92.8	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.6	6.1	(788)
Anglican	1.1	73.9	8.5	3.4	5.4	7.7	(352)
Presbyterian	0.7	4.1	78.8	3.2	5.0	8.2	(438)
Fundamentalist Protestant	0.0	1.7	13.3	65.0	6.7	13.3	(60)
Other	0.0	3.3	5.6	1.1	67.8	22.2	(90)
Independent	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	0.0	97.0	(33)

Note: All figures are percentages. Question: In what religion, if any, were you brought up? Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If yes, which?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2002.

Among those growing up as Catholics, no less than 93 per cent retained their religious affiliation in adulthood. By contrast, among Anglicans and Presbyterians, the retention rate is 74 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively. Indeed, among fundamentalist Protestants, the retention rate is even less, at 65 per cent. The evidence, then, is clear: religious independents are disproportionately being drawn from the membership of the main Protestant churches.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS INDEPENDENTS

Secularisation has often been associated with long-term value change within the advanced societies. Opinion polls have shown that those who disavow a religious affiliation are also significantly more likely to exhibit postmaterialist values, such as concerns for individual rights and the quality of life, above materialist values such as a desire for economic security and physical safety (Inglehart, 1990). These changes in value priorities are linked to the differing socialization experiences of those growing up in periods of insecurity, before and after the Second World War, as opposed to those growing up in the period following the end of the Cold War; the former are seen as having their views formed by postwar austerity and insecurity, the latter by the permissive society and liberal values that emerged in the late 1960s. Not surprisingly, then, previous international research has consistently shown that those with secular outlooks tend to be much younger than those retaining a religious affiliations (see Hayes, 2000).

This is also the case in Northern Ireland. Table 3 shows that 38 per cent of religious independents are aged under 35 years, compared to around one quarter of those with an affiliation. Indeed, of the seven socio-demographic characteristics examined in Table 3, only one—occupation—does not show a consistently significant difference between independents and those holding an affiliation within the two main religious communities, Protestant and Catholic, in Northern Ireland. The most notable and consistent differences, in addition to age, are gender, the prevalence of tertiary education among independents and their greater likelihood of having lived outside Northern Ireland at some point in their lives.

Table 3: Socio-demographic background of independents and the religiously affiliated, 2002

	Independent	Religiously affiliated		All
		Catholic	Protestant	
Gender (male)	60	42**	45**	43**
Marital status (married)	49	59*	61**	60**
Residency (lived outside NI)	42	22**	19**	20**
Age (under 35 years)	38	26**	20**	23**
Education (tertiary)	23	16**	17**	16**
Occupation (nonmanual)	63	50**	57	54*
Employment status (labour active)	63	51*	53*	54*

Note: all figures are percentages.

*significantly different from Independents at the 0.05 level

**significantly different from Independents at the 0.01 level.

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2002.

As referred to earlier, in the case of education particularly, secularisation is thus often associated with the expansion of university education, which has resulted in more questioning of the basic tenets of traditional religions (Roof and McKinney, 1989).

Religious independents are, therefore, significantly different from those who hold a religious affiliation, across a range of characteristics. In particular, the results for age mirror other findings that demonstrate the importance of the period when the person grows into adolescence as a key socializing element (Hayes and McAllister, 1999). Given the turmoil that Northern Ireland has experienced since 1968,⁷ we would expect that this environment would have a substantial impact of political attitudes. In the next two sections we examine this possibility by religious identification and differences in constitutional preferences and party choice in Northern Ireland.

CONSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES

The constitutional position of Northern Ireland dominates all aspects of politics. Until the start of the present disturbances in 1968, this division manifested itself in support of maintaining the link with Britain, as opposed to Irish unity. Since 1968, more complex options have come to the fore, notably the option of forming an independent state, which gained particular popularity among Protestants after the failure of the 1975 Convention to identify constitutional arrangement which would attract widespread popular acceptance, as well as acceptance by the British and Irish governments (Rose, 1976). Since then, however, there has been little support in either religious community for an independent Northern Ireland (see Whyte, 1990: 81).

⁷ The political violence has touched almost all sections of Northern Ireland society. For example, recent survey estimates from 1998, thirty years after the conflict had started, suggest that one in seven of the population reported being a victim of violence, one in five had a family member killed or injured and one in four has been caught up in an explosion (see Hayes and McAllister, 2001b).

Table 4: Religious identification and constitutional preference, 2002

	Independent	Catholic	Protestant
United Ireland	19	58	4
Independent State	9	11	5
Other	8	4	2
Remain in UK	64	27	89
Total	100	100	100
No. of cases	146	590	796

Note: Figures are percentages. Question: Do you think that the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be to remain part of the United Kingdom or, to reunify with the rest of Ireland?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2002.

The extent of the division in relation to constitutional preferences is demonstrated in Table 4, which shows that 58 per cent of Catholics in 2002 supported Irish unity, compared to 89 per cent of Protestants who supported remaining in the United Kingdom. Within this large bipolar view of the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, there is little scope for intermediate views; just 11 per cent of Protestants opted for some other solution to the problem, although 27 per cent of Catholics favoured remaining within the UK. By contrast, almost two-thirds of independents favour remaining a part of the United Kingdom, while just fewer than one in five favour Irish unity.

Judged against the evidence collected since 1978, support for the British link has been declining among independents (see Figure 3). In 1978, about three quarters of the independents favoured the maintenance of the British link; following a peak of 85 per cent in 1989, this has declined by about two per cent annually, to reach the level of 64 per cent recorded in 2002. At the same time, support among Protestants has remained stable, varying little from 90 per cent, while there has been an almost linear decline in support among Catholics, from 50 per cent in 1978 to 27 per cent in 2002, although this figure represents the first increase in support for maintenance of the British link in almost a quarter of a century.

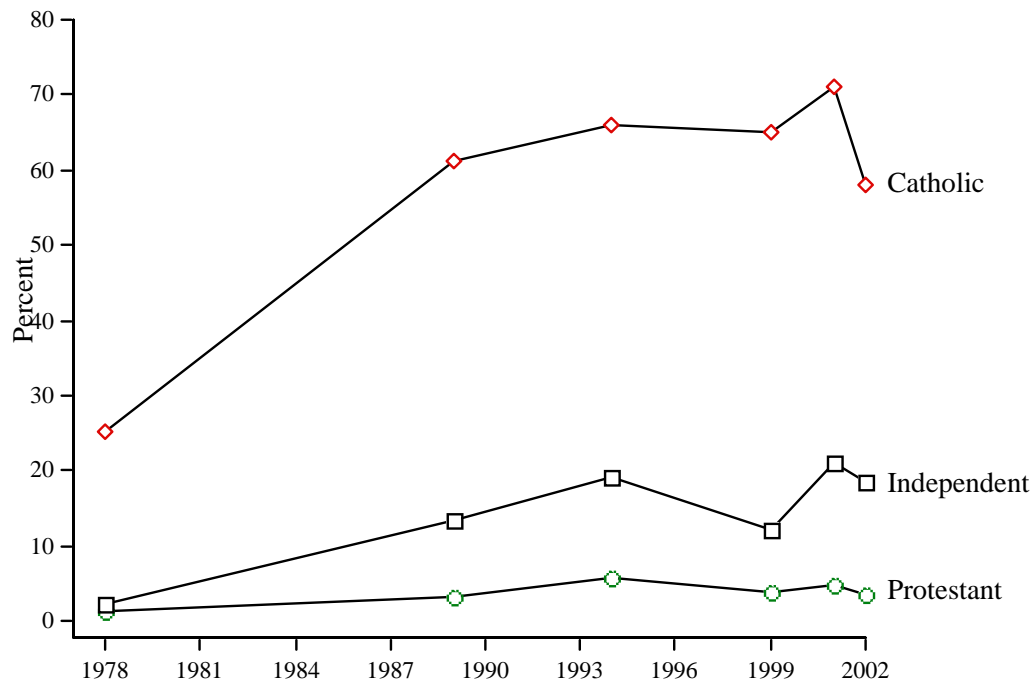
The beneficiary of this fundamental change in the constitutional preferences of Catholics and independents has been, as one would expect, Irish unity (see Figure 4). In 1978, just one quarter of Catholics favoured Irish unity; as it has become apparently more attainable, through the greater involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland affairs and the electoral successes of Sinn Fein, that proportion has increased, reaching 71 per cent in 2001. Since then, this trend has been reversed; although still a majority, just under three-fifths, or 58 per cent, of Catholics favoured Irish unity in 2002, reflecting the corresponding increase in support for the British link in almost a quarter of a century.

Figure 3: Religious identification and attitudes towards the British link, 1978-2001



Sources: Social Attitudes Survey, 1978; Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1989, 1994; Northern Ireland European Values Survey, 1999; Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2001 and 2002.

Figure 4: Religious identification and attitudes towards Irish unity, 1978-2002



Sources: Social Attitudes Survey, 1978; Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1989, 1994; Northern Ireland European Values Survey, 1999; Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2001 and 2002.

While a number of post-hoc explanations could, no doubt, be offered for this sudden rise in support for British unity, the most likely interpretation is the growing level of confidence within the Catholic community in relation to their position within the United Kingdom as well as the increasing and unprecedented influence of the Irish government in the internal governance of Northern Ireland since the ratification of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.⁸

By comparison, although the support for Irish unity among independents has been much more modest, nevertheless, starting from a low of just three per cent in 1978, it has climbed steadily since then, reaching 19 per cent in 2002. By contrast, throughout the period, Protestant support for Irish unity has been negligible.

Religious independents do, then, exhibit a distinct set of constitutional preferences, which places them apart both from their Protestant and Catholic counterparts. But while their support for Irish unity has been increasing, and support for the link with Britain correspondingly in decline, a majority nevertheless support the status quo. To what extent are their constitutional options fixed, and to what extent would independents be prepared to compromise on their constitutional views in the event that a majority opted for something other than their preferred choice? This is potentially important, since the trends suggest that independents will continue to grow as a group, and their support for Irish unity will also grow. It is not inconceivable that at some future point, independents will represent a key group capable of determining the constitutional future of Northern Ireland.⁹

For respondents who did not support the re-unification of Ireland, the survey included a filter question that asked how acceptable or unacceptable the respondent would find Irish unity if a majority of the electorate voted in favour of it. In other words, the question was seeking to elicit how flexible the pragmatic would be, in the context of a democratic choice. The results are presented in Table 5. For the purposes of this investigation, only individuals who rejected Irish unity in favour of retention of the link with Britain are included in the analysis.¹⁰

⁸ The 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey provide some empirical evidence in support for this view in that not only has Catholic opinion remained overwhelmingly supportive of the Agreement—96.9 per cent saying that they would support the Agreement if a referendum was held again today—but the overwhelming majority believe that both nationalists and unionists have benefited equally from the Agreement (66.9 per cent) and a notable minority believe (25.1 per cent) that nationalists have benefited more from the Agreement than unionists. By contrast, a majority of Protestants (52.3 per cent) now oppose the Agreement and the vast majority (77.1 per cent) also believe that nationalists have benefited more from the Agreement than unionists, with only just over a fifth (21.8 per cent) stating that both nationalists and unionists have benefited equally (see <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>).

⁹ An increasingly plausible scenario, given the repeated calls made by the two nationalist parties (SDLP and SF) for a referendum, or border poll, in relation to this very issue, but also its formal endorsement, for the first time, by David Trimble during the annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council in March 2002.

¹⁰ As the data in Table 4 suggest, among those who did not choose Irish re-unification, retention of the link with Britain was, by far, the preferred option for the vast majority of respondents. For example, whereas 93 per cent of Protestants who did not choose Irish unity endorsed this position, the equivalent proportion among both independents and Catholics was 79 per cent and 64 per cent respectively. Alternative analysis,

Table 5: Religious identification and the possibility of Irish unity, 2002

	Per cent who wish to remain part of the UK:			All
	Independent	Catholic	Protestant	
Happily accept	52	59	24	33
Not like but live with it	37	38	43	42
Impossible to accept	11	3	33	25
Total	100	100	100	100
No. of cases	90	157	696	943

Note: Question: "If the majority of people in Northern Ireland ever voted to become part of a United Ireland do you think you would find this almost impossible to accept, Would not like it, but could live with it if you had to, or, would happily accept the wishes of the majority?"

Only individuals who explicitly stated that they wished to remain part of the UK are included in this analysis.

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2002.

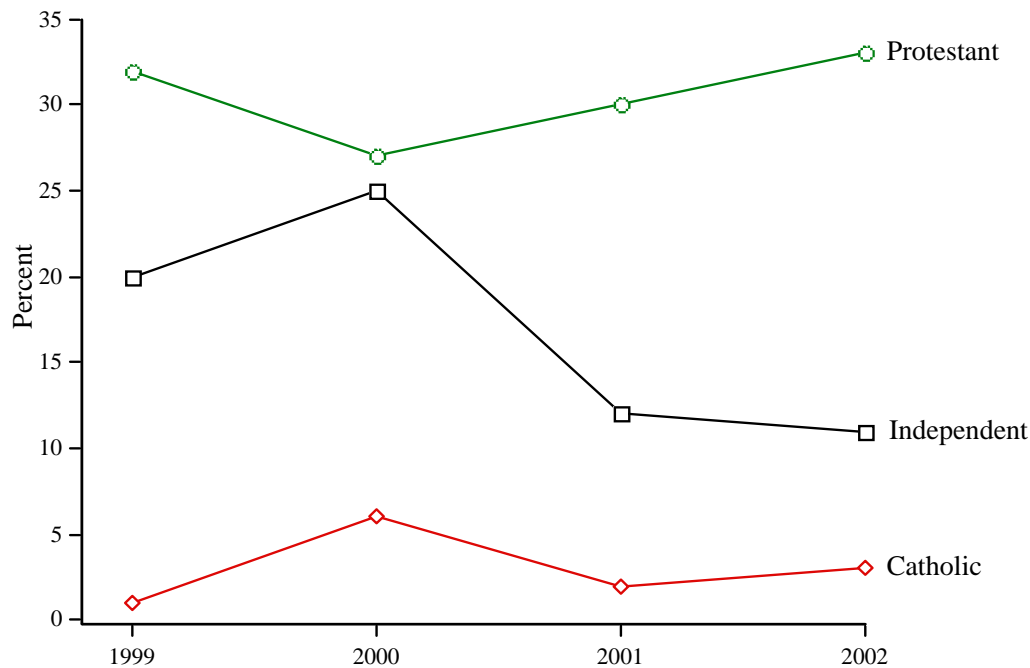
Table 5 shows that among those who wished to remain part of Britain, there is a significant minority who would be implacably opposed to Irish unity, even if a majority voted in favour of it; whereas about one in four would find such an outcome "impossible to accept" while, at the other end of the scale, one-third would be prepared to "happily accept" it.

Among Protestants, the extent of the opposition is, of course, magnified with one third of the population finding it "impossible to accept" and just under a quarter stating that they would "happily" accept the wishes of the majority. By contrast, religious independents, despite both their opposition to Irish unity and their desire to remain part of Britain, exhibit a noticeably high degree of pragmatism concerning the situation. Table 5 shows that just 11 per cent of those wanting to remain part of Britain would be implacably opposed to unity while, at the other end of the scale, just over half would be prepared to "happy accept" this position.

Religious independents are, then, more ready to compromise than either Catholics or Protestants regarding constitutional preferences. Those who wish to remain in the UK are also more prepared to compromise than Protestants if Irish unity became the preference of a majority. Figure 5 suggests that independents who wish to maintain the link with Britain are increasingly more willing to compromise on this, the proportion finding it "impossible to accept" more than halving—from 25 per cent in 2000 to 11 per cent in 2002—in the space of three years. By contrast, around one-third of Protestants consistently remain opposed to unity, regardless of the preferences of a majority of the population.

which also included respondents who chose either an "independent state" or some "other" option, suggests no substantive difference in findings

Figure 5: Unionists who say “impossible to accept” Irish unity, 1999-2002



Sources: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 1999-2002.

PARTY CHOICE

Since the late nineteenth century, the main cleavage in the Northern Ireland party system has been the constitution. The attempts that have been made to encourage voting across the constitutional divide have invariably failed, from the class politics of the Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1950s and 1960s, to the community-based politics of the Alliance Party in the 1970s and 1980s and the Women's Coalition in the 1990s (McAllister and Wilson, 1978; Fearon, 1999).¹¹ British policy towards Northern Ireland has been predicated on the existence of a sizeable and moderate centrist group, who could be persuaded to support parties promoting socio-economic rather than constitutional policies (Ruane and Todd, 1992). To the extent that such a moderate group exists within the Northern Ireland electorate, it has not been reflected in mainstream electoral competition.

Up until 1968, the constitutional divide produced two monolithic parties, the Unionist and Nationalist parties, representing their respective communities; since then, intra-community divisions on how best to resolve the conflict has resulted in a highly fragmented party system (Evans and Duffy, 1997; Knox et al., 1995). These divisions first manifested themselves within the Protestant community, with splits within the dominant Ulster Unionist party following the collapse of the Stormont parliament in 1972.

¹¹ The most recent example of this phenomenon is the collapse of the Women's Coalition who, despite its historic victory in achieving the election of two members to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, failed to get any member elected in the 2003 Assembly elections

Table 6: Religious identity and party preference, 2002

	Independent	Catholic	Protestant
Confessional	44	75	75
Bi-confessional	14	6	6
Non-confessional	42	19	19
(Abstain)	(38)	(13)	(14)
(Don't know)	(4)	(6)	(5)
Total	100	100	100
No. of cases	178	737	856

Note: Figures are percentages. Question: If there was a general election in which only Northern Ireland parties were standing, which one do you think you would be most likely to support? "Confessional" parties are defined as the UUP, DUP, PUP, UDP, SDLP, SF and "others". "Biconfessional" parties are the Alliance Party and the Women's Coalition.

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2002.

More recently, the Catholic community has suffered a major split with the entry of the IRA into electoral politics, through its political wing Sinn Fein (McAllister, forthcoming). This fragmentation, however, has not resulted in a significant move away from confessional parties, which still dominate the party system. In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case, given the increase in voting preferences for the political extremes—Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party—at both the local and national level, particularly in the post-Agreement period (see Cochrane, 2001; Totten, 2001).¹²

Given the pragmatic constitutional position of religious independents noted in the previous section, we might expect that this group would be most supportive of the biconfessional centre—represented most recently in the contemporary party system by the Alliance party and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. In fact, as Table 6 shows, independents are only marginally more likely to support a biconfessional party compared to either Catholics or Protestants; indeed just 14 per cent of independents reported such support in the 2002 survey. But independents are clearly not enamoured with the confessional parties either; just 44 per cent supported such a party, compared to three quarters of Catholics and Protestants.

In fact, almost two-thirds of religious independents opted for what might be termed the "non-confessional" option, either by saying that they did not know who they would support or by abstaining from voting. The high level of abstention among independents—38 per cent—is particularly significant; because of their substantially

¹² During the 2001 election, for example, not only was the traditional UUP dominance of Westminster seats and their vote share eaten into substantially by their DUP rivals but also, for the first time in electoral history, Sinn Fein overtook the SDLP to become the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland. The electoral strength of the two extreme parties was further enhanced during the Assembly elections in 2003, when not only did the DUP overtake the UUP to become the largest party in Northern Ireland, but the gap in electoral support between SF and the SDLP widened even further.

higher level of educational qualifications, it might be expected that they would exhibit higher levels of turnout compared to the rest of the population. This disenchantment with the available party choices suggests otherwise: rather than opting for one of the existing parties, they choose to reject electoral politics altogether.

CONCLUSION

Since the start of the present Northern Ireland conflict in 1968, various social changes have been foreshadowed as having the capacity to ameliorate the sectarian conflict. Increasing rates of intermarriage, community development, generational replacement, social mobility and labour force integration have all been promoted at various times as a solution (for reviews, see Rose and McAllister, 1983; Whyte, 1990). Despite early promise, all have failed to deliver any significant or lasting change to the nature of the Northern Ireland conflict. The rise in the proportion of religious independents within Northern Ireland represents a new—and largely unanticipated—element in the conflict; it is also potentially the most significant social change in almost four decades of the conflict.

The results presented here suggest that independents are very different socially from those who retain a traditional religious affiliation. They also differ in their constitutional preferences and are noticeably more pragmatic in being willing to accept solutions other than their first preference. All of this suggests that, at last, major underlying social change could well have an impact on the conflict, as several generations of social observers of Northern Ireland society have predicted, starting with Denis Barritt and Charles Carter in the 1960s. (Barritt and Carter, 1962).

Unfortunately, this scenario is overly optimistic, as our results for party choice suggest. Independents clearly reject confessional politics, but they are not prepared to embrace the biconfessional politics of the centrist parties, possibly viewing them as simply another part of the sectarian party system, a not unlikely scenario in light of the decision by both the Alliance Party and the Women's Coalition in 2001 to re-designate some of their members as Unionist to ensure the re-election of the Ulster Unionist Party leader, David Trimble as First Minister and thus to shore up the Good Friday Agreement.¹³ The preferred solution of the independents—withdrawal from electoral politics—suggests that their impact on the society is substantially unrealised. Until they see new parties emerging that are genuinely outside the sectar-

¹³ The Good Friday Agreement obliges Northern Ireland Assembly members to self-designate as 'Unionist', 'Nationalist' or 'Other'. Candidates for the posts of First and Deputy First Minister require parallel majorities—that is, each must enjoy majority support among Unionist Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Nationalist MLAs (see Wilford, 2001). In the first contest in November 2001 since the suspension of the Assembly, Trimble failed to obtain majority Unionist support and his subsequent re-election was thus dependent upon the re-designation of non-aligned members to a Unionist label. To achieve this goal, three members of the Alliance Party and one member of the Women's Coalition subsequently, albeit temporarily, re-designated themselves as Unionist, while the remaining member of the Women's Coalition chose a Nationalist designation (see Evans and Tonge, 2001, for a detailed discussion of this issue in relation to Alliance party members).

ian cleavage structure of the party system, religious independents will remain unmobilised.

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