The Brexit Effect? Ethno-National Divisions on the Island of Ireland among Political Elites and the Youth

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The Brexit Effect? Ethno-National Divisions on the Island of Ireland among Political Elites and the Youth

Barry O’Connell and Mike Medeiros

University of Amsterdam

ABSTRACT
The status of Northern Ireland has been at the heart of the Brexit impasse. Using semi-structured interviews of political elites and an original survey experiment administered to young people on both sides of the Irish border (N = 771), this study analyzes Brexit’s impact on identities and territorial attachments on the island of Ireland. The results demonstrate that political elites perceived that Brexit had greatly exacerbated intergroup tensions; whereas the survey experiment only identified a significant influence of Brexit on territorial attachment in the Republic of Ireland, and no significant effect of Brexit on attitudes was measured in Northern Ireland.

Introduction
The Brexit debate has been at the center of the relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) since 2016. The most publicized impasse that stalled the withdrawal of the UK from the EU has arguably been the status of Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit UK. The Northern Irish question has not only brought tension between the UK and Ireland, it has also heightened hostilities within Northern Ireland. In the late twentieth century, the Northern Irish case was marked by one of the most violent and publicized civil conflicts in the Western world. This civil war, euphemistically called “The Troubles,” claimed the lives of over 3,300 people and lasted for three decades. “The Troubles” finally came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, which has greatly contributed to peaceful intergroup relations between Catholics and Protestants in the twenty-year interim. However, with Brexit threatening to undermine many of the GFA’s main tenets, international attention is firmly back on the complex and sensitive status of Northern Ireland.

The current study seeks to analyze the impact of the Brexit debate on intergroup relations on the island of Ireland and asks: Did the Brexit debate influence territorial attachment among communities on the island of Ireland? It focuses on the perceptions of political elites and the attitudes of the younger generation. The young on both sides of the border make for a particularly interesting group of citizens to explore as they have spent their developmental years after “The Troubles” in the peaceful aftermath of the GFA.
Social Identity Theory (SIT) predicts that political stability can play a role in intergroup interaction, with “high levels of political instability linking to higher levels of in-group bias.” The accuracy of this claim, as it applies to the Northern Irish context, is examined in the current investigation.

The current study uses a mixed-method analysis framework. Firstly, in-depth interviews with political elites across the ideological spectrum were conducted. These included UK Members of Parliament (MPs), Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from both Unionist and Nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, as well as members of the Irish government (including the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar). Secondly, an original survey experiment that sought to measure the causal effect of Brexit on territorial attachment was conducted with a student sample from across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland ($N=771$).

The results indicate that political elites in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland perceived that the Brexit debate had greatly exacerbated intergroup tensions. However, the survey experiment only identified a significant influence of Brexit on territorial attachment in the Republic of Ireland, while no such significant effect was detected among communities in Northern Ireland.

We believe that the current study contributes to our understanding of intergroup attitudes and territorial attachment through two main findings. Firstly, the results support a potential disconnect between perceptions expressed by political elites and attitudes actually held by their constituents; thus, complementing existing scholarship that has highlighted such a disconnect in ethnonationalist cases. Secondly, the findings demonstrate that the influence of impactful and salient political events on intergroup attitudes and territorial attachment is context dependent. While priming Brexit was able to lead to a change in attitudes in the Republic of Ireland, such changes were, arguably, hampered by the history and salience of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

**Unintended consequence? Brexit and Ireland**

Northern Ireland is a region within the United Kingdom that comprises six of the nine counties of Ulster on the North-Eastern part of the island of Ireland. Northern Ireland became a politically separate region to the rest of the island in 1921, with the partition of Ireland. To this day, Northern Ireland is a very socially segregated region, and has experienced intense intergroup conflict between its Protestant and Catholic populations. Protestants in Northern Ireland tend to have historical lineage from Great Britain, and tend to be “Unionist,” in the sense of maintaining and strengthening the union of (Northern) Ireland and Great Britain. Catholics, on the other hand, tend to have native ancestors from the island of Ireland, and be “Nationalist” in the irredentist sense seeking to join the Republic of Ireland; thus also referred to as “Republican.” The 2011 census found that 48% of the resident population in Northern Ireland self-identified as Protestant, and 45% self-identified as Catholic, highlighting the very narrow margin between both groups. However, though there is no scientific consensus, demographic trends expect a Catholic majority by 2021, which will overtake Protestants for the first time.
The GFA in 1998 marked the turning point between Catholic and Protestant communities, bringing “The Troubles” to an end after three decades of violent conflict. The GFA was ratified by concurrent referendums both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, with respectively the support of 71% and 94% of voters. The GFA stated many clear mandates, such as a border-free island, a power-sharing executive with devolved powers following elections in Northern Ireland, and dual British and Irish citizenship for everyone born in Northern Ireland, if requested. Significantly, a key component of the GFA is the “consent principle,” which allows for the future status of Northern Ireland to be decided by a majority of its citizens who may choose to leave the UK and join the Irish Republic. This legitimizes the aspirations of Nationalists in the North and sets out a democratic avenue in which to join the Republic of Ireland.

The GFA had not only resulted in peaceful coexistence, but it had also led to move, although only slightly, toward a less sectarian political landscape. Arguably, the residents of Northern Ireland had learned to live together in a promising post-GFA reality. Then, in 2016, the voters of the UK supported an exit from the EU, and the future of Northern Ireland once again became a prominent concern.

In the 2016 referendum, Brexit was rejected by the people of Northern Ireland with 55.8% voting to remain. However, with the weight of the population in England, the overall majority of the UK voted to leave the EU by 51.9%. Brexit has the potential to undermine the GFA as the agreement clearly acknowledges EU membership as an inherent part of the treaty, “further[ing] the unique relationship [and] close cooperation […] as friendly neighbors and as partners in the European Union” [emphasis added]. EU membership allows for free trade and free movement on the island with its common trade area and single market. Financially, Northern Ireland is also deeply embedded in the EU, with Northern Ireland Structural Funds and Common Agricultural Policy allocations at €2,299 million from 2014 to 2020. The EU also funded the PEACE programs which donated over €1.3 billion from 1995 to 2013. With Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland so deeply entrenched in the EU, along with so much of the peace process facilitated by Europe, Brexit would be a logistical nightmare for the island of Ireland.

In the years since the Brexit vote, uncertainty has been rife across the islands of Ireland and Great Britain. There have been numerous political and constitutional crises in Westminster, costing the Tories two Prime Ministers. The Northern Irish Assembly was also in crisis for three years with the collapse of the power-sharing executive, due to a political stalemate between the leaders of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

Furthermore, political attitudes in Northern Ireland have already started to shift. Figure 1, using survey data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey for 2015 and 2019, shows that the citizens of Northern Ireland have become significantly warmer to the idea of reunification with the Republic of Ireland than they were prior to Brexit. While still a choice for a minority, attitudes seem definitively to have moved.

Seeing as Brexit has been reshaping the socio-political landscape of the island of Ireland, it is therefore important to try and understand its impact on the views and perceptions of citizens on both sides of the border.
Pulling together or pushing apart

Social Identity Theory is a popular lens through which to understand intergroup conflict. First developed by Tajfel and Turner, the theory has become a useful framework for understanding collective grievances, bias, prejudice and societal discrimination. According to Tajfel and Turner, SIT is based on in-group bias: “the tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group in evaluations and behavior.” A “social group” can be understood as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves as members of a “social category,” sharing salient attributes like skin color in the United States, or language in Canada. Individuals are motivated to maintain or achieve a positive sense of identity, done so by intergroup comparison, determining whether their group is different from, or superior to, groups of which they’re not affiliated. Ferguson and McKeown indicate that political stability can play a role in intergroup interaction, with “high levels of political instability linking to higher levels of in-group bias.” Stryker expands on Tajfel & Turner’s work and proposes that identities are hierarchically ordered into a structure based on their salience, and identities with the most salient likely to be activated than those down the list.

SIT has been a popular lens used by academics to examine Northern Ireland’s intergroup conflict. Though positive strides have been made through peace talks and the GFA, stark divisions among communities are still very much an everyday reality. Basing themselves on Jackson, Cassidy and Trew highlight the interesting and complex conundrum of the “double-minority model” visible in intergroup relations in Northern Ireland. Both groups can be seen to hold the minority status: Catholics, are the minority in Northern Ireland, and Protestants are the minority on the island of Ireland; “As a result, both groups may feel threatened and evaluate their identities negatively.” Stringer and Mallett highlight the delicacy of the groups’ status and self-esteem: “[W]ithin Northern Ireland, minority and majority status can fluctuate across streets, estates, and towns, and an individual’s identity as a majority or minority member may
then also fluctuate as he or she moves from one situation or environment to another. This may have ramifications for the development of mistrust.”

In-group security is a pertinent factor to take into account when analyzing intergroup relations, and a lack of trust is intensified if an out-group has a majority advantage, putting the minority group in a more vulnerable position toward discrimination. As Protestants and Catholics can be considered to both hold a minority status in varying circumstances, the threat of discrimination or prejudice also varies depending on the circumstance, creating a heightened mutual anxiety.

The salience of identity in Northern Ireland is heightened by the particular political landscape. The main political parties in Northern Ireland are segregated along clear group lines, with overtly Nationalist or Unionist ideologies and agendas. While some smaller parties, such as Alliance, have witnessed recent increases in their vote-share, perhaps signaling a slow-moving shift toward a middle-ground, the politics of Northern Ireland are still dominated by the two parties with the hardest stances on opposing constitutional status: the Unionist DUP and Nationalist Sinn Féin.

The 2016 Brexit referendum gave a telling insight into the dynamics of intergroup identity. While Protestants were much more divided than Catholics, voting patterns were still along sectarian lines. European integration has been described by Unionists as being a “Trojan Horse” by diminishing the Irish border, allowing for more influence from the Republic of Ireland, and ultimately threatening British identity; whereas Nationalists, on the other hand, welcome the diminishing border.

But how has Brexit, and the debates that followed the referendum, impacted the social and political landscapes in the North and the South sides of the island of Ireland?

**Politicians’ perceptions of Brexit’s impact on Ireland**

In order to get appropriate insight into the perceptions of the political class on both sides of the border, semi-structured interviews were conducted with political elites in Northern Ireland from every major party across the ideological spectrum, and also with leading members of the government from the Republic of Ireland. A total of nine interviews were conducted, from April 2019 to June 2019, in person, on the phone, or via email.

Unionist political elites that took part in interviews were MP Gregory Campbell and MLA Peter Weir from the DUP, and UUP MLA Robbie Butler. Unionist voices stated that they believed Brexit had clearly exacerbated tensions within Northern Ireland and was one of the main reasons for the political impasse in the Northern Irish Assembly and Executive. However, they also stated that once the UK leaves the EU these newly heightened tensions will “dissipate.” Unionists similarly indicated that the Brexit debate had exacerbated tensions between Northern Ireland and the Republic due to the Irish government’s handling of the Brexit negotiations, partnered with the EU.

Unionist political elites stated that the reason for the rise in political uncertainty was due to nationalists having “overplayed” the threat of Brexit to the GFA. Unionist politicians also expressed a belief that the Republic of Ireland was purposely avoiding a pragmatic response to Brexit and instead took a “punishing” approach to the UK. One
unionist politician stated that the Irish government had taken a confident and provocative stance against the UK as it has the backing of the EU, and this shift in power dynamic has caused Unionists to be on guard. It was expressed also that the European project diminishes national sovereignty and undermined Britishness, which has made many Unionists “enhance their own Euro-skeptic positions.”

Nationalist political elites in Northern Ireland who were interviewed were SDLP MLAs Colin McGrath and Claire Hanna, and Sinn Féin MLA Máirtín Ó Muleoir. Both Nationalist parties also believed that the Brexit debate had indeed heightened group tensions within Northern Ireland and also between the Republic of Ireland and the North. The Sinn Féin politician stated that the Brexit debate was a “toxin at the heart of the peace process […] polarizing communities.” The SDLP politician followed along these lines by stating that Brexit was a catalyst for the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly as neither of the two ruling parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, want to be at the helm of government for Brexit’s delivery. Nationalist political elites believed that tensions were rising because the Unionist side wants to implement Brexit in a way that undermines the GFA. EU membership is crucial in supporting the mandates set out by the GFA, and a full Northern Ireland exit from the EU would irrevocably damage the integrity of the treaty. Nationalists expressed a closer affiliation to the EU, as it was seen as a source of constructive relationship-building.

Yet, these opinions were not exclusive to Nationalists, as MLA Stewart Dickson of the Alliance, a “middle-ground party,” agreed that there had indeed been an increase in ethno-national tensions due to the Brexit debate, stating “the Brexit issue seems to have been sectarianized, and the Brexit issue is tied up with identity and insularity.” According to this Alliance member, Brexit had forced questions that were otherwise settled, regarding binary Irish/British national identities. They also stated that the EU has greatly benefited Ireland with the smoothing over of the hard border, which is why it has support from the Catholic community. However, for Protestants, some of which may be influenced by the stance of the DUP, British identity was tied up with “independence,” which has come to mean a rejection of EU integration.

The belief that Brexit had aggravated social tensions was also shared by members of government in the Republic of Ireland, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Minister of European Affairs Helen McEntee. According to Taoiseach Varadkar, “anything that pulls Britain and Ireland apart or divides one community from the other in Northern Ireland aggravates tensions. Brexit does both.” The Taoiseach went on to say, “European integration caused Ireland and the UK to integrate thus reducing differences North and South and within Northern Ireland. Brexit threatens to reverse the course of history.” The Irish government also prioritizes a frictionless border, as this has “allowed for the normalization of social, political and commercial relationships across Ireland,” rebuilding relationships and communities after years of conflict. When asked about whether a United Ireland could remedy the Brexit impasse, members of the government stated it was not their agenda: “Brexit is not a vehicle for achieving a united Ireland. They are separate and distinct issues.” It was also stated by the Taoiseach that the Irish government does not want to threaten anyone’s loyalty or identity, and only wants to ensure that peace continues for all people on the island.
While our sample of political elites may not be exhaustive, it is representative of political allegiances in Ireland. Moreover, the perceptions that were espoused by the politicians who were interviewed seem to match the overall positions of the parties that they represent. Though our interviews do not permit for an in-depth analysis of these perceptions, and the format might have hindered the expression of positions of dissension (a situation that has been more prominent since the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement was agreed on and published, in late 2019, amidst the Unionist side and particularly within the UUP); they nonetheless highlight that Brexit polarized the political classes in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the elites who were interviewed believed that Brexit had also impacted citizens’ attitudes, that intergroup tensions had heightened. But is this truly the case? Did Brexit impact territorial attachments among the citizens on both sides of the border in Ireland?

**Expecting the worst?**

The interviews with political elites indicated that the impact of the Brexit debate has been to distance and aggravate the Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist groups on the island of Ireland. The perceptions of the political representatives are in line with the tenets of SIT, that is that the reintroduction of a sensitive socio-political debate surrounding identity would lead both sides to perceive a greater threat for their communities, and therefore become more attached to their in-group. Unionist political elites claimed that European integration threatened to diminish and undermine Britishness. They also highlighted the role of the Republic of Ireland in worsening tensions.

The other politicians indicated that ethnonational alignments had been aggravated due to the Brexit debate. Specifically, Northern Irish Nationalists stated that tensions were caused by the undermining of the tenets of the GFA by Unionists and the UK Government. The EU was described as a force for good that has rebuilt relationships among the different communities. Though, the type of Brexit will certainly be a determining factor, on a scale from “soft” to “hard,” the decision of the British government on an UK-withdrawal undermines the GFA and threatens the socio-political gains that had been made, notably by Catholics in Northern Ireland.

We thus put forward two series of complementary hypotheses:

- **H1a:** Brexit leads Northern Irish Protestants to identify more with United Kingdom.
- **H1b:** Brexit leads Northern Irish Catholics to identify less with United Kingdom.
- **H2a:** Brexit leads Northern Irish Catholics to identify more with the Republic of Ireland.
- **H2b:** Brexit leads Northern Irish Protestants to identify less with the Republic of Ireland.

Finally, members from the government of the Republic of Ireland expressed similar opinions to those of Nationalists in the North. They stated that their chief concern was to maintain a border-free island and the GFA, of which the Republic is a co-guarantor. The debate around a potential “hard” border on the island made the relations between the Republic of Ireland and the North more salient. This fact was reflected in the government of the Republic of Ireland’s active role in trying to preserve a special status for Northern Ireland and avoid a physical detachment with the South. Therefore, we put forwards a final hypothesis:
H3: Brexit leads citizens in the Republic of Ireland to feel more attached to Northern Ireland.

**Data and analysis**

To test the hypotheses that were formulated, and verify the impact of Brexit on the territorial attachment of citizens from both sides of the border, a survey experiment was conducted. University and secondary school administrators were contacted in the Spring of 2019 and asked to send out an email to their students requesting them to answer our survey. The respondents were composed of university and third-level students from all over Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. A total of 771 usable responses were collected, composed of 521 (68%) respondents from the Republic of Ireland and 250 (32%) from Northern Ireland.

For the Northern Ireland sample, a majority of respondents who were eligible to vote in the Brexit referendum indicated having voted to remain; matching previous research that has demonstrated that younger voters in Northern Ireland were more prone to vote for this option. This was the case in our data for both Catholics and Protestant respondents.

Respondents randomly received (or not) a section of three questions on Brexit; which measured their level of surprise toward the success of Brexit in the referendum, their perceptions regarding the complexity of the Brexit process, and how “sick and tired” they were of hearing about Brexit. The Northern Irish sample was composed of 115 respondents who were Catholics (46%), 73 respondents were Protestants (29%), and 41 (16%) indicated that they had no religious affiliation. Catholics, Protestants, and respondents with no religion were as surprised at the success of Brexit in the referendum, as the data do not show a statistical difference between the religious groups. However, Protestants were significantly (at \( p < 0.1 \)) less likely to perceive the Brexit process to be more complicated than expected compared to Catholics; and respondents with no religion were significantly (at \( p < 0.1 \)) less sick of the Brexit debate than Catholics. Nevertheless, all the religious groups were on average quite surprised by the Brexit referendum results, perceived the process to be more complicated than expected, and were rather sick of the debate.

The strong attitudes toward Brexit displayed by the sub-sample that received the treatment supports its appropriateness as a priming mechanism. Research has shown that priming for socio-political phenomena can impact individuals’ intergroup attitudes as well as their identities. Brexit was definitely quite a salient issue in the news media during the administration of our experiment and for three years prior to it. Nevertheless, political debates, especially salient ones, are quite sensitive to be primed and thereafter influence subsequent attitudes. Furthermore, priming can still impact political attitudes in Northern Ireland despite the salience of intergroup frictions and the tensions associated with them. We, therefore, expect that having to answer, and think about, questions on Brexit would prime and activate previously held attitudes on the political phenomenon and thereafter impact subsequent socio-political attitudes.

Respondents who answered having grown up in Northern Ireland were asked, all on a 0–100 scale, how much they identified with being Irish and British, and how much
they felt attached to the Republic of Ireland and the UK. For their part, respondents who answered having grown up in the Republic of Ireland were only asked about their level of attachment to Northern Ireland. For more detail on the survey questions used in the analyses, see the Appendix.

Figure 2 shows the mean differences for the identity and attachment questions between the group that received the Brexit treatment and the one that did not. The results do not indicate a statistical difference between both experimental groups for subjects from Northern Ireland (columns 1–4). Being primed by Brexit did not lead to a significant difference in Irish and British identities, nor did it lead to a statistical difference for the level of attachment to the Republic of Ireland and the UK. However, Brexit did lead to a significant difference between both experimental groups for the respondents from the Republic of Ireland. Being primed by Brexit led to a stronger attachment (by 6% points) to Northern Ireland for the group who received the Brexit treatment compared to the group that did not.

These results appear to only support the last hypothesis that was put forward (H3). However, inter-individual heterogeneity is an important aspect of political behavior research. Specifically, social groups can react differently to socio-political information. We therefore also explored the potential moderating effect of Northern Ireland’s most important socio-political cleavage: religion.

We first explore the possible moderation effect of religion on the Britishness measures. The results, presented in Figure 3, do not support a moderating effect. Religion clearly, and significantly, impacts the strength of respondents’ British identity and their attachment to the UK; in a predictable pattern in which Protestants have on average the strongest identity and attachment to the UK, Catholics the weakest, and those with no religious affiliation fit in between. However, religion does not seem to have moderated the influence of the Brexit treatment on these attitudes.

As for the moderation effect of religion on the Irishness measures, the results in Figure 4 are quite similar to the previous ones in Figure 3. Once again, religion clearly has a significant impact on the respondents from Northern Ireland’s attitudes toward Irishness. Catholics have on average the strongest identity and attachment to the
Republic of Ireland, Protestants the weakest, and once again those with no religious affiliation are in between both main religious groups. Yet, as for the measures of Britishness, religion does not demonstrate a moderating influence on the impact of the Brexit treatment.

**Figure 3.** Religion and Britishness. The markers represent predictive margins derived from OLS regressions. Bars represent confidence intervals at the 76% level (corresponding to \( p < 0.1 \)).49 See Table A1 in the Appendix for full results.

**Figure 4.** Religion and Irishness. The markers represent predictive margins derived from OLS regressions. Bars represent confidence intervals at the 76% level (corresponding to \( p < 0.1 \)).50 See Table A1 in the Appendix for full results.
Overall, the results lend support to only one of the hypotheses that were put forward. The group of respondents from the Republic of Ireland that received the Brexit treatment demonstrates a statistically stronger attachment to Northern Ireland than the respondents who were not primed by Brexit. Thus, supporting hypothesis H₃. However, Brexit did not show any significant influence on the attitudes of the respondents from Northern Ireland. Being primed by Brexit did not lead to a statistical difference in the identities nor the territorial attachment of these respondents; not even when religion was explored as a moderating effect. Therefore, the results do not support in any manner the four other hypotheses (H₁a, H₁b, H₂a, and H₂b).

**Conclusion**

The present study strived to explore the potential consequences of the Brexit debate on the socio-political context on the island of Ireland (north and south). It was expected that, following tenets of Social Identity Theory, that in-group and out-group biases would be aggravated by the political instability engendered by Brexit. This was also the general expectations that were revealed by a series of interviews conducted with politicians and representatives of political parties from both sides of the border. While Unionists expected tensions to abate when Brexit was settled, there was a general agreement from the political elites that Brexit had exacerbated intergroup frictions between the communities within Northern Ireland and between both Irelands. Yet, the results of a survey experiment administered to individuals in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland dampen support for such expectations. Although priming Brexit did lead to a greater significant attachment to Northern Ireland among respondents from the Republic of Ireland, the Brexit treatment did not lead to a significant difference in the identities and territorial attachments of respondents from Northern Ireland.

The results highlight two important findings. First, they demonstrate a potential disconnect between political elites and the citizens that they represent. The lack of knowledge and detachment between elites and citizens is not new and has also been found in other ethno-territorial contexts. Yet, the consequences of such a disconnect between political representatives and their constituents in a highly divided social context, in which incidences of communal violence are rather recent, lack a proper understanding. Therefore, research into the potential impact of a disconnect between political elites and citizens in contexts of social conflict demand in-depth scholarly attention.

Second, the fact that priming Brexit was able to lead to a difference in territorial attachment among respondents from the Republic of Ireland but had no significant effect on the identities or territorial attachments of those from Northern Ireland demonstrate a conditionality to the impact of political instability on intergroup attitudes. Essentially, ethno-territorial attitudes seem to be more malleable in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland. The ambition of the whole-island nation state has a significant impact on the Irish psyche. Nationalists in the South have always seen Northern Ireland as part of their “imagined community.” However, Brexit has the potential to undermine the GFA and drive a wedge between the two parts of Ireland. This uncertainty may have increased the salience of the place of Northern Ireland in the Irish psyche and therefore lead to a stronger attachment to Northern Ireland.
The historical and current context is obviously quite different in the North. The impact of the trauma of “The Troubles,” and the hundreds of years of tensions before that, cannot be underestimated on group identities. While the GFA did bring peace to Northern Ireland and force opposing sides to work together, it failed to undermine the strength of the ethno-nationalist identities and create a post-sectarian one. Furthermore, removal of state borders between the north and the south never weakened the sectarian defenses that exist at a local level. Therefore, the ethno-national alignments remained intact, even during a time of stability. This ethno-national division is still prominently displayed by the regional political system built upon it, and that allows for it to remain continuously salient. The resilience shown in our results regarding identity in Northern Ireland is in line with the data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, Table 2A in the Appendix, that demonstrate barely any change in religious and political identities in 2019 compared to prior to Brexit (2015). Hence, it is possible that Brexit will not influence people’s territorial attachments or allegiances in Northern Ireland as they are profoundly embedded within their psyche. Ultimately, Brexit might simply be just another chapter in the Northern Ireland case, and people on either side of the conflict remain unflinching.

Nevertheless, Northern Ireland is not simply stuck in stone. Its socio-political landscape has been able to evolve through the decades; and Figure 1 points to attitudinal shifts that coincide with Brexit. Intergroup relations might be even more affected as the Brexit-related dilemmas when mixed with that the commemorative events for the centenary anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland (1921–2021), commemorations that might awaken old social wounds.

Still, future research on these relationships needs to be undertaken. Specifically, it is possible that the treatment used in this study was too weak to lead to attitudinal differences; though it did lead to a statistical difference in respondents from the Republic of Ireland. Also, a more representative sample might help with the generalizability of the findings. Yet, while the convenience student sample used is in this study is not optimal, it is difficult to imagine that older generations in Northern Ireland would not have even more profoundly anchored identities and attitudes that would be difficult to induce change through an experimental framework.

Northern Ireland is changing, with estimates that its demography could result in a Catholic majority by 2021, surpassing the Protestant population for the first time since the state’s inception. If a border poll is called, which might be in the relatively near future, the opinions of the younger electorate will be of the utmost significance. Time will tell whether Brexit will be a success or failure. Brexit is, figuratively, a “shot in the dark” with irrevocable consequences for all people on the island of Ireland, and it is in both the Irish and UK governments interests to ensure collateral damage is vigilantly mitigated.

Notes on contributors

Barry O’Connell holds an M.Sc. in Political Economy (cum laude) from the University of Amsterdam. He currently works in transnational governance at international organizations in New York and Brussels.
Mike Medeiros is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on social diversity and political attitudes. Current projects include an economic, social and centre-periphery approach to understanding public opinion and vote choice in ethno-regional contexts.

Notes
5. It is worth mentioning that these intergroup distinctions in identity and allegiance are not absolute. Many individuals vote and act in ways which do not fully align with their identity group; however, these broad allegiances continue to hold true among the majority of the population. John Garry, “The EU Referendum Vote in Northern Ireland: Implications for Our Understanding of Citizens’ Political Views and Behaviour,” in Northern Ireland Assembly Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series, 2016–2017 (Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly, 2017); Ben Clements, "Exploring and Explaining Public Attitudes Towards the European Integration Process in Northern Ireland," Irish Political Studies 25, no. 3 (2010): 393–416.
10. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 56.
19. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
32. 21 respondents (9%) indicated that they were of another religious affiliation. This answer choice was coded as missing.
38. There is a lack of ethno-national divide in the Republic of Ireland due to an “institutionalized homogeneity.” Geoffrey Evans and Richard Sinnott, “Political Cleavages and Party Alignments in Ireland, North and South,” Proceedings of the British Academy 98
Therefore, this moderation effect was not explored with the Republic of Ireland sample.


ilising National Identity.”


46. BBC, “Catholic Majority Possible’ in NI by 2021.”


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

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**Appendix**

**Table A1. Determinants of identity and attachment.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British identity</th>
<th>Attachment to the UK</th>
<th>Irish identity</th>
<th>Attachment to the Rol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brexit treatment</td>
<td>3.93 (0.56)</td>
<td>8.14 (1.19)</td>
<td>−7.88 − 1.19</td>
<td>0.11 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion: Catholic</td>
<td>−62.82*** (−10.51)</td>
<td>−43.33*** (−7.55)</td>
<td>55.60*** (10.07)</td>
<td>47.09*** (7.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>−27.25*** (−3.26)</td>
<td>−16.24*** (−2.00)</td>
<td>20.83*** (2.64)</td>
<td>23.52*** (2.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brexit treatment*</td>
<td>−2.22 (−0.25)</td>
<td>−7.363 − 0.84</td>
<td>5.99 0.72</td>
<td>3.37 0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brexit treatment* No</td>
<td>−8.45 (−0.74)</td>
<td>−11.02 − 0.99</td>
<td>−8.45 (6.674)</td>
<td>1.36 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>75.00***</td>
<td>71.86***</td>
<td>34.42***</td>
<td>24.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.
Survey Questions Used in the Analyses

Where did you grow up? (If there is more than one location, choose the one in which you spent the most time.)

1. Republic of Ireland
2. Northern Ireland
3. Elsewhere in the UK
4. Other
5. Refuse to answer

What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?

1. Roman Catholic
2. Presbyterian Church in Ireland
3. Church of Ireland
4. Methodist Church in Ireland
5. Other
6. None
7. Refuse to answer

Brexit Treatment

For the following statements, express on the scale the extent to which you disagree (0—completely disagree) or agree (100—completely agree) with the following statements:

- I was surprised when the United Kingdom voted for Brexit (to leave the European Union) in 2016.
- The Brexit process has been far more complicated than I anticipated.
- I am sick and tired of hearing about Brexit.

Northern Ireland ONLY

How Irish do you feel? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 100 (completely)?

How British do you feel? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 100 (completely)?

How attached do you feel to the Republic of Ireland? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 (no attachment at all) to 100 (very attached)?

How attached do you feel to the United Kingdom? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 (no attachment at all) to 100 (very attached)?

Republic of Ireland ONLY

How attached do you feel to Northern Ireland? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 (no attachment at all) to 100 (very attached)?