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Neither/Nor: The rejection of Unionist and Nationalist identities in post-Agreement Northern Ireland

Katy Hayward and Cathal McManus

Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

Since 2006, according to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, the largest portion of people in Northern Ireland identify themselves as neither Unionist nor Nationalist but as 'Neither'. This fact is difficult to tally with the patterns of polarised election results and the narratives of a 'culture war' that dominate most analyses of contemporary Northern Ireland. This article examines the existence of this large portion of the population in Northern Ireland who reject the identities upon which the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement is centred. We find that those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist are predominantly female, they come from all religious backgrounds, all age groups, all national identities (though predominantly *both* British and Irish). The clear majority of those who identify as Neither Nationalist nor Unionist appear to be rejecting what is on offer from the political parties in Northern Ireland. The article concludes that the 1998 Agreement has created the conditions for a growing number of people to identify as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist, but at the same time it makes the emergence of any strong alternative, 'third way' type of politics difficult to envisage.

The 1998 Agreement Paradox

The signing of the 1998 Agreement has been identified as a seminal moment, marking the end of a conflict that had come to define Northern Ireland in terms of its conflicting communities: Catholic/Irish/Nationalist and Protestant/British/Unionist respectively. As such, the narrative of two fundamentally distinct communities has become central to efforts at establishing peace (Taylor, 2009). The 'all-island and all-Ireland cross-border institutions, and institutions linking the two sovereign governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland in confederal ways' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009) make explicit the interconnection between communal, national and political identity that is assumed to exist and, crucially, to be of greater significance than all other identities. It is implied, therefore, that Unionism and Nationalism are *more* than political ideologies – they are also traditions, with cultural roots.

This means that, whereas one would expect that contemporary political ideologies are likely to evolve and respond to a changing context, tying Unionism and Nationalism intrinsically to cultural and communal identities gives them the status of 'communities' and this allows them to

be considered as fundamentally unchangeable. Indeed, much has been made, in the implementation of the Agreement, of the need to uphold and respect the integrity of ‘both communities’ and ‘two traditions’ (The Agreement, 1998, *emphasis added*).

Importantly, the Agreement does not assume the creation of an ‘alternative’ identity or a ‘mixed’ middle ground. This can be seen in the provision for a Border Poll, which was so important for gaining the support of Nationalist parties for the Agreement (Mac Ginty, 2003; Hayes and McAllister, 2001). By having the possibility of a referendum on Northern Ireland’s constitutional status written into the Agreement, the presumption appears to be that there will be at some point in the future a majority in favour of Irish unity. Such an assessment assumes that the growth of the Catholic population relative to those in the diverse Christian denominations grouped under the heading ‘Protestant’ would mean that there would be a corresponding growth in the portion of population seeking Irish unity. However, there are two problems with this assumption. The first is that to be Catholic is not necessarily to self-identify as a Nationalist and it is certainly not inevitable that you hold ambitions for Irish unity. The second is that it disregards the fact that so many within Northern Ireland do not identify with either Unionism or Nationalism. In fact, four out of every ten people in Northern Ireland to describe themselves as *Neither Unionist nor Nationalist*.

It is this group that this article concentrates on. The research we present here centres on data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT), which has been conducted annually (with the exception of 2011) by ARK (Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University) since 1998, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Most fundamentally, we seek to identify whether the decision to identify as belonging to Neither of these communities is, overall, a ‘positive’ sign of confidence in the post-conflict dispensation or a ‘negative’ sign of disengagement from it.

Do the ‘two communities’ really exist?

The reason why the Agreement assumes the existence of a binary divide and places it at the heart of the ‘settlement’ is that there is plenty of historical and sociological evidence to show that opinions among respondents who are Catholic and those who are Protestant diverge significantly on political matters relating to the Irish border and national sovereignty (Todd, 2010). Catholic and Protestant can often be more significant variables in contemporary political or sociological analysis than age, gender or class (Evans and Tonge, 2013; Hayes and McAllister, 2015); opinion on Brexit is a good illustration of this (Garry, 2016). Different traditions do exist in Northern Ireland, but is it accurate to claim they are contained within only two blocs?

A quite straightforward means of challenging the ‘two communities’ thesis is to look at the relative size of these ‘blocs’. Data from the 2017 NILT (fieldwork was carried out between September 2017 and early February 2018, and 1,203 adults were interviewed) shows that, by bringing together a diversity of Christian denominations under the heading ‘Protestant’, the size of the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland is almost equal. This survey data is close to the findings of the 2011 census (which had 41% Catholic, 42% Protestant, 16% No Religion or not stated, and 1% other, see NISRA, 2012). What it also shows, of course, is that almost a quarter of respondents identify as being neither Catholic nor Protestant (19%).

A similar impression is gained from a different question on political identity in Northern Ireland – one that is often assumed to replicate the Catholic/Protestant distinction – in that we see here too a third category of strong significance. Almost half of respondents identify as being Neither Unionist nor Nationalist (45% in the NILT survey of 2017). The scale of this response demonstrates that the ‘No Religion’ category does not, on its own, explain the existence of the ‘Neither’ population, but rather that some Catholics and Protestants also self-identify as such. This is not a new phenomenon. Data from the NILT show a trend of fairly steady growth of the proportion of the population claiming to be Neither Unionist nor Nationalist, although there has been some fluctuation in this since a peak of 48% in 2012. It is now quite apparent that the largest proportion of the population do not identify with either of the two predominant labels in Northern Ireland politics. Indeed, the growth of this group over time would suggest that it could be worth considering a new distinction in Northern Ireland between those who identify as Unionist and Nationalist, and those who identify as Neither (Figure 1).

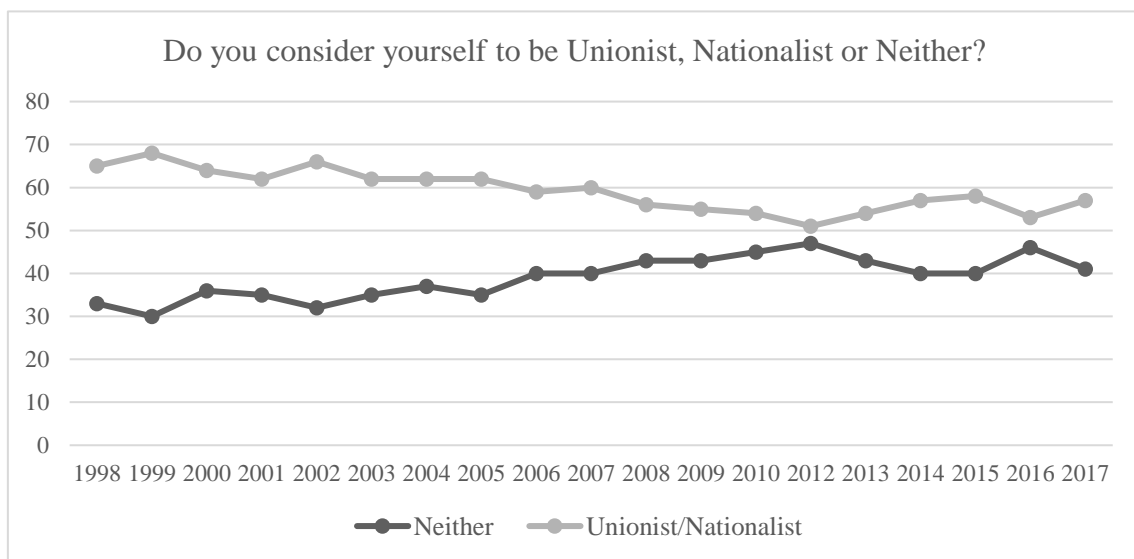


Figure 1. The proportion of respondents identifying as Unionist, Nationalist and Neither (NILT, 1998-2017)

This could be the manifestation of a phenomenon identified by Baka et al. (2012), namely that, rather than reflecting pre-existing ‘neutrality’, the design of the question itself could be producing ambiguity. In some ways, the offering of an option to be ‘Neither’ Unionist nor Nationalist is like offering a middle point in a Likert Scale. The decision to pick that middle point could be used to convey a lack of knowledge or a degree of uncertainty. But it could also reflect internal dilemmas on the part of the respondent (for example, the perception of negative associations with the other options) or it could mark a decisive rejection of the assumptions behind the question itself (e.g. that there is a binary divide) (Baka et al., 2012). By looking in more detail at who is ascribing themselves to this ‘Neither’ category, we hope to offer some insights into whether those self-reporting as Neither can be classified as having some group features or whether it is merely an articulation of dissatisfaction, protest or rejection. We would suggest that if there are consistent patterns in those designating as ‘Neither’ over the course of the twenty-year period, then it is more likely we can talk about a ‘group’, if not a community, and test this for its political significance.

Do the Neithers share common identity traits?

In this section, we wish to interrogate the question of who is a ‘typical’ ‘Neither’. In this we will look at the usual variables of sex, age and religion, but we will also note some points on which there are consistently significant differences between those who are Neither and those who are Nationalist and Unionist.

Predominantly female

NILT data shows that women have always been more likely than men to identify as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist. The growth in support for Neither has occurred across both men and women (a rise of 10 percentage points among men and 13 among women), but gender has become a more significant variable over the two decades since the 1998 Agreement. 61% of those identifying as Neither in 2017 are female. This is notable because sex is not a significant variable in support for Unionism or Nationalism (around 53% of those identifying in each category are male) (NILT, 2017). We know that nationalism itself is highly gendered and that nationalist movements are dominated by masculine interests and ideologies (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Nagel, 1998), and yet this does not in itself suggest a passive role for women in nationalist movements. There is much research to show that women have tended to have been written-out of their active role in Nationalist and Unionist mobilisation and conflict – and peace building – in Northern Ireland (Gilmartin, 2015; McDowell, 2006). For women to constitute such a large portion of those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist suggests that the rejection of the Unionist/Nationalist typology may also be associated with a rejection of the type of macho,

patriarchal politics that is still quite predominant in Northern Ireland (Ashe, 2007; Stapleton and Wilson, 2014).

Non-religious are not predominant among those identifying as 'Neither' Unionist nor Nationalist

Because of the association between Unionism/Nationalism and Protestantism/Catholicism in Northern Ireland, it is natural to assume that those who don't identify with either political ideology are likely to be non-religious. In which case, we would expect to see the rise of the Neither category being in parallel with a rise in the category of those saying they have No Religion. By comparing the data on this over the twenty years that followed the 1998 Agreement, we see that the level of support for Neither (from 33% in 1998 to 41% in 2017, with highs of 46-47%) has grown at about the same pace as the rise of No Religion (9% in 1998 to 19% in 2017) (Figure 2). It is notable that the growth of those saying they have No Religion is steadier than those who are Neither Unionist nor Nationalist. This is likely to be because an individual's decision about religious belief (in contrast to his or her political identity) is unlikely to be affected by external context and events.

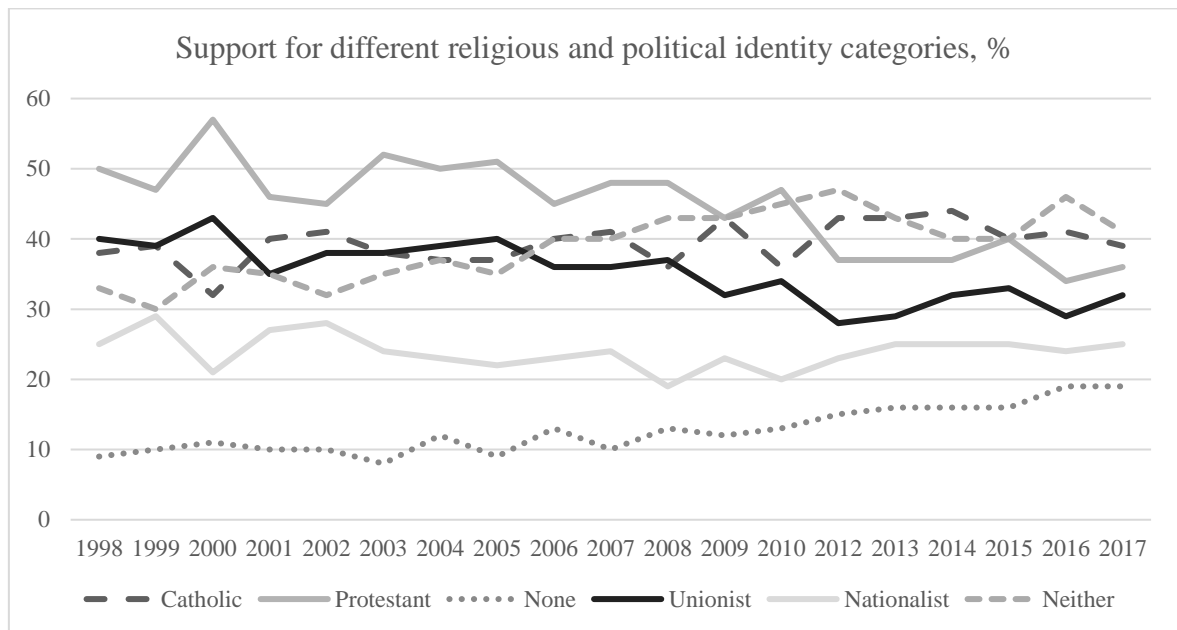


Figure 2. The proportion of NILT respondents in different religious and political categories of identity (NILT, 1998-2017)

Looking in more detail at this data we see that, in the space of twenty years, the proportion of non-religious saying they are Neither Unionist nor Nationalist has plateaued (at around 62% from a high of 74% in 2007). In contrast, there has been a trend of increasing support for

identifying as ‘Neither’ among Catholics since 1998. The data from 2017 indicates that almost a half of Catholics now identify as Neither, compared to just under one in every three Protestants. Within the category of ‘Neither’, we see 40% are Catholic, 30% Protestant and 30% of No Religion (Figure 3).

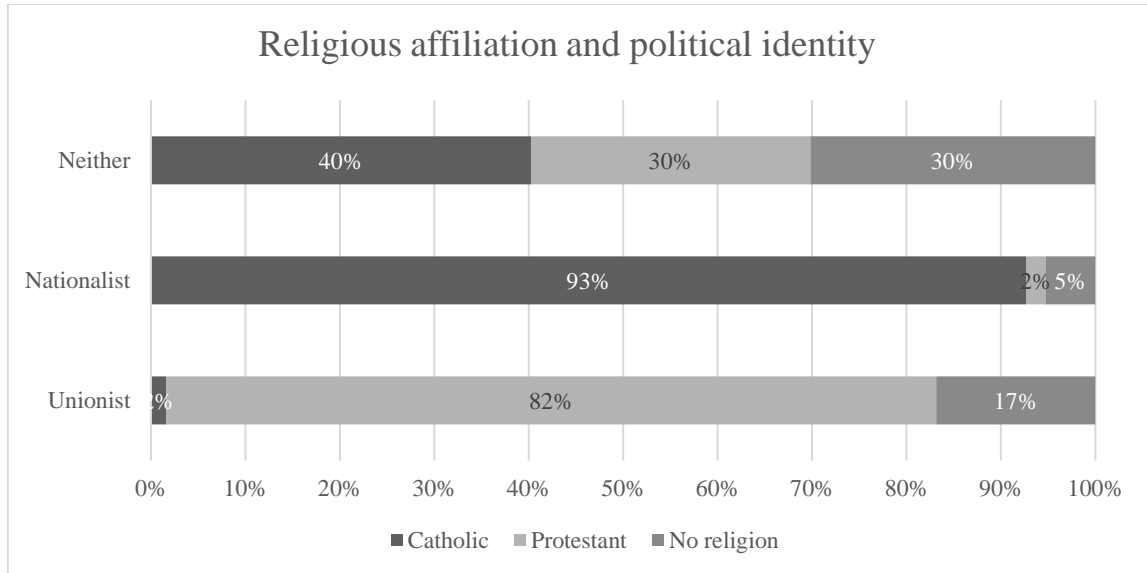


Figure 3. Religious breakdown within each of the three main categories of political identity (NILT, 2017)

To be ‘Neither’ is not just a trend among the younger generations

Several studies of post-Agreement Northern Ireland have identified increasing differences between political and voting choices across generations. Tilley and Evans (2011) see this as a consequence of the changing political environment in which the generations have been socialised, including an increase in choice of political parties (Evans and Duffy, 1997). Looking at the proportion of each generation group self-identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist since the Agreement, we see that it has become increasingly popular among the youngest adults. That said, although the oldest are still the least likely to identify as Neither, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of the over 65s who do so. It is worth noting the great leap among the 45-54 year olds from 2013 to 2017 who identify as Neither. The data becomes a little too thin to extrapolate too much about change within cohorts over time but it is notable that the generation who were most likely to describe themselves as Neither at the time of the signing of the Agreement (i.e. those then aged 25-44) have become increasingly likely to define themselves as such on its twentieth anniversary (Figure 4).

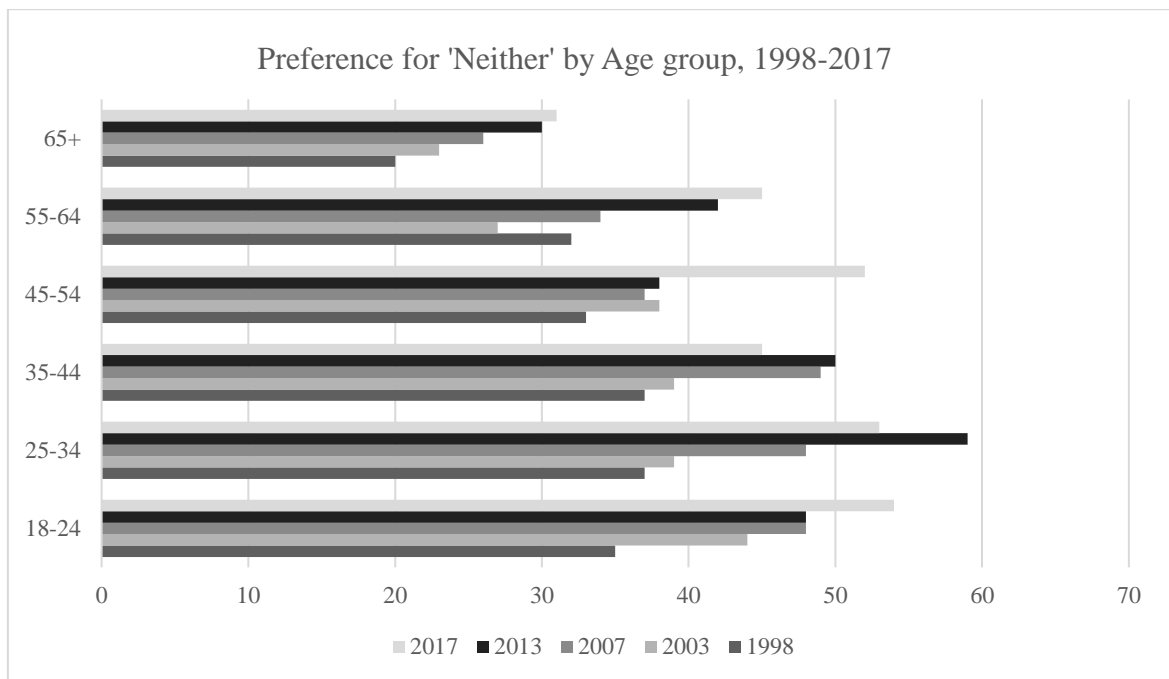


Figure 4. Proportion of each age group identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist (NILT, 1998-2017)

When we look at the age profile of those identifying as Neither in 2017, it is therefore perhaps not too surprising that it is spread fairly evenly across the generations. If we compare the age profile of Neithers to those of Unionists and Nationalists we note three points. First the age group 45-54 constitute a larger portion of support for Neither than it does for either Unionist or Nationalist designation. Secondly, the Neither designation has proportionately larger support among the youngest cohort and significantly smaller support among the oldest cohort than Unionist. Indeed, according to NILT 2017, 42% of those self-identifying as Unionist are over 65 (compared to 29% of those identifying as Nationalist and 20% of those identifying as Neither). Without overstating the case, this indicates that the political identities of Nationalist and Unionist are ones that the oldest generation are the most comfortable with. Similarly, to describe oneself as ‘Neither’ Unionist nor Nationalist is not just a trend confined to the youngest generations. We consider below whether this might have any significance for the future of Northern Ireland’s constitutional status.

Neithers are from across a spectrum of British-Irish identities

Academic scholarship is beginning to examine the growth of the category of ‘Northern Irish’ as an identity of meaning in Northern Ireland (McNicholl, 2018; Tonge and Gomez, 2015). Interestingly, McNicholl (2018) concludes that to identify as Northern Irish is not – as the constitutional arrangements of the Agreement might suggest – a synthesis of British and Irish

identities but rather represents a rejection of them. The census in 2011 returned 21% of people claiming Northern Irish as their national identity (NISRA, 2012). The question on this is not offered in NILT so we are unable to assess the relationship between the 'Northern Irish' and 'Neither' identified; instead we can look at the question offered on British and Irish identity, which offers a spectrum of exclusivity at either end, with 'equally' British and Irish identity offered as a mid-way point. It also offers the category of 'Other' than British or Irish.

One of the reasons behind the 'two communities' thesis is that Catholics are much less likely to say they have a British identity than Protestants, and Protestants are much less likely to say they have an Irish identity than Catholics. There is still some cross-over, however, which belies the idea of a stark binary. According to NILT 2017 data, 51% of Protestants claim some Irish identity and 35% of Catholics claim some British identity, although in both cases, this is predominantly as a 'minor' or 'equal' identity rather than the major identity. If, instead of religious background, we look at political identities, there are some interesting patterns of national identities. Of those describing themselves as Unionist, 44% claim some Irish identity and 52% say they are exclusively British. Of those describing themselves as Nationalist, 26% claim some British identity, but 72% describe themselves as exclusively Irish (compared to 54% of Catholics). It is therefore possible to conclude that the most exclusively connected identities are Nationalist and Irish. A 'Neither' political identity is compatible with a wide spread of national identities, including only British, only Irish and equally both. Indeed, the largest category for national identity among Neithers is 'equally British and Irish'. This shows that national identity is not as exclusively associated with Neithers in the way that it is with Unionists and Nationalists (Figure 5).

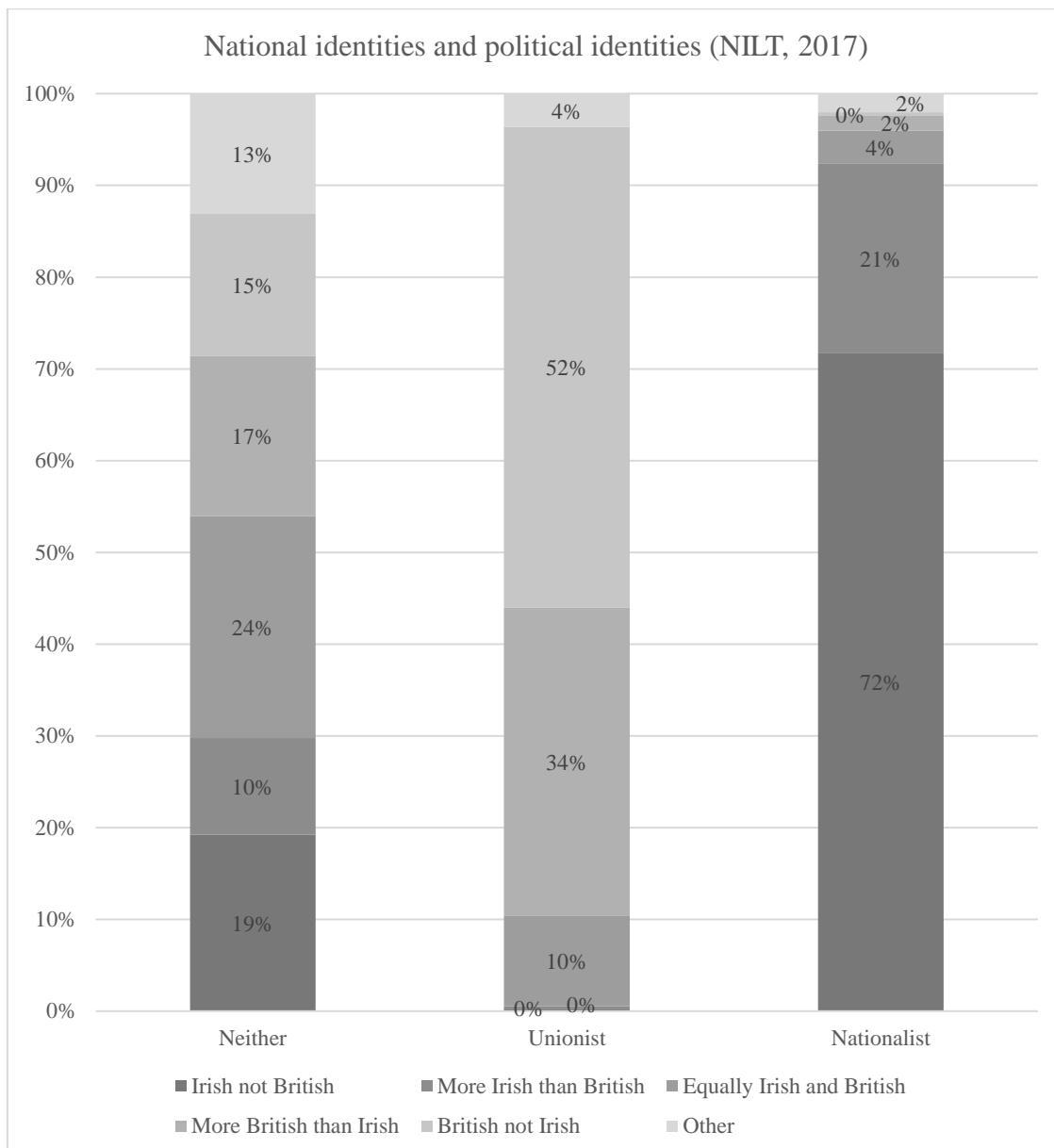


Figure 5. Self-reported national identities held within each category of political identity (NILT, 2017)

To conclude this section: those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist are predominantly female, they come from all religious backgrounds (though predominantly Catholic), all age groups, all national identities (though predominantly both British and Irish). Although we can see stark differences between Neithers, Unionists and Nationalists, those common traits alone appear to point to a ‘halfway house’ between Unionists and Nationalists rather than any distinctive community. It is worth turning, therefore, to a brief examination of whether they share common experiences in socialisation that may affect their choice to reject the traditional political identities.

Do the ‘Neithers’ share common experience?

‘Neithers’ are more likely to be highly qualified, with an experience of mixed schooling

The relationship between education and nationalistic values has a long and complex history. In the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, education was seen to play a crucial role in helping to construct a sense of national identity and belonging (Green, 2013; Özkirimli, 2010; Hroch, 2000; Reisner, 1922). The perceived relationship between education and nationalism/xenophobia has been altered significantly in the twenty-first century, as research has shown that, as levels of education increase, individuals are less likely to support or vote for radical right parties (Givens, 2017; Lazaridis and Campani, 2017; McManus, 2016; Hjerm, 2001). Indeed, using data from the International Social Survey Programme, Hjerm (2001: 37) found that ‘levels of nationalist sentiment as well as of xenophobia decrease with increasing levels of education’ – a trend confirmed by Coeender and Scheepers (2003).

With this in mind, it might be expected that those who identify as Neither Unionist or Nationalist in Northern Ireland – as a determinedly non-atavistic identity – would possess a high level of education. However, a more complex picture emerges from the NILT data. Whilst those qualified to degree level or above make up the highest proportion (26%) of those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist, one-fifth of the group had left school with no qualifications and a further 21% having achieved GCSE level but less than A Level. That said, between 1998 and 2017, the proportion of those identifying as Neither who left school with no qualifications was consistently smaller than that of Unionists and Nationalists.

A further consideration in exploring the Neither grouping centred on whether they had attended an integrated or mixed school. Integrated education emerged in the 1970s as fears were voiced that Northern Ireland’s segregated education system was a significant contributing factor to the sectarian divide (Hayes, McAllister, & Dowds, 2007). The integrated education sector has not developed to the extent that many had hoped– despite a promise in the Agreement (1998) for ‘initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing’. In the academic year 2017/2018 only 8.7% of Northern Ireland’s school population were attending integrated post-primary schools and this figure falls to 5.9% at primary level (NISRA, 2018). Analysis of NILT from 1998 to 2017 reveals that, indeed, those in the Neither category are more likely than Unionists or Nationalists to have attended a mixed religion school at some point, with 16% of Neither-identifying respondents having done so compared to 8 and 9% of Nationalists and Unionists respectively.

Neithers are more likely to be in paid employment than Unionists and Nationalists

As with education, the relationship between social class and nationalist politics is complex (Breuilly, 1993; Gidron and Hall, 2017). Links between social class and increased nationalist sentiment in Northern Ireland have often been framed around the fact that working-class areas suffered disproportionately from the violence of the Troubles (Fay et al., 1998). It might be expected, therefore, that those who identify as ‘Neither’ Unionist or Nationalist would come predominantly from the ABC1 social classification. Again, the findings present a more complex picture. In 1998, there was a question on type of employment; this enables us to see that there is little difference between Unionist, Nationalist and Neither in terms of the spread and proportion from professional, to manual to unskilled occupations represented in each category. By 2017, the largest proportion of those identifying as Neither (40%) are employed in ‘Higher or Lower managerial professional occupations’.

In terms of household income, the category of Neither has a larger portion (6%) of those on the lowest income (below £5,200 p.a.) than Protestants or Unionists or those with No Religion. We also, conversely, see that it has the highest proportion of those on the highest income bracket; in fact, the proportion on the £52,000+ income bracket was the largest in the Neither category (17%). NILT (2017) also shows that a significant proportion of those identifying as Neither (31.7%) currently own their home outright; this compares to 31% Catholics and 46% of Protestants, and just 26% of those with No Religion. This no doubt reflects the age profile of each of these groups.

On a different tack, 40% of those identifying as Neither are employed in a full-time capacity with 14.6% working part-time. 20.8% of these respondents stated that they had ‘Retired from paid work’ (which corroborates the 20% of ‘Neithers’ who say they are over 65). The data also shows that a higher proportion of Neithers are consistently in paid employment. Whereas there was just a small difference in the proportion of Neithers in paid employment compared to Unionists and Nationalists in 1998, this gap has grown steadily in the past twenty years. In 2017, 55% of Neithers are in paid employment, compared to 40 and 42% respectively for Unionists and Nationalists (NILT, 2017). This is significant as it offers a slightly different perspective on the matter of household income – paid employment offers a lot more than simply income in terms of things that can shape a person’s political viewpoint and identity. This relates to wider questions about what is needed to transform Northern Ireland into a more stable, less conflictual society (Shirlow and Shuttleworth, 1999; Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012). A higher proportion of the Neither grouping tends to be either in full or part-time employment or in education, compared to Unionists and Nationalists.

Much more likely to have lived outside Northern Ireland

There is one social factor that appears to be highly significant in affecting the likelihood of people identifying as Neither: living outside Northern Ireland. We see that it has become more common for survey respondents to have lived outside Northern Ireland for more than 6 months, but there is a striking difference between the trends among respondents identifying as Unionist, Nationalist and Neither. People identifying as Neither are much more likely to have lived outside Northern Ireland and this variable has increased in its significance over the two decades since the 1998 Agreement. In 1998, one third of Neithers had lived outside Northern Ireland; this figure had risen to 42% by 2017 (amid a larger cohort, too). This contrasts with a rise from 16% to just 19% of Unionists and 24% to 26% of Nationalists. Perhaps this is the most telling feature of all – that some substantial experience of socialisation outside of Northern Ireland offers a perspective that makes the traditional binary divide of political identity appear less appealing and relevant to an individual. Whilst there has been excellent research on the experiences of migration outside Northern Ireland (Cairns et al., 2013), and of contact with ‘others’ inside Northern Ireland (Tausch et al., 2007), the question of the political and civic engagement of ‘returnees’ to the region is a subject worthy of further analysis.

What would ‘Neithers’ vote in a border poll?

Perhaps, given the consociational set-up of Northern Ireland, the most important question to be asked of those who are Neither Unionist nor Nationalist is how they would vote in a future border poll. It is worth recognising that, whilst the critical line of competition according to the 1998 Agreement is about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, survey data has consistently shown that support for remaining in the UK (with devolution) is the preferred outcome for a clear majority of the population. Support for Irish unity peaked in 2006, just prior to the restoration of devolution after the St Andrews Agreement. This suggests that an active Assembly and Executive is good for Unionism, and that without it support for Irish unity grows. A closer look at the data also shows that the fall in support for the Union occurs quite significantly in 2017. It is surely relevant that this survey not only occurred after the triggering of Article 50 for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU (something rejected by 56% of the population in Northern Ireland) but also that, by this point, the devolved Executive and Assembly were not functioning due to a dispute between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Looking at the data (Figure 6), it seems that most of those who moved away from supporting devolution within the Union (a drop of 7 points) went to being undecided (Don’t Knows rose by 4 points), rather than support for Irish unity (a rise of 1 point) or direct rule (a rise of 2 points).

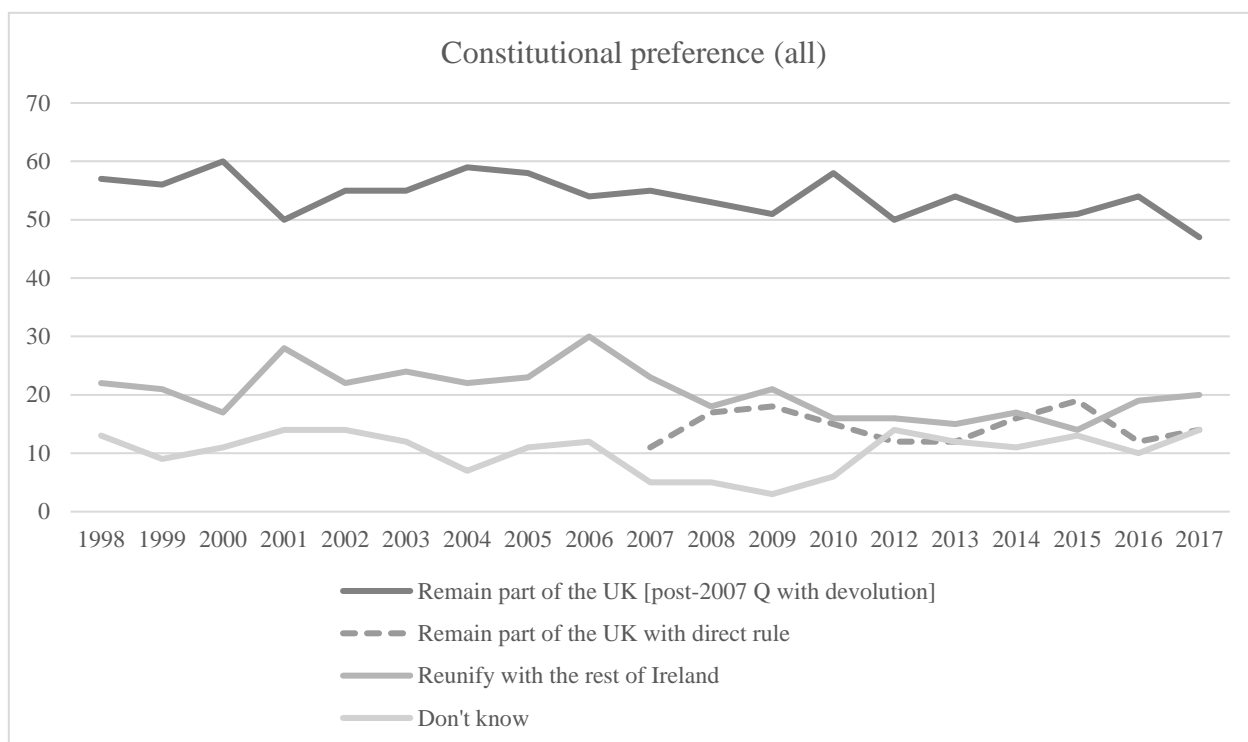


Figure 6. Preferred long-term outcome for Northern Ireland (NILT, 1998-2017)

Looking at the constitutional preference over time for those identifying as Neither, we note that there has not been any dramatic change in the spread of support within this group for the various options since 1998. Devolution within the UK is consistently the favoured outcome – three times more so than Irish unification, and twice that of the second most-popular answer, that of ‘Don’t Know’. A fall in support for devolution appears to lead to an increase in the number answering ‘Don’t Know’ rather than support for any substantive alternative. This indicates a lack of cross-over from supporting the UK union towards supporting Irish unity. If people who are Neither Unionist nor Nationalist have doubts about the Union, they move to ‘Don’t Know’. Admittedly, the options offered in the NILT survey are conservative; ‘Other’ is not spelled out (it could be Joint Authority between Dublin and London, or a federal Irish state with distinct arrangements for Northern Ireland, for example) but it is not a popular option among Neithers (3% support in 2017). Instead, one in four Neithers say they do not know their preferred constitutional outcome for Northern Ireland. In sum, we can say that those identifying as Neither are more likely than Unionists and Nationalists to be undecided, but they are predominantly in favour of the union.

What is the political significance of the Neither group?

We turn now to the question of whether those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist have any political significance for the future of Northern Ireland. Elections in Northern Ireland have been historically dominated by the two major blocs of Nationalism and Unionism with the Other largely reflected in the votes cast for the middle-ground Alliance Party. This was evident in the first election for the new Northern Ireland Assembly, held on the 25 June 1998, which was dominated by the four big parties – SDLP and Sinn Féin representing nationalism and UUP and DUP representing unionism. The Assembly election of 1998 saw Unionist parties with 55% of the seats, Nationalist parties with 42% and Others with just 8%. This support for Other parties is significantly less than we might expect, given that 33% of respondents in the NILT of 1998 identified as Neither Nationalist nor Unionist. In fact, it is immediately apparent that to be Neither Unionist nor Nationalist does not mean that you vote for an ‘alternative’ or middle ground party such as Alliance.

Closer analysis of the parties supported by those identifying as Neither in 1998 shows that the most popular was the SDLP (19%), with Alliance receiving just under 15% support from this group. Indeed, looking at patterns of support for parties from those identifying as Neither reveals that support for Alliance has remained consistently steady (in 2017 it was 17%) even as the size of the Neither cohort itself has grown. The most significant change is seen in the decline in support for the SDLP from a 2007 high of 23% to just 8% in 2017. We note that this is not at the gain of any other particular party (Sinn Féin, the DUP and the UUP all have even lower levels of support among the Neithers). Instead there has been a rise in the proportion of Neithers offering the answer ‘Don’t Know’ in response to the question on which party they feel closest to (10% in 2017). More significantly, we note that the most popular answer to this question from Neithers has always been ‘None’, and that this has risen from 22% in 1998, to 30% in 2007, to 40% in 2017. The clear majority of those who identify as Neither Nationalist nor Unionist are, therefore, rejecting what is on offer from the political parties in Northern Ireland.

This is perhaps reflected in the turnout figures for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly although even here, the picture is complex. The optimism generated by the Agreement led to a high turnout for the first Assembly election with 68.8 per cent of the electorate casting their votes. Thereafter, there is a steady decline with turnout at the 2007 election at 62.3 per cent and a record low of 54.9% recorded in 2016. This trend was bucked in 2017, however, with 64.8 per cent casting their votes amid heightened communal tensions over Brexit, the Irish Language Act and the collapse of the Assembly.

Nevertheless, even at 64.8 per cent, this still means that approximately 35 per cent of the electorate did not vote, with that figure at just over 45 per cent only ten months previously. This would certainly suggest a significant proportion of the electorate – corresponding with the Neither category – has become detached from the traditional narratives of the main parties representing Nationalism and Unionism.

That they are choosing to not to vote is also of significance and this is especially true given the wider range of political parties that are now standing candidates for Northern Ireland elections. In addition to the four main parties – DUP, Sinn Féin, UUP and SDLP – there is also an increased presence for parties such as Alliance and the Greens, who have both won a modest seat increase in recent elections. Their gains, however, do not reflect what appears to be a much wider detachment from Northern politics as represented by the Neithers.

Nor does the gains made by the radical socialist party People Before Profit Alliance (PBP) who, in securing two seats in the 2016 election, appear to have made their gains by appealing to elements of the republican community that have grown detached from Sinn Féin. That this is the case, would appear to pour cold water on the theory that a ‘normalised’ political culture in Northern Ireland would facilitate the rise of a left wing politics that could unite the working classes from across the political divide (Ref).

How then, might this growing “Neither” population be best explained in political terms? We would suggest that it is best understood within the context of political apathy (Refs).

Political apathy is a common feature of politics in Western democracies (Ref).

Alternative politics is thriving but outside electoral politics.

Rejection of the labels, specifically nationalist,

Unwilling to jump from nationalist to unionist label.

Conclusion

The 1998 Agreement anticipated the creation of a more tolerant, inclusive society in which traditional divisions became less important. In many ways, it created conditions for this and we have seen the growth in citizens self-identifying in a way that rejects the label of both Unionist and Nationalist. But at the same time, the Agreement also created political institutions and a political environment (e.g. prospect of border poll) that reinforce that ‘traditional’ divide (Mac

Ginty, 2003). In fact, it gives it far more weight than it ever had before. Interestingly, it seems that those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist are not advocating an alternative vision or option for the future of Northern Ireland. A sizeable proportion of them might say that their indecision or lack of interest about the constitutional question *is* their position, not an absence of one. Yet most of them hold what could legitimately be termed unionist preferences without wishing to be labelled Unionist per se. The biggest issue seems to be with the label of Unionism rather than the fact of the Union. For such reasons, it would appear timely to consider an alternative to the binary option of UK Union/Irish Unity. The centrism of the Alliance party has struggled to gain ground whilst that binary remains the only vision of what is on offer for a future Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 2018). This challenge only grows more acute in the context of Brexit. The predominant competing visions for Northern Ireland's future seem increasingly unrepresentative and over-simplistic compared to the type of society that many consider themselves to be living in and contributing to.

And are the people who identify as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist more likely to be creating a 'new' Northern Ireland or to be, in effect, opting-out from it? The 'typical' person identifying as Neither is more likely than either Unionists or Nationalists to be: young, female, of both British and Irish identity, supporting No Party, having lived outside Northern Ireland, to have some qualification (especially at the highest levels), to have gone to a mixed School, to be in paid employment and to have a high income. There are findings in this paper that would counter the assumptions made by many. In sum, looking in more detail at those who conscientiously say they have Neither Unionist nor Nationalist identities above all else reveals the complexity of Northern Ireland society and the inadequacy of the 'two communities' thesis. Political arrangements that appear more relevant and representative of contemporary social needs are far more likely to generate political interest (Van Deth and Elff, 2004). Twenty years after the 1998 Agreement, perhaps Northern Ireland is ready for a revolution from the centre: to make Neither/Nor into All/Together.

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