



Regional & Federal Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/frfs20>

From Secessionist Mobilization to Sub-state Nationalism? Assessing the Impact of Consociationalism and Devolution on Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland

John Nagle^a

^a Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen,
Aberdeen, UK

Version of record first published: 14 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: John Nagle (2013): From Secessionist Mobilization
to Sub-state Nationalism? Assessing the Impact of Consociationalism and
Devolution on Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland, *Regional & Federal Studies*,
DOI:10.1080/13597566.2013.775946

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2013.775946>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes.
Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-
licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly
forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any
representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to
date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be
independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable

for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

From Secessionist Mobilization to Sub-state Nationalism? Assessing the Impact of Consociationalism and Devolution on Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland

JOHN NAGLE

Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT *Survey evidence has demonstrated that support for a united Ireland from Catholics in Northern Ireland is markedly declining. Simultaneously, electoral support for the secessionist Sinn Féin party has substantially risen in the region since 1998. Critics have attributed Sinn Féin's electoral growth to consociational power sharing, which they argue rewards ethnic hardline parties. At the same time, many of these critics predicted that consociationalism would exacerbate secessionist sentiment within nationalism, a prognostication now contradicted by survey data. In analysing this paradox, we argue that there is not a switching of identities—from Irish nationalism to UK unionism—but the repositioning of Irish nationalism from a secessionist movement to a sub-state nationalism mobilizing for more resources within devolution. In explaining this, we illuminate how consociationalism allied to devolution can, if the right endogenous and exogenous supporting factors are mobilized, lead to the repositioning of identities within a regional rather than zero-sum national context.*

KEY WORDS: Northern Ireland, consociationalism, devolution, nationalism

Introduction

In June 2011 the results of the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) were published. The Northern Irish media and politicians quickly identified the result of one question in the survey as salient: “the long-term policy for Northern Ireland”.¹ The result revealed that only 33% of Catholics that completed the survey desired the unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland, a rapid decline of 14% in four years (Table 1). This outcome appeared to spawn a crisis for those actors demanding Irish unity, especially Irish nationalist political parties, since religious ascription

Correspondence Address: John Nagle, Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen, Edward Wright Building, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK. Email: j.nagle@abdn.ac.uk

Table 1. Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

Catholic preferences	2007	2008	2009	2010
To remain part of the UK with devolved government	35	37	39	46
To remain part of the UK with direct rule	4	7	8	6
To reunify with Ireland	47	39	40	33
To be an independent state	6	8	5	4

Module: Political_Attitudes. **Variable:** NIRELND2
“Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it . . .”

has typically been seen as coterminous with constitutional preferences in the divided region.

In response, Irish nationalists disputed the results by pointing to the robust Irish nationalist vote in elections, particularly the electoral rise of Sinn Féin since 1998 (Table 2), a party that vigorously asserts Irish unity as their fundamental policy.² Moreover, the NILT survey exposed apparent contradictions: while more than half of Catholics stated a preference for maintaining the link with Britain, only 1% claimed to be UK unionist or would consider voting for unionist parties; and that while only a third aspire to a united Ireland, 54% consider their primary identity as Irish nationalist. Of further note, the survey revealed the preferred option for 46% was “To remain part of the United Kingdom with devolved government”.

Neither is there any imminent sign of intercommunal cleavages fundamentally weakening in Northern Ireland. Only 1% of first preference Catholic votes go to UK unionist parties and vice versa of Protestants voting for Irish nationalists. Northern Ireland remains “a deeply divided society” (Nagle and Clancy, 2010). Less than 7% of children attend integrated schooling, “[a] majority of individuals confine their living arrangements and social interaction networks exclusively to their own community” (Hayes and McAllister, 2012: 8), and there are high levels of ethnic marital homogamy, which is not decreasing.

Despite these concerns, there appears a long-term change in constitutional preferences for Catholics in Northern Ireland. In 1998, survey results revealed that only 19% of Catholics wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK; and, while the Catholic electorate has grown by *c.* 2% since 2001, the total number of Catholics voting for nationalist parties has dropped by a similar figure. Given these figures, it is said that NILT illuminates a “radical shift in the ways religious, national, and political identities are aligned” (Nolan, 2012: 144) in the region. The changing contours of identity

Table 2. Sinn Féin’s performance in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections

Northern Ireland Assembly elections	Sinn Féin vote
1998	142 858 votes, 17.6%, 18 seats
2003	162 758 votes, 23.5%, 24 seats
2007	180 573 votes, 26.2%, 28 seats
2011	178 224 votes, 26.9%, 29 seats

exposed in NILT remind us to adhere to the warning: we should not “treat ethnic groups as unitary actors and ethnic identities as given *ex ante*, automatically salient, fixed ... and predictive of individual political behavior” (Kalyvas, 2008: 1043). Rather than places defined by homogeneous and antagonistic expressions of ethnic identity, divided regions are dynamic political and social contexts wherein such identities are reimagined. Such a perspective challenges a body of literature that casts scepticism on the capacity of ethnic identities to be reconstructed once mobilized (Van Evera, 2001; McGarry and O’Leary, 2009).

The expectation that ethnonational identities in deeply divided regions are durable can lead to the design of specific institutions to regulate destructive conflict. In particular, the implementation of consociational power sharing in divided regions is broadly based on the premise “that communal or ethnic divisions are resilient rather than rapidly biodegradable, and that they must be recognized rather than wished away” (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995: 338). Consociationalism’s ability to regulate conflict stems from how its institutions accommodate the divergent ethnonational aspirations of rival groups in governance, including proportionality in public resources and appointments. Pertinently, as a historically divided region, Northern Ireland’s polity became consociational with the implementation of the Belfast Agreement, a peace accord signed in 1998.

Consociationalism, notably, has also come under severe censure from critics (Wilson and Wilford, 2003; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Horowitz, 2008). Among numerous criticisms, it is claimed that by recognizing the competing self-determination claims of nationalists and unionists, consociationalism is little more than a “holding operation” that is “unlikely to last” (Nairn, 2001: 35) before being torn apart by the centrifugal motion of separatism. Through accommodating an “either–or constitutional choice between a United Kingdom and a United Ireland”, consociationalism is seen to fuel secessionist aspirations (Wilson and Wilford, 2003: 7).

Given the claim that consociational institutions entrench identities and exacerbate secessionism in divided societies, in this paper we address particular issues.

- Rather than axiomatically hardening, can identities in violently divided societies be ameliorated or softened? What are the endogenous and exogenous conditions that promulgate ethnic identity transformation in violently divided regions?
- If support for Irish unity among Catholics in Northern Ireland is diminishing, what implications does this have for both the dominant ethnonational explanation of conflict in Northern Ireland and its regulation through a consociational framework?

In this paper we hypothesize whether consociationalism allied to regional devolution provides a logical context for the paradoxical situation of contemporary Irish nationalism: that the secessionist Sinn Féin party has become electorally dominant within the nationalist bloc yet most Catholics are relatively happy with the current constitutional position of Northern Ireland albeit with regional devolution and power sharing. Consociationalism, hence, has not led to the complete erosion of Irish nationalism; instead, it has been unwittingly redirected. Irish nationalism has changed from a secessionist movement to a form of sub-state nationalism mobilizing for greater

resources and recognition mainly within the context of UK devolution.³ Therefore, while Irish Catholics continue to vote for hardline nationalist parties, this is not necessarily to be made consonant with the desire for Irish unification. Irish nationalists, while voting for parties they believe will act as strong defenders of their ethnic interests in the public sphere, are relatively content with the constitutional status quo (Mitchell *et al.*, 2009: 402). We are not, according to this hypothesis, witnessing the transformation of ethnicity in regards to Irish nationalism—involving the switching of ethnic identities—but the repositioning of ethnicity within another context.

Such an analysis would appear to support the optimistic analyses of many proponents of consociationalism and group-based rights. It is argued that consociationalism “is more likely to transform identities in the long run” (McGarry, 2001: 124) and that “the dissolution of (undesirable) collective identities and antagonisms may be more likely to occur after a period of consociational governance” (O’Leary, 2005: 19). The reason why consociationalism can “provide a hospitable environment for the erosion of difference” (Coakley, 2009: 145) relates to how intercleavage co-operation at the elite level can contribute to the gradual fostering of communal trust at the grass-roots. Normatively, the equal recognition of group identities within the polity creates a sense of security within groups, which inexorably leads to a more flexible sense of ethnic belonging (Kymlicka, 2007; Nagle, 2009).

Alongside consociational power sharing, a contributing factor driving changes within separatist nationalism concerns the project of devolution, which has been rolled out across the UK since 1997. In this dynamic, the devolved regions of UK (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have witnessed broadly analogous processes: the major secessionist parties have become electorally dominant post-2007. Yet, while some commentators have speculated that this trajectory is evidence of nationalism on the march (Bogdanor, 1999; Nairn, 2001), survey data show that there is no great alacrity among voters in these regions to demand secession. Although, as we shall see, the introduction of devolution in Northern Ireland is quantitatively different to that in Wales and Scotland—in so far as it was bound up with consociational power sharing and the institutions of conflict regulation—it is possible to view devolution as rewarding secessionist parties without rewarding secessionism by limiting the political horizon of secessionist parties to the regional scale (Keating, 1996; Guibernau, 2006). Thus, rather than based on a primordialist conception of ethnic identity, which acts to promulgate intergroup antagonism, liberal consociationalism, within the framework of territorial self-government, can, if the correct supporting endogenous and exogenous factors are mobilized, contribute to ethnonational conflict management by creating a context for identities and politics to be more tied to regional rather than zero-sum, competing national contexts.

The article is organized as follows. First, we review the main debates concerning the potential construction and reconstruction of ethnicity. Second, we explore what role consociationalism and devolution may play in changing ethnic identity and facilitating peace. Third, as a way of exploring ethnic identity change, we examine and resolve an apparent paradox: how the ethnonational cleavage is currently fossilized in Northern Irish regional electoral politics and yet the number of Catholics that support the notion of a united Ireland is declining.

Ethnic Identities and Change

The claim that ethnicity is primordial, that ethnic groups exist as a fact of nature and are exogenous to social pressures, no longer holds. Ethnic identities, hence, “are not stamped in our genes” (Van Evera, 2001: 20), but individuals have multiple identities, and their mode of ethnic identification is malleable depending on wider forces. Because ethnic identities are “the products of human action and speech ... as a result they can and do change over time” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000: 848).

Yet, the heuristic gap between constructivism and primordialism may not be as great as it is often assumed. While it is agreed that ethnicity is often constructed for various purposes, at the same time ethnicity is experienced by group members as an “everyday primordialism”, a belief in the unchanging essence of their ethnicity (Fearon and Laitin, 2000: 848). Such beliefs in the primordial quality of identity make ethnicity appear resilient once formed and less prone to reinvention for any political purposes.

The rigidity of ethnicity once constructed appears particularly salient for deeply divided societies, especially those fractured by violent secessionist mobilizations. Van Evera (2001: 20) claims that “ethnic identities, while constructed, are hard to reconstruct once they form ... the conditions needed for reconstruction are quite rare, especially in modern times, and especially among ethnic groups in conflict”. McGarry and O’Leary (2009: 17) assert that ethnic identities in Northern Ireland have become “inflexible, resilient, crystallized, durable, and hard”.

Lustick’s (1979) classic definition of a deeply divided society provides some insight into the hardness of ethnicity. These are societies in which ascriptive ethnic ties have generated an “antagonistic segmentation of society, based on terminal identities with high political salience, sustained over a substantial period of time and a wide variety of issues” (Lustick, 1979: 325). All political and cultural issues, therefore, are reduced to the position of the ethnic cleavage, identities are cross-indexed by ethnic groupness and intercommunal boundaries are sharp enough so that “membership is clear and, with few exceptions, unchangeable” (Lustick, 1979: 325). The conflicting groups’ animosity, perception of enmity, and deep-rooted fear and hatred of the other exacerbates the level of division and segregation in divided societies—ranging from residential districts, schooling, family networks and socializing.

While it is clear that a hard concept of ethnicity can be constructed, the debate is to what extent ethnicity can be reconstructed once politically mobilized into ethnonational secessionist movements, especially given the seeming intractable character of these conflicts. It is clear that identities are less durable than often assumed; ethnic identities can be depoliticized and constructivism would be theoretically meaningless if it only predicted a hardening of ethnicity during civil war. If this were so, it could be “safely downgraded into a simple mechanism of primordialist dynamics” (Kalyvas, 2008: 1046). Instead, “identities do not always remain stable and fixed during the conflict; if they do change, they may soften rather than only harden” (Kalyvas, 2008: 1045).

This leads us to asking: what are the endogenous and exogenous dynamics that can lead to identity change within nationalist movements? In particular, we analyse whether secessionism can be redirected into a broad acceptance of sub-state

nationalism within the context of regional devolution, supported by exogenous actors and consociational power sharing.

Consociationalism and Ethnicity

The degree to which ethnic identities can be engineered to undergo transformation is at the core of contemporary efforts to design institutional structures in divided societies. One reason for this is that ethnonational conflict is largely seen as about contested senses of identity (Rothman, 1997). Although inequalities between groups may underpin ethnic differences, such grievances alone are not predictive of secessionist conflict (Collier, 2010). Where applicable, grievances appear more pronounced in divided regions where the minority group are excluded from their share of political power and their cultural identities are restricted.

The diagnosis that the Northern Ireland conflict is “fundamentally rooted in ethnonational antagonism” (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995: 855) led to a prognosis that centred on the recognition and accommodation of group identities. Consociationalism was suggested as fit for Northern Ireland as a form of democracy and conflict regulation because it is seen by consociational advocates as typical of divided societies, where divisions are longstanding and when there is intergroup violence. In Northern Ireland the predominant cleavage is ethnonational, meaning that voters rarely shift across cleavages so that the competition for power occurs almost exclusively within ethnonational blocs.

One consequence of a failure to implement a consociational arrangement in 1974 was a search to craft a revised model fit for the specificities of Northern Ireland. In particular, power sharing alone in such societies may not be enough for secessionist minorities who view consociationalism as essentially integrationist because it maintains the territorial integrity of the existing state. Towards this, the successful implementation of consociationalism required key transborder institutions (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009: 26).

The Belfast Agreement of 1998 encompassed a number of extra features that went beyond classical consociationalism leading to the revised model being labelled “complex consociationalism” (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009). As the conflict in Northern Ireland is fundamentally over competing nationalisms, the Agreement recognizes the two groups’ self-determination claims, the need to share political power, as well as “parity of esteem” for their cultural identities. Addressing the exogenous aspects—the trans-state character of the conflict—the Agreement reconfigured the relationships between nationalists and unionists and their respective kin states. This meant that the Republic of Ireland dropped its irredentist claim over Northern Ireland in exchange for cross-border institutions between it and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, provisions were made in the Agreement for the reform of policing, the release of paramilitary prisoners, demilitarization and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.

A fundamental issue stimulated by consociationalism concerns its impact upon ethnic identities. Proponents of consociationalism claim that “it is more realistic to accept that different groups will continue to exist than to seek the ‘deconstruction’ of group ties” (McGarry, 1998: 860). At the same time, proponents reserve an emancipatory potential for power sharing regarding how it can depoliticize ethnic identities.

Potentially, consociationalism might achieve this in Northern Ireland since it is mainly a 'liberal' rather than a 'corporate' consociation. Corporatism "accommodates groups according to ascriptive criteria, and rests on the assumption that group identities are fixed, and that groups are both internally homogeneous and externally bounded" (McGarry and O'Leary, 2007: 675). The consociationalism of the Belfast Agreement (GFA), alternatively, is promoted as liberal: it "rewards whatever salient political identities emerge in democratic elections, whether these are based on ethnic groups, or on sub-group or trans-group identities" (McGarry and O'Leary, 2007: 675). In theory, ethnic cleavages could disappear if people disidentified from ethnic identities and stopped supporting ethnically based parties.⁴

The hope that consociationalism in Northern Ireland would moderate antagonistic identities has been challenged. To start, consociationalism and its proponents have been accused of "primordialism" (Wilson and Wilford, 2003) for supposedly accepting the fixity of and even further institutionalizing ethnicity. Consociationalism is also charged with engendering a poor quality of democracy: the use of vetoes is seen as expediting policy logjams and ethnic brinksmanship, which can lead to a hardening of ethnic politics rather than co-operation. Consociationalism is further blamed for generating fierce distributive, intercommunal conflicts over public resources (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; Horowitz, 2008).

As proof of consociationalism's centrifugal dynamic, critics have claimed there is clear evidence of increasing ethnic polarization in Northern Ireland (Hayes and McAllister, 2012). The relatively low threshold required for candidates to be elected to office supposedly encourages ethnic entrepreneurs to use the politics of communal fear and 'ethnic outbidding', which has led to the electoral victory of the hardline parties of nationalism and unionism (Wilford and Wilson, 2006: 8). Equally, by accommodating self-determination claims, the electoral rise of Sinn Féin since 1998 is read as evidence of how consociationalism fuels secessionism. Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) claim that Sinn Féin "have won political support through the contention that the Agreement will lead to a united Ireland".

Defenderism and Kin State Ambivalence

The premise that consociational arrangements strengthen secessionist claims, on the basis of Sinn Féin's vote in Northern Ireland since 1998 is problematic and misreads nationalism. Although nationalism—classically defined—refers to movements designed to "render the boundaries of a nation congruent with those of its governance unit" (Hechter, 2000: 7), nationalism often remains a dormant property within ethnic groups and many members are ambivalent about secession. Although numerous violent conflicts appear secessionist, for some members of minority groups independence is not always a primary objective. They may more realistically desire the recognition and accommodation of their national identities on a basis of relative parity with the dominant group, or to have a degree of autonomy within the larger state.

Evidence of this can be seen in the context of Northern Ireland, paradoxically even in militant secessionist organizations. For example, rather than gaining strength from the secessionist desires of the nationalist population, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) emerged as a 'defenderist' organization in response to the needs of the

Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, with the goal of a united Ireland secondary for many individuals who joined the IRA in the early 1970s (Alonso, 2007; Moloney, 2007: 80–84; McDonald, 2008: 64). Similarly, many conflicts immediately prior to the outbreak of violence in the region were over the display of nationalist symbols and identities, such as the flying of national flags, as well as ongoing concerns about discrimination (Purdie, 1990). Problematically, the public display of nationalist symbols were practically proscribed by the unionist authorities, which read them as indicative of emergent secessionist mobilization.⁵

Nevertheless, there is an important proposition here: the recognition and accommodation of group identities may be more important to members of minority groups than outright secession. Secession, while desirable for many, is at the same time often viewed with a high degree of ambivalence by group members. They are fearful about the potential violent social and economic instability that could be provoked by secession. Equally, nationalists can be alienated from the movement when secessionist hardliners use extreme violence and sectarian rhetoric. For instance, Todd *et al.* (2006: 338) found that while IRA violence and emotive campaigns like the Hunger Strikers of 1981 could harden identity, at the same time it could cause “alienation from nationalism and Irish identity” for individuals.

Another factor that can dampen secessionist identities is the shifting relationship between kin state and kin group. Minority national groups may suspect that the kin state is at best ambivalent about unification. The kin state may worry about the costs—financial and human lives—associated with absorbing disgruntled members of a group who simply refuse to accept secession. Additionally, a considerable population of the kin state view their kin group as somehow different, not as pure as, or having something of an anomalous identity. This ambivalence has certainly characterized the Irish nationalist experience. Although the Irish state once claimed territorial sovereignty over the ‘six counties’ of Northern Ireland, which they defined as part of the nation, the historical record demonstrates that this was little more than rhetoric and realpolitik meant that successive Irish governments were never truly committed to unification (English, 2006). Pertinently, the issue of Irish unification looms low in the list of issues that concern voters and political parties in elections in the Republic of Ireland (English, 2006: 425–426).

Perhaps due to this kinship ambivalence, there has long been in Northern Ireland a strong sense of regionalism, a regional identity distinct from the rest of Ireland and the ‘mainland’ UK, and this is common to both nationalists and unionists. While there is little political will for an independent Northern Ireland, as many as 29% of respondents in one survey identified themselves as being ‘Northern Irish’, as opposed to British or Irish (see Nagle and Clancy, 2010). Thus, secessionism as a primary identity of Irish nationalism has rarely been a stable or homogenous product. Ethnonationalism can, at different junctures, be a secessionist movement or one that is largely content with strong group-based rights that protect its interests and identities within the context of the existing state.

The final part of the paper looks at how consociationalism allied to devolution, in the context of Northern Ireland, possibly encourages the politics of regional sub-state nationalism rather than secessionist mobilization, which is often predicted by critics of both ethnofederalism and consociationalism.

Devolution and Consociationalism

As noted earlier, consociational power sharing alone may be inadequate in regions involved in secessionist disputes, since it may appear to minorities as too integrative by consolidating the territorial character of the state. Here, consociationalism needs complementing with forms of self-governance and/or trans-state institutions creating links between ethnonational minorities and their kin state where applicable.

The granting of some form of regional self-governance is seen as a method to peacefully accommodate minority nationalism (Gurr, 1993: 301). In a comparative analysis of Quebec, Catalan, Basque and Scottish nationalism, Guibérneau (2006: 68) argues that devolution –embracing federalism, symmetrical and asymmetrical devolution—has “prevented secession and weakened pro-independence claims”. In explanation, Guibérneau (2006) argues that devolution locks sub-state national movements into an uneasy relationship with the central state, in which they enjoy substantial powers but press for ever greater resources and legislative powers. This thesis underscores Keating’s (1996) earlier analysis on nationalist movements in the same regions as essentially problem-solving mobilizations that reconcile the wish for autonomy and greater independence while remaining ambivalent about outright secession.

Yet the claim that “devolution tames secessionist leaders” (Guibérneau, 2006: 70) is unsettled (see Bakke and Wibbels, 2006; Erk and Anderson, 2009). One reason for this is that the term territorial self-governance (TSG) (Wolff, 2009) masks a wide range of constitutional structures. At one end of the spectrum, some regions (e.g. Basque Country, Greenland and Aceh) have been granted a high degree of autonomy to control their own affairs, including tax-raising powers, the security forces, justice system and local civil service. At the other end, some regions are endowed with a weaker version that limits powers. Moreover, the successful implementation of TSG is often contingent on how fiscal decentralization, intergovernmental fiscal transfers and political copartisanship across tiers of government relate to the society’s level of wealth and its ethnic composition (Bakke and Wibbels, 2006: 2). Additionally, while Guibérneau (2006) rightly corrects the logic that territorial self-government inevitably bolsters secessionism, it is not possible to say that it has warded off separatism in the regions she analyses since violent secessionism has not been impending.

A different scenario exists in violently divided societies that have experienced violent separatism. The track record of TSG in the aftermath of violent conflicts is less certain. In an analysis of federalism, Lake and Rothchild (2005) argue that, in the short run, territorial decentralization “can be a valuable tool in the transition to peace because it can serve as a costly signal of moderation by the political majority, when offered, can help allay minority fears about its likely treatment in the future”. However, the authors stress that it is not decentralization itself that contributes towards conflict mitigation; rather, it is the offer of territorial decentralization by the majority which reveals their apparent benign intentions. Yet the long-term viability of this solution is threatened by the fact that few states follow up with the offer and instead gravitate towards consolidating centralization, a process that exacerbates minority fears and strengthens the hand of secessionist extremists. Given the problems of creating durable territorial decentralization, Lake and Rothchild (2005: 111) have

identified what they consider to be the extraordinary conjunction of conditions only under which decentralization can enduringly flourish.

Notably, it can be argued that the combination of extraordinary conditions specified by Lake and Rothchild (2005: 111) are in some way present in Northern Ireland: multiple ethnonational groups cohabit the same national space; no ethnonational group can achieve decisive control over the region; each group is led by representatives willing to accept the cultural identities of the other; and democracy is robust. In so being, Northern Ireland has some important characteristics conducive to TSG.

First, rather than an ethnically homogenous territory, Northern Ireland is a region hosting two conflicting ethnonational groups. Power sharing structures relations between groups and the safety net of veto guarantees that no group can dominate the polity. Moreover, both unionists and nationalists are largely proponents of some form of TSG for the region as it places a number of key decisions and resources at their disposal. Equally important, as we shall see, the centre, rather than trying to repatriate powers, the Westminster government is dedicated to some form of self-government across the main national regions of the UK, apart from England. The preference of the UK government is not to integrate Northern Ireland but to promote devolution within bounds.

Secondly, rather than simply believing that the other group can be integrated or have their cultural identities marginalized, both nationalists and unionists, albeit reluctantly, through signing up to the Belfast Agreement accept the validity of each other's national aspirations and identities. Finally, although power sharing in the region underwent a number of collapses and hiatuses in the aftermath of the Agreement, the regional government has consolidated since its resumption in 2007 and the major parties in the region are committed to democratic means.

It is worth noting, none the less, that Northern Ireland was granted devolution in 1998, the weakest form of TSG. The devolved Northern Ireland government still remains subservient to Westminster in policies concerning defence, immigration, international and foreign relations, taxation, borrowing and Europe. Devolution is, therefore, an explicitly constitutional and legislative act which involves "the transfer to a subordinate elected body on a geographical basis, of functions at present exercised by ministers and Parliament" (Bogdanor, 1999: 2), but crucially without theoretically compromising the legal sovereignty of the Westminster parliament.⁶ Of equal importance, devolution in Northern Ireland was not wholly granted as an instrument of bringing peace to the region; it was part of a package of introducing devolution across the UK, including Scotland and Wales.

Despite these points, when devolution was granted to Northern Ireland it was viewed by the UK government as a critical component of peace, bound up with the Belfast Agreement and its consociational framework. The British government hoped devolution would be acceptable to both nationalists and unionists in the region. To deal with separatist nationalists, devolution would peacefully accommodate their national identities and give them a say in regional politics. For reformist unionists it was a means to gain some regional powers within a reconstructed state, yet simultaneously retaining the jurisdiction of the state. Both sides, therefore, could present devolution as increasing the democratic representation of their respective groups while concurrently strengthening their national aspirations.

The hope that devolution would cool secessionist mobilization appeared to have been dealt a grievous blow in 2007. The elections across the UK that year witnessed the rise of the Scottish National Party (Scotland), Plaid Cymru (Wales) and Sinn Féin (Northern Ireland), all of whom entered their respective regional governments on the basis of promoting, to different degrees, independence, albeit with qualifications. Since then, the gathering strength of these parties in their respective regional governments has led one commentator to summarize thinking on the issue as teleological: “a one-way process that seemingly can have only one conclusion—breakup and separation” (Curtice, 2011).

Despite this prognostication, the long-term dynamic of devolution across the UK is unclear. One reason for this is due to the slightly asymmetrical fashion that devolution was introduced to the sub-state national regions. In Scotland, which has been granted more powers than the other regions, survey data show that Scots are increasingly more likely to think of their primary identity as Scottish rather than British.⁷ In Wales, which was given lesser powers than Scotland or Northern Ireland, a reverse dynamic is witnessed, as the Welsh are more likely to view themselves as British first rather than Welsh and only 11% of those surveyed indicated a constitutional preference for independence.

Notwithstanding the evidence pointing to the strengthening of Scottish nationalism and identity—especially as the Scottish National Party (SNP) increased their vote in 2010 to become the majority party within the regional Scottish parliament—there is no correlation to show that Scots are more likely to desire independence (Curtice, 2011). The Scottish Social Attitudes survey (ESDS Government, 2012), which tracks constitutional preferences in Scotland annually, read support for independence to be at 32% in 2011, lower than in 2005.

Despite coolness for secessionism, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (ESDS Government, 2012) reveals that 74% of Scots want the Scottish government to have the most influence over the running of the country rather than the Westminster government. Instead of desiring outright independence, Scots appear to prefer the option of expanding the powers granted to the Scottish government. This option has been called ‘Devolution Max’ as it entails full fiscal autonomy for Scotland by allowing the regional parliament to raise all its own taxes and run its own social security system while sharing issues related to defence, overseas aid and foreign affairs with Westminster (Keating, 2012). This development, similarly proposed for Catalonia, Quebec and the Basque region, is symptomatic of how voters in sub-state nations “fail to make a sharp distinction between independence and devolution, seeing it more as a spectrum of options and bundles of powers” (Keating, 2012).⁸

Notably, a slightly lesser dynamic is present in Northern Ireland. Devolution in Northern Ireland is an open-ended mechanism which affords the regional government potential to expand its powers albeit with the consent of the Secretary of State and the approval of Westminster. The power-sharing government has called for more powers from Westminster. In September 2011 it successfully argued for taking control of air passenger duty for long haul flights out of Northern Ireland. However, the main area in which the Northern Ireland government has sought to extend its powers is corporation tax. While Northern Ireland’s closest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, has been able to set the low corporate tax of 12%, Northern Ireland is wedded to the UK’s 28% rate.

Northern Ireland's political parties and business community have argued that this disadvantages the region in so far as it loses competitiveness with the Republic in trying to attract high-value foreign direct investment (FDI). Research in favour of reducing Northern Ireland's corporate tax to 12% in line with the Republic has argued that the reduction would create over 184 000 new jobs by 2030 and recover an initial loss of £150 million in reduced corporation tax within six years (Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group, 2011). While the UK state has examined the constitutional changes required for the Northern Ireland government to set corporate tax rates, any change would be accompanied by the loss of £500 million of Northern Ireland's block grant from Westminster (c. £9 billion) under European Union rules.

There are a number of important issues revealed by the cross-party support for the campaign to have corporate tax set by the Northern Ireland government. First, devolution sets off a train of events in which the regional governments mobilize to demand ever-increasing powers to be devolved, yet at the same time support for outright secession does not increase and even wanes. Thus, the public and elected officials of devolved regions demand more regional powers, even strong autonomy, short of complete independence. For example, while secessionism has a very small constituency in Wales, a 2011 referendum supported an increase of 20 direct law-making competencies devolved to the administration (Welsh Government, 2011). Research has also shown that as more powers are devolved to Scotland, Scots "are more secure and settled within the UK" (Carrell, 2011). Second, fighting to increase devolved powers can provide a focus for nationalist and unionist political parties to co-operate in the context of power sharing. Therefore, devolution creates a context in which party mobilization is fundamentally situated in the regional and local rather than primarily over the broader constitutional question.

This dynamic can be witnessed in the changing policy positions of Sinn Féin, the largest Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland. While Sinn Féin once refused to even recognize the existence of Northern Ireland, which it called a "failed statelet", it now campaigns to have more powers devolved to the region. This change of emphasis is most evident in its shifting, reformist economic policies. Sinn Féin's socio-economic strategy was once contained within the hybrid nationalist and socialist ethos of 'Eire Nua' ('New Ireland'), "a broad outline based upon a 32-county agrarian economy within a federal structure" (Tonge, 2006: 39). Sinn Féin's militant partners, the IRA, waged an economic war on the region by bombing businesses and financial districts and even abducted and killed business leaders. Yet, since devolution in 1998, and despite Sinn Féin's outwardly socialist and secessionist identity, the party has campaigned for not only the reduction of corporate tax for the region, but also for greater levels of FDI and other ostensibly neo-liberal policies, like Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) to help with the construction of public projects.

Sinn Féin (2012) vociferously argues that their politics is delivering a united Ireland. They claim that by strengthening local devolved powers, especially in regards to economic policy, they are creating a gradualist trajectory in which the various mechanisms and institutions that uphold the union are loosened. For instance, in its campaign to reduce and harmonize corporate tax with the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin claims that "partition is wasteful and inefficient and duplicates government

and public-service structures; it imposes an unnecessary administrative burden on those wishing to do business in both jurisdictions” (McCann, 2008).

Yet, by entering a consociational power-sharing government within the framework of devolution, Sinn Féin has entered a game in which their politics primarily focuses on the local rather than the constitutional question. Sinn Féin has forged a strange dynamic with its electorate in which they unwittingly satisfy this constituency rather than fundamentally orientate their optimal needs towards secession. It mobilizes for more powers to be devolved to the power-sharing government; its electorate desire a party who can defend their interests in the public sphere against unionists while simultaneously providing for more powers and resources to be placed at their disposal. At the same time, through doing this, by ensuring nationalists feel secure that their interests are well represented in the regional polity, the desire for secession is concomitantly weakened.

Although we have argued that Sinn Féin has shifted from a secessionist to a sub-state nationalist movement located within a regional power-sharing framework, a proviso is required. In distinction to Scottish and Welsh nationalism, Sinn Féin stands for election in two states—the UK (Northern Ireland) and the Republic of Ireland—a policy that reflects their status as an all-Ireland party rather than one exclusively dedicated to Northern Ireland. A primary goal of Sinn Féin is to increase its vote in the Republic of Ireland, thus enabling the party to join the government as a junior coalition party and advance secessionist politics from a position of state power. To an extent, the party’s drive for electoral expansionism in the south has been successful: its vote share rose from 6.9% to 9.9% accompanied by an increase from 4 to 14 seats in the 2011 national election.

Despite this, there is no clear evidence that Sinn Féin’s improving electoral performance in the Republic of Ireland can be ascribed to the politics of Irish unity. Crucially, the party advances policies that are largely particularistic to the two jurisdictions (north and south) and which appeal to different demographic constituencies. While in the Republic of Ireland Sinn Féin presents itself as an oppositional, “radical left-wing, even anti-system party” (Walsh and O’Malley, 2012: 6), as a party of government in Northern Ireland it is able to attract middle-class Catholics by promoting a mainstream position. Thus, in the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin’s policies are directed at people living in deprived urban working class areas disenchanted with the economy and the established parties (Walsh and O’Malley, 2012: 10). More problematic, the party’s adoption of policies that are specific to one jurisdiction can come into conflict with those of the other. For instance, the party’s campaign to harmonize corporation tax in Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland, while publicized as an effort to minimize partition, in reality creates a level playing field for the two jurisdictions to compete for FDI (see Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group, 2011: 7). Rather than an all-Ireland party, Sinn Féin’s contrasting policies in the two jurisdictions places it more as a sub-state nationalism that mobilizes differently in two states.

Conclusion

This paper started with the results of the NILT survey, which revealed that Northern Irish Catholic preferences for a united Ireland were at an all-time low. Paradoxically,

at the same time, since 1998 Sinn Féin has become the largest Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland at the expense of moderate nationalist parties (Mitchell *et al.*, 2009). In seeking to analyse this paradox, we have asked to what extent liberal consociationalism allied to devolution may have contributed to the repositioning of Irish nationalism away from secessionism to sub-state nationalism. Secessionism is no longer the primary goal of Catholics in Northern Ireland; electoral and survey data point to the conclusion: nationalists are relatively content with the constitutional status quo but they desire strong representatives who will stand up for their perceived rights, especially in regards to identity and resources. We have argued that a fundamental dynamic driving this is liberal consociationalism, backed by positive exogenous actors, within the context of devolution.

Critics of consociationalism and devolution view these mechanisms as institutionalizing sectarian identity and furthering secessionist aspirations. Accordingly, TSG empowers ethnic elites by incentivizing them to press for ever radical, secessionist objectives. Consociationalism, as such, is not only based upon a primordialist and segregationist logic that identities are fixed, but it also acts as an identity concrete mixer to further harden ethnicity, it builds a structure that appears to almost completely disavow the potential for individual agency and ethnicity to undergo amelioration.

Yet, as we have illuminated in this paper, while consociationalism and devolution can reward secessionist parties, they do not necessarily reward their secessionist aspirations. While consociationalism/devolution may favour the mobilization of secessionist political parties, at the same time it incentivizes parties to mobilize on local and regional grounds, thus satisficing their group's need for strong representation without requiring secession. At the same time, it is doubtful whether consociationalism will, in the short to medium term, terminally erode ethnic cleavages in the region.

Looking at the ameliorating effects of liberal consociationalism allied to devolution on secessionist movements in Northern Ireland, it appears feasible to advocate these processes as beneficial for other similarly divided regions. This fits nicely with the idea that Northern Ireland is a template of successful peace-building and a model for export to war-torn regions (see Nagle and Clancy, 2010). A qualification is required: it is not possible to see such frameworks and normative principles as *identikit*, readily transposable to all violently divided societies. Research has convincingly challenged the idea "that federalism can be a one-size-fits-all solution to ethnic and other forms of intra-state conflict" (Bakke and Wibbels, 2006: 2) and instead points to the benefits of "federalism deeply rooted in the specific features of diverse societies" (Bakke and Wibbels, 2006: 2–3). Notably, therefore, the ongoing moderation of secessionist parties in Northern Ireland demonstrates the validity of designing institutions that match the specific exigencies of the violently divided society.

Notes

¹The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2011), Module: Political Attitudes (NIRELND2). See <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/> (accessed 27 Feb 2013).

²There is an argument that NILT results unwittingly under-represent preferences for a united Ireland. This is because historically Catholics in Northern Ireland have been wary of outwardly showing support for a united Ireland given that it is often seen as commensurate with IRA support. However,

the disbanding of the IRA in 2005, allied to Sinn Féin as an increasingly moderate party that courts votes across all Catholic demographics, has made declarations of support for Irish unity less stigmatized. Yet, as noted, rather than increasing, Catholic preferences for a united Ireland are declining.

³Sub-state nationalism refers to minority national groups located within a larger state which mobilize behind nationalist political parties. These groups do not necessarily desire independence, but may wish to have their distinct national identities accommodated within the existing state via forms of regional autonomy (Kymlicka, 2007: 68).

⁴For example, some consociations have obliged voters to select candidates only within their own ethnic segment, cross-community parties have been proscribed and ministerial seats and public positions allocated in advance of elections (e.g. Ta'if, Dayton, Cyprus (1960) and Burundi). While the Belfast Agreement is largely 'liberal', two aspects are corporatist: the system of designation for elected officials to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the veto. Assembly rules require the 108 elected politicians to register as either 'nationalist', 'unionist' or 'other' (non-unionist or nationalist) to ensure that when policy votes are taken, nationalists and unionists possess a mutual veto to act against majority ethnic lock-in where minority groups are excluded from the decision making process. The veto is thus corporatist as it reserves specific rights to groups and not to individuals.

⁵The Flags and Emblem (Display) Act (NI) of 1954 which forbade the public display of so-called "provocative emblems" in Northern Ireland had the *de facto* intention of proscribing the use of nationalist symbols.

⁶Although the Belfast Agreement is an international treaty between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, all aspects of the Agreement are revisable according to the will of the Westminster parliament, even if this entails the UK breaking its treaty obligations (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009: 36).

⁷Only 19% of Scots surveyed stated that their primary identity was British compared to 52% of English whose primary identity is British (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/oct/06/national-identity-disunited-kingdom-debate> (accessed 7 March 2013)).

⁸In the autumn of 2014 the electorate of Scotland will vote on the issue of Scottish independence. The option of voting for 'Devo Max was' was considered but finally omitted.

References

- Alonso, R. (2007), *The IRA and Armed Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Bakke, K. M. and Wibbels, E. (2006), Disparity, and Civil Conflict in Federal States, *World Politics*. Vol.59, No.1, pp.1–50.
- Bogdanor, V. (1999), *Devolution in the United Kingdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carrell, S. (2011), UK Citizens Reject "British" Label, Guardian Survey Finds, *The Guardian*. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/oct/12/uk-citizens-reject-british-survey> (accessed 1 May 2012).
- Coakley, J. (2009), Implementing Consociation in Northern Ireland, in R. Taylor (ed.), *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. London: Routledge, pp.122–143.
- Collier, P. (2010), *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places*. London: Vantage Books.
- Curtice, J. (2011), Scottish and Welsh Voters Enjoy Devolution's Slippery Slope, *The Guardian*. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/09/scottish-welsh-devolution-slippery-slope> (accessed 1 May 2012).
- English, R. (2006), *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*. London: Macmillan.
- Erk, J. and Anderson, L. (2009), The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?, *Regional and Federal Studies*. Vol.19, No.2, pp.191–202.
- ESDS Government (2012), Scottish Social Attitudes Survey. Available at <http://www.esds.ac.uk/government/ssa/> (accessed 26 November 2012).
- Fearon, D. and Laitin, J. (2000), Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity, *International Organization*. Vol.54, No.4, pp.845–877.
- Guiberméau, M. (2006), National Identity, Devolution and Secession in Canada, Britain and Spain, *Nations and Nationalism*. Vol.12, No.1, pp.51–76.
- Gurr, T. (1993), *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.

- Hayes, B. and McAllister, I. (2012), Integration or Segregation? Community Relations in Northern Ireland Since the Belfast Agreement, Paper presented at the 62nd Political Studies Association Annual International Conference, Belfast, 3–5 April.
- Hechter, M. (2000), *Containing Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horowitz, D. (2008), Conciliatory Institutions and Constitutional Processes in Post-conflict States, *William & Mary Law Review*. Vol.49, No.4, pp.1213–1248.
- Kalyvas, S. (2008), Ethnic Defection in Civil War, *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol.41, No.8, pp.1043–1068.
- Keating, M. (1996), *Nations against the State: The New Politics of Nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Keating, M. (2012), Rethinking Sovereignty: Independence-lite, Devolution-max and National Accommodation, *The Future of Scotland*. Available at <http://www.futureofscotland.org/rethinking-sovereignty-independence%E2%80%90lite-devolution-%C2%AD%E2%80%90max-and-national-accommodation/> (accessed 24 November 2012).
- Kymlicka, W. (2007), *Multicultural Odyssey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lake, D. and Rothchild, D. (2005), Territorial Decentralization and Civil War Settlements, in P.G. Roeder and D. Rothchild (eds), *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp.109–132.
- Lustick, I. (1979), Stability in Deeply Divided Countries: Consociationalism Versus Control, *World Politics*. Vol.31, No.3, pp.325–344.
- McCann, J. (2008), Private Members Business: Varney Review, *Northern Ireland Assembly*. 31 March.
- McDonald, H. (2008), *Guns, Smoke and Mirrors: How Sinn Féin Dressed up Defeat as Victory*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.
- McGarry, J. (1998), Political Settlements in Northern Ireland and South Africa, *Political Studies*. Vol.46, No.5, pp.853–870.
- McGarry, J. (2001), Northern Ireland, Civic Nationalism, and the Good Friday Agreement, in R. Wilford (ed.), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.109–136.
- McGarry, J. and O’Leary, B. (1995), *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- McGarry, J. and O’Leary, B. (2007), Iraq’s Constitution of 2005: Liberal Consociation as Political Prescription, *International Journal of International Law*. Vol.5, No.4, pp.670–698.
- McGarry, J. and O’Leary, B. (2009), Power Shared after the Deaths of Thousands, in R. Taylor (ed.), *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O’Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. London: Routledge, pp.15–84.
- Mitchell, P., Evans, G. and O’Leary, B. (2009), Extremist Outbidding in Ethnic Party Systems is not Inevitable: Tribune Parties in Northern Ireland, *Political Studies*. Vol.57, No.2, pp.397–421.
- Moloney, E. (2007), *A Secret History of the IRA*. London: Penguin.
- Nagle, J. (2009), Sites of Social Centrality and Segregation: Lefebvre in Belfast, a “Divided City”, *Antipode*. Vol.41, No.2, pp.326–347.
- Nagle, J. and Clancy, M.-A. (2010), *Shared Society or Benign Apartheid? Understanding Peace-building in Divided Societies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nairn, T. (2001), Farewell Britannia: Break-up or New Union? *New Left Review*. Vol.7, pp.55–74.
- Nolan, P. (2012), *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report*. Belfast: Community Relations Council.
- Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group (2011), *A Case for Reduced Corporation Tax*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group.
- O’Leary, B. (2005), Debating Consociational Politics: Normative and Explanatory Arguments, in S. Noel Jr (ed.), *From Power Sharing to Democracy: Post-Conflict Institutions in Ethnically Divided Societies*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, pp.3–43.
- Purdie, B. (1990), *Politics in the Street: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Blackstaff.
- Rothman, J. (1997), *Resolving Identity-based Conflict in Nations, Organizations, and Communities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Shirlow, P. and Murtagh, B. (2006), *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City*. London: Pluto Press.
- Sinn Féin (2012), All Ireland Development and Irish Unity, Available at <http://www.sinnfein.ie/unity-and-all-ireland-development> (accessed 29 November 2012).

- Taylor, R. (2006), The Belfast Agreement and the Politics of Consociationalism, *The Political Quarterly*. Vol.77, No.2, pp.217–226.
- Todd, J., O’keefe, T., Rougier, N. and Bottos, L. (2006), Fluid or Frozen? Choice and Change in Ethno-national Identification in Contemporary Northern Ireland, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*. Vol.12, Nos.3–4, pp.323–346.
- Tonge, J. (2006), Sinn Féin and the “New Republicanism” in Belfast, *Space & Polity*. Vol.10, No.2, pp.135–147.
- Van Evera, S. (2001), Primordialism Lives!, *APSA-CP: Newsletter of the Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association*. Vol.12, No.1, pp.20–22.
- Walsh, D. and O’Malley, E. (2012), The Slow Growth of Sinn Féin: From Minor Player to Centre Stage? Working Papers in International Studies, Dublin City University, No.2.
- Welsh Government (2011), Written Statement—Welsh Referendum 2011, Available at <http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2011/welshreferendum/?lang=en> (accessed 23 November 2012).
- Wilford, R. and Wilson, R. (2006), *The Trouble with Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Democratic Dialogue.
- Wilson, R. and Wilford, R. (2003), *Northern Ireland: A Route to Stability*. Swindon: ESRC.
- Wolff, S. (2009), Complex Power-sharing and the Centrality of Territorial Self-governance in Contemporary Conflict Settlements, *Ethnopolitics*. Vol.8, No.1, pp.27–45.