



# Research Update

## Belonging and Alienation in the new Northern Ireland

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### Introduction

As the repercussions of the Christmas Flag Protests continued into 2013, the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister produced a new version of a good relations strategy for Northern Ireland: *Together: Building a United Community*. At the heart of this document is the idea that building a 'united community' for Northern Ireland must begin at local level (e.g. by removing interface barriers) and with the younger generation (e.g. through shared school campuses).

Such a notion has good credentials in social scientific theory. From a young age, the process of socialisation sees us modify our identities and behaviour in order to feel acceptance and belonging within a community (Goffman, 1959). Local identities are particularly potent because they are more rooted in personal connections than most others – regular encounters through daily routine can give rise to a wide network of acquaintances (Fischer, 1976). The term 'social capital' has been used to show that these contacts – and the trust and confidence arising from them – can act as a resource for the benefit of individuals and wider society.

In order to examine the sense of trust, confidence and 'belonging' that may be crucial to the building of a 'united community' in Northern Ireland, the 2013 surveys of NILT and YLT introduced a

new set of questions within the module on Community Relations. These questions sought to assess respondents' perception of division, their willingness to cross community boundaries, their sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods and to Northern Ireland, and their self-perceived influence on decision-making. This Research Update outlines the responses to these questions, focusing in particular on differences between respondents of different religious affiliations (and none) and those of different generations.

### The practice and prospect of mixing

According to data from the 2011 Census, almost 4 in 10 of the 582 local government wards are 'single identity' (in which a single community group makes

up more than 80% of residents), and only 1 in 20 are fully mixed (i.e. with no one group in an absolute majority). Although this represents a significant increase in the amount of residential diversification since the 1998 Agreement, studies have found that residential segregation still occurs on a smaller scale level even within 'mixed' wards (Nolan, 2014: 115). We can assume, therefore, that the majority of NILT/YLT respondents come from areas which have a clear dominant community identity, even at street level. Nevertheless, most respondents (2 out of 3) perceived their neighbourhood to be free from the effects of segregation, although those not identifying as either Protestant or Catholic were more likely to observe such divisions (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Not only did most respondents portray a lack of segregation in their neighbourhoods, they also indicated

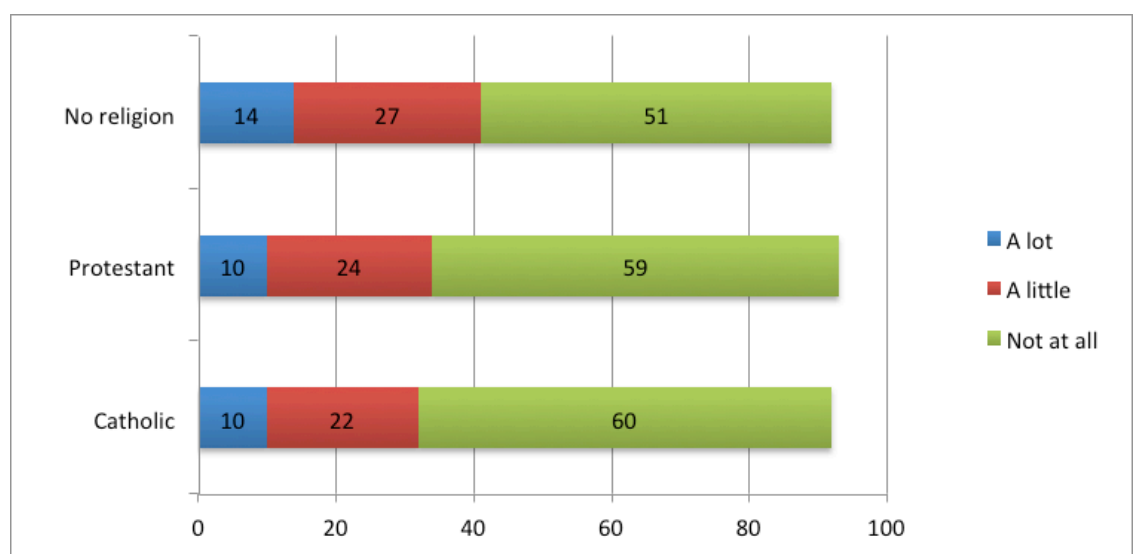


Figure 1. The extent to which your local neighbourhood is, in practice, segregated (% respondents)

a personal willingness to cross lines of community division themselves. For example, a large majority (4 out of 5) would be willing to register with a GP in an area dominated by a community other than their own. Among all respondents, both Catholic and Protestant, the proportion willing *only* to move surgery if it was to an area with the *same* community identity as theirs was only 12% greater than those willing to move to one with a different majority community.

Religious differences were more pronounced regarding the prospect of visiting premises associated with particular community traditions.<sup>2</sup> It is notable that those claiming no religious denomination mark the mid-way ground between Catholics and Protestants when describing how safe they would feel in all such places. For example, two thirds of those of no religious denomination would feel comfortable visiting *either* an Orange Hall or a GAA club, whereas only half of Protestants would feel safe in a GAA club and only half of Catholics would feel safe in an Orange Hall. Schools of all types were considered more 'safe' for people of all religions and none; interestingly, the same proportion of Protestant respondents (78%) said they would feel comfortable in a Catholic School as in an Orange Hall. In sum, although most respondents presented a positive impression regarding their experience of mixing, and willingness to do so further, their sense of security diminishes as the places to be visited become more culturally distinct.

## A comfortable fit?

This helps to put in context a new question asked in the NILT and YLT surveys to gauge people's sense of belonging to

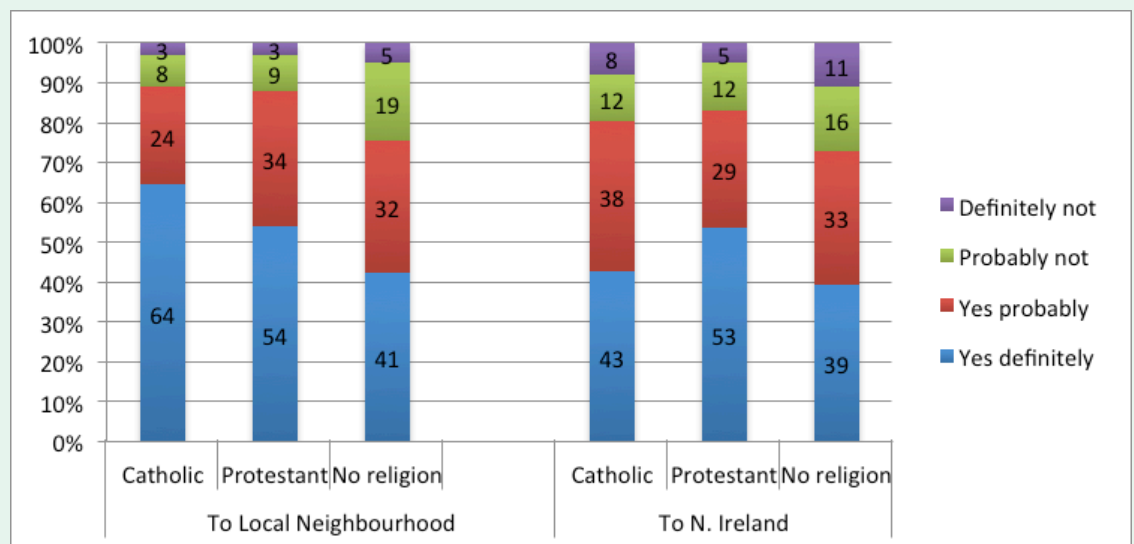


Figure 2. Do you feel a sense of belonging...

their neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland: *Thinking about this immediate neighbourhood/Northern Ireland, the kind of place it is and the kind of people who live around here, would you say that you feel a sense of belonging to this neighbourhood/Northern Ireland?* The explanatory comment for this question in the survey encouraged respondents to think about whether they felt they had much in common with those around them. Figure 2 is a depiction of the answers to this question in relation to respondents' sense of belonging both to their neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland.

Categorising respondents in terms of their broad religious affiliations (Catholic, Protestant, none) shows us that:

- Catholics of all ages are much more likely to feel a stronger sense of belonging to their neighbourhood than to Northern Ireland;

- Catholics' sense of belonging to their neighbourhood is stronger than Protestants', who in turn tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging to Northern Ireland than Catholics;
- Those self-describing as having 'No Religion' are less likely to feel that they have a sense of belonging to either their neighbourhood or to Northern Ireland than either Catholics or Protestants.

The survey also points to other factors that are significant in the experience of belonging in Northern Ireland. Those respondents living in a rural area and those who own (rather than rent) their accommodation, for instance, had stronger sentiments with regard to local 'belonging'. At the broader level, identification with Northern Ireland was significantly weaker among those with higher educational qualifications

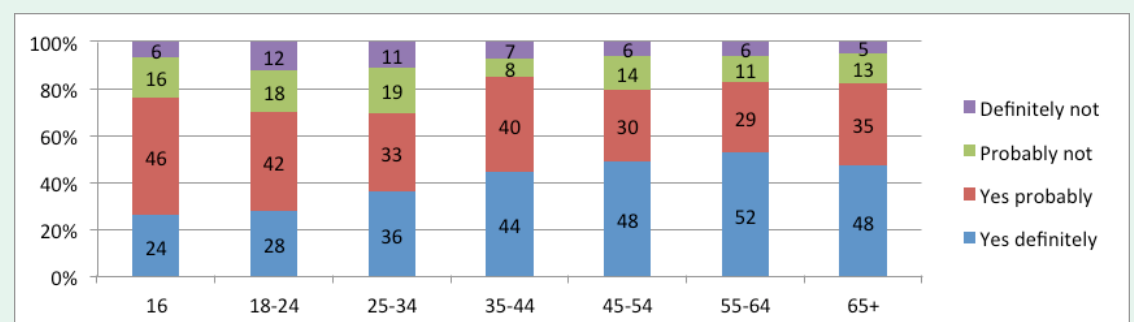


Figure 3. Do you feel a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland? (Generational comparison, % respondents)

and those who had experience of living outside Northern Ireland. Yet a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland was also weaker among those who were most wary of ethnic diversity<sup>3</sup>; perhaps indicating that prejudice can arise as much from insecurity in group identity/membership as from bravado. Perhaps unsurprising, given the resurgence of expressions of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland, those respondents identifying as being from a minority ethnic community background (just 5% of all respondents) also had a much more ambivalent sense of belonging to Northern Ireland (about 40% felt a sense of belonging here, compared to 80% of total NILT respondents).

## Generational differences

Looking more closely at the data, we see that there is also a significant generational shift at play with regard to identification with Northern Ireland as a community (see Figure 3). In part, this weaker sense of belonging to Northern Ireland among younger people may reflect the shift in community majorities across generations (i.e. with a Protestant majority confined to older cohorts [Nolan, 2014]), but it could also indicate a growing sense of alienation among younger Catholics in particular.

18% of Catholic YLT respondents said they ‘definitely’ feel a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland, compared to 43% of Catholic NILT respondents; even at neighbourhood level, only 39% of Catholic YLT respondents felt a definite sense of belonging, compared to 64% of older Catholics. More broadly, the YLT results for this question reflect a pattern similar to those in the NILT survey noted above. There are significant differences between communities in terms of a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland (with Protestant young people having a significantly stronger sense of this identity), and between Catholics/Protestants and those identifying as having ‘No Religion’, who are even less likely to feel a sense of belonging at any level.

## Conclusion

Social capital and a ‘sense of belonging’ are understood to foster civic engagement in modern society, which is otherwise characterised by individualism and consumerism – neither of which are conducive to democratic participation or collective action. However, although voter turnout remains high in Northern Ireland compared to elsewhere in the UK and Europe (52% in the May 2014 elections, compared to the EU average of 43%), the findings of the 2013 NILT survey reveal

a degree of pessimism among these voters as to the influence that they have over decisions that affect them (see Figure 4). A sense of powerlessness is particularly acute among young people and among those with no religious denomination. This could be seen to reflect the effects of a consociational model of power-sharing, in which those who do not identify strongly with one of the two communities reified by the political system feel the odds to be stacked against change towards diversification or moderation, regardless of how actively they seek to participate in local or regional politics.

What we see, overall, is a society with generally high levels of belonging, especially at local level, but low levels of perceived influence in decision-making at any level. We see a society in which most people are confident (at least in hypothetical terms) in traversing community boundaries into different areas and institutions, and in which many would feel safe in a building associated with the cultural traditions of a community other than their own.

However, we also see a society in which those who are often identified as holding the key to a more peaceful future – younger people and those who are free from any one religious denomination – are the people who have the strongest feelings of alienation and pessimism.

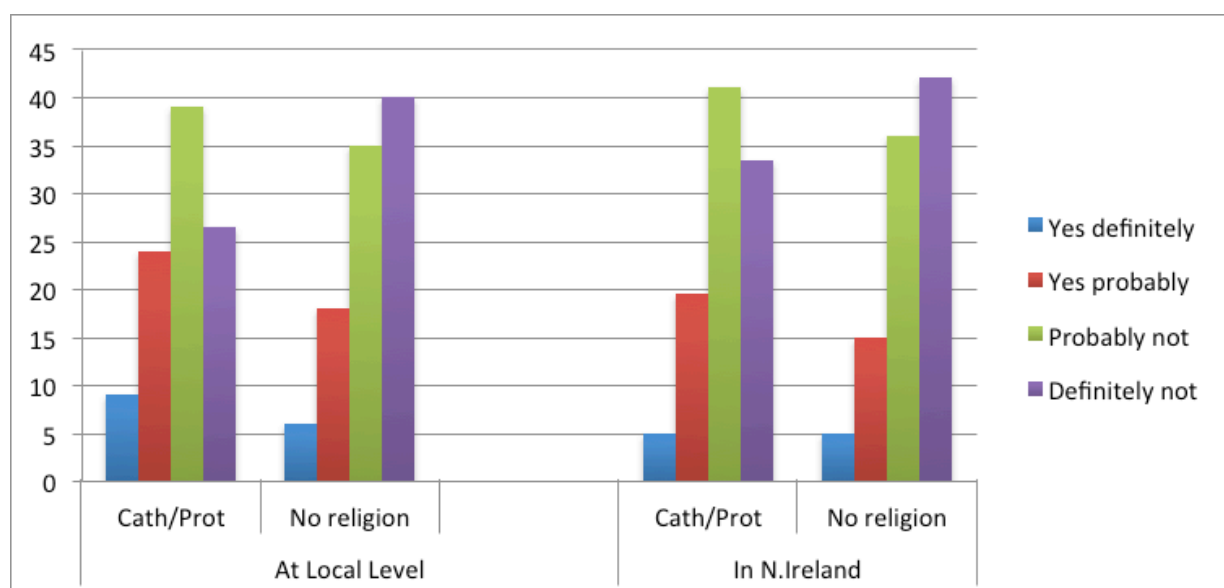


Figure 4. Do you feel any influence when it comes to decisions about what happens... (% respondents)

## Key points

- Around 4 out of 5 of respondents from all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland.
- Only 4 in 10 respondents from minority ethnic backgrounds feel a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland.
- Only a third of respondents from all backgrounds consider themselves to have any influence in local decision-making, and this reduces to one quarter of respondents for decisions made about Northern Ireland.
- The majority of respondents from all backgrounds don't perceive the area in which they live to be divided and claim they would feel safe in places with a different dominant community to their own.
- Younger respondents and those identifying as having no religious denomination are less likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood or to Northern Ireland. They are also more likely to perceive divisions to exist in their local areas, and they are less likely to feel that they have influence in decisions at any level.

## References

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- OFMDFM (2013) *Together: Building a United Community*, [www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community-strategy.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community-strategy.pdf)

## (Endnotes)

- 1 The question asked was: "In some areas the communities are divided and Protestants and Catholics tend to go to different local shops or use different GP surgeries and other services. Thinking about this area, would you say that this happens..."
- 2 Respondents were asked to think about an event that they wanted to go to in a nearby town, and consider how they would feel if it was to be held in four different premises: A GAA club, an Orange Hall, a Protestant secondary school and a Catholic secondary school.
- 3 Those agreeing with the statement, "In relation to colour and ethnicity, I prefer to stick with people of my own kind".

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys are carried out annually and document public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT and YLT are joint projects of the two Northern Ireland universities and aim to provide independent sources of information on what the public think about the social issues of the day. Check the surveys' websites for more information ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) and [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)) or call us with any queries.

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