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Class, Identity, Integration, and the Two-Tiered Peace Process

This article critically examines the extent to which increases in socio-economic equality between Protestants and Catholics over the post-Agreement period has corresponded to a gradual de-centering of ethnopolitical identity in social relations and political processes. I argue that, while there has been an increase in social integration and moderate growth in the political middle ground, such trends are not experienced equally across class contexts. On an everyday basis, ethnopolitical identity is most strongly felt in relatively deprived and religiously segregated communities who have experiencing very little by the way of peace dividends and suffering disproportionately and intergenerationally from conflict-related trauma and an ongoing sense of sectarian threat.

Keywords: class, identity, inequality, integration, Northern Ireland, peace, poverty.

Družbeni razred, identiteta, integracija in dvotirni mirovni proces

Članek kritično presoja, v kolikšni meri povečana družbena in ekonomska enakost med protestanti in katoličani v obdobju po podpisu Velikonočnega sporazuma sovpada s postopnim upadanjem etnocentrizma v družbenih odnosih in političnih procesih. Po avtorjevih besedah je družba sicer bolj povezana in politika nekoliko bolj sredinska, a to ne velja za vse družbene razrede enako. V vsakodnevnem življenju je etnopolitična identiteta najbolj izražena med razmeroma prikrajšanimi in versko ločenimi skupnostmi, ki so od mirovnega sporazuma imele bolj malo koristi in se že več generacij nesorazmerno spopadajo s post-konfliktnimi travmami in stalnim občutkom ogroženosti.

Ključne besede: *družbeni razred, identiteta, neenakost, integracija, Severna Irska, mir, revščina.*

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1. Introduction

In the early period of the peace process, key authors on the conflict in Northern Ireland (NI) argued that the mutually opposed national and religious identities constituting Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) communities would gradually be diluted through economic development and increased social equality (Douglas 1997; Elliott 2002). Politically, leaders were aware that a promise of economic growth and material prosperity would be essential to increase the appeal of the Good Friday Agreement (hereafter the Agreement), especially among the poor and working-class communities of Belfast, which experienced a disproportionate share of the violence during the Troubles (Coulter 2019, 124). Proponents in the British, Irish and U.S. governments argued that the Agreement would provide sufficient security to attract foreign investment and usher in a new era of cooperation wherein Unionist and Nationalist leaders could agree to disagree on ethnopolitical issues and work together to promote the shared social and economic interests of their constituencies. Since, the same leaders continue to applaud the Agreement as a model of effective peace that should be followed by other societies emerging from conflict, ignoring the stark inequalities that continue to blight Northern Irish society (Coulter et al. 2021, 1–4, 11–12) and constitute ongoing patterns of conflict and disorder (Creary & Byrne 2014; Holland & Rabrenovic 2017).

Certainly, evidence of increased tolerance and integration among the historically polarized ethnic blocs continues to mount. For instance, Nagle's (2009) analysis suggests that "multiculturalism" was advanced as a result of urban renewal schemes promoted by the NI Executive. Ethnographic work by Drissel (2007, 177) details how newly constructed public spaces in Belfast "have been utilized by youth to effectively blur schismatic distinctions and at least partially transform their collective identities." Overall, when the Assembly functions, the Unionist and Nationalist parties struggle to cooperate on most meaningful legislation, and disputes over policing and the past have consistently divided government along ethnonational lines (Coulter et al. 2021, 44–49, 70–103; Nolan 2014, 12–14; Lawther & Hearty 2021). Nonetheless, on a day-by-day basis, gradual shifts in civil society reveal a notable degree of flux in the identities and agencies of the NI citizenry. Statistical analyses by Coulter et al. (2021, 164–203) suggest an increased variability of identities among NI residents. Todd (2018, 315) reveals the capacity of NI citizens to "stretch the conventional boundaries of nation and group," signaling "everyday potential for quite radical revision of conventional constructions of the nation." The 2018 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey even showed that "more people than ever in the province, 50 %, say they are 'neither unionist nor nationalist'" (Lowry 2019).

Further, over time improvements in economic equity outcomes have continued, despite the political logjams in Stormont. The narrowing disparities in

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employment rates between Protestants and Catholics is frequently cited as evidence of the overall growth in equity and integration resulting from the Agreement (Coulter et al. 2021, 11). By 2014, at least 60 % of entrants to higher education were Catholic, and 60 % were female, leading to a significant redistribution of the communal shares of professional occupations (Nolan 2014, 13). Such trends suggest that the predictions of prominent authors writing in the ceasefire period and shortly thereafter has, to some extent, come to fruition. Douglas (1997, 171–172) predicted that, as a result of the "new social structures" that emerged in the 1990s, "the greater diversity of social behavior" would facilitate the emergence of "more subtle definitions of the Self and the Other." In a similar vein, others suggested that the expansion of private housing markets, and concomitant processes of suburbanization and increased social mobility would steadily reduce Catholics' emotive attachment to Irish Nationalist ideology, as material concerns gradually outflank those of ethnopolitical identity (Elliott 2002, 181).

Indeed, as the subsequent pages illuminate, the peace process has facilitated social mobility and intergroup integration between Catholics and Protestants. However, this dynamic has been evident primarily among the middle-classes. In poor and working-class CNR and PUL communities in Belfast suffering most from the legacy of conflict, the "peace dividend" promised to them in the ceasefire period (1994–1998) has failed to materialize (Knox 2016). Drawing from a systematic literature review of scholarship on class, inequality, identity, and the peace process in NI over the last 25 years, I argue here that a two-tiered peace process is shaping processes of identity formation in distinct ways in middle-class versus poor and working-class communities. To sufficiently contextualize the analysis, though, it is important to first provide a brief historical overview of the emergence of the current class structure in NI.

2. National Identity and Class Formation: Past to Present

In the mid-20th century, a sectarian state intent on maintaining political alliance between the Unionist bourgeoisie and working-class Protestant communities heavily favored Protestant workers over their Catholic counterparts for decent paying, blue-collar jobs in the shipbuilding, manufacturing, and engineering sectors (Bew et al. 2002). The decline of these industries in NI began shortly after the second World War, intensifying over subsequent decades. Between 1950 and 1994 manufacturing employment declined by 58.4 %; and between 1971 and 1991, the unemployment rate increased 14.6 %, and outmigration rose by 12.2 % (McGovern & Shirlow 1997, 188). Their favored position in blue-collar sectors, rather than educational attainment historically marked working-class Protestant males' socio-economic advantage over their Catholic counterparts and women, and was key to their political alignment with middle-class Unionism.

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However, as the Troubles continued into the 1980s, and the neoliberal project of the Thatcher and Reagan regimes effectively undermined the power of labor, "traditional heavy industry closed its doors," to be replaced by service industries and a flexibilized work force that displaced "the male, and mainly Protestant, industrial worker" (Smyth & Cebulla 2008, 176).

Throughout the period of Direct Rule from 1972 to 1998, the British state would attempt to address Northern Ireland's struggling economy and undermine the Republican insurgency by investing heavily in the province's white-collar public sector. Nearly 90 % of the funds invested by the British state in NI primarily benefited the middle and upper classes (McGovern & Shirlow 1997, 192). While the fruits of this investment were initially concentrated among privileged Protestant communities, middle-class Catholics would eventually come to benefit as well, as anti-discrimination legislation (such as the Fair Employment Acts of 1976, 1989 and 1998) gradually improved equity in hiring (Mitchell 2006, 63). Today, a much larger portion of workers (one in four) in NI work for the state compared with the United Kingdom (U.K.) average (although this is down from over one in three in the early 1990s) (Gunson et al. 2018, 7), many of whom are well educated professionals. Considering that public sector wages are on par with the U.K. average, and the cost of living in NI is lower than in other U.K. countries (Coulter 2019, 133), middle-class professionals in NI enjoy a relatively high standard of living.

Some research also suggests that the private labor sector has improved significantly. Recent reports indicate an unemployment rate in NI which is at "a record low," comparing favorably to the U.K. average (Duncan et al. 2021, 1). This trend is attributed in part to a growing tourism industry that has generated over £2 billion in output and created 52,000 jobs over the past two decades (Gray et al. 2018, 12). The Joseph Roundtree Foundation (2022, 3) documents measures of poverty that "are generally lower than elsewhere in the U.K.," due largely to the province's "relatively affordable housing costs, compared to other parts of the U.K." As these same authors indicate, however, interpreting such figures at face value obscures the reality of stark class and spatial disparities in socio-economic outcomes and quality of life in NI. For instance, a significant share of the population – "almost one in five people" – still live in poverty, including 24 % of children (Joseph Roundtree Foundation 2022, 5). Across the whole of NI, the growth in food banks reflects an increasing food insecurity crisis which will likely be exacerbated by the gradual implementation of Westminster's "welfare reform" measures (Coulter et al. 2021, 260–269). "Cuts in the real value of working-age benefits are expected to reduce the real incomes of poorer households and housing costs are expected to increase for low income households as a consequence of rising rents" (Gray et al. 2018, 146).

Moreover, despite gains in the rates of private sector employment, wages in NI are 16 % below the U.K. average. Praise of the gains made in Northern Ire-

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land's labor market tends to be based on a metric which only includes "those who are seeking employment but excludes those who are not" (Coulter 2019, 126–127). In 2018, the rate of "worklessness," which estimates employment as percentage of the entire working age population (not only those actively seeking work), indicate that economic activity in NI was 7 % lower than the other U.K. countries (Gray et al. 2018, 23). This is due in part to the relatively high percentage of the population (1 in 7) suffering from conflict-related trauma. About one-third of those categorized as economically inactive are people claiming long-term sickness benefits, and many of these individuals suffer from trauma because of being a victim or perpetrator of violence, or of living with a relative who was (Coulter et al. 2021, 4–5; see also, Tomlinson 2016). Disproportionately, such problems are concentrated in those under-served neighborhoods in North and West Belfast where most of the killings in the city during the Troubles occurred (Mesev et al. 2009).

Labor market problems are also the result of a highly unequal education system, in which pupils from poor and working-class families – especially boys – struggle to learn. Working-class Protestant boys hold the lowest school "attainment" levels in the U.K. after Roma youth, with working-class Catholic boys fairing only marginally better (Nolan 2014, 98). Consequently, young working-class males in NI have economic inactivity rates of over 20 %, higher than the other U.K. countries and Ireland. Many others are forced into part-time jobs "and relatively insecure forms of employment (such as zero hours contracts)" (Gray et al. 2018, 23, 152). Borooah and Knox (2015, 84) report that in 2013, there was a "56 percentage point gap between Northern Ireland's grammar and secondary schools in the proportions of their pupils obtaining good GCSEs and, as worryingly, this gap has shown little sign of reducing over time." The same authors indicate that an "absurdly small" number of socially and economically disadvantaged students enroll in grammar schools, which have greater capacity than secondary schools to prepare their pupils for university (Borooah & Knox 2015, 87). Various quantitative analyses indicate that "the gap between the lowest and highest skilled [in NI] was higher than any OECD country" (Duncan et al. 2021, 1; see also Magill & Mc Peake 2016; Bradshaw et al. 2018). Educational outcome measures, like labor market metrics, illuminate the spatial concentration of disadvantage. The 2017 NI Multiple Deprivation Report found over two-thirds of pupils in the Shankill, Falls and New Lodge areas of West Belfast "under-achieve" at school (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2017). Findings by Hughes and Loader (2022, 1) suggest that the "cross-community class interests animating" the grammar school system "not only perpetuate inequalities within respective communities but may also present a significant barrier to peacebuilding efforts in education, and ultimately impede progress towards a more socially cohesive society." Social immobility and stark levels of socio-economic inequality across working-class and middle-class Unionist and Nationalist communities

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contribute to generalized feelings of discontent which may be channeled by opportunistic leaders in ways which fuel interethnic distrust and resentment (Holland & Rabrenovic 2017; Holland 2022, 52–55).

3. Segregation, Class, and Ethno-National Identity: Evidence from Belfast

Jennifer Todd explains how, as day-to-day patterns of social interaction change in accordance with shifts in social structures, gradual alterations of identity may occur, diluting the power of rigid social and political boundaries (Todd 2005; 2018). In Belfast's more privileged sites of interaction, avoidance of discussion about, and displays of ethnopolitical identity facilitates formation of relationships across the traditional communal binaries which, to some extent, cross over into multiple social spheres, and persist due to the few spatial and economic barriers imposed on agents within these social environments. In the increasingly ethnically "mixed" grammar schools, universities, professional workplaces, and other "middle-class" sites of interaction, cultural mechanisms of social regulation which institutionalize codes of silence on issues of ethnonational and ethnoreligious identity, underscore the growth of cross-communal integration (Holland 2022, 27–50). In Belfast specifically, the increased residential "mixing" in private housing markets (Gray et al. 2018, 177; Shuttleworth et al. 2020) and workplaces (Shirlow & Murtagh 2006, 118) among the middle-classes especially, coupled with this social milieu's greater access to cosmopolitan shared spaces facilitates a process of de-ethnicization that is less evident among poor and working-class residents. On the contrary, in under-served communities, greater levels of segregation and isolation across the institutional contexts of housing, education, and even leisure centers in some areas (Shirlow & Murtagh 2006; Herrault & Murtagh 2019) obstruct the extent to which contact translates into long-term relationships with outgroup members.

This is not to say that much good work dedicated to facilitating dialogue, tolerance and trust between PUL and CNR communities does not occur. On the contrary; the author met various community leaders from relatively deprived neighborhoods in Belfast who engage in projects which bring at-risk Protestant and Catholic youth together for play and to discuss difficult issues of identity. Others have identified broader, community-level intergroup cooperation in some areas of the city historically most susceptible to sectarian violence and disorder (Knox 2010; Byrne 2011). Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that poor and working-class families are less willing than their more privileged counterparts to enroll their children into officially integrated schools, which guarantee proportional representation of students who identify as Protestant, Catholic, or Other. Integrated schools, serving less than 10 percent of NI pupils, include lessons intended to build dialogue and trust across religious and national

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boundaries, and show a stronger capacity than non-integrated schools to facilitate close cross-ethnic friendships (Blaylock et al. 2018). Even for those who attend integrated schools or engage in other cross-communal relation building work, constructing an environment more broadly conducive to multiculturalism is quite challenging. Many young people from working-class communities located near sectarian interface areas still fear being identified as an outgroup member when traversing ethnosocial boundaries and struggle to maintain mixed friendships outside the safe spaces provided by integrated schools or community-based organizations (Holland 2022, 36–37). Although the city center provides some refuge from the threat of sectarian intimidation, accessing this part of Belfast is often difficult for relatively poor young residents from segregated neighborhoods and single-community estates, who face potential intimidation from paramilitaries, and must travel far distances across sectarian interfaces while lacking access to quick and reliable transportation (Harland 2011, 423; Shirlow & Murtagh 2006; McAlister et al. 2014).

These combined challenges to mobility throughout the city undermine the frequency of intergroup contact that can facilitate "mixed" friendships and subordinate ethnopolitical loyalties to supranational identifications (Hughes et al. 2007). Research from the early post-Agreement period showed a high proportion of 18–25-year-olds (68 %) living in Belfast neighborhoods separated by "peace lines" had never had a meaningful conversation with an outgroup peer (McAuley 2003, 64; Shirlow 2002). Although segregation has declined in NI overall (Gray et al. 2018, 177), the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2016) reports that 94 % of those residing in social housing in Belfast live in segregated or "single communities," where over 80 % of residents are from the same ethnoreligious group. It is unlikely, then, that integration among youth in such communities – often Republican and Loyalist strongholds – has risen substantially.

In these segregated and relatively deprived neighborhoods, memories of the Troubles remain particularly central to processes of collective identity reproduction. These neighborhoods experienced disproportionate levels of the political and sectarian violence of the Troubles, and thus struggle most acutely with the consequences of political leadership's inability to uncover the truth behind the crimes from which they or their loved ones continually suffer (Coulter et al. 2021, 70–103, 4–5). A systemic sense of collective threat from neighboring outgroup communities, and periodically escalating tensions emerging from political mini-crises simultaneously provide a locus of community activity where young people (or, young men) can perform valued roles as protectors of their communities. Although young men risk being criticized and excluded from communities when exercising agency in this way, some continue to follow such scripts, as they are provided with other pathways to identity formation (Harland 2011; Holland & Rabrenovic 2017). Findings from Creary and Byrne's (2014, 221) survey of 120 community group leaders in NI suggest that ongoing disadvantage,

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low self-esteem, and low self-image "continue to fuel youth interest in violence, thereby raising the potential to harm the peace process." Polls conducted earlier in the peace process indicate a greater resistance to integration among young people than older adults, especially among Protestant youth, who, in many instances, perceive a decline in the status of their families and communities to the benefit of Nationalists (McAuley & Tonge 2007, 43–47; Byrne 2011, 11). Just five years after the Agreement, McAuley (2003, 64) described a fragmentation within Unionism over support for the peace process, and the polarization of working-class CNR and PUL communities in particular "over a range of contentious issues, including, among others, the chosen routes of parades by the Orange Order, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, [and] the nature of policing." Nearly two decades later, political entrepreneurs' "manipulation of socio-political symbols [...] ultimately compromises the power of class-based discourses" to transform NI politics (Holland 2021, 9). Community leaders quoted in Holland and Rabrenovic (2017, 234) describe how a "scarcity mindset" continues to fuel ethnopolitical tensions at the street level. Some in underserved Belfast communities "are still poor [...] and they believe that they still have to fight" over resources along sectarian lines. Such a scarcity mindset among young men, in particular, coupled with feelings of ennui and fear, provides fertile ground for recruitment by paramilitary groups aligned with the ethnopolitical objectives that contributed to the escalation of the Troubles in the first place. While evident to some extent in CNR communities, this phenomenon is especially apparent in working-class PUL neighborhoods experiencing an increasing "disconnect" from middle-class political Unionism (Holland & Rabrenovic 2017, 234). Many residents, of all ages, hold disdain for paramilitarism. Yet, for some young people, joining a paramilitary group not only is expected to bring status, but a "sense of community" (Holland 2022, 40). For a greater number of individuals, attachment to ethnopolitical symbols and ideologies take more subtle forms yet can still powerfully connect them with insular constructions of identity that impede cross-ethnic social integration.

4. Class Dimensions of De-Ethnicization

Collective emotive attachments to ethnopolitical entities rooted in the legacy of conflict is less apparent in middle-class and upper-class networks. Recent survey research documents a decline in ethnonational identification in some relatively privileged sections of the society. Hayward and McManus's (2019, 148) analysis, for example, shows a higher proportion of those identifying as neither Nationalist nor Unionist tend "to be either in full or part-time employment or in education, compared with Unionists and Nationalists – a finding which correlates with this group tending to have higher educational qualifications." In addition, the gap between the proportion of individuals identifying with neither

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ethnonational tradition "in paid employment compared with Unionists and Nationalists [...] has grown steadily in the past 20 years" (Hayward & McManus 2019, 147).

As early as the mid-20th century, the improvement of living standards for upwardly mobile Protestants brought with the creation of planned suburban communities, such as Glengormley, "while not displacing traditional [ethnopolitical] fixations [...] drained them of some of their emotional centrality" to middle-class life, and ultimately "weakened traditional allegiances with the Unionist party" (Patterson 2006, 182; cited in Legg 2018, 59–62). More recently, in Belfast and beyond, other cultural differences are emerging within the broader Protestant community. For instance, Protestantism functioned to culturally bond middle-class Unionist and working-class Loyalist communities and was integral to the constitution of a shared Protestant/Unionist political consciousness (Morrow 1997; Bruce 1986). However, religious observance, while declining faster among Catholics in recent years, is overall lowest among Protestants (Coulter et al. 2021, 170), especially the Protestant middle-classes (Brewer 2013). In addition, research shows that Protestants tend to identify with a wider range of identities than Catholics (Loyalist, British, Northern Irish, and even, to a lesser extent, Nationalist) (Muldoon et al. 2007), and "ethno-nationalism has become less important in predicting vote choice for Protestants, but not Catholics" (Tilley et al. 2019, 1). Apparently, a decline in perceived group status satisfaction resulting from socio-structural changes associated with the peace process (increased Catholic mobility, for instance) has led some Protestants to explore alternative identifications (Goeke-Morey et al. 2016). The past two decades have witnessed a steady increase of both Protestants and Catholics (especially young people in these groups) disassociating from Northern Ireland's ethnopolitics and religious institutions (Coulter et al. 2021, 164–203). Affluent Protestant areas of NI have recorded lower voter turnouts than privileged wards in the other U.K. regions (Evans & Tonge 2009, 1027). More recently, Peter Shirlow, who leads research on voting trends in NI at Liverpool University's Institute of Irish Studies, comments that "a large section of the 18–40 Protestant electorate appears at the very least to be indifferent to politics at Stormont, especially on the unionist side" (quoted in Delargy 2017). Alliance, an historically middle-class party unaligned with Unionism or Nationalism (Tonge 2008, 64) has seen modest electoral gains in recent years (Hayward 2020). Yet, a greater number of those disenchanted with the dominant ethnonational parties, from across the communal divide, simply avoid the polls (Coulter et al. 2021, 44).

Non-voting is not only an issue in privileged Protestant wards, however. Working-class Protestant communities in Belfast have generated the lowest voter turnout in some post-Agreement elections (Brewer 2013), as many feel unrepresented by middle-class political Unionism and perceive the power sharing structure to have furthered a Nationalist agenda. Many in the same com-

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munities have expressed an emotive attachment to Unionism and Loyalism, not through voting, but rather, an alternative grassroots politics, demonstrated most recently in the widespread Loyalist street protests over the terms of U.K. withdrawal from the E.U. and perceptions of pro-Nationalist "two-tiered policing" (BBC News 2021). Thus, considering its various forms, emotive Unionist ethnopolitical energy is especially lacking in more privileged Protestant communities. Yet, detachment from ethnopolitics is also apparent among the upwardly mobile Catholic community, especially young middle-class Catholics who have little experiential connection to the Irish Nationalist struggle. Indeed, since devolution, young Catholic "professional types" have turned out to the polls in relatively low numbers (Delargy 2017).

Of course, the "middle-classes," like any socially constructed group, contain members who display various dissonant attitudes and behaviors, and this is certainly the case in NI (Graham & Shirlow 1998). For example, both Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – the self-described representatives of working-class Republicanism and Loyalism, respectively – have put forward an increasing number of middle-class party candidates. Moreover, some middle-class Catholics continue to connect with the collective identity of a minority Nationalist community who rose in resistance to a sectarian state. Involvement with the church in cultural activities also helps maintain a Catholic/Nationalist collective identity that transcends class position to some degree (Goeke-Morey et al. 2016). Nonetheless, the compartmentalization of ethnonational, religious, and class identities is evident among a sizable segment of the Catholic middle-class. For instance, Catholic grammar schools across the North devised their own private transfer exams as a result "of pressures from middle-class Catholic parents," and despite Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labor Party's (SDLP) opposition to the grammar school versus secondary school structure. Even as most would never vote for a Unionist candidate, middle-class Catholics overall seem to be "with the Unionists in wanting to maintain the grammar/secondary school divide" (McDonald 2009).

5. Brexit: A Re-Centering of Ethnopolitical Identity?

Divisive ethnopolitics is, of course, nothing new in post-accord NI, but the wake of Brexit brought rising fears of a re-escalation of conflict and reversal of the progress made toward democratization and integration of the PUL and CNR communities over the preceding quarter century (Cochrane 2020). Certainly, Brexit has had a divisive political impact, and changed the political views of some Catholics and Nationalists who were previously content with the constitutional status-quo. The percentage of Catholics who would consider voting for a united Ireland increased following the Brexit vote (Garry et al. 2018), as Sinn Féin escalated rhetoric calling for a referendum vote on unification (Reuters 2017). At

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the same time, while those aligned with the brand of hardline Ulster Unionism embodied by the DUP were galvanized to resist the prospect of unification, the broader Protestant and Unionist community has been quite divided over Brexit related issues. Forty percent of Protestants voted "Remain" in the 2016 Brexit referendum, compared to a vast majority of Nationalists (88 %) and Catholics (85 %) who voted the same (Garry et al. 2018). In the subsequent 2019 General Elections, the social and economic anxieties over Brexit galvanized the middle ground to show up at the polls to an extent not witnessed in NI for over a decade (Hayward 2020, 55), and some from the Unionist "business class" even indicated an openness to at least discussing the prospect of a united Ireland (Mallie 2018). Many who voted Alliance were "motivated by their pro-remain stance and by frustration at DUP-Sinn Féin ability to hold the region in limbo [...]" (Hayward 2020, 55). The Alliance Party and SDLP gained seats in the Executive as "previous DUP and Sinn Féin voters change[d] their minds" (Hayward 2020, 55). While Alliance gained a modest degree of support from young, Catholic, and working-class voters, two-thirds of those who voted for the party were, nonetheless, middle-class (Tonge 2020, 463).

Indeed, "Brexit has complicated, if not transcended, the traditional unionist/nationalist binary that defines political positions" (Hayward 2020, 49), yet this dynamic is most evident among middle-class constituencies. Despite the increased turnout of the "middle ground" to the polls in 2019 compared to previous post-devolution elections, low turnout, especially among young voters, is an ongoing issue. Not coincidentally, the more "hardline" Nationalist and Unionist parties – Sinn Féin and DUP, respectively – still receive the largest shares of votes overall (Coulter et al. 2021, 14–16, 35).

It is important to note that although disassociation from ethnopolitical positions is more apparent among the middle-classes, this is not to say that middle-class voters are necessarily more politically enlightened than their working-class counterparts. As McAuley (1997, 170) recognized, there has always been a willingness, "by at least some sections of the Protestant working class, to reassess their own position, and to challenge the authority of the established Unionist political leadership." In the post-Brexit era, Holland (2022) documents cases of Loyalist rejection of divisive DUP politics over the Withdrawal deal. However, while progressive segments of the PUL community continue to challenge established Unionist leadership, they generally still hold ideological commitment to conventional brands of Ulster Loyalism, having been more directly affected by the Troubles and thus more committed to preserving the Union they, or those close to them, risked their futures to defend. Rather than turning to the political center, then, many Loyalists simply avoid the polls altogether. In addition, material interests at stake with regard to Brexit and the NI Protocol for other sections of Unionism, who feel threatened vis-à-vis potential economic losses from E.U. withdrawal, are of less concern in working-class Loyalist strongholds,

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which have received little by the way of peace dividends. In Republican working-class communities, historically most committed to the unification agenda and core base of support for Sinn Féin, a re-escalation of constitutional politics in the wake of Brexit has only further re-centered the intersubjective meanings constituting collective ethnonational identity (Holland 2022, 97–98, 155–160).

6. Conclusion

In the ceasefire period Coulter (1997) examined how a withdrawal of a large segment of the Unionist middle-class from NI politics during Direct Rule undermined the trajectory of peacemaking and development of a more generative Unionist politics. A quarter century later, significant sections of both the Unionist and Nationalist middle-classes are withdrawing from local NI politics. While facilitating cross-communal interactions which ease the development of a broader range of relationships, disassociation from issues of ethnopolitical identity may also undermine efforts at inculcating a willingness and ability to engage across communal lines about issues that continue to politically divide the broader Unionist and Nationalist communities and ameliorate the pains of conflict for those without the option to simply turn away from them. In a sense, class difference increasingly cuts-across ethnoreligious lines, resulting, in certain instances in the de-centering of the traditional binary identities in shaping social and institutional relations. However, twenty-five years after the Agreement, such a dynamic is more notable in middle-class communities. In relatively deprived Republican and Loyalist communities the concomitant, coercive forces of ethnopolitical identity on the one hand, and poverty and inopportunity, on the other, continue to shape attitudes and agencies in ways which impede cross-communal integration. Ultimately, Northern Ireland's peace process remains at risk so long as it follows a developmental trajectory fractured along class lines.

Much could be done to ensure the working-class comes to benefit from the peace dividend more meaningfully. The British government could invest in the creation of decent paying jobs for those without a college education, reverse entitlements cuts and, in the longer term, work with local leaders in NI to create a more equitable education system that provides better prospects for youth from under-served communities with disproportionate levels of special needs. To mitigate the capacity of local political entrepreneurs in NI to manipulate the ethnonational and religious anxieties exacerbated by Brexit and the NI Protocol, the Irish and British governments, in cooperation with more moderate Nationalist and Unionist leadership in NI, should enhance efforts countering the divisive rhetoric of hardline Nationalist and Unionist leadership, be more ardent in their work to sustain key provisions of the Agreement and work more diligently to promote inclusive constructs of citizenship in a post-Brexit world. More must also be done to make working-class PUL and CNR communities

feel included in ongoing British-E.U. negotiations and enhance their felt sense of citizenship. In addition, the British and Irish governments, elected officials in NI and international donors should increase financial and political support for integrated education and community-based organizations with histories of success at bringing at-risk PUL and CNR youth together for meaningful dialogue and relation building, and increase investment in shared housing and public transportation systems connecting segregated neighborhoods to anonymous urban spaces undefined by sectarian territoriality. More generally, the NI, British, and Irish governments should listen to what representatives from relatively deprived PUL and CNR communities have to say about how they could be better served socially and economically by the peace process and devise policy accordingly.

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