

The Long View of Community Relations in Northern Ireland: 1989-2012



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Introduction

For just over twenty years now surveys in Northern Ireland have been monitoring changing attitudes to equality issues and relations between the two main religious communities during periods of conflict, peace-building and devolution (via the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey (NISA) 1989-1996 and the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) 1998-2012. While these monitoring statistics have provided much needed indicators on how the Northern Ireland public as a whole has perceived the situation on a year by year basis there has been limited analysis of the depth and richness of this dataset. Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland are not monolithic groups yet they are inevitably treated as such in the quest for rigorous measures of change. This briefing paper presents some results from a fuller report which digs deeper into survey data from the past in order to pull out the individual 'stories' of sections of our population during those years, and to look to the future by providing evidence based recommendations for current policy.

In May 2013 the Northern Ireland Executive brought forward its new policy to build a shared future entitled *Together: Building a United Community* (OFMDFM, 2013). Understanding the causes and dynamics of inter-community division will be essential to the success of policy for better inter-community relations. This includes understanding how policy and events impact across different income-groups, age-groups and themes. NILT remains the most comprehensive data base on attitudes across Northern Ireland. This in-depth study allows for the full impact of this data recorded over more than twenty years to be applied to emerging policy.

Perceptions and fears around community relations remain vulnerable to political and social turmoil.

Over twenty years, evidence from the Life and Times Survey suggests that the underlying 'climate' of approval for greater inter-community

engagement and tolerance in Northern Ireland has gradually improved. This does not however imply that significant events do not and cannot set relationships back, and sustainable progress remains vulnerable to immediate political events. Over the last 20 years, by far the most negative period in public attitudes took place in the period following the Good Friday Agreement and was symbolised in the Holy Cross dispute and its aftermath, the collapse of devolved institutions and polarisation over decommissioning. Since then, attitudes and confidence have demonstrably returned in both communities, especially as a result of the restoration of devolution in 2007. However, it is clear that community relations and perceptions of relations are not independent of the perception of progress in achieving a deeper political stability. The early evidence of deterioration in the perception of community relationships between 2010 and 2012 suggests that progress depends on a plausible holistic commitment to building a shared society that requires attention and cannot be taken for granted.

Improvements in perceptions of community relations have occurred where violence is seen to recede (ceasefires of 1994) or where an accommodation has been successfully achieved (devolution in 2007). Where one side perceives progress which is not sufficiently shared (Agreement in 1998), community relations remain unstable. Where sectarian violence returns (Holy Cross 2001 and potentially in the violence of 2012-13) perceptions of community relations fall sharply. Political effort to find resolutions to cultural issues and to matters relating to safety and the rule of law are therefore paramount.

Attitudes to mixing have softened since 1990 and have remained consistent. Attitudes do not of themselves enable change in behaviour and require a change in policy.

The public continues to accept the desirability of plural solutions and to approve of efforts to achieve mixed workplaces, shared neighbourhoods and more sharing between children and young people. Objections to mixed marriage have reduced in both communities and in all social groups in the past twenty years. A majority have continued to support integrated schools for twenty years. However consistent attitudes have only led to behavioural change where there has been policy to promote and protect those taking action. Thus change has been most evident

Figure 1: Percentage saying relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were 5 years ago.

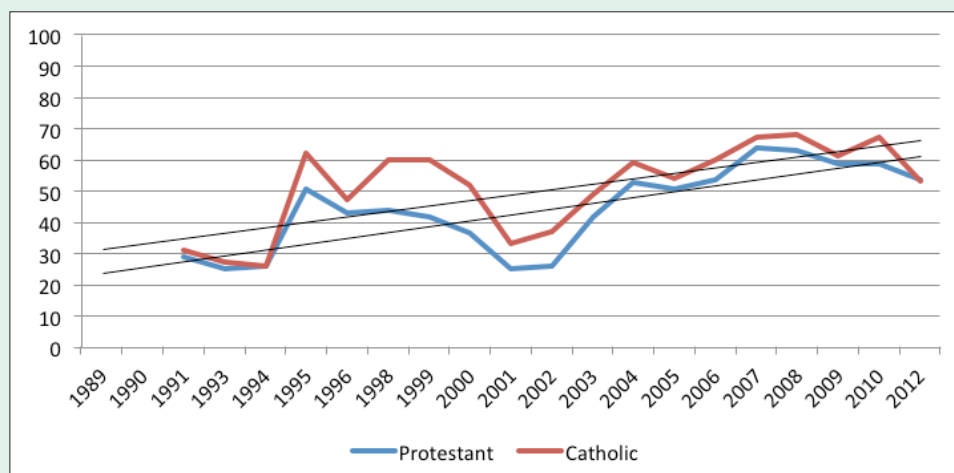


Figure 2: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood

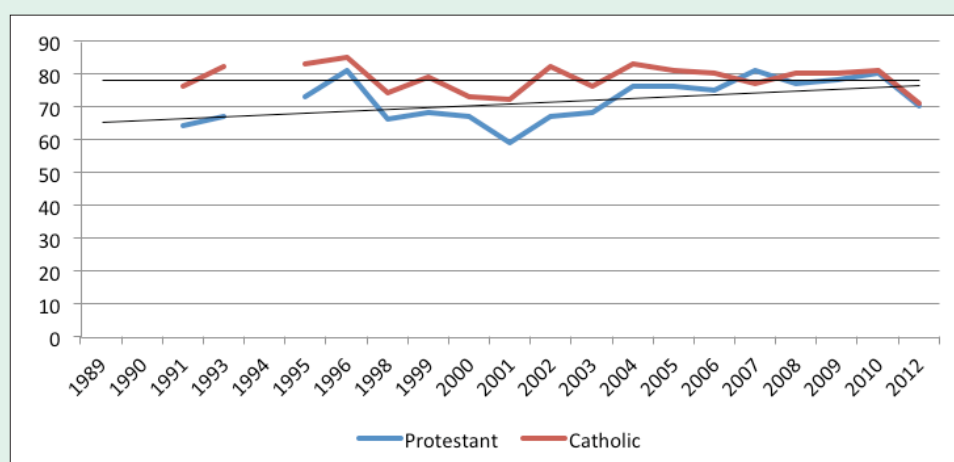
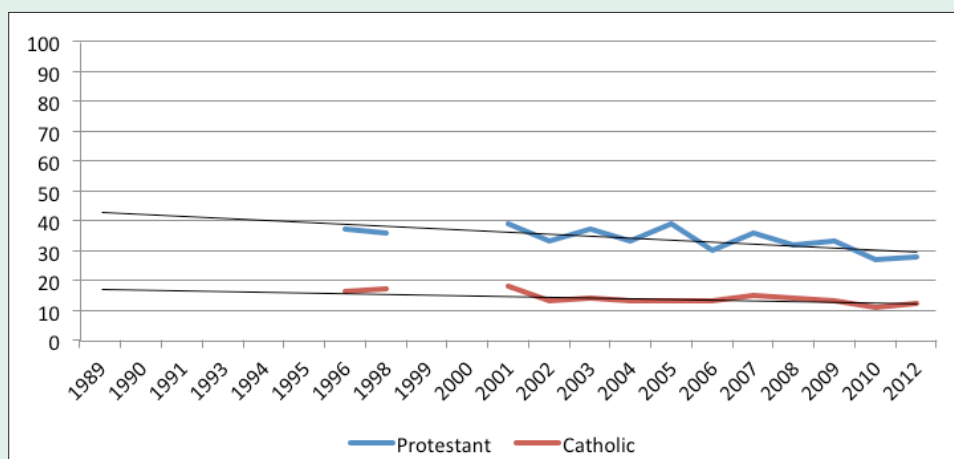


Figure 3: Percentage saying they would mind if a close relative married someone of a different religion



where action has been supported by institutional protection, as in the case of workplace and integrated schools. There has been less willingness to intervene in neighbourhoods.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to a rise in fear and antagonism.

Over twenty years young people have proved more responsive to changes than adults, both positive and negative in perceptions of community relations. Furthermore, they have often been more reticent to support mixed religion neighbourhoods than adults while supportive of shared schooling, mixed marriage and shared workplaces. This suggests that the obstacles lie in real fears and the risks which some young people run in relation to violence. Of particular concern has been the sharp decline in the perceptions and attitudes of young people towards improving community relations in recent years suggesting an increase in anxiety and antagonism in youth culture, dashing hopes that the peace process would liberate young people from the fears of the past. Prioritising community relations policy to address the obstacles faced by young people should be a priority.

Figure 4: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Young Protestants)

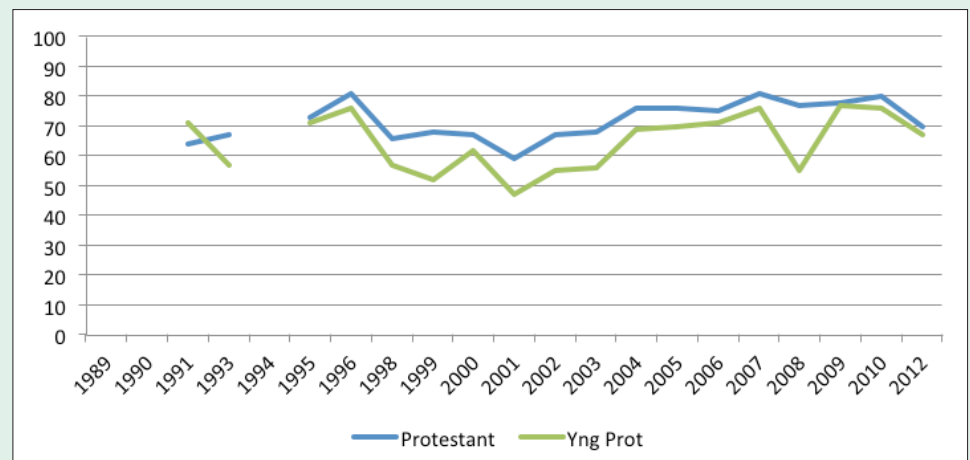


Figure 5: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Young Catholics)

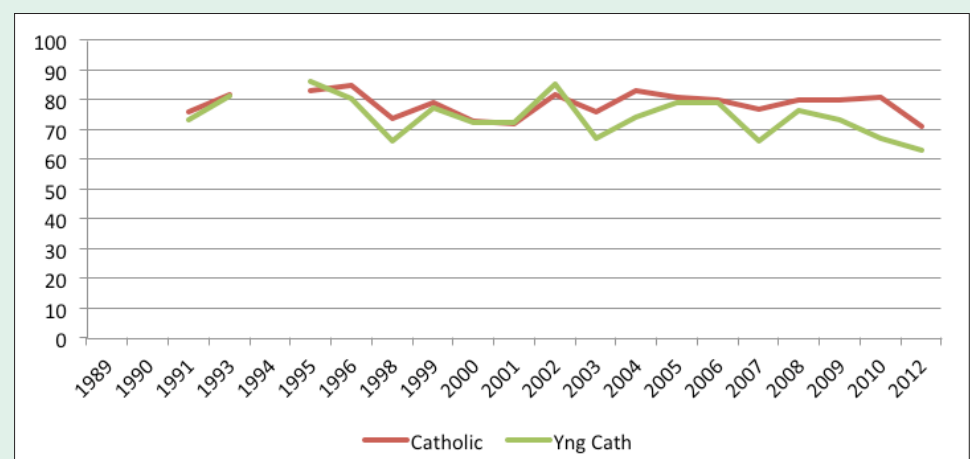
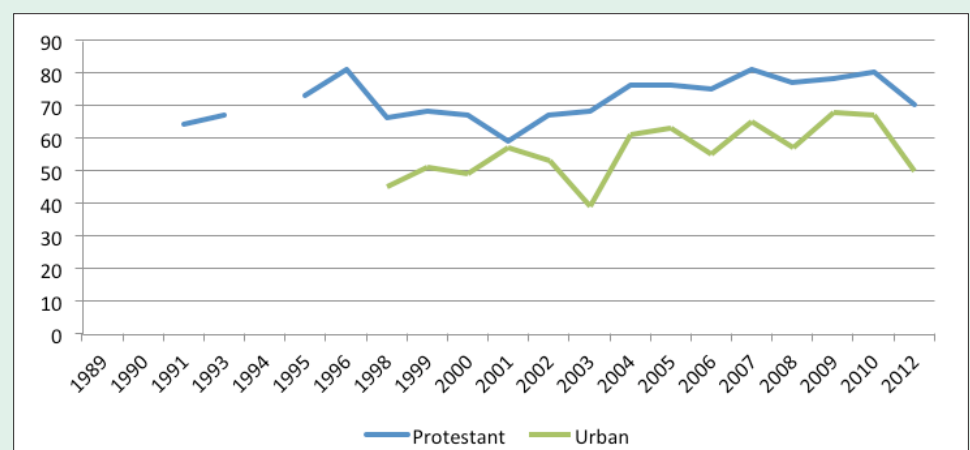


Figure 6: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Urban Protestants)



Perceptions of an improvement in community relations have been less marked in urban areas than in rural communities.

The evidence of gradual improvement evident in rural communities has not been reproduced in urban areas in recent years. This may suggest both that policy in each context may need to be refined and that issues around interfaces, urban space and cultural disputes require greater attention.

Prejudice against ethnic minorities is extensive and runs at an unacceptably high level across Northern Ireland.

Attitudes among Protestants in urban areas are particularly hostile.

Evidence gathered by the Life and Times Survey since 2005 suggests that prejudice against ethnic minorities is widespread and sustained. Although there is a clear association with economic change, this does not account for the level or spread of prejudice over time. There is evidence that prejudice extends into all communities, but is greatest where interaction has been closest, among urban Protestants. Attitudes to ethnic

Figure 7: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Urban Catholics)

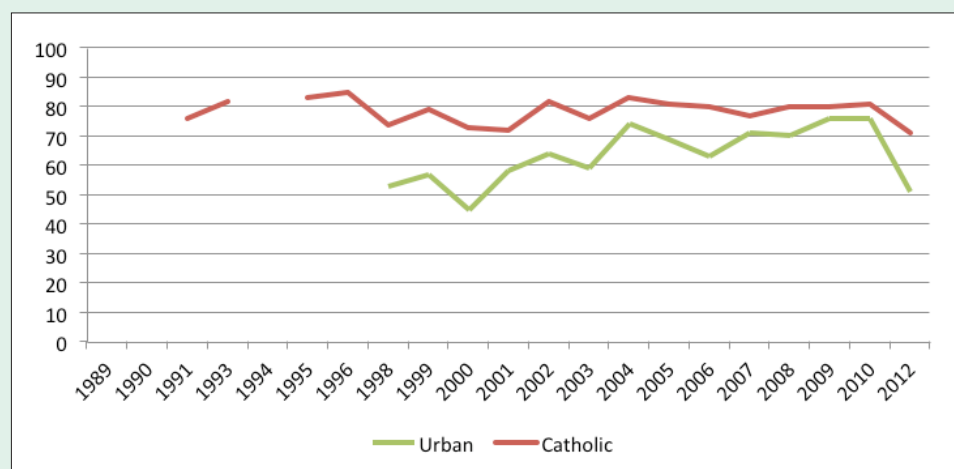
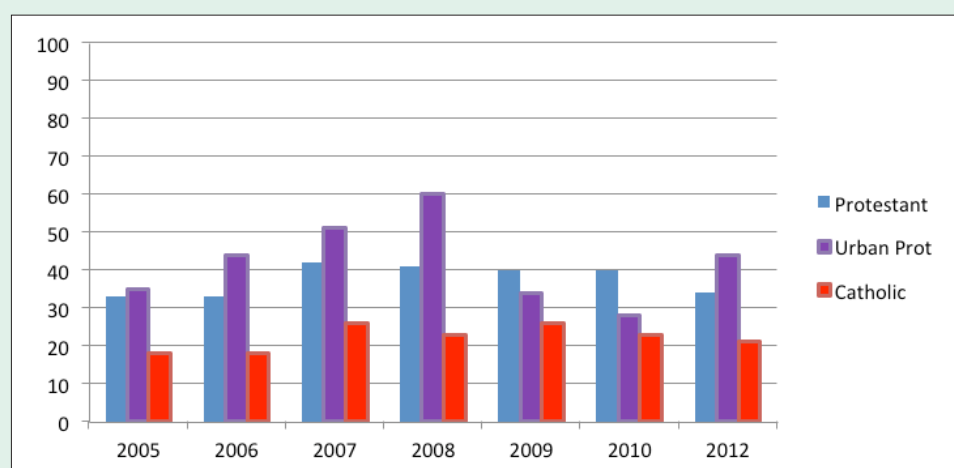


Figure 8: Percentage saying that they are 'very' or 'a little' prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities



minorities are markedly more hostile among Protestants than among Catholics and appear to be affected less by educational qualification and age than by location. Action to tackle this at a cultural and educational level should be prioritised.

Questions of identity and constitutional preferences are partially malleable, with new and complex results.

Political and national identity has been subject to a number of changes over twenty years. The most constant evidence is that very few Protestants consider themselves to be Irish while few Catholics describe themselves as British. However, the numbers describing themselves as 'Northern Irish' have varied over time, and appear to be affected by changes in political events. At the same time, however, attitudes to constitutional outcomes have changed dramatically among Catholics with a drop of 50% among those believing that the best long-term future for Northern Ireland was in a United Ireland. This

too may reflect changing political and economic circumstances or it may reflect increasing willingness and ability among those identifying themselves as Irish to realise this within the setting of Northern Ireland.

The driving force of separation is political, cultural and national rather than economic. However the fear generated by poor relations reinforces the suspicion of sharing.

A number of logistic regressions were carried out in order to examine the factors associated with a desire for single-religion neighbourhoods and opposition to mixed marriage. For the purposes of this analysis the survey datasets were combined into five time-periods or cohorts:

- Pre ceasefire years 1989-1993
- Post ceasefire and up to the Agreement 1995-1998
- On-off devolution 1999-2006
- Settled devolution 2007-2010
- Flags dispute onward 2012 –

The relative importance of each of a number of factors is seen most easily from the 'word clouds' on the following pages where words are given prominence depending on their relative importance to the model. The models include variables which were available in all survey datasets and do not include urban/rural variables which were not included on the survey until 1998. The words which have most weight visually are

Figure 9: Protestant national identity (All Protestants and Young Protestants)

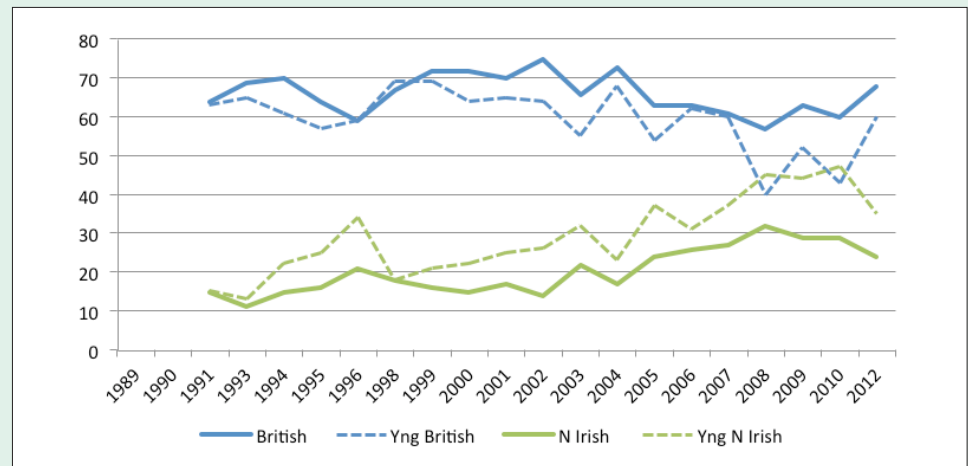
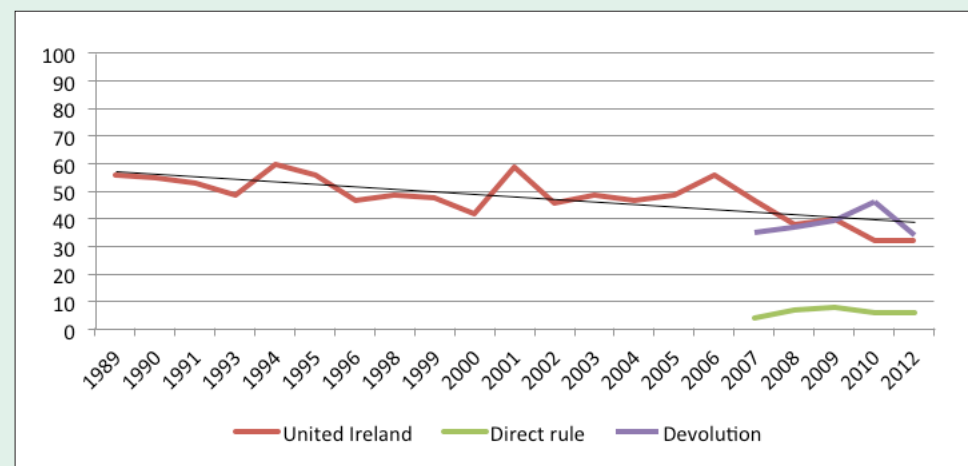


Figure 10: Constitutional preferences of Catholics



Up until 2007 the question only suggested two answers ie remain in the UK or unify with Ireland. However from 2007 a third option was listed which was to remain in the UK but with devolved government.

the ones that have most weight in the model itself and contribute the greatest explanatory value¹.

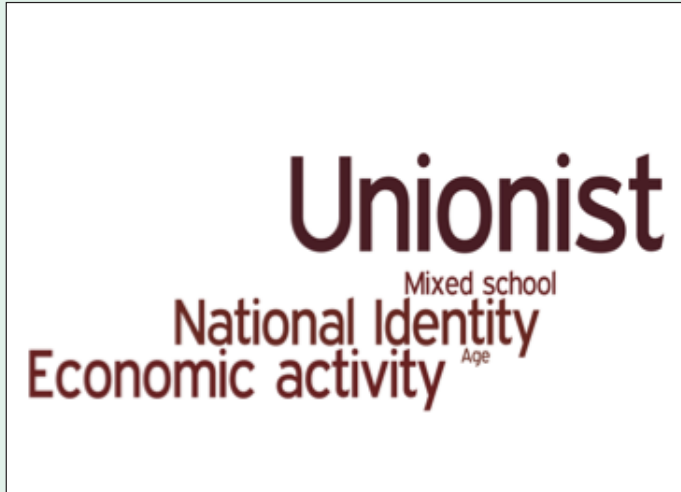
The evidence of the Life and Times survey over twenty years is that opposition and resistance to shared neighbourhoods is greatest among those with a strong political, cultural and national identity. This is particularly evident among Protestants where having a Unionist or Ulster identity

tend to be the strongest predictors. Unemployment, lack of education or living in social housing tend to be secondary predictors while having attended a mixed school is often associated with a positive desire for shared neighbourhoods. Among Catholics demographic variables are more prominent but national identity and political hostility still account for a large proportion of those hostile or opposed to shared neighbourhoods. It is evident though that concerns are greater in areas of social housing, among the young and (from the earlier analyses) in urban areas.

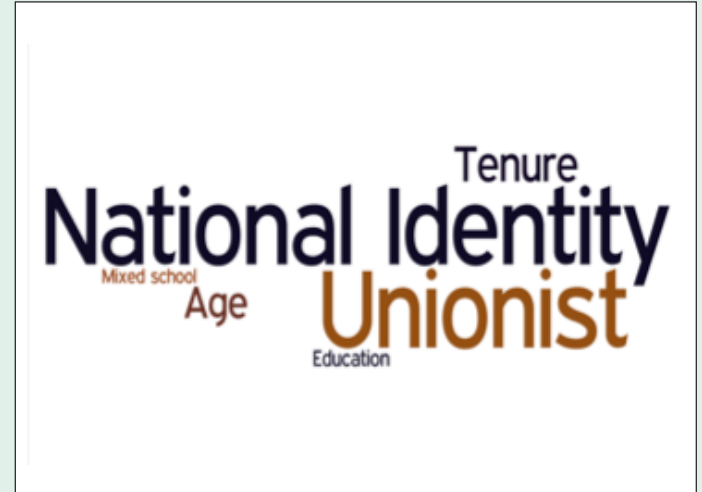
¹ Using advanced wordle.net where the weight used is the size of the change in the model if the term is removed.

Figure 11: Factors that predict Protestants preferring single religion neighbourhoods during five time-periods

Pre ceasefire years 1989-1993



Post ceasefire and up to the Agreement 1995-1998



On-off devolution 1999-2006



Settled devolution 2007-2010



2012-

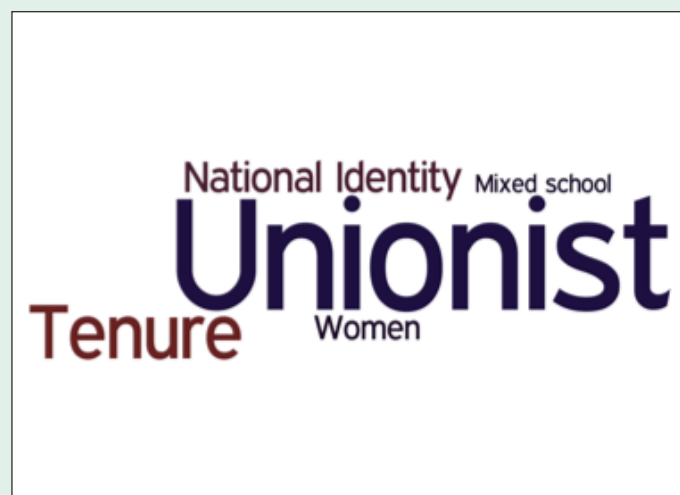
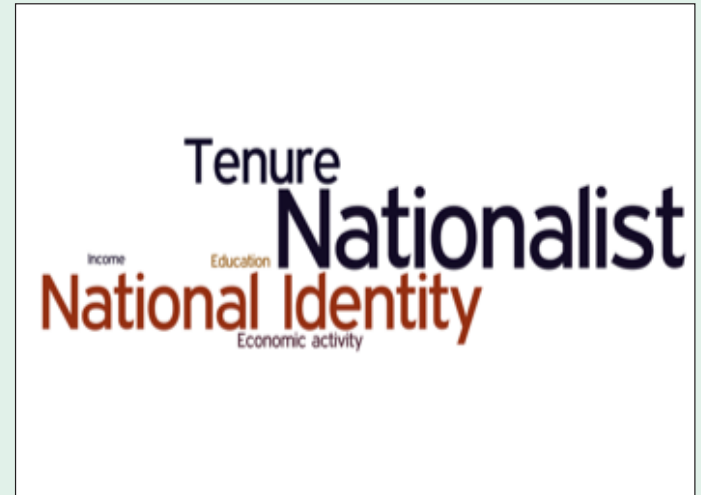


Figure 12: Factors that predict Catholics preferring single religion neighbourhoods during five time-periods

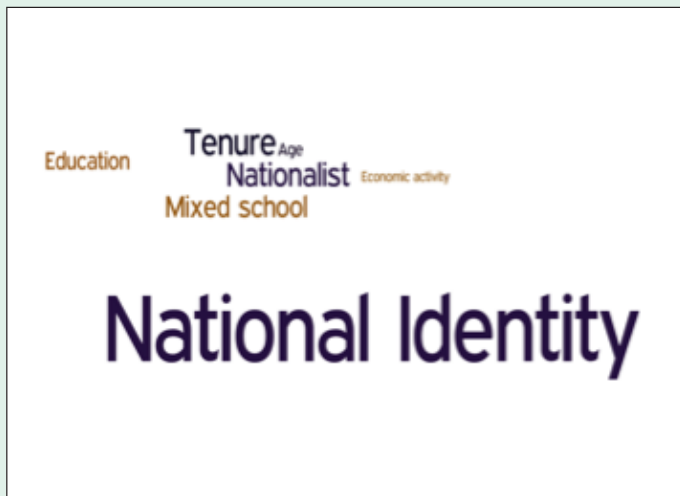
Pre ceasefire years 1989-1993



Post ceasefire and up to the Agreement 1995-1998



On-off devolution 1999-2006



Settled devolution 2007-2010



2012-



Conclusion

The Life and Times survey suggests that progress has been made in improving inter-community relationships; that values in relation to sharing are remarkably constant and that nationality and constitutional issues may now allow for complex rather than simple solutions. However it also suggests that community relations in Northern Ireland remain extremely fragile and vulnerable to events and political changes and in this context, a number of priorities seem outstanding:

- Efforts to sustain political agreement, cultural pluralism and community co-operation.
- Development of mechanisms to tackle flashpoints and manage trigger events.
- New policy to address issues of threat and safety, especially for young people and in urban areas.
- Policy to promote cultural and national accommodation to promote interaction and to address fears.
- Policy to promote greater sharing and integration in education.
- Policies to address issues of territorialism and fears of sharing in areas of social housing.
- Policy to tackle racism and to reduce hostility to those from ethnic minorities.
- Policy to promote improved relationships between young people.

References

OFMDFM (2013), *Together: Building a United Community*. http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/together_building_a_united_community.pdf

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** (NILT) is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. Its predecessor from 1989 to 1996 was the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes** survey. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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