



# Research Update

## Changing identities in Northern Ireland

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Identity is a complex concept, and we can hold many different identities at the same time. The holding of multiple, shared or mixed identities is acknowledged in the good relations strategy *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUS)*. Our sense of identity is also fluid, and how we describe ourselves can change over time. Communities are usually made up of people with similar identity or identities, and so strength of an identity may affect our sense of belonging to a specific community. Devine and Schubotz (2019) found that people who do not belong to main communities in Northern Ireland have the weakest sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood or to Northern Ireland. Thus, not only are identities important for an individual person, they are important for society as a whole.

The role of identity has received much policy attention. Most recently, the *New Decade New Approach* document, which was published on 9 January 2020, stressed the importance of identity in Northern Ireland, stating the need to 'reflect the freedom of all persons in Northern Ireland to choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity' (page 15). In response to this, the document highlights that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 will be amended by three Assembly Bills to establish a statutory Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

The annual *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey began in 1998. An important element of the survey is the inclusion of the same set of questions on good relations and identity every year. Using these data, we can track how or if societal attitudes are changing. This Research Update uses NILT data to explore changing patterns of identities in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years.

### Religious and political identities

Religious affiliation has historically played a major role in Northern Ireland society and policy, and community relations has traditionally been perceived as relating to the Catholic and Protestant communities. When the NILT survey began in 1998, 38 per cent of respondents said that they were Catholic, 51 per cent reported belonging to a Protestant denomination, 1 per cent said that they belonged to another religion or didn't know what religion they were, and 9 per cent said that they had no religion (see Table 1). By 2018, there was no change in the proportion of respondents who

said that they were Catholic. However, the proportion of respondents with a Protestant affiliation had dropped to 40 per cent, whilst there was a rise in the proportion of people saying that they had no religion (17%), and in the proportion naming another religion or giving some other type of answer (6%).

However, we know that divisions in Northern Ireland are not solely focused on religious affiliation or religious doctrine. Instead, there is significant emphasis on other types of identity and preference, such as national identity or constitutional preference. Both of these have seen changes over the past 20 years (Curtice, Devine and Ormston, 2013). Table 2 looks at political identity, that is, the proportion of NILT respondents identifying as Unionist or Nationalist. Of particular note is the increase in the proportion of those who identify as neither Unionist nor Nationalist, rising from 33 per cent in 1998 to 50 per cent in 2018.

Table 1: Religious affiliation

	%	
	1998	2018
Catholic	38	38
Protestant	51	40
No religion	9	17
Other answer/other religion/ not answered	2	6

Table 2: Political identity

	%	
	1998	2018
Unionist	40	26
Nationalist	25	21
Neither	33	50
Other answer	2	3

Analysis of 2017 NILT data by Katy Hayward and Cathal McManus (2019) found that those identifying as neither Unionist nor Nationalist were predominantly female, and came from all religious backgrounds, all age groups, and all national identities (although predominantly by respondents who felt both British and Irish). This pattern is also evident among respondents to the 2018 NILT survey.

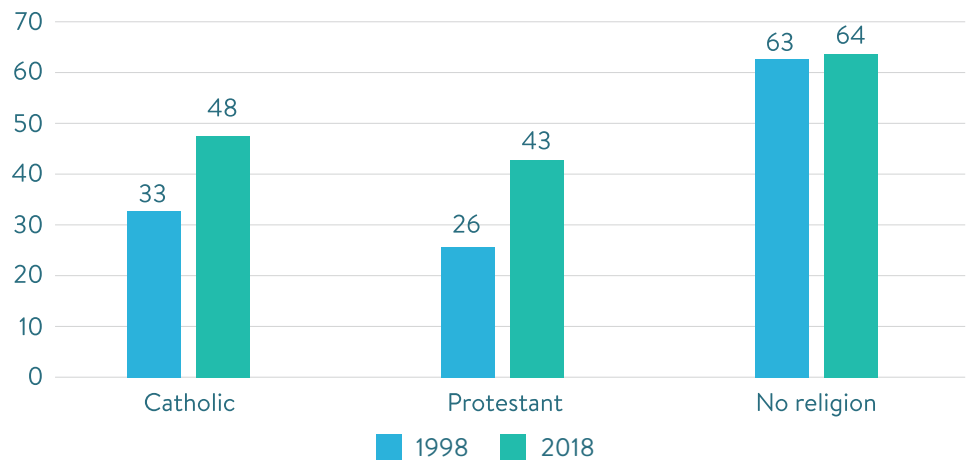
The first NILT survey in 1998 indicated a statistically significant relationship between religious affiliation and political identity. The majority of Catholics (63%) said that they were Nationalist, whilst a majority of Protestants (72%) said that they were Unionist. Nevertheless, a sizeable minority of both Catholics (33%) and Protestants (26%) described themselves as neither Nationalist nor Unionist. Moreover, 63 per cent of those with no religion said this.

Figure 1 shows that 20 years later, there has been little change in the pattern of identity among respondents with no religion. In contrast, the growth of a neither Nationalist nor Unionist is evident among other religious groups is evident. Thus, by 2018, nearly one half (48%) of Catholic respondents and a slightly lower proportion of Protestant respondents (43%) described themselves as neither Unionist nor Nationalist. This represents a rise of 15 percentage points and 17 percentage points respectively.

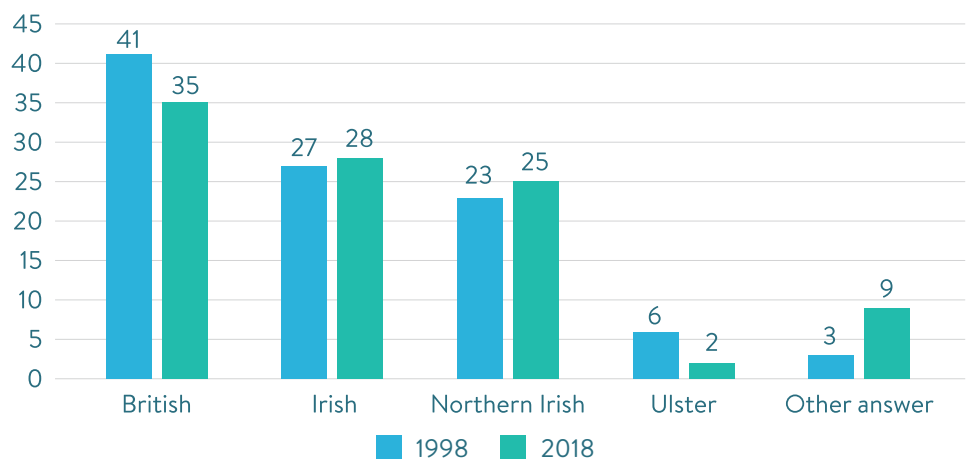
## National identity

National identity is also a significant marker in Northern Ireland. Figure 2 shows that overall, the pattern of national identity over the past 20 years has been fairly stable, especially in relation to the Irish identity (27% in 1998 and 28% in 2018). There has also been little change in the proportion of respondents

**Figure 1: % identifying as neither Unionist nor Nationalist, by religious affiliation**



**Figure 2: National identity (%)**



describing themselves as Northern Irish: 23 per cent in 1998 and 25 per cent in 2018. However, there was a decrease of 6 percentage points in the proportion saying that they were British. There was also a fall in the proportion giving an Ulster identity, and this now only represents 2 per cent of respondents.

The relationship between national and religious identity has also remained fairly stable. Table 3 focuses on the three main identities (British, Irish

and Northern Irish), and shows that in both 1998 and 2018, around two thirds of Catholic respondents described themselves as Irish. A similar proportion of Protestant respondents in both years described themselves as British. Of note, however, is that the proportion of Protestant respondents feeling that they are Northern Irish has risen from 18 per cent to 25 per cent. At the same time, the proportion of those with no religion describing themselves as Northern Irish has fallen from 38 per cent to 33 per cent.

**Table 3: National identity by religious affiliation**

	%							
	1998				2018			
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
British	8	67	34	41	5	63	38	35
Irish	65	3	16	27	64	4	13	28
Northern Irish	24	18	38	23	23	25	33	25

**Table 4: Political identity by national identity**

	%							
	1998				2018			
	British	Irish	N Irish	All	British	Irish	N Irish	All
Unionist	68	3	30	40	59	<0.5	17	26
Nationalist	2	71	20	25	1	57	15	21
Neither	28	23	50	33	38	42	66	50

Table 4 explores the relationship between national identity and political identity over the past 20 years, and shows some fading of traditional relationships. In 1998, seven out of ten British respondents identified as Unionist (68%), and a similar proportion of Irish respondents identified as Nationalist (71%). However, by 2018, these figures had decreased. Of particular note is that the rise in proportion of respondents saying that they are neither Unionist nor Nationalist is evident across all three national identities.

## Dual nationalities

The data presented so far in this Research Update do not acknowledge that national identity can itself be multi-faceted. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement outlines the birthright of people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves as Irish, British or both, and this is reinforced in the *New Decade New Approach* document. In order to represent this complexity, the NILT questionnaire has regularly included the 'Moreno question', which recognises that people can hold dual and compound identities (Moreno, 2006). Therefore, in answering this question, respondents are not limited to one national identity.

Table 5 shows the changing patterns and complexities of national identity between 2007 (when the question was first asked) and 2018. Despite the fairly stable pattern shown in Figure 2, the responses to the 'Moreno question' show some elements of change. In particular, the data suggest increasingly singular identities, given the 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of respondents saying that they are 'British not Irish', and the 5 percentage point increase in relation to 'Irish not British'.

There has also been a rise in the proportion giving some other type of response, which included Northern Irish and British/Northern Irish. One limitation

**Table 5: 'Moreno question'**

	%	
	2007	2018
Irish not British	18	23
More Irish than British	17	11
Equally Irish and British	17	13
More British than Irish	24	14
British not Irish	19	29
Other	4	10
Don't know	<0.5	1

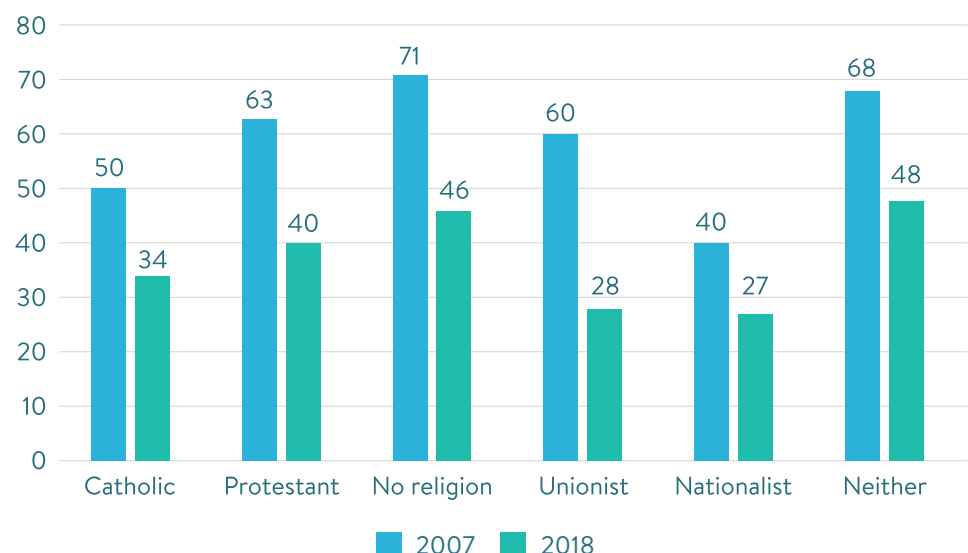
of the 'Moreno question' is that it was specifically designed to focus on dual identities. However, as seen in Figure 2, this is not totally appropriate in Northern Ireland, as a third identity (Northern Irish) is evident among a sizeable minority of respondents (25%).

It is useful to group the responses to the 'Moreno question' into three main categories 'Only Irish', 'Irish and British', and 'Only British', as well as 'Other/don't know'. In 2007, 58 per cent of respondents gave a response

that incorporated both Irish and British identities. By 2018, this has fallen to 38 per cent.

Figure 3 shows that the fall in those identifying with as both Irish and British is evident across all three religious categories, as well as across all three political identities. The largest decrease is among those who are Unionist – from 60 per cent to 28 per cent. At the same time, the proportion of Unionist respondents saying that they 'Only British' rose from 39 per cent to 70 per cent.

**Figure 3: % with both Irish and British identity**



The fall in the proportion of respondents feeling that their identity involves both British and Irish elements is evident across all age groups, especially among those aged between 35 and 64 years. For example, in 2007, 64 per cent of those aged 55-54 years would describe themselves in this way, falling to 35 per cent of this age group in 2018.

## Discussion

The data presented in this Research Update indicate that the pattern of identity in Northern Ireland has changed

since 1998 when the Life and Times survey began, and when the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was published. The findings show reduced levels of religious affiliation, signalling increased secularisation and providing confirmation that divisions in Northern Ireland cannot be merely described using religious labels. There have been changes in political identity; in particular, the proportion of respondents identifying as neither Unionist nor Nationalist has risen from 33% in 1998 to 50% in 2018. Similar changes in identity are also visible among the 16 year olds taking part in the Young

Life and Times survey (Bradley, 2020). These trends mean that good relations work is being undertaken in a new context. Moreover, it is important that the rejection of traditional patterns of identity are acknowledged by politicians, policy makers, and especially by those implementing the *New Decade New Approach* document.

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The questions on good relations were funded by The Executive Office.

## Key Points

- In 1998, 9% of NILT respondents said that they had no religion, compared to 17% in 2018.
- Between 1998 and 2018, the proportion of NILT respondents saying they were Protestant fell from 51% to 40%.
- 33% of respondents in 1998 said that they were neither Unionist nor Nationalist, rising to 50% in 2018.
- In 2018, 35% of respondents identified as British, 28% as Irish and 25% as Northern Irish, similar to the pattern in 1998.
- In 2007, 58% felt that they identified as having some elements of British and Irish identities. This fell to 38% in 2018.

## References

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)

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