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Policy Briefing Paper:

Religion and National Identity in Northern Ireland: A Longitudinal Perspective 2001-2011

Introduction

Demography has historically been a central focus of politics since at least the 19th Century in Ireland (Gregory et al 2013). It was a key element in delimiting and defining the partition of Ireland and since then population numbers and geographical distributions by religious denomination have been closely scrutinised in successive Censuses (see Anderson and Shuttleworth 1998) as indicators of voting intentions, the durability of Northern Ireland as a state, and as a marker of community relations. Protestants have normally been equated with Unionism and a cultural and political affiliation with Britain whereas Roman Catholics (hereafter Catholics) usually have been understood to have an Irish national identity and to favour ending the current union between Britain and Northern Ireland just as the union between Britain and the whole island of Ireland was severed almost one hundred years ago. This is, of course, a simplistic reading of the situation with voting

intentions sometimes not always following denominational lines but it has sufficient truth to play to both the hopes and the fears of the various contending political parties of Northern Ireland.

The proportional decline of Protestants as a share of the Northern Ireland population has been matched in recent Censuses by those who declare no religious affiliation – the ‘nones’ and the ‘not stated’. At the same time as they might be viewed as being positive in the sense that they may exist as a third section outside the traditional blocks of Catholics and Protestants used in standard sectarian accounting they can also be argued to be a nuisance category for the purposes of some elements of social policy which, as in the case of employment equality measures, often focusses on the numbers and proportions of Catholics and Protestants. They may also represent a growing trend towards secularisation in Northern Ireland in which people have no formal denominational identity or at least are not prepared to write it out in a Census. For these reasons, it is therefore important to know more about this group.

The 2011 Census was innovative because it asked for the first time questions about national identity across the whole UK. In Northern Ireland it showed that besides the expected British and Irish identities there was also a substantial number of people who declared they were Northern Irish (although this should not have been a surprise because of the earlier appearance of this group in surveys such as the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey). However, the Census results raised public awareness of this group as it suggested that there were in fact three identity groups, at least, in being rather than just the two that were usually assumed to exist. Whereas the geographical distributions of the British and the Irish mapped in large part to Protestant and Catholic places respectively, the demography and geography of those people who said they were Northern Irish seemed much less clearcut. There was therefore considerable interest in understanding more about the Northern Irish as there also was about those with complex, dual, and multiple identities.

The Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) offers novel insights to both these sets of questions. It is a data linkage study that links a 28% sample of the Northern Ireland population – selected from healthcards – to the Census in 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011. Its absolute size, based on 104 of 365 birthdates, permits detailed geographical analysis and its linkage between Censuses allows the description and analysis of the ways in which groups of people have changed between Censuses. We use these data in this paper to examine the factors that have driven the increase in the proportion of nones and not stated between 2001 and 2011. We then follow this with an examination of the backgrounds of the Northern Irish and those with dual, multiple and complex identities in 2001 and 2011. The NILS allows this to be done for the first time at the level of population statistics rather than for the comparatively small samples of many surveys.

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In 2001, Catholics were 40% of the population and in 2011, 41%. The proportion of Protestants fell from 47% in 2001 to 43% in 2011 and the Nones and Not Stateds rose from 13% to 16%. Catholics and the Nones and Not Stateds numbers grew in absolute terms, whereas there was a fall in the numbers of Protestants between 2001 and 2011. In this section, we seek to explore how these changes happened.

The size of a religious denomination in any place is a consequence of the number of people who espouse it, new members who are born into it, other members who die, emigrants who leave, and immigrants who arrive. The relative balance of all these factors in combination leads either to the numerical growth or decline of a denomination over time. The NILS allows us to assess the contribution of each of these factors to account for the changing numbers of Protestants, Catholics, and Nones and Not Stateds between 2001 and 2011 since it records births, deaths, emigration, immigration and also transfers between these groups. This type of accounting approach allows the relative contribution of the factors noted above to be assessed and this information is shown below in Figure 1, estimated for the total population.

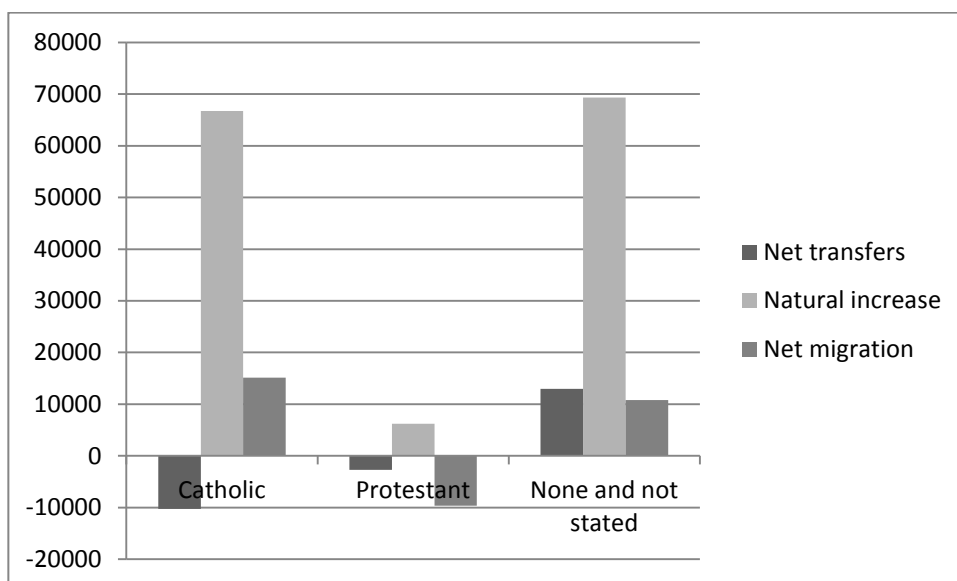


Figure 1: Denominational change 2001-2011 in Northern Ireland

The absolute and proportional growth of the Catholic community is underpinned by high natural increase (an excess of births over deaths) and net in-migration (more entrants to Northern Ireland than exits). Some of this in-migration may be attributed to the arrival of overseas immigrants. The fall in the numbers and shares of Protestants is a result of weaker natural increase (the number of births nearly balances the number of deaths) plus net out-migration from Northern Ireland. The absolute and proportional growth of the Nones and Not Stateds is fuelled by an inflow of those who stated they were Catholic or Protestant in 2001 but in 2011 stated they had no religion plus high natural increase and net in-migration. There may still be some fertility

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differentials by religious denomination but it should be noted that Catholics and the Nones and Not Stateds are younger on average than Protestants with more people in child-bearing age groups so even if birth rates were the same, more Catholics and Nones and Not Stated children would be born.

We now turn to transfers between the three groups between 2001 and 2011. There are negligible transfers between Catholics and Protestants, and vice versa, so these are ignored. Most transfers involve Catholics and the Nones and Not Stated, and the Protestants and the Nones and Not Stateds. There is an interesting geography to this. Catholics and Protestants who lived in the East of Northern Ireland were more likely to become Nones and Not Stateds in 2011 than those in the West. There was a high flow from the Nones and Not Stateds in 2011 to Protestant denominations whereas there was a smaller flow to Catholicism. The Catholic Church therefore experienced greater net losses than the Protestant Churches through transfers to the Nones and Not Stated although Protestants in 2001 were more likely to become Nones in 2011 than Catholics. There are similarities but also differences between those who declared themselves as Catholics and Protestants in 2001 but who became Nones and Not Stateds in 2011:

Similarities

- Not being married increases the chances of becoming None or Not Stated in 2011
- Increasing age decreases the chance
- Living in a non-rural area increases the chance
- Changing address increases the chance
- Being a social renter increases the chance but being a homeowner decreases it

Differences

- Protestant students show less chance of None or Not Stated in 2011 Catholic students
- Education does not have a statistically significant effect for Catholics but increased education increases the chances of Protestants becoming None or Not Stated by 2011
- Being divorced has a bigger effect for Catholics

The analysis shows the individual and social factors that are associated with not stating a religion. Some of these, such as age, are likely to work to decrease transfers to the Nones and Not Stateds in the future as the Northern Ireland population ages but others, such as growing levels of divorce and education may well mean a further future increase in the numbers and shares of Nones and Not Stateds.

National identity in Northern Ireland

In this section we consider the social and demographic factors that are associated with the various expressions of national identity in the 2011 Northern Ireland Census. For British and Irish identities religion remains a major influence in the expected way so most attention is focussed on those with dual and Northern Irish identities as less is known about these groups in the 2011 Census. The geographical distribution of the British and Irish follows closely, for example, that of Protestants and Catholics respectively but the maps for

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those who were Northern Irish or who had dual or multiple identities were less clear. The analysis thus considers individual situations as measured by the 2011 Census and also selected transitions between 2001 and 2011 and how they relate to these latter identities.

The following factors are associated with giving a dual/multiple identity in 2011 relative to those who stated they were Irish:

Positive

- Being Protestant in 2001 and 2011
- Moving to or from the None and Not Stated categories between 2001 and 2011
- Increased levels of education
- Becoming retired

Negative

- Becoming unemployed
- Becoming widowed or divorced

We can also compare those with dual/multiple identities with the British as a reference group. Against this yardstick, people with dual/multiple identities are still more educated, but they are less likely, and to have left a religion or newly stated one in 2011. The precise picture depends on the reference group but the trends and patterns remain fairly consistent.

For the Northern Irish, relative to the Irish, the following factors appear to be important:

Positive

- Being Protestant in 2011
- Moving to or from the None and Not Stated categories between 2001 and 2011
- Being a private renter in 2001
- Changing address between 2001 and 2011
- Retiring between 2001 and 2011

Negative

- Increased education
- Entering either employment or unemployment between 2001 and 2011

Once again, relative to those who just have a British identity, there are important and interesting differences. Being Northern Irish, for instance, is associated with more education than being British, to be positively associated with being married (or widowed) by 2011, and to live in areas that seem to have become less socially deprived through time.

Contextual effects on national identity

Our analyses of contextual geographical factors yielded some interesting insights. In general, those living in income-deprived areas are more likely to be Irish than British, Northern Irish or having dual/multiple national identities. The same pattern is found for Catholics and there is an overlap. Movers into deprived areas are more likely to have an Irish national identity, than a British national identity and are also less likely to have dual/multiple identities.

Our analysis picked up an effect of strengthening of minority identities for those living in highly concentrated (segregated) areas. This effect is known from previous literature (Umaña-Taylor 2004; Furrow, King, and White 2004; Wuthnow et al. 1992; Peek 2005; Phinney 1989). When compared to the Irish (and mainly Catholic) baseline category, (Protestant) movers between SOAs are more likely to say they are British, and less likely to say they are Northern Irish the higher the percentage of Catholics of the area to which they moved.

To summarise, Protestants are more likely to report to be 'British' on the Census form, rather than any of the mixed identities or Northern Irish, if they live in strongly Catholic Super-output areas (communities) and if they live in deprived areas. The same pattern can be found for Catholics and the category 'Irish', although we also found that the Catholic population tends to have more stable identities on average, and is less prone to switching between religious denominations/identities than Protestants.

Conclusion

The analysis of religion shows that the increase in the numbers and proportions of Catholics and Nones and Not Stated population groups between 2001 and 2011 is driven by natural increase (additional births over deaths) and, in the case of the Nones and Not Stateds, by people who declared a religion in 2001 stating they did not have one in 2011. The age breakdown of the Catholic and Protestant populations means that the trends seen in 2001-2011 are likely to continue into the future, at least in the short term. The association of address changes with becoming a None or a Not Stated in 2011 is intriguing. Is this a result of people leaving parental homes where a religious denomination is ascribed to them by another household member? Or is it a result of people freely making a choice when they move to another place and leave, partially at least, an old religious identity behind?

The results for the dual/multiple and Northern Irish national identities conform, to some extent, to prior expectations. Those with dual/multiple identities are more likely than either the British or the Irish to be more educated and are more likely to be members of that religiously mobile group that either became religious in 2011 or decided not to state a religion in 2011 whereas they did in 2001. These effects are larger than those

associated with other personal or labour market changes. The Northern Irish are more of a contradictory group, they are less educated than the Irish but more educated than the British, and are more likely to change address than the Irish who seem the most fixed in place of all national identity groups. They seem to be a truly diverse group whether they are analysed at an aggregate geographical level (Shuttleworth and Lloyd 2013) or analysed using Microdata. These statistical patterns cannot claim causality, but they show some of the inter-relationships within the data. As such they indicate important lines for further enquiry which might include greater longitudinal efforts to understand the stability and persistence of national identities.

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