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What forms the basis of cross-community politics among the

'peace generation' in Northern Ireland? An exploration of the

identities and politics of young Alliance Party supporters

Submitted by: Daniel Donovan

Supervisor: Prof. Colin Coulter

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Abstract

A quarter-century after the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Irish society and politics is changing. A generation of children have grown up in peace and are now old enough to exercise their democratic franchise. The rise of the Alliance Party, a cross-community, non-sectarian party, across recent elections, becoming the third-largest party in the Assembly following the 2022 Assembly election, represents an intriguing political development, particularly in the context of a generation of peace, a changing society, and the traditional view of Northern Irish societies as being denoted by 'two communities'. I employed a qualitative research design to conduct eight in-depth interviews with young Alliance Party supporters, exploring their identities and politics to uncover the basis of increasingly popular cross-community politics in Northern Ireland among the 'peace generation'. My research uncovered fluid structures of identity formation, commitment, and maintenance among young people, which has allowed them to construct progressive, issues-based political identities beyond the traditional binary. It also found how young Alliance supporters come from diverse and mixed socio-cultural backgrounds, are more likely to have experienced an integrated education and hold positive views of social integration, hold ambivalent beliefs towards nationalism, and believe the Good Friday Agreement requires reform for cross-community politics in Northern Ireland to become normative, rather than exceptional. These hypotheses are intended to supplement future research in this area to further understand the changing contexts, and thus processes, of identity construction young people are experiencing in contemporary Northern Irish society and the possibilities for a shared future this presents

"Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth, and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace – respect for diversity".

(John Hume)

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Introduction

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), a settlement which laid the cornerstone of peace in a region denoted by the longest-running conflict in Europe since the end of WWII. The thirty-year period known as 'the Troubles' represented an 'ethno-national' conflict between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland and led to the deaths of over 3,500 people, most of whom were civilians. The settlement acknowledged the ethno-nationalist nature of the conflict and the complex issue of identity in the region (O'Toole, 2018). It recognized the right of the people of Northern Ireland to self-determination, their diverse identities and traditions, and their right to self-definition (Good Friday Agreement, 1998:1-2). It established devolved, democratic institutions based on the principle of power-sharing and cross-community governance (1998:5-6), brought an end to the violent conflict which had ravaged the region, resolving what had once seemed 'intractable problems' between the warring factions (Hain, 2023), and allowed a generation of children in Northern Ireland to grow up in relative peace.

The quarter-century since the agreement was ratified has seen Northern Irish politics and society undergo significant change. The results of last year's Assembly Elections saw change manifest politically as Sinn Féin rose to become the largest party in the Assembly for the first time. However, the popularity of the non-sectarian, cross-community Alliance Party, becoming the third-largest party in Northern Ireland, represents a more remarkable political development when contrasted to the contextualised fortunes of the established stalwarts of the 'two communities' divide. Sinn Féin marginally increased their share of first-preference votes (+1.1%) but remained on twenty-seven seats. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) saw a significant decrease in their first-preference vote share (-6.7%), losing three seats to obtain just twenty-five, as well as their

status as Northern Ireland's largest party. Alliance and Independents were the only two groups to increase their seat share since the 2017 Assembly Elections, with Alliance experiencing the greatest increase in support in terms of seat share (+9 to 17 seats). Alliance are the most successful party in attracting cross-community support but had rarely reached double figures in terms of first preference vote share (Mitchell, D., 2018:3). However, the 2022 Assembly Elections saw the party receive the third-largest share of first-preference votes (13.5%).

The party ran on an inclusive and progressive platform under a 'together we can' slogan. In the party's manifesto, leader Naomi Long outlined her party's overarching vision that 'together, we can do things differently' (Alliance Party, 2022a:4). The party's election campaign video reiterated these 'progressive' commitments and a 'move away from binary politics' by focusing on 'delivery not division', 'building bridges not barriers', 'inspiring hope not fear', and 'fighting poverty and inequality, not each other' (Alliance Party, 2022b). This rhetoric of unity, and its growing popularity, stands in stark contrast to the divisive rhetoric of Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister in that infamous 1933 debate in the Northern Irish House of Commons at Stormont on the 'rights of the minority':

> '…in the South they boasted of a Catholic State. They still boast of Southern Ireland being a Catholic State. All I boast of is that we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State' (Northern Irish House of Commons, 1933).

This rhetoric symbolized the founding ethnocratic principles of Northern Ireland's nationhood, exemplifying the adversarial relationship between the then Protestant majority and Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. The 'two communities' which would become the placeholders of a deep-seated ethno-national divide. A division which would come to dominate and shape all aspects of Northern Irish politics and society throughout its centenary of existence.

My interest in this research topic stems from a long-standing personal intrigue with all things Northern Ireland, birthed in conversations with my late grandfather about his youth growing up in Co. Fermanagh. These conversations illuminated the immediacy of life in Northern Ireland to life in the Republic, yet the region's distinct 'foreignness', our shared history, yet different constitutional trajectory, its complex identities, political system, and perpetually ambiguous future, with the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement looming large amid contemporary developments. My grandfather, like the region itself, was a complex character who held what often seemed to be contradictory beliefs. He was proof to me that viewing Northern Ireland through a binary lens obscures the complexity of people's identities and political beliefs. Last year's Assembly elections reignited this fascination. Much media attention in the Republic focused on Sinn Féin's rise, particularly in the context of the party's unprecedented success in the Irish general election two years earlier.

Little attention was paid to the success of the Alliance Party and the popularity of its unique political platform. Furthermore, 13% of the party's supporters are Catholic, 18% are Protestant, and 30% identify as having 'no religion' (NILT, 2021), representing an unusually diverse support base in a famously divided society. In conducting some initial exploratory research, I was also struck by the involvement of young people in both the formal and informal dimensions of the party's activities. The party holds significant support among the 'peace generation' (14%), second only to Sinn Féin (24%) and ahead of the established UUP and DUP (10% and 13% respectively) (NILT, 2021). My research focuses on those young Alliance supporters, their diverse cultural backgrounds, and identities, yet shared politics and shared vision for the future in a famously divided society, to provide insight into the basis of cross-community politics in Northern Ireland. Research into the 'peace generation' is particularly important as generational

change has often been viewed as a solution to the region's deep-seated division (Hayes &

McAllister, 1999:459).

Literature Review

Introduction

For Whyte (1990) broad academic interest in the protracted conflict known as 'the Troubles' has

allowed Northern Irish politics and society to become the subject of intense academic scrutiny.

This has persisted, with interest shifting from the conflict itself to its socio-political impacts and

the region's status as a case study in conflict resolution. Such research has followed a stable path

in seeking to measure identity patterns as, in deeply divided societies, these patterns tend to

structure people's political attitudes (Whyte, 1990; Coakley, 2007) and is central to the

development and maintenance of division in Northern Ireland (Cairns & Lewis, 2003:142-3).

There thus exists a wide range of academic literature pertaining to the concept of identity within

Northern Irish politics and society. The intent of this literature review is to provide a

comprehensive overview of this literature to provide a conceptual framework from which to

understand the idiosyncratic relationship between identity and politics in Northern Ireland. These

concepts are explored by drawing upon literature that encompasses historical, sociological, and

political approaches to understanding the process of identity construction, performance, and

maintenance, and its implications on politics in Northern Ireland in the context of the Good

Friday Agreement, and the generation of relative peace the region has experienced as a result.

The Importance of Identity to Politics in Northern Ireland

For Connor (1994:42-3) the nation is 'a self-differentiating ethnic group' whose essence lies in

its shared cultural 'uniqueness'. He argues that in cases of ethnic conflict there is a divergence of

basic identity which manifests itself in an 'us-versus-them' mentality (1944:46). The partition of

Ireland into two distinct polities was an attempt to satisfy two adversarial ethno-nationalist identities (Irish nationalism versus British unionism) and their division around the constitutional status of the region (Coulter & Shirlow, 2021:209; MacGinty et al., 2007:5). What some have called a 'double majority' situation whereby both ethno-nationalist groups view themselves as the legitimate majority (Cairns, 1982; Ferguson, 2005). Whilst ethno-national mobilisation broadly followed religious lines (Coakley, 2007:577), with Catholics overwhelmingly nationalist and Protestants predominantly unionist, the conflict was not a theological one (Barnes, 2005:67-8; McEvoy, 2008:8).

The persisting division in Northern Ireland has been widely viewed as a continuation of this founding ethno-nationalist conflict (MacGinty et al., 2007:7; McEvoy 2008:9-10; O'Leary & McGarry, 1993:3; Cairns & Darby, 1998:574). What it means to be Catholic or Protestant in Northern Ireland is instead related to the interplay between ethno-national, cultural, and political identities (Coymak & O'Dwyer, 2019:76; Coakley, 2007:577-8). Thus, these adversarial ideologies are bound in a series of social identities represented in these 'two communities' (Ferguson & McKeown, 2016:215). Early discussions realised the inadequacies of deterministic paradigms, which focus on conflict as arising out of individual differences, in explaining the Troubles in Northern Ireland (Cairns, 1982; 1987). Accordingly, social identity theory has become the dominant paradigm from which to understand the conflict in the context of an intergroup process of identity formation and its importance to ethnic groups' objective of self-determination (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Cassidy & Trew, 2004; Muldoon et al., 2007; Coakley, 2007).

This theory posits that individuals become members of an in-group by a social process (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Firstly, individuals self-categorize themselves based on internal and external

interpretations of self, defines their place in society as they strive to enhance their self-esteem (1986:283). Secondly, alterations in personal behaviours occur depending on whether an individual receives positive value connotations from in-group membership (1986:283). Finally, individuals evaluate their in-group identity based on comparisons with out-groups, leading to a maximisation of similarities within groups and differences between them (1986:283-4). Thus, identities are located within organized structures of social relations (Cassidy & Trew, 2004:524). This theory allowed Stryker & Burke (2000:286) to develop the idea that the self was a collection of identities ordered in a 'salience hierarchy', which denotes the relative probability a particular identity will be activated across social situations depending on one's commitment to that identity and the social implications of holding it.

In the context of Northern Ireland, Cairns & Hewstone (2005) found that Catholics and Protestants with a strong commitment to their respective ethnic in-group identities had higher levels of prejudice towards out-group members. For Coakley (2007) identity formation in Northern Ireland represents a social process involving the construction of a 'salience hierarchy' which produces a political identity. Individuals first undergo socialization based on their cultural background (ethnic group membership, national identity, and religious identity), followed by the construction of a communal identity (national identity) based on the saliencies of their socialisation, and the resulting socio-political orientation this interplay births (political preference) (2007:581-89). This outlines a process by which ethno-national identities, based on underlying social contexts, are fundamental to structuring political identities in Northern Ireland (2007:89).

Consequently, religion has come to be viewed as an ethno-national identity marker rather than the essential causal factor of the conflict (O'Connell, 1989:48; McGarry & O'Leary, 1995:171-

213; Muldoon et al., 2007:90). Indeed, McAllister & Wilson (1977:207-8) described the 'confessional' nature of Northern Ireland's pre-agreement political system in how its political parties attracted 'the exclusive support of one or other community', despite eschewing explicit religious titles. A political system denoted by 'ethnic outbidding' whereby party support within the 'two communities' or 'ethnic blocs' is determined by the strength of a party's ethnic identity rather than social or economic policies (Tilley et al., 2021:228). However, Mitchell (2003:16-17; 2005:126-7) cautions against the tendency to underestimate the force of religion in contemporary Northern Ireland as it obscures the multidimensional role it maintains in the identity construction process, and thus, maintaining divisions (Coulter et al, 2021:168).

<u>The Impact of the Good Friday Agreement on Politics in Northern Ireland</u>

Arend Lijphart (1977) presents consociationalism as a model for remedying conflict in divided societies by fostering democracy through power-sharing and consensus-building. He consociational government as where 'the centrifugal tendencies inherent in plural societies are counteracted by cooperation between the leaders of the different segments of the population' (1977:1). After thirty years of violent conflict in Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement brought an end to the Troubles and established a devolved, power-sharing government in Belfast and a constitutional settlement to the existential questions behind the voilence (McEvoy 2008:139-40; Coulter et al., 2021:164). The agreement explicitly recognized the 'two communities' and required elected members of the Stormont Assembly (MLAs) to designate as nationalist, unionist, or other (Tilley et al., 2021:229), thus holding Northern Ireland to be a society divided by a binary (Coulter et al., 2021:164) and making national identity an indicator of socio-political identity (Coakley 2007:580).

The agreement is widely viewed as consociational (O'Leary, 1998; O'Leary, 1999; McGarry & O'Leary, 2004; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006; Tilley et al., 2021). For O'Leary (1999:67-8) its commitment to cross-community power-sharing, proportionality rules throughout its institutions, community self-government and equality, and veto rights for minorities meet Lijphart's criteria for consociational democracy. Dixon (2005:358) challenges consociationalism, arguing the theory represents a 'primordial view of communal identity' which births a choice between limited democracy or none, and that the agreement represents an 'integrationist variant of power-sharing' (2005:365). He, among others, believes the agreement has entrenched existing ethno-national divisions (Dixon, 2005:365-66; O'Flynn, 2003; Taylor, 2006). Others believe the provisions of the agreement provide the basis for political moderation (O'Leary, 1999, McGarry & O'Leary, 2006; McCrudden et al., 2016). The post-agreement years have seen the persistence of 'ethnic outbidding' as the public has turned to the more extreme parties within each bloc (MacGinty et al., 2007:8), from the SDLP to Sinn Féin for nationalists and the UUP to the DUP for unionists. However, these extreme parties have moderated their policies to allow them to enter government (Todd, 2007:566; Tilley & Evans, 2011:603).

The agreement has moderated the impact of ethno-nationalism on politics as ethnic republicanism and unionism has become civic republicanism and unionism (McGlynn et al., 2014:286-7). A study of voter preferences and party manifestos between 1998 and 2016 found a moderation of the ethno-national policy dimension of parties, with ethno-national policies becoming less salient in predicting party affiliations among Protestants, due to intra-bloc convergence, but not Catholics (Tilley et al., 2021:240-1). This furthers the idea of Protestant-unionist disaffection in the post-agreement context (Stevenson et al., 2007; McAuley & Tonge, 2007). Another study found increased support for more extreme parties among young people

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does not reflect the emergence of entrenched political polarisation but is the result of the expanded electoral choices within the new political context in which they have been socialised (Tilley & Evans, 2011). Despite the overall moderation of ethno-nationalism in Northern Irish politics, the failure of the agreement to address the continued potency of ethno-nationalist identities undermines its aim of a shared future (McGlynn et al., 2014:276; Todd et al., 2007:20-1). This has been attributed to the weak plurality consent between the 'two communities' which has caused an impasse on issues of cross-community importance (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006:63; Hayward, 2006:276).

This anti-pluralism is reflected in the support demographics of the major parties with the SDLP and Sinn Féin (nationalist) having almost exclusive Catholic support, and the DUP and UUP (unionist) having almost exclusive Protestant support (NILT, 2021). Furthermore, the continued segregation of Northern Irish society through each community's 'cultural infrastructure' has played a major role in maintaining this division (MacGinty et al., 2007:7, Hewstone et al., 2005; Muldoon, 2004:463; McLernon et al., 2004; Tonge & Gomez, 2015:8). For Micthell (2018:336) Alliance has been the foremost critic of the 'exclusionary side-effects of power-sharing' in Northern Irish politics. Their main criticism of the agreement is that it excludes the growing number of people in Northern Ireland who are non-aligned, that its consociational model contains a 'primordial pessimism', a similar critique to Dixon's, and its institutionalisation of the 'two communities' binary is inherently destabilising (2018:443-45). He concludes by saying Alliance's critique is 'overstated' on the basis that Alliance's view of identity politics has not garnered electoral support (2018:345-47). However, recent developments in Northern Ireland means this analysis must be reconsidered.

<u>Identity Innovation in Contemporary Northern Irish Society</u>

The agreement has staved off violence, moderated party-political platforms, and allowed people to give civic allegiance to shared democratic institutions, whilst maintaining their diverse identities and traditions (Wilford & Wilson, 2006:33). However, it has also intensified polarisation and raised questions as to whether a shared sense of identity that transcends the 'two communities' can be achieved (Wilford & Wilson, 2006:8; McNicholl, 2019:26; Tonge & Gomez, 2015:5). The newly emerged 'Northern Irish' identity has a strong effect on political trust, socially liberal attitudes, and has the potential to contribute to sustaining peace in the region (Coulter et al. 2021:182; Ó Dochartaigh, 2021: 24). Some believe it may eventually serve the basis for a 'common in-group identity' (Coymak & O'Dwyer, 2020; McNicholl, 2019; McGylnn et al., 2014). However, the multifaceted nature of a 'Northern Irish' identity, the political instability caused by Brexit and its heterogenous effects on national identification, means the opportunity to build a shared national identity has dissipated in favour of attempts to maintain political stability (Coymak & O'Dwyer, 2020:78; Teague, 2019:702-3; Canavan & Turkoglu, 2022:12).

Nevertheless, the era of assured unionist hegemony in Northern Irish politics has ended and the region is undergoing demographic changes, increased secularisation, and dealignment from traditional political identities (Ó Dochartaigh, 2021:16-7). What Coulter et al. (2021:166) call a 'period of identity innovation' in the context of a generation of peace. They employ Coakley's typology to assess these changes. On religious identity, they highlight the changing size of religious communities and increasing secularisation, describing how Catholic and Protestant identities remain important but are increasingly difficult to associate with a political or national identity (Coulter et al. 167-68). The 2021 Census shows that Catholics (42.31%) now outnumber

Protestants (37.36%) for the first time. However, both religions have experienced a decrease in the numbers of people identifying with them, with 17.4% now identifying as having 'no religion'. Furthermore, Catholics are more likely to continue to identify as 'Catholic' for political reasons after stopping religious observance compared to Protestants (McNicholl in Graham, 2022).

In terms of national identity, there is an increase in people identifying as 'somewhat Irish' or 'Irish only', whilst a decrease in people identifying as 'British only', counterbalanced by an increase in people identifying as 'British and Northern Irish' and 'British, Irish, and Northern Irish' (NISRA 2022:3). Those identifying as 'Northern Irish only' decreased from 21% to 19.8%. This shows a collective 'Northern Irish' identity is a long way from being a shared identity for the 'peace generation' as young Protestants are likely to hold a 'Northern Irish' identity but Catholics less so (Coulter et al. 2021:180). Finally, most people in Northern Ireland now identify as 'neither' unionist nor nationalist (38%), with these people two-and-a-half times more likely to vote against Irish Unity, with support for the Union remaining stable since the Agreement (Coulter et al. 2021:217; 2021:191-3).

These developments show that processes of identity construction are dynamic, even in deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland (Mulddon et al., 2007:92; Coakley, 2007:591) and suggest that formative socialisation in the post-agreement era is moving Northern Ireland beyond the 'two communities' binary. Most political parties remain placeholders of the traditional 'two-communities' divide, apart from the Alliance Party. The factors behind Alliance's rise have been described as contextual, a shift to the middle-ground on Brexit and an absence of a power-sharing government, and temporal, those long-term trends of political dealignment amid a changing society (Tonge, 2020:463; Hayward, 2020:52-4; Murphy, 2022:97-8). This

dealignment has been described as suggesting a move away from the hegemony of the

constitutional question (Coulter & Shirlow, 2021:216; Tonge, 2022:528) and from exclusively

ethno-centric voting towards the formation of non-binary political identities (Tonge, 2020:466),

representing an intriguing area for further academic research.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The aim of this literature review was to provide a conceptual framework which allows us to

understand the idiosyncratic relationship between identity and politics in Northern Ireland. Social

identity theory allows us to understand this relationship by illuminating how the construction,

performance, and maintenance of the adversarial ethno-national ideologies in Northern Ireland is

based on a series of social identities bound in an identity salience hierarchy, serving as a

powerful conditioning force on political identities in the region, and underpinning the persistence

of 'two communities' binary across Northern Irish politics and society. The landmark Good

Friday Agreement's power-sharing institutions have moderated the impact of 'ethnic outbidding'

on the region's politics. However, its institutionalisation of the 'two communities' divide, as well

as its failure to address the existence of segregated 'cultural infrastructures' have maintained this

division the post-agreement context. The Alliance Party has highlighted the exclusionary nature

of the region's political institutions towards non-aligned, cross-community parties.

This criticism is becoming more relevant as Northern Irish politics and society seems to be

gradually moving beyond the 'two communities' binary, rendering it extraneous in explaining

this contemporary period of 'identity innovation' (Coulter et al., 2021:215; Coulter et al.,

2021:165). Whilst establishing a shared 'Northern Irish' identity as a common in-group identity

is unlikely as collective identification remains a source of division and Brexit threatens a new

ethno-national frontier (Muldoon et al., 2007:99; Coymak & O'Dwyer, 2020:74), the rise of the

Alliance party demonstrates the existence of a cross-community political identity which is superordinate to the bi-polar identities underpinning support for the other parties (McNicholl, 2019). My discussion exposes a clear gap in the academic literature surrounding holistic analyses of the factors behind the rise of the Alliance Party, with existing discussions focusing primarily on the effect of Brexit (Tonge, 2020; Hayward, 2020; Murphy, 2022). Furthermore, no studies exist which examine the identities and attitudes of those party supporters who belong to the 'peace generation', from which Alliance garner high levels of support.

Research Methodology

Research Aim and Objectives

My literature review outlined social identity theory as a useful theoretical framework from which to understand the relationship between identity and politics in Northern Ireland, the impacts of the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Irish politics and society, and the socio-political changes the region is currently undergoing, particularly in the growing popularity of cross-community politics, which the 'two communities' binary is extraneous in explaining. My overarching research question is therefore: What forms the basis of cross-community politics among the 'peace generation' in Northern Ireland? I intend to answer this question by exploring the identities and politics of young Alliance Party supporters as the party represents the most popular cross-community party in this famously divided society and a popular destination for 'peace generation' voters.

Thus, my research took a deductive approach, grounded in the conceptual framework deduced from my exploration of the application of social identity theory to this field of research in my literature review, which provides the basis for the questions set for each interview conducted as part of my research. The objectives of these questions was to explore the respondents' socio-

cultural backgrounds, national identities, political identities, why they chose to support Alliance, whether they believe the party can maintain these support levels after the Brexit fallout settles, and whether the Good Friday Agreement requires reform for cross-community politics to become normative, rather than exceptional, in Northern Irish politics.

Research Paradigm

For Hakim (2000 in Burnham et al., 2004:30) research design is the point at which questions illuminated in analysis of theoretical discussions on a certain topic are converted into feasible research projects which can provide answers to these questions. As my literature review highlighted social identity theory as a framework from which to understand how the construction, performance, and maintenance of the adversarial ethno-national ideologies is based on a series of social identities bound in an identity salience hierarchy, my research utilises an interpretivist or social constructivist paradigm.

This philosophy emphasizes that the actions of individual actors within society are based on the social context in which that action takes place and how different social contexts produce different meanings (Gronmo, 2020:77-8). These subjective meanings are constructed through interactions with others, and through the historical and cultural norms that occur within people's lives (Creswell, 2013:24-5). This will allow me to understand how Alliance Party supporters and activists have constructed their identities in a way which has allowed them to view cross-community politics as their political preference in a society dominated by the 'two communities' binary.

Research Design

A social constructivist approach primarily utilises qualitative methods (Gronmo, 2020:77). This is because qualitative research is an activity that locates the researcher in the world around them

as they attempt to interpret socio-political phenomena in terms of the meaning people ascribe to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011:3) and thus complements the social constructivist idea that people's perceptions of reality are subjective based on the social contexts in which they occur. Qualitative research allows researchers to collect in-depth information from a relatively small number of participants (Burnham et al., 2004:31; Bryman 1996/98:94). Hence, I chose to employ semi-structured interviews as my preferred qualitative method. This approach allowed me to construct broad questions, based on those concepts deduced from my literature review, and outlined in my research aims and objectives.

This approach empowered participants to provide in-depth answers and talk freely about their views and thus, allowed me to learn the social meanings that participants applied to Northern Irish politics and society in constructing their political beliefs (Creswell, 2013:25; Pierce, 2011). By employing this approach, I was at liberty to improvise questions to explore interesting topics brought up by respondents or as a prompt to enhance the depth of information received. Overall, this method proved both practical for myself and interview respondents, and applicable to the aims and objectives of my thesis, yielding insightful responses from all participants.

<u>Sampling Method</u>

The aim of this research is to discover what forms the basis of cross-community politics among the 'peace generation' in Northern Ireland by examining the identities and politics of young Alliance Party supporters. Thus, participants were selected based on two key criteria. First was that they were either an Alliance Party voter or activist, and second was that they were born after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and grew up a part of Northern Ireland's 'peace generation'. My lack of existing social networks in Northern Ireland meant my target population was difficult to penetrate. A s a result, I utilised snowball sampling to obtain a population of

interview subjects. Snowball sampling allows researchers access hard-to-reach populations and involves identifying an initial set of participants and requesting that they suggest other potential participants who meet the sampling criteria (Dosek, 2021:651).

Dosek (2021) outlines how utilising social media platforms to identify and contact possible participants can provide the initial access required to conduct snowball sampling. After some initial difficulty in attempting to contact the Alliance Youth, I took to their Instagram page to identify activists and supporters. This allowed me to come into contact with a leading member of the organization, who agreed to take part in an interview and proved a vital gatekeeper in procuring other participants from within his social network. He informed possible participants of my research and provided my university email address by which they could contact me directly for further details. This sampling method proved fruitful as I was able to obtain eight participants that met my aforementioned criteria. Of these eight participants, five were men and three were women and their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-three (*see* Appendix A).

<u>Research Ethics</u>

In the process of designing a qualitative study, researchers must consider what ethical issues may arise and effectively plan how they will overcome them (Paoletti et al., 2013:21; Creswell, 2013:56). My research was guided by the Sociological Association of Ireland's (SAI) Ethical Guidelines (*see* Appendix B) which contains best-practice instructions for conducting ethical sociological research. My role as a researcher was to protect the welfare of all participants involved in my research and ensure no participant was adversely affected by my conduct (SAI Ethical Guidelines:1) and to ensure honesty and integrity by following the highest professional standards in all stages of my work (General Principles:1/2). Informed consent was obtained from all participants (1.1; *see* Appendix C). Each participant was explicitly informed of my research

aims and objectives, the purpose of my research, the role they will play in it, as well as my ability to conduct interviews via phone or online, in my consent form (1.1).

All participants were sent a letter of introduction via email demonstrating my research is conducted with the consent and oversight of my research supervisor (*see* Appendix D). All participants were informed of their right to anonymity, their right to refuse participation in an interview, or withdraw participation in my research at any point in this process (1.1). All participants were afforded the opportunity to choose an appropriate pseudonym for use throughout this thesis (2). As a 'gatekeeper' was vital to procuring a sample population, I was steadfast in ensuring informed consent was obtained directly from possible participants and that no information about them was obtained from a third-party (1.1). Permission was granted by all participants to record the interviews conducted for transcription purposes (*see* Appendix E for interview transcript) on the basis that any such recordings would be stored on a secure server to protect their confidentiality and privacy and would be removed upon publication of results (2). All respondents were assured that personal identifiers would be removed from both recordings and transcripts, and that any transcripts made could be sent to them upon request to ensure the integrity of my results (General Principles:2). All findings were reported accurately to uphold my integrity and professional competence as a researcher (General Principles:1/2).

Limitations

The depth of knowledge qualitative research provides comes at the expense of being able to generalize about the population as a whole (Burnham et al., 2004:31). All interview participants are from Northern Ireland, however the small sample size utilized in my research means the insights obtained cannot be generalized across all young Alliance party supporters or activists, much less all members of the 'peace generation' in Northern Ireland, including those many

young people who may be ambivalent about cross-community politics and the Alliance Party. This is compounded by the fact that the data collected in qualitative research is anecdotal and lacks the operational rigour of quantitative research (Pierce, 2011).

Findings and Analysis

Introduction

Each of the eight interviews I conducted as part of my research were transcribed. From this basis, I was able to evaluate and analyse the data by sorting the information obtained into interesting themes which reappeared across the research process. This approach allowed me to make judgements of, and assort, the data in consideration of the theoretical framework I used to deduce the questions set for each interview conducted as part of my research (Burnham et al., 2004:217-18). Thus, the structure of this discussion follows the questions set for each interview, and an analysis of those specific themes therein. A summary of these findings is provided at the end of this discussion.

Diverse Socio-Cultural Backgrounds

(i)   The Good Friday Agreement and Social Acceptability

Four of the eight interview participants described themselves as having come from 'mixed' cultural backgrounds whereby each of their parents come from either side of the 'two communities' divide. During the Troubles in Northern Ireland the social acceptability of such religious intermarriage between the 'two communities' was low as the social arrangements governing social contact between the communities were rigid (Lee, 1985:62-3). Three of these four participants raised the importance of the Good Friday Agreement in allowing their parents to marry and in allowing their marriage to be seen as socially acceptable within their

communities. Tara (22) from Co. Down spoke of the attitude of the Catholic clergy towards her parents who wished to marry in 1997:

> 'At that time the priest refused to marry my parents because they were from different religious backgrounds. The Protestant church my dad was a member of allowed it. Obviously at that time there was still that conflict, but nobody now would bat an eyelid at a marriage like that, it's far more socially acceptable'.

James (22) from Co. Tyrone said the following about his Catholic-nationalist mother and Protestant-unionist father:

> 'They married in 1999, just after the agreement was signed and, in many ways, it allowed their marriage to be socially acceptable in Northern Irish society. They had been together for years, secretly, and felt that social attitudes had changed enough at that point for them to become official to their families, friends, and wider communities, particularly my father's family who had been ardent unionists and very much proud of their Protestant culture'.

Similarly, William (20) from Belfast spoke of the social acceptability brought about by the agreement on his parents' relationship:

> 'The very fact my parents were married was a product of the Good Friday Agreement and the ceasefires because otherwise they were not able to do so because of the attitudes and militancy within their respective communities [in Belfast]'.

This speaks to the idea of the friction between in-groups and out-groups, the 'two communities', based on the rigidity of social relations between them in the context of the conflict and its existential nature (Lee, 1985:63). The idea posited by these interviewees, that the agreement

brought about increased social acceptability of cross-community relations, may be due to the removal of this existentiality from the daily social domain, allowing for a re-organization of Stryker & Burke's (2000) 'salience hierarchy', due to shifting in-group perceptions about the threat of the 'other' and a fluidity in in-group identity structures and commitment levels to ethno-national identities (Coulter et al., 2021:167; Cairns & Hewstone, 2005).

(ii)   Integrated Education and the Contact Hypothesis

Every interview respondent spoke strongly about the importance of integrated education in overcoming the deep-seated division in Northern Irish society. Their experiences of the education system in Northern Ireland were diverse, two had an entirely integrated education, three attended either an integrated primary school or secondary school, two had an exclusively Catholic education, and one an exclusively Protestant one. Interestingly, those three who said they experienced a segregated education said they would have preferred an integrated one. Chritopher (18) from a Protestant area in South Belfast made the conscious choice to attend an integrated secondary education based on his 'uneasy' experience of primary education:

> 'Many of the governors in my primary school were faith leaders, and we had weekly assemblies from all the different Protestant denominations who would literally come into school and preach to us. Even from a young age, because my parents weren't religious, I felt it was all very abnormal. I couldn't understand why a school ran by the government, and wasn't supposed to be religious, was pushing that narrative'.

He described how his secular upbringing and apolitical parents allowed him to stand on his own and construct his own identity, beliefs, and see the 'hypocrisy' of state education in Northern Ireland which made him 'uncomfortable'. Similarly, Louis (18) also chose to attend an integrated

secondary school after attending a Protestant primary school and noticed a change in the social networks held by students between the segregated and integrated system:

> 'Because I came from a mixed family and mixed area in Antrim my social life was mixed and then going to primary school you were associating with just one community. This meant a lot of my friends who lived in more divided areas would only socialise within the Protestant community, even if it wasn't a conscious choice. When I went to secondary school, I was more comfortable because my social life translated to the social environment of school and people were more open minded'.

Furthermore, William (20) described how an integrated education gave him opportunities to go beyond the divide and understand other cultures and identities, an opportunity he wishes more children could have in Northern Ireland:

> 'My best friend when I was growing up was Korean. So, I think that shows even then the identity of Northern Ireland was moving beyond a binary…It very much exposes you to those different backgrounds and different people. And then when you're growing up you have those connections and an understanding of different cultures'.

He added how he believes integrated education 'can do so much to move us beyond the divide' by exposing people to different cultures and building understanding and friendships between communities. This idea of 'exposure' aligns with the contact hypothesis, first proposed by Allport (1954) amid segregation in the United States, suggesting contact between in-group and out-group members can reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict, reflected in the unprejudiced attitudes of interview participants throughout my research. As we saw, Northern Ireland's education sector represents a placeholder of the segregated 'cultural infrastructure' that

maintains ethno-national division in the post-agreement context. The agreement viewed

'initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing' as a vital aspect

of the reconciliation process (Good Friday Agreement 1998:18). However, only 8% of students

currently attend integrated schools (Butterly, 2023), despite 69% of people stating they would

prefer to send their children to integrated schools (NILT, 2021). Just as interviewees highlighted

the necessity of integrated education to remedying division, studies have also shown that

intergroup contact at school is strongly linked to reduced intergroup anxiety, reduced prejudice

towards out-group members, and more optimistic views on the future (McGlynn et al., 2007;

Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Niens & Cairns, 2020; Hughes, 2013).

(iii)   A Secular Politics 'Beyond the Two Communities'

Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly secular, with 36% of the 'peace generation'

identifying as having 'no religion' (NILT, 2021). Each respondent described themselves as 'not

religious' or not a 'practising' Protestant or Catholic, representing a highly secular group. We

previously saw how academics have come to view religion as an ethno-national identity marker

rather than the cause of the conflict (O'Connell, 1989:48; McGarry & O'Leary, 1995:171-213;

Muldoon et al., 2007:90). On this idea Eavan (18) told me:

> 'People identify as Protestant or Catholic because it represents their politics, or in my
>
> case because it represents their cultural background or heritage. So, every time I have to
>
> tick a box on a form, I tick the Catholic box.'

This supports the idea of religion being utilised as an indicator of cultural background in

Northern Ireland, rather than representing levels of religious observance or commitment to an

ethno-national ideology. William (20) had a unique experience of religion in his youth due to his

mixed cultural background, being both a member of the Catholic church, making his Holy Communion and Confirmation, and the local Presbyterian church where he was a member of the boys' brigade. He told me how religion 'can't be mapped to political ideology anymore':

> 'We've seen the census data shows there's now more Catholics than Protestants…. whereas if you look at polls regarding which way people would vote in a unity referendum the numbers don't translate'.

Louis (18) agreed with this take, providing strong opinions on the tendency of many to see Northern Ireland through a sectarian binary, an approach he called 'outdated' and 'simplistic'. Indeed, if you were to take the approach that sees religion as a marker of ethno-national political identities, you would ride roughshod over the Alliance Party supporters I interviewed for this thesis and their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

'Northern Irish' as an Anti-Nationalist National Identity

(i)   The Socio-Spatial Context of National Identity Commitment

Out of the eight people interviewed, seven identified as being primarily or somewhat 'Northern Irish' with one participant antagonistic to such classifications entirely. Several participants outlined how their commitment to a certain national identity varies across different social and geographical situations. William (20) attends university in England and told me how he tends to call himself 'Irish' when people in England ask where he's from:

> 'I'm someone that uses Northern Irish, Irish, and British interchangeably. When I'm in England for university, I call myself Irish. I think that's because I find young people in England don't really understand the difference between Ireland and Northern Ireland…so it's just easier'.

William also spoke of holding a strong sense of Northern Irish identity in Northern Ireland itself due to the region's cultural 'uniqueness' and as an indicator of post-binary attitudes. He also spoke of his experience of the Queen's passing and how this revived a sense of 'Britishness' in him, which he found surprising:

> 'When the Queen died, I found myself feeling more British at that time. It surprised me how moved I was by the funeral and pageantry'.

This speaks to a revival of a sense of 'Britishness' amid the use of memory in 'cultural practises of representation' (Ashplant et al., 2000:11) whereby the commemoration of the monarch's life was inextricably linked to cultural symbols, and thus British nationalism. Eavan (18) also spoke about how his 'Northern Irish' identity is more reflective how 'people in London and Dublin don't really understand the issues in this place' than any strong sense of nationalism. A means of social differentiation between the rest of Britain and Ireland or a 'banal indicator of place' and geography as opposed to a strong socio-political commitment (McNicholl et al., 2019). Overall, this denotes a fluidity in the salience hierarchy of national identities held by participants whereby different socio-spatial contexts invoke different levels of commitment to Northern Irish, Irish, and British, identities.

(ii)   Anti-Nationalism in the Ethno-Nationalist Context

One thing which was striking throughout the interview process was the overall ambivalence of participants towards nationalism. Several participants alluded to the idea that nationalism in Northern Ireland, whether it be Irish or British, causes both social segregation and an obscuration of politics. Jenny (23) told me her opinions of national identity:

'I would describe myself as Northern Irish first and foremost…When I was younger, I would have said British because that's what I was taught. But when you look into what identity, nationality, and nationalism means, particularly here in the context of the Good Friday Agreement, you're free to express yourself however you wish'.

Again, this is a demonstration of the fluidity of identity formation structures and the decreasing salience of formative socialization in the context of peace. Tara (22) said she identifies as 'Northern Irish' because she feels other identities confine her to 'one side'. Similarly, Louis (18) spoke of holding 'Northern Irishness' as it's 'neither inherently unionist nor nationalist'. This suggests that participants see a Northern Irish national identity as a means of exercising their freedom to self-define and as a display of progressivism, a movement beyond ethno-national politics and the 'two communities binary', a somewhat anti-nationalist identity despite being a national identity indicator. The words of Christopher (18) illuminate this idea excellently:

'Whether it's British or Irish nationalism I could never understand it because it obscures the substance of politics, like what do you believe in? What policies? This kind of identity politics allows politicians to be ideologically lazy and prevents progress'.

William (20) said many of those who identify as 'Northern Irish' align with Alliance because they're people 'moving beyond binary issues'. He adds how the 'political system, the politicians, force people back into these cleavages at election time through tribal nationalism', reaffirming this idea of distain among Alliance supporters towards ethno-nationalism, and their 'Northern Irishness' as an expression of this. James (22) described being 'fed up' of divisive politics as it 'side-lines important issues that really matter'. These issues form the next part of my analysis.

Political Identities and Political Issues

Three respondents described Alliance as a 'broad church' encompassing people who are 'centre-left and centre-right' and 'soft unionists, soft nationalists, and neither' but united around the idea of a shared society and shared future. Christpher (18) described leaving the Labour Party to join Alliance as he thought Jeremy Corbyn's platform was 'too extreme' and how Alliance was the one party that was 'accommodating of all viewpoints'. He found Alliance's policies to be 'common-sense and moderate arguments focused on solutions not identity' after attending some meetings of his local branch. Lucy (23) and William (20) similarly referred to the idea of 'evidence-based policy'. Lucy has a background in public policy and is a PhD student at Queen's University she voted Alliance for the first time in 2022 after reading their manifesto:

> 'My background means I read manifestos and study party platforms before voting and I liked the evidence-based, non-ideological nature of Alliance…. People might not agree with Alliance on everything, but the fact they don't take a stance on the constitutional question makes them seductive to people like me who just want to see political parties focus on political issues'.

William (20) described how people in Northern Ireland 'feel we share a common moral duty…to fix politics and pass on peace' and that Alliance focuses on 'what's best for Northern Ireland based on the evidence'. This again speaks to the idea that the constitutional question and ethno-national divisions obscures politics, a common theme throughout my research. Another participant, Tara (22), also noted the party's 'commitment to inclusivity' as 'more reflective of the direction [Northern Irish] society is going in'. There appeared to be ideological convergence around 'socially liberal' policies and moving 'beyond the binary' among all participants, with this forming the basis of support for the party among interviewees. Lewis (18) told me how:

'Alliance represents the new Northern Ireland. All other parties want to keep us divided on flags, language, emblems, just the past, whereas Alliance wants to offer solutions to improve Northern Ireland…some parties portray themselves as socially liberal, but their actions aren't…I think Alliance is the only party that actually is'.

James (22) was open about being a gay man in Northern Ireland and finding Alliance to be accepting of him and being 'genuine' about supporting socially liberal policies around issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex adoption, whilst other parents merely pay 'lip service' to such issues. William (20) told me how he believed the party's progressive stance on socio-cultural issues is behind the party's high levels of support among his 'peace generation' as he sees such issues as the 'key thing in their politics'.

Most respondents highlighted frustration around political instability and absence of government in the region (due to what three participants called 'ransom politics'), segregated education and housing, the healthcare crisis, and political tribalism. Tara (22) told me how these issues 'go beyond traditional divisions and can unite people' citing the unity between Sinn Féin and the DUP during the Covid-19 pandemic as an example of how politics can work if 'politicians decide to work for the entire community and set aside division to make Northern Ireland better for all'. Jenny (23) told me how 'Alliance stood out because they want to go further than shared education, they want a shared society'. Five out of the eight participants also made explicit reference to the 'positive platform' of the party compared to their opponents, who respondents viewed as out of touch with young people.

The Future of Cross-Community Politics in Northern Ireland

   (i)   The Future of Alliance in the Post-Brexit Context

The Alliance Party have a clear, pro-European position, advocating for a return to the European Union at the earliest opportunity and viewing the Northern Ireland Protocol as imperfect, but necessary mechanism in the current context (Alliance Party, 2022:86). This pragmatism on the Brexit issue has translated into support for the Windsor Framework (Alliance Party, 2023). Thus, it was unsurprising that all interviewees voiced opposition to Brexit. My literature review demonstrated how many academic discussions have focused on the rise of Alliance in the context of the Brexit fallout in Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2020; Hayward, 2020; Murphy, 2022). All interviewees discussed the importance of the party's consistent position on Brexit as contributing to their success in the 2022 Assembly elections. Lucy (23) believes Brexit saw a huge sway of middle-class unionist voters to Alliance. On this, Louis (18) described Brexit as 'the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of political affiliations', adding 'I think Alliance has become the home of political moderates as a result of the mess it has caused'. Eavan (18) also called Brexit a 'wake up call for a lot of people about the limitations of the institutional arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement'.

However, interviewees were steadfast in their belief that the Alliance Party is more than a single-issue party and has a bright electoral future. For Jenny (23) the party's huge manifesto is proof that Alliance 'offers solutions to a broad range of issues affecting people in Northern Ireland'. William (20) addressed this argument and raised an interesting point:

   'I think we have a much broader base beyond the Brexit issue. The aim of building a united

   community is something that unites everyone, but we're so much broader than that. …In

   terms of social issues and climate change we're leading the way…A lot of people dismiss us

as being a single-issue party, but we don't dismiss Sinn Féin and the DUP for being single-issue parties with a platform based on the constitution question".

James (23) also believes Brexit has allowed the party to strengthen their base but doesn't see the party becoming one of the top two parties in Stormont due to the institutionalization of the 'two communities divide' and polarisation of much of the electorate as a result. Louis (18) agreed but said that 'I can see Northern Ireland become a three-party dominant state where Alliance serves as the voice of moderates from all sides of the divide and represents a shared political identity focused on tackling issues beyond the constitutional question'. Indeed, every participant raised the need to reform the Good Friday agreement if cross-community politics is to grow and eventually become normative in Northern Ireland.

(ii)   Reforming the Designation Mechanism of the Good Friday Agreement

The Good Friday Agreement contains safeguards which ensure all sections of the community cooperate within the devolved institutions. Strand one of the agreement, which establishes democratic institutions in Northern Ireland, contains a designation mechanism which ensures key decisions are taken and affirmed on a cross-community basis;

> (i)   Either parallel consent which involves a majority of members present and voting, including a majority of the unionist and nationalist designations present and voting.

> (ii)   Or a weighted majority with 60% members present and voting, including 40% of the unionist and nationalist designations present and voting.

Alliance have long argued that the designation mechanism requiring cross-community support means their votes count for less than unionist and nationalist MLAs and disincentivize people

from voting for cross-community parties (Mitchell, 2018:5). Whilst eight interviewees explicitly stated the need for institutional reform, seven highlighted their belief that the designation mechanism should be reformed. All respondents acknowledged the necessity of the Good Friday Agreement when it was initially conceptualized, its importance to securing peace and allowing them to grow up without fear of violent conflict. Four participants noted how the agreement was tailored at a time when the rise of a cross-community third force in Northern Irish politics and a nationalist majority would have been unthinkable. James (22) believed removing the designation mechanism can 'temper the adversarial relationship which the agreement institutionalized' and 'make cross-community politics a viable alternative to voters who won't see supporting Alliance as a wasted vote'. The belief held by all participants is the idea of the agreement serving as a transitional mechanism and that it is time to consider its contemporaneity amid the current stalemate and the needs of Northern Irish society. Louis (18) said the following:

> 'The agreement provides a solid foundation, the groundwork needed for Northern Irish society to move on peacefully into the future…no party should be able to hold the institutions to ransom and the fact Alliance doesn't have an equal voter in selecting a First Minister and Deputy is unfair, especially given the popularity of our cross-community platform'.

Tara (22) described the current political stalemate as a 'stalling period' and proof that Northern Ireland needs to reconsider aspects of the agreement:

> 'Going door to door, people are becoming more responsive to our calls for reform because Brexit has now highlighted shortcomings and the ransom politics the system encourages…there's a sense among young people that we need a functioning executive to prevent a slip back into violence if socio-economic issues aren't addressed'.

Lucy (23) provided similar sentiment saying: 'mandatory coalition gives one party the power to hold the entire country to ransom…with peace so fragile, it's not good enough. What good is a peace agreement if people descend back into violence because of economic disarray and a lack of representation?' A comment made by James (22) summarizes the position of the young Alliance party supporters I interviewed: 'society is changing but politics hasn't caught up, and it won't catch up until there's institutional reform'.

Indeed, for Hayward & McManus (2019) the agreement has created the conditions for a 'third way' to grow but simultaneously makes an alternative to the current two communities-orientated politics difficult to envisage. This sentiment is echoed within wider society. Most people (40%) believe the Good Friday Agreement remains the 'best basis for governing Northern Ireland, but needs some changes', with this position held almost equally across all communities; 37% among Catholics, 41% among Protestants, and 44% among those with 'no religion' (NILT, 2021), suggesting growing appetite for institutional reform in the context of a generation of peace and the current socio-political developments outlined by the young people I interviewed.

Summary of Findings

My findings provided insight into the identities and politics of young Alliance Party supporters in Northern Ireland. In terms of the socio-cultural backgrounds of respondents, half (50%) of the eight interviewees described themselves as coming from a 'mixed' cultural background or family. Three (38%) respondents made explicit reference to the Good Friday Agreement as encouraging social acceptability within and between adversarial ethno-national communities, allowing their parents to marry. All respondents (100%) described themselves as 'not religious' or not 'practicing' any religion, supporting the idea of increased secularization in Northern Irish society and casting doubt over religious identification as an ethno-national identity marker, with

respondents highlighting how religious identification for them indicates their cultural background, not observance or political ideology.

Five of the eight interviewees attended mixed schools throughout the course of their education (63%), with two (25%) attending both integrated primary and secondary schools, figures markedly higher than the rest of the Northern Irish population. Respondents who had attended an integrated secondary school after a segregated primary school noticed a change in the social networks held by students between the segregated and integrated system. Respondents also noted how integrated education provided opportunities to establish social networks 'beyond the divide' and the opportunity to understand different cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. All respondents (100%) believe integrated education is something which should be widespread in Northern Ireland to encourage cross-community relationships, a view supported by academic literature on the 'contact hypothesis'.

Seven out of eight (88%) respondents described their national identity as primarily or to some extent 'Northern Irish'. One participant was antagonistic to the idea of nationalism entirely. Several respondents outlined how commitment to a nationality varies across social and geographical contexts. Overall, responses pointed to a fluidity of national identification on this basis, with 'Northern Irish' viewed as a way of exercising their ambivalence towards the traditional ethno-national divisions in Northern Irish society and liberty to look beyond binary issues as opposed to support for a shared national identity project. Overall, respondents indicated discomfort towards the idea of nationalism as whole, particularly given the ethno-national context in which they live.

Respondents described the Alliance Party as a 'broad church' encompassing a diverse range of constitutional and policy beliefs, but there seemed to be convergence on the idea of achieving a

shared society through progressive, socially liberal policies, such as integrated education, LGBTQ+ rights, and abortion rights. Respondents noted the party's 'evidence-based', 'non-ideological' approach to policymaking, lack of a position on the constitutional question, commitment to inclusivity, and frustration with establishment parties as factors which drew them to Alliance over other parties in Northern Ireland.

Finally, all interviewees (100%) expressed a pro-EU position and a belief that Alliance is more than a single-issue party, believing that being on the 'right side' of, and 'consistent' around, the Brexit issue has allowed the party to expand its base, particularly among middle-class unionists, and that the 2022 Assembly Election represents an important change in the electoral psyche of Northern Ireland amid a 'stalling period' at Stormont. In this context, all interviewees (100%) stated the need for reform of the agreement's institutional framework, with seven (88%) explicitly highlighting the designation mechanism as a barrier to growth of the party and cross-community politics. Respondents also believed the designation mechanism entrenches political polarization in Stormont, alienation among the electorate, and doesn't reflect the changes society is undergoing. Simply put, that Northern Irish society has outgrown the institutional design of the agreement.

Conclusion

My thesis aimed to uncover the basis of cross-community politics among the 'peace generation' in Northern Ireland by exploring the identities and politics of young Alliance Party supporters in the context of a changing relationship between the process of identity formation in Northern Ireland, a famously divided society in which identity and politics has held an idiosyncratic relationship. My literature review outlined a fluidity in structures of identity formation and identity saliency hierarchies. My findings support this idea, demonstrating how a generation of

peace has allowed young people more autonomy in constructing their socio-political identities beyond familiar political alignments and the 'two communities' binary. My research showed that the young Alliance party supporters interviewed come from mixed socio-cultural backgrounds, have experienced secular and apolitical upbringings, have experienced integrated education, have experienced cross-community social relations from a young age, identify with no religion, and display positive attitudes about the future of the region.

They also hold ambivalent beliefs towards nationalism, viewing their national identity as subject to the socio-spatial context in which it is expressed as opposed to the essence of their politics. They see a 'Northern Irish' identity as a representation of their cross-community outlook as opposed to a socio-political project, which many admit is unrealistic. Their political identities focus on political issues rather than ethno-national ideology, with most holding a progressive and socially liberal political identities. These young people believe that cross-community unity can be achieved by tackling cross-community issues, with the unity between Sinn Féin and the DUP during the Covid-19 pandemic cited as an example of what can be achieved when cross-community politics is deemed 'necessary'.

Most respondents see the existing institutional framework which constitutes governance in Northern Ireland as inhibiting the growth of cross-community politics and maintaining political polarisation among the 'two communities', preventing progress in tackling serious issues and building a shared future. They believe the Good Friday Agreement should be a 'living document' subject to scrutiny and alignment with the society it exists to govern and protect. Above all, my research demonstrates the growing irrelevance of the 'two communities' thesis in understanding Northern Irish politics and society and the need for succinct understandings of the changing contexts, and thus processes, of identity construction young people are experiencing in

contemporary Northern Irish society and the possibilities for a shared future this presents. As ever, the need to truly understand the changes in Northern Irish society, beyond preconceptions, inflammatory rhetoric, and statements of certainty, is vital to securing a peaceful future. In this light, it is important to note that my findings outline several intriguing hypotheses for further research into cross-community politics in the region and how peaceful pluralism can be fostered in a famously divided society.

Appendices

Appendix A: Research Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Relevance	Interview Date
Christopher	18	M	Alliance Youth Activist and Alliance Party Supporter	19/03/2023
Eavan	18	M	Alliance Youth Activist and Alliance Party Supporter	14/03/2023
James	22	M	Former member of Alliance Youth and Alliance Party Supporter	20/03/2023
Jenny	23	F	Alliance Party Supporter	14/03/2023
Lucy	23	F	Alliance Party Voter 2022 Assembly Elections	27/03/2023
Louis	18	M	Alliance Youth Activist and Alliance Party Supporter	11/04/2023
William	20	M	Alliance Youth Activist and Alliance Party Supporter	14/03/2023
Tara	22	F	Alliance Youth Activist and Alliance Party Supporter	20/03/2023

ETHICAL GUIDELINES SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

The Ethics Committee of the Sociological Association of Ireland is grateful for the use of ethical codes produced by the British Sociological Association, the American Sociological Association, and the Australian Sociological Association.

Introduction

The Sociological Association of Ireland's (SAI's) Ethical Guidelines consist of a set of general principles and statements of ethical practice concerning the professional activities of sociologists in Ireland. The guidelines are intended to generate awareness about potential problems and conflicts of interest that might arise for sociologists; to draw attention to their obligations regarding the interests of persons and groups with whom they work; and to provide guidance on ethical issues they may encounter in a variety of roles and work situations. Reflecting the SAI's view that responsibility for the highest standards of conduct in research, teaching, and professional service rests with individual sociologists, the strength of the guidelines depends ultimately on discussion, reflection, and continued use by SAI members.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The following general principles express a common set of values that serve as a guide for sociologists in determining ethical courses of action.

I PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

Sociologists seek to maintain the highest levels of competence in their work. They are aware of the need for ongoing education in order to remain professionally competent and they avail of the appropriate professional, technical, and administrative resources to ensure competence in their professional activities. They consult with other professionals when necessary for the benefit of their students, research participants, and clients and they undertake only those tasks for which they are qualified by education, training, or experience.

II INTEGRITY

Sociologists are honest and fair in the conduct of their professional activities. They are careful to avoid behaviour that might undermine public confidence in sociology and are prepared to consult with colleagues in order to protect the reputation of the discipline. They do not knowingly make or support

statements that are false, misleading, or deceptive either because of what they suggest or omit in relation to their own work activities or those of individuals or organisations with whom they are associated. Such statements concern, but are not limited to, professional qualifications and expertise; research findings and publications; review processes, employment decisions, and references.

III RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, DIVERSITY, AND EQUALITY

Sociologists respect the rights, dignity, and worth of all people. They strive to eliminate bias in their professional activities and to promote equality of opportunity and participation. They do not tolerate any forms of discrimination based on age; gender; race; ethnicity; national origin; sectarian or religious denomination; sexual orientation; disability; health conditions; or marital, domestic, or parental status. They are sensitive to cultural, individual, and role differences and acknowledge the rights of others, including those of other sociologists, to hold values, attitudes, and opinions that differ from their own.

IV SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Sociologists are aware of their professional and scientific responsibility not only to students, colleagues, and clients, but to the wider communities and societies in which they live and work. Thus, while promoting academic freedom and the production and dissemination of knowledge in forms that are accessible to the public, they have a general duty to safeguard the confidentiality of privileged information. They are sensitive to issues arising from inequalities of power and alert to possible conflicts of interest that may prevent them from conducting their work in a fair and impartial manner.

GUIDELINES FOR GOOD PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Aim Sociologists have a general duty to promote a working environment that supports fair practice and equality of opportunity. The execution of this duty can be problematic. There may be conflicts between good practice and established procedures in particular institutions or constraints imposed by external funding bodies. Where possible members should seek to change procedures that are inimical to good practice. They should be particularly sensitive to issues arising from inequalities of power. These exist not only between staff and students, but among colleagues. Sociologists who find themselves in the position of managers and employers have a duty to balance the interests of staff in different grades including academic, clerical and support staff and to be sensitive to the potential for unfair practice when writing references and participating in reviews. These guidelines address equality and power issues in teaching and other academic settings.

1 POWER RELATIONS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Members should act in ways which ensure equal opportunities for all students, colleagues or job applicants irrespective of age, class, disability, ethnicity, gender, political beliefs, sexuality, 'race', religion. Steps should be taken to increase participation from minority groups within the profession at all levels. Members should take care to ensure that direct or indirect discrimination does not take place at any stage in selection procedures - advertising, response to preliminary enquiries, shortlisting, interviewing - or in the requirement of formal qualifications which are not wholly necessary. (It is acknowledged that, in research, commonality of gender and/or ethnicity between researcher and researched may sometimes be appropriate for methodological reasons). Care should be taken that the element of preferment frequently present in the appointment of part-time teachers does not amount to indirect discrimination. Such posts should be advertised wherever possible. Sexual, sectarian, racial and disability harassment are abuses of power which negate both the principle of equal opportunities and the possibilities of a good working environment. Members thus have a duty to refrain from them and to actively oppose such behaviour by others. Members should not use the inequalities of power which characterise many working relationships including those between teachers and undergraduate, graduate and research students to obtain personal, sexual, economic or professional advantages. Members should be aware that such inequalities of power pertain not only in coercive but also in consensual relationships. They should take care that personal or sexual relationships entered into at work on a consensual and reciprocal basis do not reinforce or exploit those inequalities of power, and do not disadvantage or unfairly advantage the less powerful party.

2 OBLIGATIONS TO STUDENTS

Members employed in teaching institutions have both academic and ethical obligations to their students. Besides the general duties of competence, adequate preparation and up-to-date knowledge, they should observe the following principles.

All students are entitled to adequate information in good time about the content of courses, programme choice, modes of assessment, and appeals procedures. They are also entitled to prompt and fair evaluation of their work, and to the keeping of full and proper records of their progress. Members should support students' studies in a diligent manner by regular attendance to teach and by being available for consultation with students. Members should respect the confidentiality of personal information about students. They have a duty to ensure that any records are secure and that access to them is restricted. While intellectual differences are a sign of healthy diversity and exposure to these is a proper part of students' education, members should not allow intellectual differences or personal animosities among colleagues to impinge on students' relationships with those colleagues. Members have a duty to assist both undergraduate and postgraduate students in their attempts to find employment. T his will normally involve the writing of references and, in the case of graduate students, may include introducing students into appropriate networks. Members should not deceive or coerce students into serving as research subjects. They should not use them simply as cheap labour in the conduct of research. They should not represent the work of students as their own.

In view of the considerable evidence that they distribute their time and attention differentially between groups of students in ways inimical to equal opportunities, teachers have a duty of self-awareness on this issue. Teachers are advised not to enter into personal, emotional or sexual relationships with students. They have a duty to minimise discriminatory practices by students which might detract from equality of educational opportunity; this applies particularly to racial, sectarian and sexual harassment, including verbal abuse. They should be cognisant with the disciplinary codes existing in their institutions for dealing with students who insult or intimidate others, including their teachers and supervisors. Members should be particularly aware of the inequality of power between teacher and student, and the difficulties which may be experienced in either close or distant working relationships. This may be so particularly in one-to-one supervisions. Supervisors should take particular care not to exploit such inequalities of power. If personal or emotional difficulties develop between supervisor and student which may impede the successful completion of the student's work, it is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure that an alternative supervisor is found and that the student's progress is not jeopardised.

3 OBLIGATIONS TO COLLEAGUES

Members should try to minimise the intrusion of self-interest or personal factors on their commitment to the production and spreading of knowledge, and should ensure that their behaviour towards colleagues contributes to a positive working environment. When acting as managers and as employers, members have a duty to implement fair employment practices and promote equal opportunities in relation to appointments, appraisal and promotion.

All employees should be properly informed of the terms and conditions of their employment. Care should be taken not to underpay part-time staff or to engage them or secretarial staff to carry out unpaid duties. All employees, particularly research staff, should be clearly informed about intellectual property rights with respect to the data which they collect or to which they may have access. The general principle of academic freedom means that freedom to analyse and publish the results of

research should be limited only in exceptional circumstances. Members should not knowingly misrepresent the findings of their research, or the work of others. They should not present other people's work as their own, or hold up the publication of work by others so that their own gets precedence. They should acknowledge fully all those who contributed to their research and publications. Attribution and ordering of authorship and acknowledgements should accurately reflect the contributions of all main participants in both research and writing processes, including students. Material quoted verbatim from the writings of others must be clearly identified and referenced to its author. Where ideas or material are drawn from the written work of others without verbatim quotation, the sources should be cited to the full extent that is reasonably practicable for the purpose in hand.

4 REVIEW PROCESSES

Sociologists may be involved in a wide range of review processes: these include reviewing proposals or manuscripts prior to publication, book reviews, research grant applications, accreditation of courses, examination of theses, and involvement in procedures for appraisal or promotion of individual staff, as well as writing references for students and colleagues. Members have a general duty to ensure that any participation in review processes is an honest evaluation of work in question.

The expression of strong views for or against a particular piece of work are part and parcel of the review process. In reviewing the work of others, however, members should avoid conflicts of interest. They should also normally avoid participating in review procedures where they have a close positive or negative connection with those under review. Members should not normally review the same book in more than one journal, except in relatively rare cases where the journals involved have non-overlapping membership and where the editors are agreeable. All reviews should be based on full and conscientious reading and consideration of the work in question. Members should supply requested references promptly and ensure that these are full, fair and adequately considered. Within legal limits, they should not disclose personal information which is not directly relevant to the post in question without the subject's explicit and prior consent. In cases where they feel unable to give a positive reference, that information should be clearly communicated to the person concerned, to enable them to seek another referee. Editors of journals or books accepting or soliciting manuscripts should ensure that publication is reasonably prompt. Potential delays should be communicated to the author as quickly as possible, with permission to seek publication elsewhere if the delay is likely to be prolonged.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Aim   The integrity of sociological enquiry and the freedom to research, study, and publish the results of research is a major concern of sociologists. SAI members have a responsibility both to safeguard the interests of those involved in or affected by their work and to report their findings accurately and truthfully. They need to consider the consequences of their work or its misuse for those they study and other interested parties and they should not accept work that they are not qualified to carry out or that is outside their true fields of expertise. Members should satisfy themselves that the research they undertake is worthwhile and that the methods used to elicit information are appropriate. Further, they should be aware that they have some responsibility for the way in which their research may be utilised. Discharging that responsibility may present difficulty, especially in situations of competing social interests or where there is unanticipated use of information by third parties. These guidelines address these and other key issues for sociologists in their relations with research participants, sponsors, and/or funders.

1 RELATIONS WITH RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Sociologists, when they carry out research, enter into personal and moral relationships with those they study, be they individuals, households, corporate entities or other social groups. Members have a responsibility to ensure that the welfare of research participants is not adversely affected by their research activities. They should strive to protect the interests of research participants, their sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting concerns. Though frequently characterised by disparities of power and status, research relationships should, where possible, be founded on trust. In cases where the public interest dictates otherwise, and particularly where there is abuse of power or exploitation, obligations of trust and protection may weigh less heavily. Nevertheless, these obligations should not be discarded lightly.

1.1   Responsibilities towards Research Participants

As far as possible, sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on members to explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be promoted. In general, co-operation in fieldwork should be negotiated and not assumed. Where there is a possibility that data may be shared with other researchers, the potential uses to which the data might be put may need to be discussed with research participants.

Research participants should be made aware of their right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wish. They should understand how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality and should be able to reject the use of data-gathering devices such as tape recorders and video cameras. Members should be careful, on the one hand, not to give unrealistic guarantees of confidentiality and, on the other, not to permit communication of research films or records to audiences other than those to which the research participants have agreed. When making notes, filming or recording for research purposes, sociologists should make clear to research participants the purpose of the notes, filming or recording.

In some situations, access to a research setting is gained via a 'gatekeeper'. In such cases, members should adhere to the principle of obtaining informed consent directly from the research participants to whom access is required, while at the same time taking account of the gatekeeper's interest.

Members should be sensitive to research participants whose vulnerability may be increased by factors such as age, disability, or social status. In cases where an individual is not in a position to provide information, it may be appropriate to obtain the information from a third party. In these situations, extreme care should be taken not to intrude on the personal space of the person to whom the data refer, or to disturb the relationship between the person and the third party. In general, data should not be obtained where it can be inferred that the person about whom the data are sought would object to supplying certain kinds of information.

There is an obligation for members to be aware of the possible consequences of their work. In particular, they should attempt to anticipate, and to guard against, consequences for research participants which can be predicted to be harmful. Sociologists are not absolved from this responsibility by the consent given by research participants. While some participants in sociological research may find the experience a positive and welcome one, others may feel wronged by aspects of the research process. This can be particularly so if they perceive apparent intrusions into their private and personal worlds, or where research gives rise to false hopes, uncalled for self-knowledge, or unnecessary anxiety.

2. ANONYMITY, PRIVACY, AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The anonymity and privacy of those who participate in sociological research should be respected whether or not an explicit pledge of confidentiality has been given. In some cases, it may be necessary to decide whether it is proper or even appropriate to record certain kinds of sensitive information. Members have a duty to ensure that personal information concerning research participants is kept confidential. Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity must be honoured, unless there are exceptional, clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise. Colleagues and others given access to the data must also be made aware of their obligations in this respect. By the same token, members should respect the efforts of other researchers to maintain anonymity.

Extreme care is required when delivering or transferring any confidential material over computer networks. Appropriate measures should be taken to store research data in a secure manner, in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act. These may include the removal of identifiers, the use of pseudonyms and other technical means for breaking the link between data and identifiable individuals. Care should also be taken to prevent data being published or released in a form that would permit the actual or potential identification of research participants.

2.1   Covert Research

The use of covert research raises serious ethical issues but covert methods may avoid certain problems. For instance, difficulties may arise when research participants alter their behaviour significantly because they know they are being studied. Researchers may also face problems when access to information is

closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests. However, covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces that is conducted without the knowledge of those implicated is not generally recommended and should be engaged in only when it is not possible to use other methods to obtain essential data. In such studies, it is particularly important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants. Ideally, where informed consent has not been obtained prior to the research it should be obtained post-hoc.

3 ETHICAL PRACTICE IN RELATIONS WITH SPONSORS AND /OR FUNDERS

A common interest exists between the sponsor, funder and sociologist as long as the aim of the social enquiry is to advance knowledge, although such knowledge may only be of limited benefit to the sponsor or funder. This relationship is best served if the atmosphere is conducive to high professional standards. Members should attempt to ensure that sponsors/funders appreciate the obligations that sociologists have, not only to them, but also to society at large, research participants and professional colleagues and the sociological community. The relationship between funders and social researchers should be such as to enable social enquiry to be undertaken as objectively as possible. Research should be undertaken with a view to providing information or explanation rather than being constrained to reach particular conclusions or prescribe particular course of action.

3.1   Obligations Roles and Rights
Members should clarify in advance the respective obligations of funders and researchers, where possible in the form of a written contract. They should refer the sponsor/funder to the relevant parts of the professional code to which they adhere.

Members should be realistic and fair in their costing and avoid compromising on quality in order to save costs. Members should also be careful not to promise or imply acceptance of conditions which are contrary to their professional ethics or competing commitments. Where funders are also involved in the research, or where those who tender for research are involved in funding decisions, the potential for conflict between the different roles and interests should be made explicit to all parties.

Members should be clear about their own general or specific obligations to funders, whether contractually defined or the subject of informal or unwritten agreements. They should be honest and candid about their qualifications and expertise and the limitations, advantages and disadvantages of the various methods of analysis and data and the time-scale of the proposed research. They should acknowledge the necessity for discretion with confidential information obtained from funders. They should also try not to conceal factors which are likely to affect the quality of the work or the completion of a proposed research project.

3.2   Research Outcomes

Members should not accept contractual conditions that are contingent upon a particular outcome or set of findings from a proposed enquiry. A conflict of obligations may also occur if the funder requires a particular methodological approach. In this context, it is important to recognise that members have an obligation to ensure that funders grasp the implications of the choice between alternative research methods.

Members should also clarify, before signing the contract, if they are entitled to disclose the source of their funds, the aims of the institution concerned, its personnel and the purpose of the project. Members should also clarify the position regarding the right to publish and disseminate the results of their research before signing the contract.

3.3   Confidentiality of Information

Researchers are often given confidential information by the funder. Methods and procedures which have been utilised to produce published data, should not, however, be kept confidential unless otherwise agreed. When negotiating research funding members should be aware of the legal requirements with regard to ownership of, and rights of access to, data.

In some political, social and cultural contexts particular sources of funding may be contentious. Candour and frankness about the source of funding may create problems of access or co-operation for the social researcher but concealment may have serious consequences for colleagues, the discipline and research participants. The emphasis should be on maximum openness. Where funders also act directly or indirectly as gatekeepers and control access to participants, researchers should not devolve their responsibility to protect the participants' interests onto the gatekeeper. Members should be wary of inadvertently disturbing the relationship between participant and gatekeepers since that will continue after the research has been completed.

3.4   Obligations to Funders during the Research Process

Members have a responsibility to notify the funder of any significant departure from the agreed terms of reference of the contracted research. A research study should not be undertaken where the resources available are known to be inadequate, regardless of whether the work is sociological or interdisciplinary. Upon accepting financial support, members must make every reasonable effort to complete the proposed research on schedule, including agreed reports to the funding source. Members should be prepared to take comments from funders or research participants or those designated by such parties.

GUIDELINES FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Aim   The aim of these guidelines is to outline general principles of good practice for postgraduate research. With growing numbers of students entering into postgraduate programmes the SAI feels that

formal guidelines are urgently required. These guidelines address the responsibilities of Sociology departments, supervisors, and students. Doing postgraduate research can be a very stressful experience. In Ireland a central issue is the fact that postgraduate students generally do not receive adequate funding and so fund their own PhD research. This can lead to a variety of tensions and potential problems. (For further discussion on these issues see Norman Graves and Ved Varma (eds.), *Working for a Doctorate*. London: Routledge).

1   COURSE ɪNFORMATION

Sociology departments should ensure that detailed information is made freely available to all intending students. This should be in the form of a postgraduate booklet outlining all relevant requirements and regulations. These should include information about conditions of full-time and part-time registration, minimum and maximum registration periods, examination requirements and so on. Arrangements for supervision and the monitoring of student progress should also be clearly set out in writing. Details of facilities for postgraduate students, including workspace, computer facilities, postgraduate awards/studentships, teaching assistantships and teaching opportunities or expectations should also be provided. Departments should generally only accept students for registration in areas in which they have relevant expertise.

Once students are registered they should receive regularly updated written information outlining the following: arrangements for supervision and for reviewing students' progress; procedures and requirements of postgraduate students including the submission of research proposals, progress reports, and the form in which the thesis is to be presented; eligibility for up-grading from Master's to PhD, transfer and appeal procedures; complaint and grievance procedures; student regulations and disciplinary procedures; equal opportunities and harassment policies, codes and procedures; availability of, and access to, resources including: work space, stationery, photocopying, telephone, computing facilities, travel and conference funds, library facilities, careers and counselling services; relevant departmental activities such as departmental seminars; institutional research ethics policies and procedures (students should also be alerted to the SAI Ethical Guidelines); institutional policies and procedures on intellectual property rights; requirements for the examination of theses and for appeals; regulations about the appointment of examiners.

2 MONITORING AND ꜱUPPORT

A named staff member should have overall responsibility for research degrees. In addition, a research degree committee, or its equivalent, should regularly review and monitor the progress of students and be empowered to intervene in the case of problems or disputes. There should be clearly defined procedures enabling students to change supervisor where necessary. There should also be clear procedures for transfer to another university that should be known to students. Departments should have formal arrangements for ensuring continuity of supervision during periods of staff leave.

Postgraduate students should be encouraged to become fully involved in the intellectual and social life of the department. Students should also be made aware of external sources of support and

development such as: the SAI Postgraduate Summer School; SAI Conference and membership concessions.

3 THE STUDENT/ SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP

Each department should have a formal code of practice for research students which should, clearly define the responsibilities and expectations of students and supervisors. Supervisors and students should agree formally how these requirements are to be met and this agreement should be kept under review. It is the student's and the supervisor's joint responsibility to ensure that regular meetings take place. A timetable of work should be developed and monitored from the outset. Students should submit regular written work to their supervisor and should expect regular and prompt feedback. It is crucial that supervisors give substantial feedback on research proposals, and, once fieldwork is completed, continue to give feedback on the interpretation and analysis of data.

Supervision is a two-way process. It is essential that supervisors recognise that primary responsibility for the supervisory *relationship* rests with them. Of course this relationship can only work successfully if both parties are committed. It is important for supervisors to realise that students are responsible adults who do not undertake postgraduate degrees lightly. It is therefore inappropriate for supervisors to create a hierarchical supervisory relationship, for example by putting undue pressure on a student. It is also crucial that both supervisors and students are aware that it is the student who must take ultimate responsibility for their own *research*. It is inappropriate for a supervisor to try and take control of the thesis, or to pressurise a student to complete.

It is good practice for a written record to be kept by both parties of important supervisory advice, and any agreements made. Supervisors should be familiar with current regulations and take responsibility for reminding students of such matters as length limits and the issue of plagiarism. Supervisors should play an active role in the choice of appropriate examiners, and it is good practice for the issues involved to be discussed with students. Supervisors should not act as examiners of PhD theses, although one person from the institution should always take part in the examination. Whether or not the institution has a formal procedure for this, it is a supervisor's duty to advise whether a thesis is ready for submission. Where students choose not to take advice, supervisors should have the right to place a written statement of the advice given on file.

Supervisors should ensure that students are supported in their professional self-development. For example students should be encouraged to give papers at conferences, and to publish articles under their own names. Students should be aware that in joint publications drawing on their work they have the right to be first named authors. Students should also be aware of the extent to which joint publications may affect a judgement about whether the thesis is their own work, particularly given that joint publications are not the norm in Irish sociology.

It must be recognised that postgraduates who are employed by their supervisors as research assistants, and who draw on their supervisor's data for their own degree are in a particularly delicate position. In

all cases where students are working as part of a larger project team, or where joint supervisor/student publications are proposed, questions of intellectual property rights should be carefully considered by all concerned.

4 EMPLOYMENT OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

It is helpful to students' careers for them to have teaching opportunities. These should be properly remunerated and should be supported by appropriate training and supervision. Although there are general issues that apply to all casual teaching staff (see SAI Guidelines on the Employment of PartTime and Short-Term Contract Staff), there are specific employment issues relevant to postgraduate students. It is important that departments recognise that the majority of postgraduate students in the Social Sciences have no external funding. In practice this means that students need to work to support themselves even though they might be registered as full-time students. This balancing of research and teaching can be very difficult for students to manage.

Postgraduate teaching staff are a vulnerable group, particularly in the university where they are registered for their degree. A combination of understaffing and increases in student numbers can lead to a situation where postgraduate students are pressurised into taking heavy teaching loads. All parties need to recognise that overwork is likely to lead to students taking longer time-periods to complete their theses.

It can be the case that the teaching done by postgraduate students facilitates the universities/ departments rather than the students' professional development as sociologists. In some cases, the difficulties of doing a postgraduate degree are compounded by exploitation which can be very difficult to resist. In addition, postgraduate students are often given contradictory messages about their role in the university and whether their research or teaching commitment should be given priority.

Departments need to be clear about their expectations of students and to make these known to students from the outset.

4.1   Recommendations

Teaching opportunities should be fairly distributed amongst postgraduate students. Students should not be put under pressure to teach and all students should be given a written contract outlining the terms and conditions of their employment. Formal training (in respect of teaching) is essential, particularly for first year postgraduate students.

Departments should realise that there a number of practical ways in which they can help to ensure that teaching and research are not necessarily incompatible activities. For example, it is preferable that students have continuity in their teaching over the course of their studies; the teaching assistantship model facilitates this. It may also be helpful for students to teach in areas related to their own thesis topic, so that there is some synergy between their research and teaching commitments.

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GUIDELINES ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF PART-TIME AND

SHORT-TERM CONTRACT STAFF

Guidelines in the Employment of Teaching Staff

Aim   In recent years there have been increases in the employment of academic staff on part-time and short-term contracts in Irish universities. The SAI is concerned about the casualisation of university teaching, as well as the conditions of service under which staff are employed. Part-timers and those on fixed term contracts often undertake work of the same type and level as permanent full time staff, however, they are generally paid at lower rates, and experience insecure employment. The guidelines aim to help to promote good practice and to raise awareness of the inequalities created as a result of such employment practices. At the same time, the SAI recognises that in many cases decisions about appointments are made at university level. It is therefore essential that departments lobby for permanent appointments to protect the working conditions of all sociologists employed by universities. It should be the responsibility of the Head of Department (or equivalent) to ensure that an appropriate code of practice for part-time and short-term contract staff is observed. (For further discussion see 'Casualisation of University Teaching', *Equality Issues*, Irish Federation of University Teachers, Summer 1996).

1   APPOINTMENTS PROCEDURES AND TERMS OF CONTRACT
Appointments procedures should be fair and open. The requirements and duties of all posts should be clearly specified in writing. It is preferable for part-time staff to be contracted to work (and paid) prorata on academic scales (e.g., 30% of a full time contract). This proportion should reflect the proportion of a full-time workload carried by the part-time staff member. These pro-rata salaries should be subject to relevant incremental increases. Where staff are employed on hourly contracts, it is essential that adequate provision is made within the contract for preparation of classes, marking, administration, and scholarship, besides that allowed for formal teaching. The fragmentation of fulltime or part-time posts into a series of occasional appointments as a cost-cutting measure should be strongly resisted by departments.

2   INDUCTION AND TRAINING
All new part-time and short-term contract staff should receive copies of all appropriate documents, including for example institutional procedures and requirements. They should also attend an induction or training event, covering such areas as how to conduct small group meetings, guide students, or grade students' work. All part-time and short-term contract staff should have access to staff-development programmes.

3   COURSE INFORMATION AND COURSE ORGANISATION
Information should be given about the content, structure and assessment of the entire courses with which staff are involved, not just that part of it for which they are responsible. All part-time tutors

should receive a full course guide covering: the programme of topics for classes, reading to be covered by students in preparation for classes, the form and amount of written work to be prescribed for students, forms of assessment to be used on the course. Part-time tutors should normally operate under the tutor in overall charge of the course(s) on which they teach to provide continuing guidance during the course. Where such part-time tutors grade the work of students, they should normally only do so when an established member of staff acts as co-marker and has the final word on the level of grades.

4   ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND REPRESENTATION
All staff, including part-time and short-term contract staff, should have a recognised 'location' within a department. They should be given access to resources such as headed note paper, provision of stationery and photocopying facilities, library facilities, E-mail, access to a telephone, a named postbox/pigeon hole. Meetings at the course or departmental level should be open to all staff. Facilities for research and scholarship should be available to all staff. The limitations placed on staff employed on 'teaching only' contracts should be clearly specified and should not impede opportunities for scholarship and 'private' research. All such staff should be accorded appropriate rights as members of a department e.g., representation on committees. Short-term and part-time staff should have access to services and facilities such as staff common rooms.

5   EVALUATION AND MONITORING
Evaluation of the performance of part-time and short-term contract staff should be consistent with that for full time staff.

Guidelines in the Employment of Research Staff

Aim   Over the past decade there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of sociologists involved in research, especially in private sector. The greater availability of funding for social research is reflected in expansion of employment in academic institutions, but particularly in the growth in the numbers of private consultancy firms who employ sociologists as researchers.   As the sector has expanded, so too have work structures and arrangements so that there are now many more sociologists who work on contract or as freelance researchers.   These guidelines are an attempt to set out standards of good practice for those involved in employing researchers whether in research institutes or the more unregulated private sector.

1   APPOINTMENTS PROCEDURES AND TERMS OF CONTRACT
There should be a fair and open appointments procedure for all research positions of more than three months duration. The status, terms and conditions of all posts, including authorship, should be clearly specified in writing. The requirements and responsibilities of all posts should be explicit and available to any individual contracted as a researcher. In the case of researchers employed on a short-term contract or hourly or daily basis, there should be a recognition that research work may often take much longer

than anticipated and adequate flexibility in this regard be provided, so that work is appropriately remunerated.

2 INDUCTION AND TRAINING

All newly contracted research staff should be furnished with appropriate documents, including, where relevant, institutional procedures and requirements. They should be briefed by the research team and their work programme discussed and clarified. In the case of trainee/junior researchers, there should be provision for a regular review of their work, including, in the case of long-term or permanent contracts, a facility for career review. Where appropriate, all research staff should have access to staffdevelopment programmes.

3 STATUS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Researchers involved in large research projects should be given information about the entire research project in which they are involved and, as far as is practicable, be facilitated to participate in activities associated with the project such as meetings, seminars, conferences etc. Research staff, regardless of status, should be given due recognition/credit for their work in research reports and publications.

4 ACCESS TO RESOURCES

All research staff, regardless of status or length of contract should have a recognised location with access to an office, including computer, phone, E-mail and fax, photocopying, etc. They should also have access to headed notepaper, stationery, etc. Research staff should have rights to attend meetings, be represented on committees, have access to common rooms in the organisation/institution in which they are working. Research staff should be entitled to represent the organisation for which they work commensurate with their seniority and experience.

5 EVALUATION AND MONITORING

Evaluation of the performance of temporary and short-term staff should be consistent with that for fulltime staff.

Appendix C: Interviewee Consent Form

Special Topics Consent Form 2022-23

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my assignment for my Special Topics module in the department of Sociology at Maynooth University, NUIM. My research is designed to explore…. the identities and politics of young Alliance Party supporters to understand what forms the basis of cross-community politics among the 'peace generation' in Northern Ireland.

This interview will take approximately 25-30 minutes of your time and can be conducted online via Zoom or Skype or via phone. Also, with your permission, I would like to tape record the conversation. A copy of the interview tape will be made available to you afterwards if you wish to hear it.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the tapes/notes of our conversation safely i.e., promptly removed from mobile devices and kept in a secure manner. Your identity will be kept confidential, and I will use a code number/pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at my university email address:

daniel.donovan.2021@mumail.ie

Thank you for your engagement, it is very much appreciated!

"I have read the description above and consent to participate."

Signed_____

Date _____

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact my supervisor at: supervisor name, email and phone number here. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Appendix D: Introduction Letter

Maynooth University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Roinn Socheolaíochta Ollscoil Mhá
Nuad Maynooth University
Department of
Sociology

16 February 2023,

Dear Sir/Madam,

I hope this finds you well. This is a letter of introduction for Dan Donovan, a third-year student who is in my thesis class dealing with Northern Irish society and politics. Dan is interested in speaking to members of the Alliance Party and if you were able to facilitate him that would be appreciated. If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch with me (colin.coulter@mu.ie). Thanks in advance for your assistance.

Yours Sincerely,

Professor Colin Coulter
Department of Sociology
Maynooth University

Name: William (pseudonym)

Age: 20

Occupation: Student/Member of Alliance Youth

Role: Alliance Youth Activist/Voter

Date: 14/03/2023

Transcript (Part 1)

Daniel (Interviewer)

Thanks for joining me. So, I'm doing a research project and my focus is to look at the identities and the attitudes of Alliance party voters, activists, and politicians. So, we had the Assembly elections last year and down here it was all talk about Sinn Fein. But when we analyse the results, especially the change from the last election to the recent election, the one thing that stands out is the rise of the Alliance party. So that's kind of what I wanted to look at in more detail. When I was doing my literature review, the recent political and demographic changes were described as representing a period of identity innovation, a movement beyond the old two communities binary. So, I wanted to look at kind of what the politics is behind the rise of Alliance in this context, the issues shaping this increasingly popular cross-community party. With support at 13% Catholic, 18% Protestant, and 30% neither, it's a unique and interesting block. I have a few questions planned and I will be taking a semi-structured approach, but I want you to do the talking because you've got the knowledge and experience of Northern Irish politics. So, your own background then. You're a child of the post Good Friday Agreement era. What was your childhood like?

William (Interviewee)

So, for someone born into relative peace, the impact of the Troubles never escapes you. We know obviously 3000 people died, but the amount of people affected by the troubles went much further than that. Everyone has stories of heart affected their families, so think, even though you're growing up as a generation within peace, the impact of that still exists. The impact of the division of society as well. So, you still have that sectarian divide. I grew up in a in a mixed area, my mother was a Catholic from West Belfast, and my father was Protestant from east Belfast. So, two very different backgrounds. And so, they settled in a mixed area because that's where they felt was the best place to raise their kids because they'd come from different sides. And so, I was brought up around people from all different cultures, not just Protestant and Catholics and. My best friend when I was growing up, uh wasn't even born here, they were Korean. So, I think that shows even then the identity of Northern Ireland was starting to move beyond the binary divide that the people think of us as in. I also went to relatively mixed schools as well. So, I had that background of meeting people from different from different religious, cultural, and political backgrounds. Not everyone has been that lucky. So, I was brought up very aware of what peace can do. The very fact that my parents were married was a was a product of the Good Friday Agreement and the ceasefires, because otherwise they were not able to do so because of attitudes and militancy in their respective communities. So, while it was a political agreement, it ended the violence, set up the political institutions, it actually went much further than that. It affected all elements of society and led to an attitudinal shift. For all of us looking at peace 25 years on, has the full potential of the agreement being realised? I think not. I'm sure you'll ask me about why alliance is growing, and we see that the agreement doesn't provide that ability for us to grow. It doesn't expect that a third force, a third way, will emerge in Northern Ireland and it shows that that society is evolving quite rapidly actually in the north.

Daniel (Interviewer)

A mixed cultural background, your parents weren't forcing religion, politics, or a certain identity on you. You had the freedom to build your own, would you say?

William (Interviewee)

Yeah, I mean it's certainly not sacredly accurate in in terms of…I mean, I had my first communion. I had my confirmation in the Catholic Church, but I was also a member of the Presbyterian Church across the road. I was in the boy's brigade over there so. I think my parents got one each sort of sort of thing.

I was very much part of both churches which is really unique. The schools that I went to were majority Protestant. I didn't go to Catholic school, so during your communion and confirmation was outside of the norm there, but there was still a big group of us that did. I think my parents sort of tried to give me the opportunities of all of them. Not necessarily to pick and choose because at that age you're not really sitting thinking about the big questions in life of is God real and am I a Protestant or am I a Catholic? It's very much exposing you to those different backgrounds and to different people. And then when you when you're growing up you have those connections and an understanding of different cultures. I was involved in youth politics for many years and the youth parliaments and youth councils, etcetera and I remember going in into the room one day and someone who's now one of my, one of my good friends realised that that that session was the first time they met a. Protestant and they were 15. And that's not an abnormal story in Northern Ireland. So many people experienced that, and I think I was very fortunate that I didn't. But it doesn't mean that I that I don't appreciate that that we do still live in a very divided society, and we need to move to move beyond that. Just not everybody has the

opportunity to go to a mixed school. I think you only have 8% of kids doing to integrated schools which was meant to be 20% twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement. It can do so much to move us beyond the divide.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Do you think at this point in time any talk about the constitutional question, which we've heard a lot about down here after the election and census results, with the political deadlock in Northern Ireland surrounding the Protocol, that we need to move away from language of certainty and the constitutional question and look to points of unity to truly make the best of the Agreement?

William (Interviewee)

Yeah, I don't think you can map religion to political ideology. That that people always associated with. So, we've seen that the census data now shows there's more Catholics than Protestants in in Northern Ireland, which is something was expected. Whereas if you look at polls regarding which way people would vote in a unity referendum, the numbers don't translate there. If you look at how people identify in the life and times survey, something that Queens and Ulster universities run every single year for the last 20-25 years and if you look at how people vote two months later, it doesn't hold true because there's other factors. Why are people voting and joining alliance more and more these days is. I think it's because people are fed up of everything being boiled down to the constitutional question, and I think that that is leading a big amount of people to join us and actually wanting to focus on some of the issues that are keeping people up at night; the crisis and health service and the education system, for example.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Having read the Manifesto for the 2022 Assembly Elections I very much got that that seems to be the party's focus. It's there's little mention of binary politics, apart from the introduction calling for the need to look beyond binary politics and the bickering between the established parties, its very issue focused.

William (Interviewee)

We're driven by evidence-based policy. So, we will look and see what the best thing for Northern Ireland is in terms of economic policy, social policy, political unity, and in terms of Naomi's (Long) health and justice portfolio from 2020 to 2022. A lot of the work that she has dome, the five bills that she passed, was based on evidence from around the world of what is best in terms of committal reform. What is best in terms of anti-stalking legislation. What works best for victims of domestic abuse so. That's one area where we've been able to implement legislative change. Our manifesto is something like 92 pages long and I remember during the election people laughing at just how long ours was compared to other parties. But we went into the into the election with a manifesto for a change, against the binary divide and the polarisation that exists within Northern Ireland. But we also have plans to tackle that as well as tackling the big issues too. You may have seen that we've a big campaign **to end ransom politics** which has been gaining a lot of traction especially with the absence of the Assembly. People are sort of saying hang on a second, these alliance people who were always the 5th party, so we never really took them seriously, are actually coming here with a comprehensive plan and some proposals that could really change things and. If you look at the Sinn Fein and DUP vote, the DUP vote fell by 1/4, so there's a lot of people very much fed up the DUP. Now, almost all that quarter went to the TUV, s they're staying within the Unionist block, but there's a significant amount of people that also went from the DUP to Alliance just straight away. The SDLP vote went two ways, to us

and t to Sinn Féin. So yeah, we've got this sort of hard line aspect of the polarization, people are being pushed to the poles **but the middle ground is actually the largest it's ever been.** If you add up the amount of seats for Alliance, SDLP, and UUP, and the SLP and UP didn't have good elections, but they didn't lose that many seats. So most of the Alliance gains came from DUP or Green Party seats. So we've got the largest middle ground in the assembly that we've ever had and that could show that actually are people really is supportive of the of these extremes as maybe an initial look at the numbers show?

Daniel (Interviewer)

Certainly, if you were to listen to the likes of Jeffrey Donaldson and Jim Allister, you would be left with the impression that an overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland support Brexit and oppose the Protocol, but it is it a minority, especially the TUV vote which is to the right of the DP.

William (Interviewee)

Yeah, the TUV has existed since 2007 or 2008 and they've never, they've never got more than that one MLA seat, Jim Allister himself. And yeah, they came close in 2022, but that does seem to be the high watermark.

I mean, Jim Allister, as soon as Rishi Sunak and Ursula von der Leyen announced the Windsor Framework, this revised version of the Protocol. Before he had the chance to read itt he was out saying he can't support it. Of course, I've many issues with the DUP, but we knew that they would take time to look at it and least they are looking at it instead of. If you remove the word no from the English language, Jim Allister would be rather lost. So, I think we need to look at the issues and understand where people are voting both ways as well.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Yeah, definitely. Just want to backtrack a little bit. Do you think that the innately political nature of Northern Ireland, the rampant politicisation of all aspects of life, made you more political yourself?

William (Interviewee)

I'm obviously in England now for Uni and I spend most of my time back home, I'm not even in England for half the year. But being in in the two places has sort of shown me how unique we are in in Northern Ireland in the sense of how politically involved. Young people in Northern Ireland growing up, either because you've been brought up on one side of the divide or you've been brought up in between the divide or you've had some sort of personal connection to issues or you've been growing up in poverty, or you've had an issue in terms of your health or education, whatever the case, a of more people are politically active. From a young age, we are aware of politics because it surrounds us. It's not just something that you turn the news on for and hear an update at night. It's all around you 24/7. It affects all that you do to, what school you go to, what clubs you join, what sports you play, what you do at weekends. So, there's a whole range of issues there that that exists so people are aware of that. The fact that politics is so closely linked to the social and cultural means that it's all around us and shapes us as a result. For me I think growing up in a mixed family, politics was always around because my grandparents were on very different sides of many, many issues, voting for the UUP on one side and Sinn Fein and the SDLP on the other. So, you've got very different backgrounds there, Christmas dinner was always very fun. But I think a lot of people feel we share a common moral duty in Northern Ireland, that we need to do something to fix this and pass on peace. That it's our issue and we need to fix it. A lot of young people are growing up now and we know we've got this brain drain

in Northern Ireland which is totally decimating the economy. There are only 24/25,000 university spaces each year in Northern Ireland and about 48,000 apply. So, you've got 40% of all people that want to stay in Northern Ireland forced away and we know that only 36% of them will return. So, we're losing a massive amount of young people. It's the same in the in the South, it's an all-Ireland issue of emigration an. As more and more people are moving to GB (Great Britain) for university and never coming back there's a real desire to make things better in Northern Ireland as it's a fantastic place to live, work, and study, but it doesn't always feel that way.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Yeah, you want to make Northern Ireland feel more homely for everyone, to keep people here and ensure the place can reach its full potential.

William (Interviewee)

Yeah, very much so. I say, and everyone in Alliance says, Northern Ireland is not made-up of green and orange, nationalists, and unionists, that we're one community, not two different communities. We're one community with very different views and beliefs within that. And to think that really changes how we approach all the issues because if it's two communities, it's two competing interests, it's two different sides, two different outcomes. We're never going to get far if we if we think of everything in a binary. Furthermore, you'll miss those growing numbers of people in the middle.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Demand Better. That's that was the slogan the party used a few years ago. So, given your background, as an example of a Good Friday Agreement success story, two communities coming

together, do you think your background, your exposure to both sides, that becoming involved in Alliance was a natural progression? Or did you flirt with any other political parties?

William (Interviewee)

Yeah. So, I joined Alliance when I was 14. I think that probably says more about me than it does anything else! So, I joined when I was 14. That was in January of 2017, I can remember it vividly. I was sitting mock exams, so I should have been studying, but I had the telly on in the background and Martin McGuinness was announcing that he was resigning as Deputy First Minister, so we knew that that there'd be elections. I was politically interested before, the Brexit referendum made everyone politically aware. And so I was looking at these different parties and Alliance seemed to chime very closely with me. A very active local Alliance MLA, Paula Bradshaw, had helped me with an issue the year before. So that's sort of made me think, oh, okay. And then obviously the leadership of Naomi Long, she's a force in in Irish politics and so passionate she is about making this place a better place. So, I think those issues coming together. I also, felt a real sense of hopelessness. I'm 14 and obviously I can't affect much change here, but the institutions collapsed the day after I was born in 2002. So I was 5 when they institutions got back up and running and then they collapsed again when I was 14 until I was 17. So, what system are you living in that by the age of 17 the institutions have been down for 8 1/2 years, half my lifetime there has been no functioning political institutions, and I thought why? Why do I want to stay here? And if I am staying here, I want to make this place better. So, I joined the Alliance Party. I didn't tell my parents. I remember I went away on a school trip and came back, and the membership pack had arrived in the post and there was some questioning!

But they've been incredibly supportive, they're now Alliance supporters and they always would have been sympathetic to the aims of the party without explicitly supporting it. They would have

been more UUP and SDLP on each side and I very much think that there's a lot of people that. The more media attention we're getting, the more work that we're able to do on the ground because we're more MLA's more elected councillors, people are saying hang on, these people are in this for the right reasons and doing a good job.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Yeah, so you're able to convert them as well!

William (Interviewee)

Yeah, it's always about making sure come election time!

Daniel (Interviewer)

Young people, people your age, people you're talking with, more so outside the party, do you think these young people are more tolerant to different ideas and a different politics? I was reading the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, and I was looking at support for political parties by age group. Alliance's support among young people was around 13%, Sinn Fein was around 24%. Alliance support is very evenly spread across age categories, whereas Sinn Fein seem heavily focused on the youth and the DUP more so on middle-aged and older, do you think do you think there's scope for the alliance party to eat into that voting block more?

William (Interviewee)

Yes, I think we we're unique amongst the parties in Northern Ireland in that our support is evenly spread across age groups, but also if you look the gender breakdown as well, we perform much better amongst women than men. The DUP and Sinn Féin do much better with men. In terms of young people, young people very much believe in our cause. They want to see in Northern

Ireland that works better for them. Alliance is 53 now, we've been through our peaks and troughs electorally over that time. We've also seen different policy platforms in terms of: Yes, a united community first and foremost, but now we're also we're very much a progressive party. We're socially progressive on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, and a whole range of soio-cultural issues. And so, we are seeing young people coming over because of that, and that's probably the same reason why Sinn Fein do well with the young people as they run on a socially progressive platform, though not necessarily implementing it when they're in government. So, for a lot of a lot of young people, the key thing in their politics is social issues. The rise of social media is enabling us to look around the world and see these issues exist around the world and people want to tackle those social injustices at home too. We're an internationalist party, we're pro Europe, we want to re-join the EU. So, people see the socially progressive policies, economically progressive policies, our whole range of policy solutions to tackle important issues, as well as our overall aim to build one united community and that, and this has really resonated with people, particularly young people.

Daniel (Interviewer)

So that segues nicely into the elephant in the room, Brexit. So obviously one thing that sticks out is the jump in support for Alliance after the referendum in 2016, and the political turmoil that followed it. In this light, do you think Alliance are a single-issue party or have a much broader base and have simply benefited from Brexit?

William (Interviewee)

I think we have a much broader base beyond the Brexit issue. Yeah, the aim to building a united community is it's something that unites us all, but we're so much broader than that. I mean in

terms of the social issues, as I said there's that part. In in terms of climate change, we're leading the way on tackling the climate issue. We got so many amendments through on the climate change bill in the Assembly, it was incredible just sitting there watching MLAs from all parties voting for amendments that we've worked hard over the years to get drafted. We've now got targets in place that means departments must report back their climate progress. So, we've got real legislative changes there. In terms of the economic issues, we're against Tory austerity. The Conservative government has debased how politics operates within the UK over the last 13 years and. If you look at the benefits tap, if you look at how they're treating migrants with this horrible bill, we're opposed to all of that. And if you look at our recorded in local government as well, we're standing up for people. So, it's not like we're not just a one-issue party. I think a lot of people dismiss us as just being a single-issue party, but we don't dismiss Sinn Fein/DUP for being single issues issue parties with a platform based on the constitutional question, so I don't think that is fair. Our guiding principle is making this place work, putting aside our views on the constitutional question if we have them, including those that don't have views on it, so we all come together on this progressive socioeconomic platform. We believe that by working together we can tackle the many issues we face. Together we can.

Daniel (Interviewer)

So, in terms of Brexit, uh, do you think that despite its negatives it presents a huge opportunity for the party to unite people?

William (Interviewee)

Yeah, I mean Brexit has been a disaster. The reason we were opposed to Brexit, apart from. our liberal internationalist views, is that we knew it would be an unmitigated car crash, and that has

proven the case. We had a document released called "build bridges, not borders/barriers" demonstrating immediately the need to work together. We wanted to obviously have a people's vote as a confirmatory vote on the end deal. If that wasn't possible we wanted to stay in the customs union and the single market, if that wasn't possible, we wanted some sort of alignment, and if none of that was possible, then we're really not the good place and we ended up in that position with the Protocol because it protected Northern Ireland's place within the within the Single Market but didn't provide our voice in it as Northern Irish political voices were nowhere near the negotiations table because we didn't have an executive. So, we lost our position and now with this Windsor framework it looks to have appeased some of the issues the Unionist community had but the Tories can't take can't take ours view for granted either. We saw the Protocol as the least worst option and. There were issues with it. We were identifying those issues. We were suggesting proposals on medicine, on veterinary issues, and on agricultural issues. We were proposing practical solutions. But we need to move beyond the issues of Brexit because for seven years it has been all we've been talking about. I think of all those lost opportunities over the years to invest in our communities. Tackling the divide in Northern Ireland costs over a billion pounds a year. Imagine if we had those billion pounds to invest in the health service or the education system. It would be transformative. So, we need to we need to move beyond Brexit and focus on the day-to-day issues affecting people here.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Looking to the future. When the Brexit dust settles and the next election comes around or the election after that, do you see Alliance maintaining these support levels?

William (Interviewee)

We're now in a position from whereby since the 2019 general election to now, Alliance has been the third party. So, we've been on that been riding this way for some time but it's not by fluke. We've been working hard to build support over the years at the local government level and at grassroots level. Our activists working so hard day in day out to get our message out there and more and more people are encountering what we stand for. So, I think we can maintain, and grow, our support by maintaining that hard work on the ground and sticking to the message which has resonated.

Transcript (Part 2)

William (Interviewee)

In May 2019, we moved from 31 councillors to 53. So that's given us a massive base. We're in all but one council in Northern Ireland now, so working hard for communities right across the country. We've always been seen as a Belfast based party by a lot of our critics but that doesn't stick anymore. So, we've got a real presence right across Northern Ireland. So, when people right across Northern Ireland see Alliance represented them, working hard, and delivering for them. Then I'm certain we'll continue that road to success. You've also got people fed up that again, the DUP and Sinn Féin can't work together, despite it being a system they both agreed to at St. Andrews. We're now the third party, we're in opposition, so people will be coming over and working with us because our entire ethos is about working together, working with and for people from across in the divide.

With the current Stormont stalemate and exhaustion with the established parties, there's a real risk of voter apathy in upcoming issues. I think it's an issue we can't solve but we can do a lot by continuing to work hard, delivering for people up and down the country.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Recent polling shows a shared national identity is unlikely. However, do you think a shared political based on the issues that you've talked about, and we've discussed, offers the best chance at building that united society you talked of earlier and maximising Northern Ireland's potential in the post-Good Friday Agreement era?

William (Interviewee)

I think what we in what we need to do is reform the institutions. We're in a situation now where the compatibility of the institutions with the European Convention of Human Rights is being questioned. A few years ago, that the NI Human Rights Commissioner wrote to the government espousing as much. So, we've got an issue there. A lot of how we discuss things is based on "if the Unionists aren't happy, or if the nationalists aren't happy, or if they don't feel that they're able to buy into the into the processes". With the rise of this third force, that's approximately 20% of the voting bloc in elections, but when you consider the NILT survey about 40% of people say identify as neither nationalist nor unionist, on the constitutional question there seems to be ambivalence.

If you ask people what their national identity is, around 25% of people that will say they're Northern Irish first and foremost and then some combination of Irish and British or British, and Irish, whatever order they choose. I'm someone that uses Northern Irish, Irish, British interchangeably. When I'm in university in England, I call myself Irish. I think it's because I find young people in England don't really understand the difference between Ireland and Northern Ireland and the conflict, so it's just easier! I also identify as British too, for example when the Queen died, I found myself feeling more British at that time. It surprised me how moved I was

by the funeral and pageantry. Northern Ireland is becoming its own, like the Northern Irish identity is very unique, based on a unique culture, a unique history, and people feel that represents a unique national identity. It's very complex!

So, you've got those people, many of whom are closely associated with Alliance. And I think while that grows, then there's an opportunity to move forward because people are moving beyond binary issues. I think people have always been beyond the binary issues, beyond the traditional divide, but the politics, the political system, the politicians, the parties force people back into these cleavages at election time through tribal nationalism. If we can get to a place where we don't force people back into that box by reforming the institutions. Then that opens a whole range of opportunities for a future where, yes, we recognise that people of course have different views on where they want to see this place, but we can set those aside and focus on making this place work for everybody, and I think we are getting to that stage. Societal change can only bring us up so far. There comes a point where politics has to adapt and reflect societal change, The current institutional arrangements are holding us back, and once we reform those, I think that can give us the potential to really bring people together in this place we call home.

Daniel (Interviewer)

Excellent, ending on a hopeful note. Thank you very much. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule. It was very enjoyable and informative.

William (Interviewee)

Yeah. No, it was great. It was so nice to talk to you. Thanks for getting in touch

Daniel (Interviewer)

Yeah, enjoy the weekend. Best of luck with your studies and thanks ever so much again!

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