

The Trap of sectarian politics: Sectarianism and voting in Northern Ireland

Bonnie Weir¹

Milan Švolík²

Yale University

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ABSTRACT

To what extent do voters to remain loyal to their sect, or ethnic group, at the expense of democratic accountability? Ethnic polarization ostensibly affects political behavior in countries across the globe, from Bosnia to Iraq, from India to Northern Ireland. We investigate the consequences of such polarization for the toleration for undemocratic and unaccountable behavior by political leaders in the latter case. We deploy a choice-based survey experiment to gauge how citizens in a democracy trade-off between sectarian loyalty and electoral accountability in their voting behavior. Using this methodology helps us to avoid problems common to conventional surveys, such as social desirability bias, to better gauge actual public support for democracy. We find that even in an advanced democracy, sharp ethnic or sectarian polarization leads citizens to sacrifice democratic values in favor of voting along ethnic lines – but not for the reasons one might expect. Specifically, even when voters individually do not hold ethnic preferences that override values of electoral accountability, they expect that others do – and therefore vote according to ethnic divisions. In such a context, pessimistic expectations about other voters leads to a trap in which democratic accountability is seriously eroded.

INTRODUCTION

Observers have long noted that electoral politics in Northern Ireland, a society deeply divided along ostensibly sectarian fault lines and still healing after a bloody, three-decade civil conflict, are effectively “sectarian headcounts.”³ One could be forgiven for thinking that sectarianism plays

¹ bonnie.weir@yale.edu

² milan.svolik@yale.edu

³ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2017/05/27/a-northern-irish-party-seeks-a-path-between-sectarianism>

a large role in political behavior in Northern Ireland; a candidate from Sinn Féin, the largest political party, even used a sectarian headcount in his constituency to motivate voters in his 2015 campaign for the Legislative Assembly.⁴ Moreover, vote shares in that Assembly have been steadily growing for Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), now the two largest parties and which are seen as the most ardent protectors of Catholics and Protestants, respectively, of all party options.⁵ The hegemony of these two, polarized parties developed despite widespread dissatisfaction with their performance and multiple instances of devolved government collapse due to the withdrawal of either Sinn Féin or the DUP from power sharing. This raises obvious questions about the existence and potential effects of sectarianism twenty-five years after the peace agreement in Northern Ireland. But it also has broader implications for the robustness of democracy in Northern Ireland and the effect of sectarian polarization and divisions on democratic institutions: Do voters really operate on sectarian, or ethnic, preferences in Northern Ireland?⁶ Does sectarian or ethnic identity trump other policy concerns or goals that citizens have? To what extent are there cross-cutting cleavages in post-conflict Northern Ireland?⁷ And are voters willing to tolerate bad governance or even undemocratic behavior on the part of their preferred political leaders – especially if it means not voting for someone from the “other” group?

To answer these questions, we conducted a survey experiment over three waves, the last of which was in June 2022; respondents in this wave were a representative sample of 500 Catholics and 500 Protestants in Northern Ireland.⁸ Here, we examine initial findings from this third wave.

We find that although twenty-five years after the Good Friday Agreement, voters in Northern Ireland have sectarian preferences, they are willing to punish bad politicians and reward non-sectarian ones. Indeed, there is a hidden consensus in Northern Ireland against corruption and

⁴ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2017/sinn-fein-hit-by-storm-of-anger-in-sectarian-headcount-leaflet-row/31195067.html>

⁵ Sinn Féin was the so-called “political wing” of the Irish Republican Army, an armed insurgent group that fought to end British presence in Northern Ireland during the conflict known as the “Troubles”; the DUP refused to sign the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement.

⁶ FN TO DEVELOP: We use “sectarian” and “ethnic” interchangeably in this case. Explain why “sectarian” really means “ethnic”

⁷ Dahl, Lijphart, O’Leary

⁸ In the first two waves, we include respondents who identify as something other than “Catholic” or “Protestant” in background. Here, we are interested in the revealed preferences and political behavior of voters who come from one community “background” or another – which includes the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland (42% of respondents in 2021 said they were raised Catholic; 46% Protestant. See <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2021/Background/FAMRELIG.html>)

violence and in favor of non-sectarian politics. However, voters expect others to be much more sectarian than they actually are in their political choices. In a place where meaningful political power lies with the two largest parties, one from the second-largest group “designation,” the stakes of defection crystalize around elections and voters retreat into a polarized bloc of camps. This retreat happens because they expect others to be guided much more by sectarianism than they themselves are – or than warranted by facts. Voters in Northern Ireland are caught in a trap of sectarian expectations, not preferences.

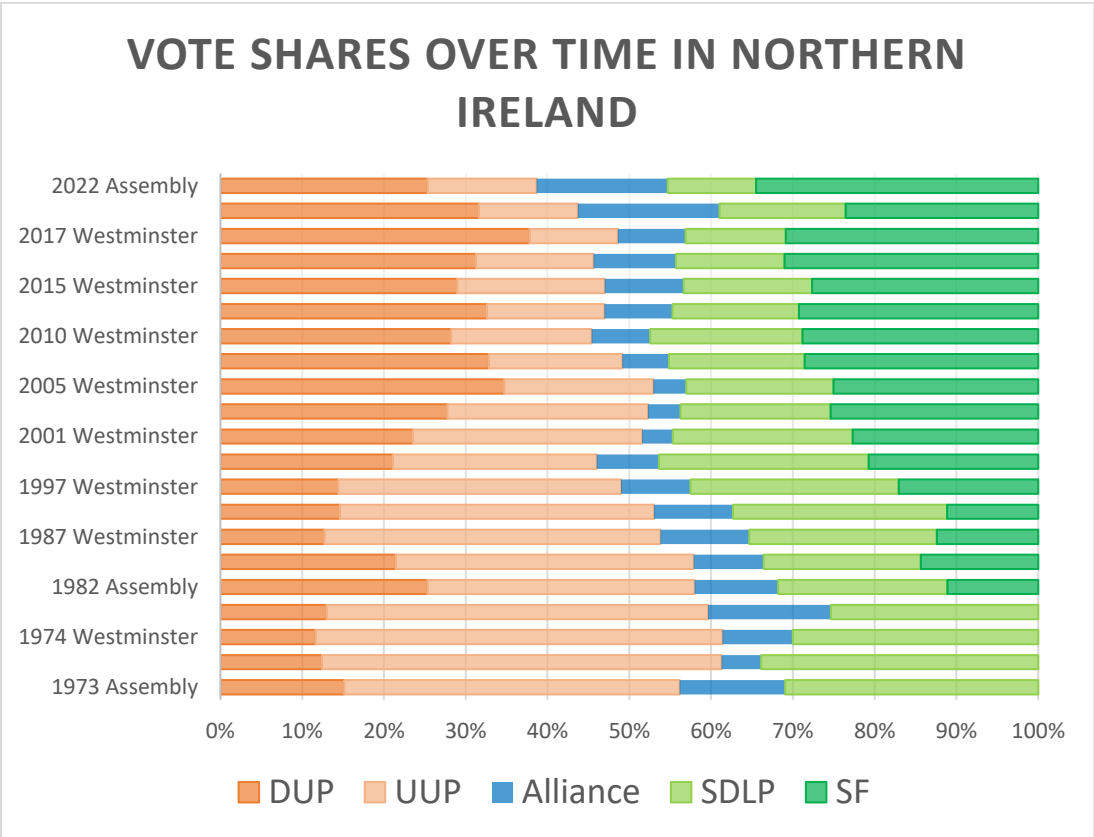


Figure 1: Vote shares of the five largest political parties in Northern Ireland Westminster and Assembly elections, 1973-2022

SECTARIAN PREFERENCES IN VOTING

Northern Ireland has become more politically polarized than it has been in many years, by multiple measures. The sense of having an exclusively “British, not Irish” identity or, conversely, of being “Irish, not British” has swelled from less than a fifth of the surveyed population in 2007, to one third and nearly one quarter of respondents, respectively, in 2019.⁹ During the decade from 2010, there was essentially no change in the percentage of people who identify as “unionist” or “nationalist.”¹⁰ However, there has been a remarkable increase in polarization among those who do identify as such during that same time: among unionists, the percentage of those who identify as “very” or “fairly strong” unionists has grown from 52% to 68%, and among nationalists, those who consider themselves as very or fairly strong in their beliefs has skyrocketed from 49% to 71%.¹¹

Vote shares of the five largest political parties in Northern Ireland reflect persistent divisions in political behavior at the aggregate level. Figure 1 illustrates this remarkable polarization between unionist and nationalist parties, with a slim segment of voters supporting the “other,” non-sectarian Alliance Party. Crucially, these divisions have not changed much at all for decades, even stretching back into the height of the conflict. Indeed, if there has been any change at all, it is that Sinn Féin and the DUP - understood as the most ardent protectors of their own community’s identity and interests - have consolidated political power on either side of the two blocs.

	CANDIDATE 1	CANDIDATE 2
BACKGROUND	Protestant	Catholic
POSITION	Wants to keep a union with Britain	Wants a united Ireland
EXPERIENCE	Served on the neighbourhood renewal partnership for his local district council	Served as a member of the Committee for the Economy

Figure 2: Candidate choice scenario: Baseline contest between unionist and nationalist

⁹ See the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (IRBRIT: Do you see yourself as Irish or British? (Asked in the [Identity](#) module in 2007)

¹⁰ See the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (UNINATID: Do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?

¹¹ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. UNINATST: *Are you a very strong (unionist/nationalist)?*

Considering these aggregate trends, is it really the case that twenty-five years after the peace agreement, voters in Northern Ireland operate on sectarian, or ethnic, preferences? The answer to this question has important implications for key aspects of democracy in Northern Ireland: both accountability and moderation in politics are more of a challenge in a society where almost everyone identifies along an apparently sectarian division – and keeping politicians in check can't be done with the credible specter of simply voting for the other side.

Establishing whether citizens in Northern Ireland are sectarian at the polls is not an easy task; like racism or sexism, asking people about sectarianism evokes answers that are likely skewed sharply by respondents' understanding of socially desirable stances: Most people don't want to admit that they are sectarian. To address this measurement problem, we adopt an approach that infers the strength of citizens' sectarian preferences in voting in Northern Ireland from their choice of candidates in a series of hypothetical election scenarios. Each candidate is experimentally assigned characteristics and policy positions that approximate real-world elections. We can establish the effect of each of these attributes and platforms by randomly varying one at a time; by comparing choices of respondents in the presence and absence of any one feature, we know what its effect is on voters' choices. Crucially, this framework allows us to test how strong sectarian preferences are in Northern Ireland when the reluctance to cross ethnic lines implies tolerating corrupt behavior or even endorsements of violence by one's "own side."

We first establish a baseline understanding of citizens' preferences for a "co-ethnic" candidate – that is, how many Catholics prefer a Catholic candidate and vice versa for Protestants, in an election scenario that approximates a contest between a nationalist and a unionist. The candidates both have comparable political experience. Specifically, all respondents saw the table in Figure 2 and were asked which candidate they prefer.

In this baseline scenario, there is significant sectarian, or co-ethnic, voting. As Figure 3 shows, Catholics prefer the Catholic candidate who is in favor of a united Ireland at a rate of 83.8%. The

preference for a co-ethnic candidate is slightly strongly for Protestant voters; 89.4% of Protestants prefer the Protestant unionist candidate.¹²

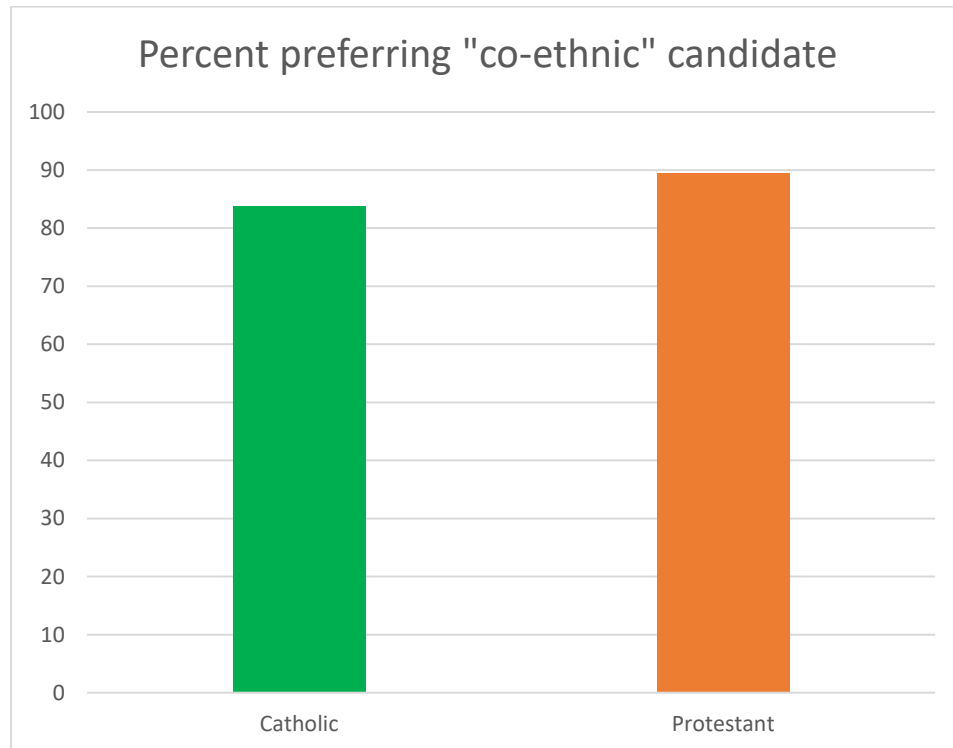


Figure 3: Sectarian preferences in Northern Ireland: Preferences among Catholic and Protestant voters for a co-ethnic candidate

ACCOUNTABILITY AND SECTARIAN POLITICS

In a society as starkly divided along sectarian lines as this, political accountability rests primarily on the willingness of voters to forsake their allegiance to their group and punish a co-ethnic candidate. This is also the main challenge to political accountability in these societies. There are few undecided voters. Everyone has a camp – in Northern Ireland, they are usually born into their

¹² Voting patterns and conventional survey data also indicate that very few citizens in Northern Ireland would vote for candidates or parties who do not come from their own community. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2016-Northern-Ireland-Assembly-Election.pdf>

camp – and, given a straightforward choice between sectarian (or, as in Northern Ireland, “designated”) candidates, they stick with their camp. But what happens when a citizen’s co-ethnic candidate engages in corrupt behavior? Do voters hold their “own” politicians accountable? Or is sectarian loyalty so strong that voters are willing to tolerate bad behavior on the part of “co-ethnics”?

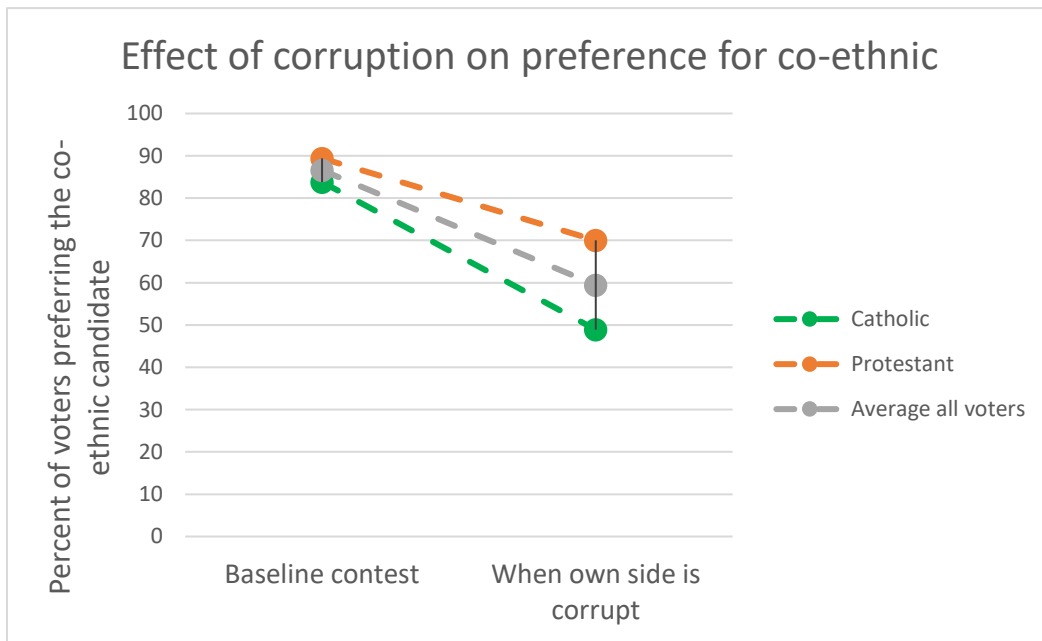


Figure 4: The effect of corruption on voter preferences for a co-ethnic candidate

We presented a random subset of our respondents with an election scenario that differed from the baseline contest in *only* the fact that, instead of having some neutral political experience, one of the candidates “was investigated for the mismanagement of government resources.” We find that voters do hold accountable politicians from their own group when they have corrupt dealings. Figure 4 illustrates the punishment that voters dole out to such politicians: When a Catholic candidate is corrupt, the Catholic vote for him drops by about 35% in an election against a non-corrupt Protestant;¹³ in an election against a non-corrupt Catholic, Protestants vote for a corrupt

¹³ The proportion of Catholics preferring a Catholic candidate drops from 83.8% to 48.9% when he is corrupt.

Protestant candidate at an almost 20% lower rate.¹⁴ In other words, corruption is clearly electorally disadvantageous, even in a society as divided as Northern Ireland.¹⁵

How do voters respond to politicians that flirt with violence? Again, a random subset of our respondents confronted election scenarios in which one of the candidates “encouraged his supporters to violently disrupt campaign rallies of his political opponents” while the other did not. While the approval of violence tends not to be this explicit in Northern Ireland, the historical backdrop of a violent conflict and the related fact that there have been more or less formal forms of overlap between violent and institutional iterations of nationalism and unionism makes tacit or indirect approval – or even threats – of unrest or violence a salient accountability concern.¹⁶

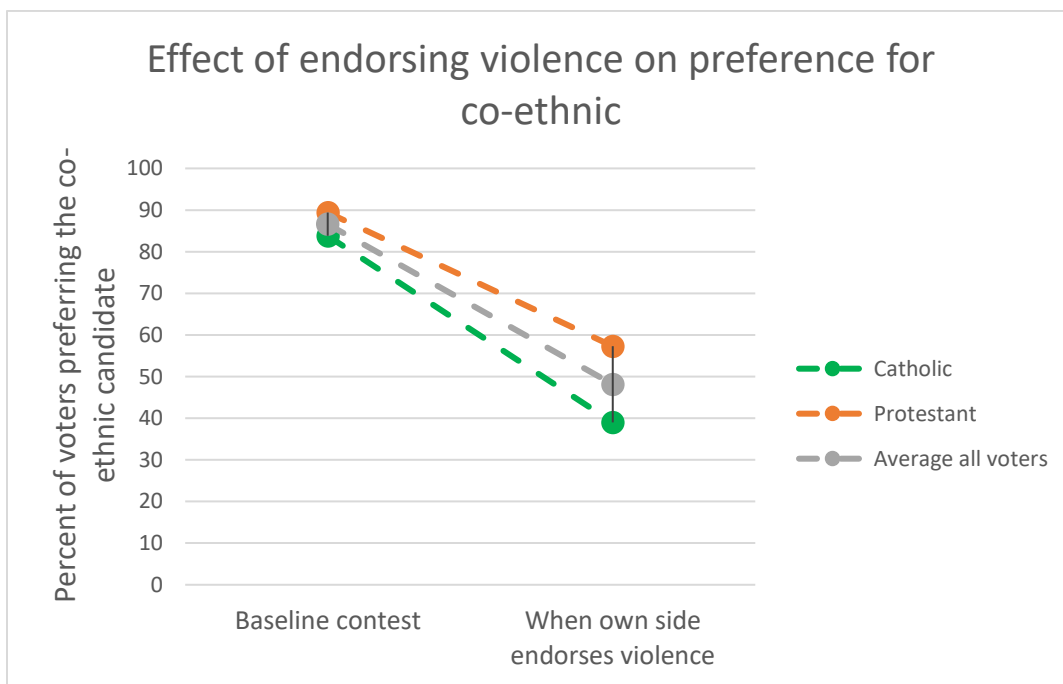


Figure 5: The effect of endorsing violence on voter preferences for a co-ethnic candidate

¹⁴ 70% of Protestant voters prefer the Protestant candidate when he is corrupt, down from 89.4% in the baseline scenario.

¹⁵ Note: calculate electoral outcomes for corrupt Catholic and Protestant candidates in addition to co-ethnic preference changes. Need effective vote shares.

¹⁶ For e.g. Michelle O’Neill saying that there was “no alternative” to armed struggle, Donaldson meeting with Bryson, etc.

Endorsing violence is even more electorally self-defeating than is corruption. Refer to Figure 5. There is a 45% drop in the proportion of Catholics who prefer the Catholic candidate when he endorses violence, and Protestant preference for the Protestant candidate who encourages violence declines by 32%.¹⁷ Put bluntly, Northern Irish voters don't like politicians who would encourage political violence.

In our findings on accountability of politicians who are corrupt or flirt with violence, there is an asymmetry between Catholic and Protestant voters: Protestants tolerate co-ethnic candidates who are corrupt or who endorse violence at slightly, but statistically significant, higher rates than do Catholic voters. This mirrors the slightly stronger preference that Protestants have for a co-ethnic candidate in the baseline election scenario. But in the case of tolerating politicians who apparently dabble in fraud or encourage violence among their supporters – which Protestant voters do more than Catholics – we might say that political participation is a bad thing for accountability.

Importantly, we find that voters punish bad politicians from their “own side” not by vote switching, but rather by abstention.¹⁸ In other words, there are limits to voters' willingness to defect from their co-ethnics at the polls; citizens hold politicians from their own background accountable not by voting against them, but instead by simply *not* turning out to give them a vote. Voters in Northern Ireland are not that willing to cross sectarian or ethnic lines when one of their own misbehaves. This tendency for disengagement in the face of bad politicians may help to explain the high rates of voter abstention in many areas throughout Northern Ireland.¹⁹ While rampant disengagement from voting may sound like a bad thing for the health of a democracy, in a divided society, voter abstention can be highly effective as a punishment for bad politicians.²⁰

The picture of sectarianism as it informs individual political preferences is therefore a nuanced one. Voters have strong sectarian preferences at a baseline, meaning that citizens in Northern Ireland almost all prefer a candidate from their own group to a candidate from the “other side”

¹⁷ Support for the Catholic candidate among Catholics drops from 83.8% to 39% (a 44.8% decrease), and support for the Protestant candidate among Protestants drops from 89.4 to 57.3% (a 32.1% decrease.)

¹⁸ For each candidate choice scenario, we ask respondents not only which candidate they prefer, but also how likely it is that they would turn out to vote in that contest.

¹⁹ <http://www.eoni.org.uk/Register-To-Vote/Electorate-Statistics/> Note: map and examine abstention rates, compare with quality of relevant politicians.

²⁰ *Insert: Descriptive statistics, graphic rep of turnout changes from baseline to corrupt/violence*

with comparable experience, all else being equal. Citizens in Northern Ireland are indeed willing to hold co-ethnic politicians accountable when they misbehave – but not by crossing sectarian lines and voting for the opposing candidate. Instead, disengagement in the form of abstention from voting is a powerful and unexpected tool that voters use to hold co-ethnic politicians accountable. However, sizeable chunks of Catholic and Protestant voters still prefer the candidate from their own group – in fact a majority of Protestants do – even when that candidate explicitly endorses political violence.

MODERATION IN SECTARIAN POLITICS

Sectarian preferences in Northern Ireland are strong but not all-encompassing for all voters. But what are the prospects for non-sectarian politics in a place where voters would often rather abstain than vote for the “other side”?

	CANDIDATE 1	CANDIDATE 2
BACKGROUND	Protestant	Catholic, said that should no longer matter in politics
POSITION	Wants to keep a union with Britain	The question of union with Britain or a united Ireland is not a priority
EXPERIENCE	Participated in the All Party Group on International Development	Served as a member of the Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs Committee

Figure 6: Candidate choice scenario: Contest between a unionist and a non-sectarian Catholic

Refer to Figure 6: Suppose political leaders in Northern Ireland decided to moderate by saying: “the question of the union with Britain or a united Ireland is not a priority” and that communal background “should no longer matter in politics.” Does this have a moderating effect on voters? For the sake of an example, imagine a Catholic candidate who takes this non-sectarian position in an election against a unionist. Based on a conventional view of Northern Irish politics, one might think that a consequence of such moderation would be a loss of votes: he might be abandoned by some Catholic voters and unlikely to attract many Protestant supporters. We find *the opposite*. A

candidate who moderates is actually more attractive to his co-ethnics – and gains a significant amount of voters “from the other side”, or out-ethnic voters.

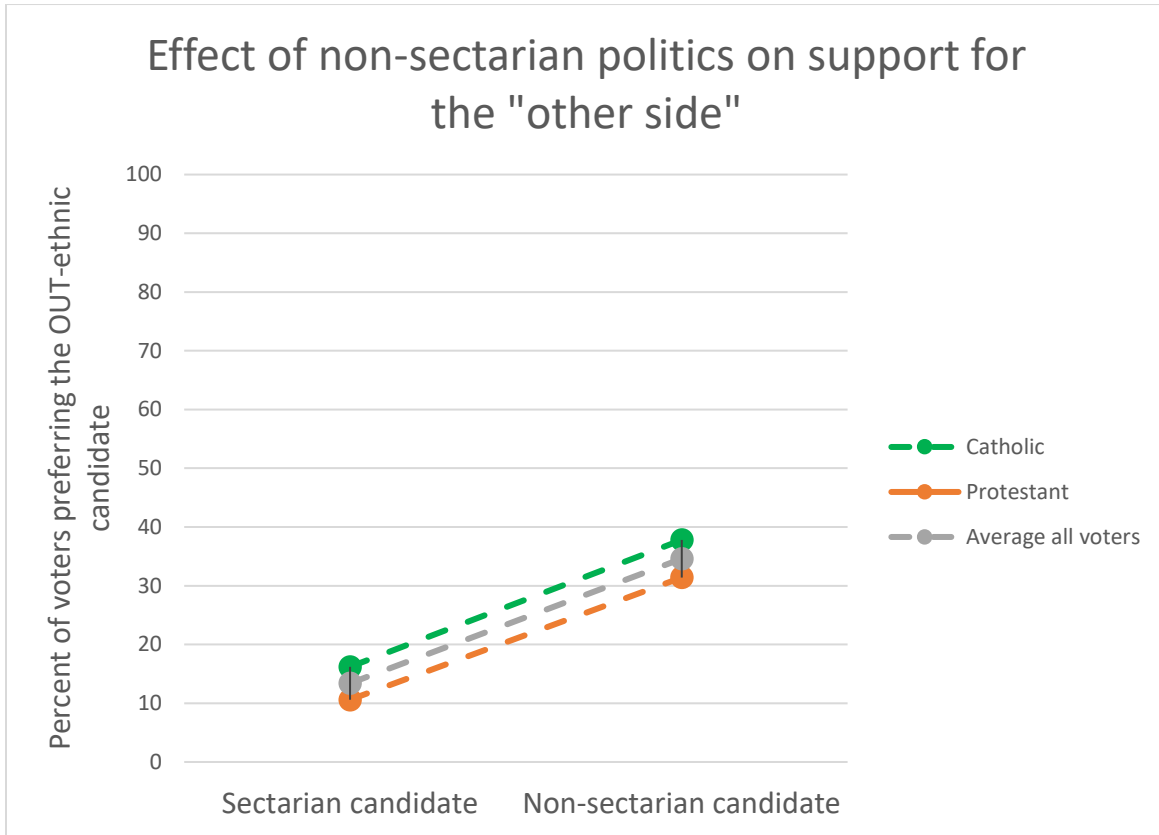


Figure 7: Effect of non-sectarian politics on voter preferences for an out-ethnic candidate (in a contest with a sectarian candidate)

In fact, while non-sectarian candidates are marginally more attractive to voters from the same communal background, perhaps the most striking effect of taking a non-sectarian position is the moderation it seems to trigger in out-ethnic voters. As Figure 7 illustrates, a Protestant candidate taking a non-sectarian position increases his vote among Catholics by almost 22 percentage points (orange dashed trend line.) Similarly, 21% more Protestants are willing to vote for a Catholic candidate when he takes a non-sectarian stance (green dashed line.) Overall, more than a third of voters abandon the sectarian candidate from their own background and instead support the candidate from the "other side" when they adopt a non-sectarian position.

It seems that it is electorally advantageous for politicians to moderate in Northern Ireland. But is it electorally decisive? We find that the vote for a non-sectarian candidate in a contest against a sectarian candidate goes up by anywhere between 13.5% and 15.2% percentage points overall (see Figure 8.)²¹ In the example just above, a contest between a non-sectarian Catholic and a unionist – an election that would otherwise end up in roughly a 50/50 split – the *non-sectarian candidate wins* by just over 35 points.

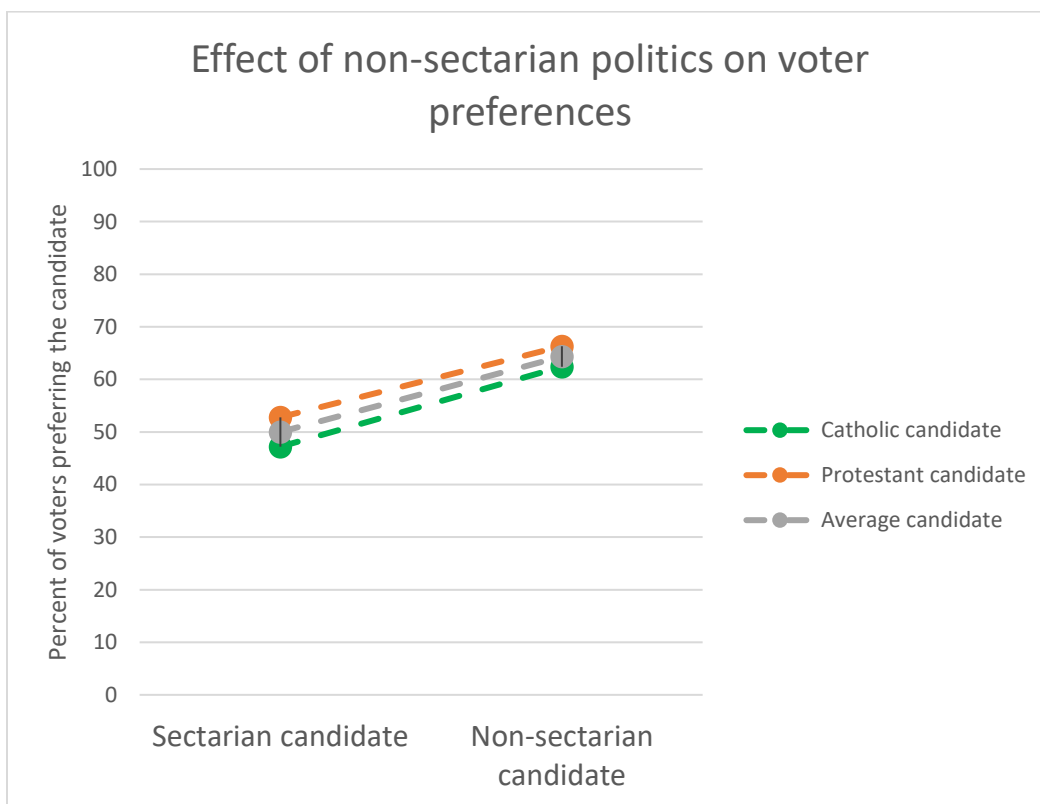


Figure 8: Effect of non-sectarian politics on voter preferences for non-sectarian candidate (in a contest with a sectarian candidate)

²¹ When the contest is between a non-sectarian Protestant candidate and a nationalist, and a non-sectarian Catholic candidate and unionist, respectively.

While voters are reluctant to cross community lines and vote for the opposing, sectarian candidate when their own candidate misbehaves, they reward non-sectarian politicians mostly by vote switching.²² Moderation in a place steeped in division is deeply desirable.

THE TRAP OF SECTARIAN POLITICS

The question of the appeal of moderation resonates broadly in an age in which democracies are threatened by erosion via the forces of polarization from within; but it also bears directly on the more specific possibility that the non-sectarian Alliance Party of Northern Ireland can further expand its electoral mandate. While tacit support for all sectarian, or designated, parties²³ – from the longer-established, more “moderate” parties (Ulster Unionist Party and Social Democratic and Labour Party), to both of the currently largest parties (DUP and Sinn Féin) – has fallen over time, precipitously in the case of the former two.²⁴ This could be symptomatic of an increased appetite for non-sectarian politics; however, conventional survey data also suggest that the drop off in preference for sectarian parties is more accounted for by voters who “don’t know” which party they would support, rather than by voters defecting to non-designated parties.²⁵ This suggests a growing apathy toward politics in segments of Northern Irish society, but it is also reflective of the drawbacks of traditional surveys on sensitive questions like political preferences and anything related to sectarianism.

Indeed, there are signs of voter apathy as well as cynicism in Northern Ireland: there is a marked divergence between voters’ stated political preferences and their voting behavior. Despite what we find – that voters find non-sectarian politics highly appealing – in successive elections, sectarian parties, particularly those seen as less moderate, by far win the largest vote shares. Moreover, there is a discrepancy between our findings in support of moderation and the real-life pattern that ethnic

²² *Insert: descriptive statistics on effective vote shares and turnout, compare baseline and non-sectarian scenarios.*

²³ Here, support is measured by which party voters feel closest to, as asked in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. (*POLPART2: Which of these political parties do you feel closest to?*)

²⁴ Feelings of closeness to/support for the UUP and SDLP dropped from 16% and 17% in 2010, respectively, while support for the DUP and Sinn Féin fell from 18% and 11% in 2010, respectively, to 14% and 9% nine years later.

²⁵ Although feelings of closeness to the Alliance Party increased in the NILT Survey from 10% to 15% between 2010 and 2019, the percentage of voters who responded that they “don’t know” which party they feel closest to increased remarkably, from 2 to 15% in those same years.

“hardliners” continue to win the lion’s share of votes in elections in Northern Ireland.²⁶ What explains this discrepancy? What accounts for the apparent persistence of sectarianism in elections in Northern Ireland?

We argue that, in a system where meaningful political power is allocated to the two largest political parties,²⁷ voters face very strong incentives to support the presumed biggest party from their own designation. Like other coordination problems, this dilemma is driven by voters’ expectations of others’ vote choices – the expected choices of their co-ethnics as well as the other side.

In our experiment, we ask respondents to tell us how they think others will vote in an array of randomly assigned election scenarios, including those reviewed above, and how confident they are about their guesses. We find that (1) voters in Northern Ireland have very negative expectations of others’ sectarian loyalty, and (2) that these expectations are not warranted by facts.

Both Catholics and Protestants slightly underestimate to what extent all voters would opt for a co-ethnic in a contest between a nationalist and a unionist, but for the most part, they are pretty close to the truth: Catholic and Protestant respondents predict, respectively, that 78.3% and 79.9% of Catholics will vote for the nationalist; the truth is that 83.9% of Catholics would vote nationalist. And Catholics and Protestants guess, respectively, that 86.7% and 83.2% of Protestants will prefer a unionist; the truth is 89.4%. If anything, both sides estimate slightly more sectarian loyalty for voters from the other side, even though they still get close to the truth in guessing about a straightforward election between a nationalist and a unionist.

Expectations of sectarianism become especially warped around policing bad behavior among co-ethnic politicians: Catholics and Protestants alike overestimate – by a lot – how tolerant the other group of voters will be of co-ethnic candidates who engage in corruption or encourage violence. For example, Catholics and Protestants on average expect that just over 65% of Catholics will support a nationalist who flirts with violence over a play-by-the-rules unionist; in reality, only 39% of Catholics would still opt for the nationalist (a massive drop from 83.9% at the non-violent

²⁶ *Discuss more: this is not to discount Alliance’s recent success, but to raise the question of why its mandate is not expanding more. There are also many plausible ad hoc, partial explanations for electoral outcomes in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Fein’s rhetorical moderation in the north/focus on bread and butter issues.*

²⁷ In fact, the Saint Andrews Agreement legislation stipulates that the largest party (full stop) along with the largest party from the second-largest designation can nominate the first and deputy first ministers, respectively.

electoral baseline.) Many more Catholics would abandon a nationalist politician who endorses violence than both Catholics and Protestants think.

We also find that the more confident a voter is about their expectation of others' sectarian preferences, the stronger she thinks others' sectarian preferences must be – and crucially, the more wrong that voter is. This pattern is particularly pronounced when politicians from the “other side” misbehave; the more certain voters are that others would stick with such a candidate, the further their belief is from the truth. Figures 9 and 10 show the pattern by which voters who are more confident in their estimations of others' sectarian loyalty (moving from left to right) overestimate such loyalty by larger and larger degrees (the distance between guesses, at points, and the truth, at the black horizontal line increases.)

The tendency to overestimate others' sectarian loyalty in Northern Ireland also seems to correlate with stronger sectarian preferences in the first place. For instance, Protestants expect slightly more sectarianism from others in their vote choices than do Catholics, and in a range of election scenarios – including those in which the unionist candidate is corrupt or pro-violence – Protestants display slightly stronger sectarian preferences and more loyalty than do Catholics.

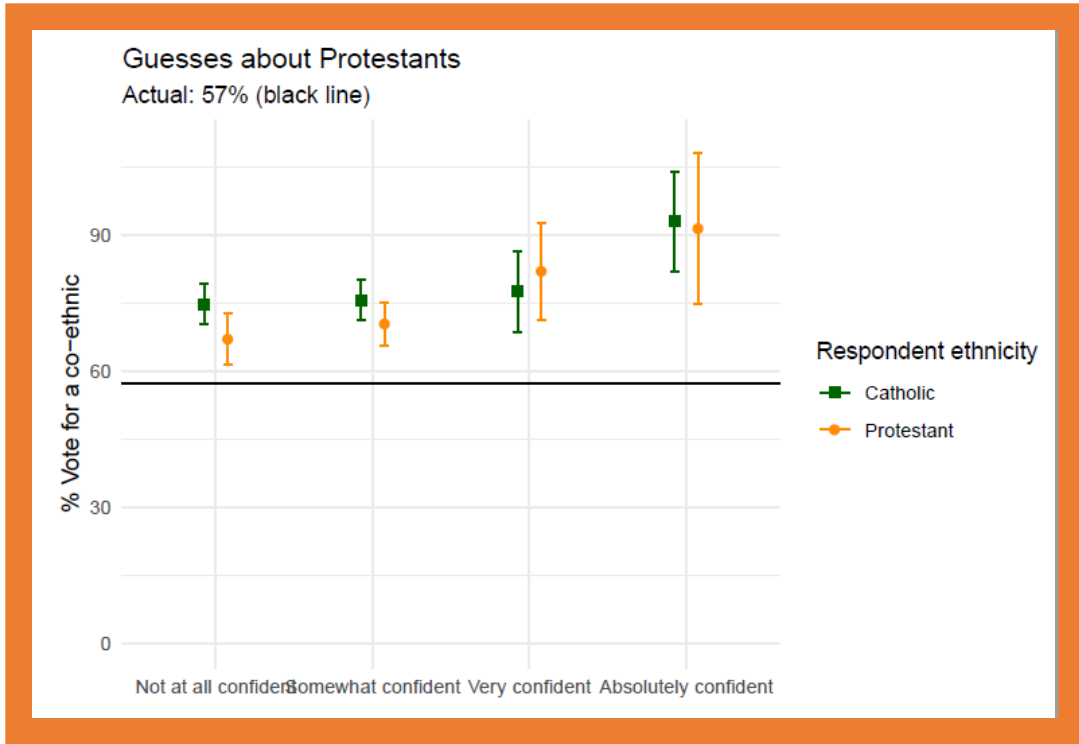


Figure 10: Confidence in guesses about Protestants’ “sectarian” preferences and expected strength of Protestants’ sectarian preferences: Election with a unionist who endorses violence

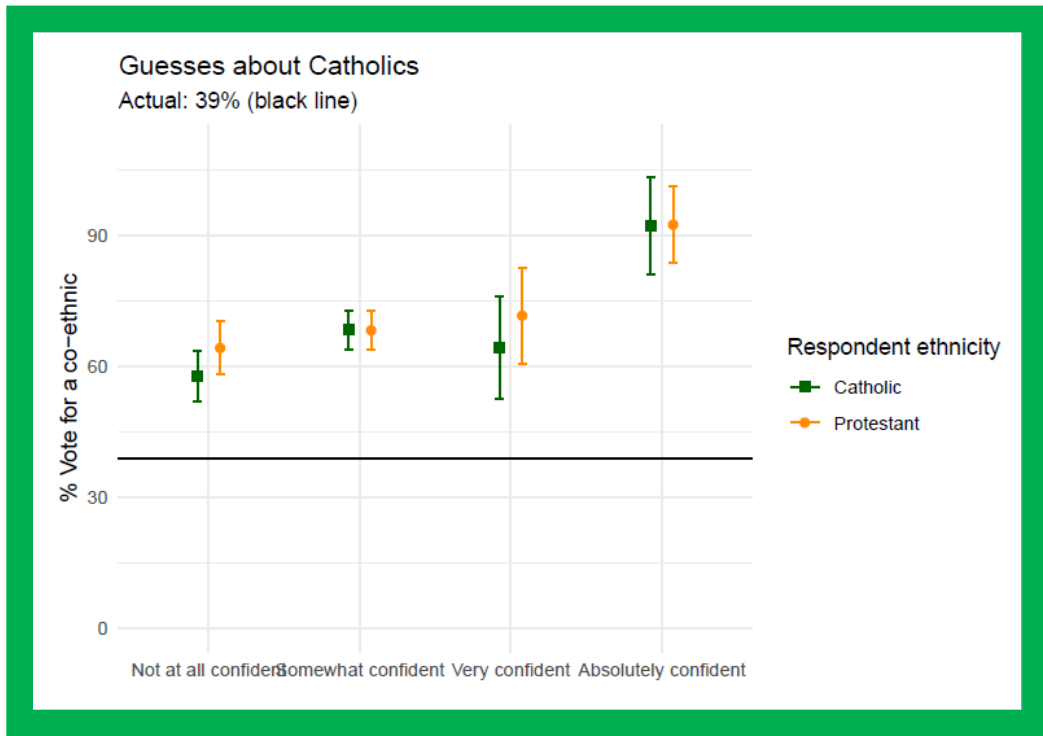


Figure 10: Confidence in guesses about Catholics’ “sectarian” preferences and expected strength of Catholics’ sectarian preferences: Election with a nationalist who endorses violence

In short, despite the fact that voters from both backgrounds are indeed willing to punish one of their own politicians for bad governance, or reward politicians who advocate for non-sectarian politics, they do not expect that others would do the same. This mistrust of others' commitment to democratic principles and the stakes of defection from one's own group crystalize around elections; voters may want to abandon bad candidates from their own group or flock to moderate politicians, but when the time comes to head for the polls, they are simply not willing to take that chance. The retreat into sectarian divisions happens because voters expect others to be guided much more by sectarianism than they themselves are – or than is warranted by facts. The trap of sectarian politics is one of bad expectations.

The persistence of sectarian politics and negative expectations is reflected in a growing lack of confidence in the political institutions of the peace process. On the heels of the Agreement, a full 40% of those surveyed in Northern Ireland said that having a Legislative Assembly at Stormont was giving ordinary people more say in how it was governed.²⁸ But by 2014, only 17% of respondents said the same thing, and two-thirds of the surveyed population claimed that the Assembly was “making no difference.”²⁹ By 2019, a plurality of citizens – more than 40% – said that the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement needs to be changed in order to work better.³⁰

²⁸ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. PUBVOICE: *Is the Assembly is giving ordinary people more say in how N Ireland is governed?*

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2019/Political_Attitudes/VIEWGFA2.html