

Brexit, Betrayal, and Blood: The Effect of Political Identities and Brexit-Related Issues on Support for Violence in Northern Ireland

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Utilising social identity and categorisation theories, this study investigates the impact of identity strength, group threats and feelings of betrayal on individuals support for violence in Northern Ireland. Previous studies in the region have focused on the role of Catholic and Protestant identity strength in perpetuating intergroup conflict, and the impact of positive contacts to improve intergroup relations. This study examines the four main political identities in the region: Unionists, Nationalists, Loyalists and Republicans. Residents of Northern Ireland completed a survey asking about their identity, political views, attitudes towards Brexit and support for violence. The study uses correlation and regression analysis to investigate relationships between these variables. It shows that feelings of betrayal by Westminster and the Democratic Unionist Party positively correlates with support for violence. The study also demonstrates that higher levels of perceived group threat (the fear of Union breakup) and the strength of Loyalist identity predict stronger support for violence. Results further show that strength of Loyalist identity and fear of Union breakup both act as partial mediators on each other when investigating their predictive relationships with support for violence. To better illustrate these results, interviews were conducted with Northern Irish residents. The study demonstrates that political identity and group threats are predictive of support for violence, which might help explain current unrest in the region. This study utilised a small sample size and therefore should be considered an explorative pilot study.

1. INTRODUCTION

'An anarchy in the mind and in the heart, an anarchy which forbade not unity of territories, but also 'unity of being', an anarchy that sprang from the collision within a small and intimate island of seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or to live apart, caught inextricably in the web of their tragic history.' (Lyons 1979)

With the dissolution of the Northern Irish Assembly by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) over the Northern Ireland Protocol, the re-polarisation of sectarian communities and questions over the future of Northern Ireland (NI), the above quote feels as relatable today as during the Troubles, the ethno-nationalist conflict spanning thirty years in NI. However, the origins of the conflict in NI stretch further back (Cairns 1987). In 1998, a peace agreement was brokered between the British government and warring paramilitaries, creating a new Northern Irish General Assembly (Northern Ireland Office 1998). Known as the Good Friday Agreement, it ended the multigenerational conflict between Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants. However, tensions never completely disappeared, and when the United Kingdom (UK) left the European Union (EU), an event known as Brexit, inter-group relations became strained.

This study examines emerging tensions in NI through the lens of the social identity theory (SIT). Previous research examining identities in NI has primarily focused on the identity split between Catholics and Protestants and the effects of intergroup contact. There is little recent SIT research in the region, and with the re-emergence of potential conflict, it is important that the topic is discussed. This project aims to fill a gap in the literature, investigating the impact of political

identity on support for violence. The project discusses how Brexit-related issues pose a threat to Unionist identity groups, providing a psychological explanation for the recent rise in unrest. The study predominantly focuses on the Loyalist identity, as this group is most affected by Brexit.

The following sections discuss the NI conflict, define intergroup conflict and SIT, examine the current political situation, and explain the various identity groups in NI. The paper discusses the differences between the Unionist and Loyalist identities, determining that Loyalism is a distinct identity. Analysis showed that the strength of Loyalist identity and fear of Union (henceforth referring to the United Kingdom) breakup predicts support for violence, the implications of which are discussed.

CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The identity-based conflict between British Unionists and Irish Nationalists has spanned centuries. As Great Britain's closest neighbour, Ireland has been plagued by British invasions since the 12th century (O'Byrne 2003) resulting in a state of near-constant inter-group conflict (Cairns 1987). The British monarchy struggled to control Ireland until Henry VIII conquered the region, forming the Kingdom of Ireland in 1542 (Ellis & Maginn 2007). He implemented Protestantism as the official religion but could not convert the majority who remained Catholic (Ford 1999). Two separate religious groups developed: the traditional Irish Catholic church and a new British Protestant church, creating an intrinsic link between national and religious identities (Claydon & McBride 1998). The continued Catholic rebellions led to the forced merger of the British and Irish Kingdoms at the end of the 18th century (Kelly 1987). Catholics were second-class citizens in this new state, with fewer rights than their Protestant counterparts, reinforcing

group differences (MacManus 2018). The majority of southern Ireland were Irish Catholics who wanted to supplant British rule and form an Irish free state, creating a Nationalist identity. The north of the island consisted of a Protestant majority affiliated to Britain who wanted to maintain the union; they formed the Unionist identity. After a series of violent revolts from the Nationalist community, the island was officially separated into 32 counties and two states in 1937 (Constitution of Ireland). The 26 southern counties, with a Nationalist majority, formed The Republic of Ireland (ROI). The remaining six counties with a Unionist majority became NI, and remained part of the UK, creating a 300-mile land border between the two nations (Ferguson & McKeown 2016). However, a prominent Catholic Nationalist minority remained in NI, separated from their peers. The partition of Ireland created divisions in NI, with intergroup conflict developing between communities with opposing goals regarding NI constitutional status (Moxon-Browne 1991). This escalated into violence developing into a multi-decade conflict known as the Troubles.

The Troubles spanned 30 years, from 1968 to 1998, leading to over 3,600 deaths and 40,000–50,000 injuries (CAIN Institute 2007). In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement between the British government and paramilitaries created a Northern Irish Assembly to govern the region, representing both communities (Northern Ireland Office 1998) and de-militarised the north-south border. The Northern Irish Assembly (metonymically referred to as Stormont) was formed, with an executive mandated to consist of two political parties representing the Nationalist and Unionist communities. The government could not form without collaboration between political representatives from both communities, ensuring that both were represented at the top level of government (Torrance 2022). However, this agreement highlights and ossifies intergroup differences (Leach et al. 2021). These communities still have opposing views on NI's constitutional status, while ethnic representation ensures that this conflict is maintained at the highest level of politics, institutionalising intergroup conflict. This type of ethnic representation has been shown to lead to political instability (Murer 2010). This is seen in NI, where the assembly has been suspended for over a third of its lifespan, due to inter-community feuds in the executive (McCann 2022).

The Good Friday agreement nearly broke down after Stormont collapsed between 2002–2007 over allegations that Sinn Féin supported a paramilitary spy network (Melaugh 2022a). In 2006, The St Andrews Agreement restored the executive with the DUP and Sinn Féin forming a government together. However, it caused division within the Loyalist community with some seeing the partnership as a betrayal of the Unionists (TUV n.d.). British forces finally departed NI in 2007, following the signing of The St Andrews Agreement (Melaugh 2022b) bringing relative peace to the region.

INTERGROUP CONFLICT AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY (SIT)

Psychological frameworks are critical for understanding why conflicts occur (Kelman 2009). They help us understand how individuals view themselves within conflict scenarios and their motivations for engaging in violence (Wolff 2022). Further, they help explain

why conflict resolution is challenging and why hostility may re-emerge.

Intergroup conflict can be defined as competition between two or more groups over resources, values, or claims to status and power (Coser 1967). It can be understood as a spectrum. At one end, intergroup conflict exists as stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, with overt violence, warfare, and genocide at the other (Fisher 1994). Extreme intergroup conflict requires more than outgroup prejudice and dislike (Al Ramiah & Hewstone 2013). Opposing group goals, paired with historical and structural factors like group oppression, can lead individuals to feel sufficiently strong emotions to engage in violence (Mackie, Devos & Smith 2000). One of the most common frameworks for explaining intergroup conflict is SIT.

Social identity is an individual's knowledge that they belong to a specific social group which they value. They form emotional connections with the group and group members (Tajfel 1978). Social groups create a shared identity, which guide actions and beliefs (Hogg 2016). SIT posits that even simple acknowledgment of group identity can produce intergroup conflict (Billig & Tajfel 1973), and argues that the more an individual values their group membership, the more they promote their group's superiority and goals over others (Tajfel 1978). When groups have mutually exclusive goals, it highlights group salience, heightening intergroup conflict and outgroup prejudice (Sherif & Sherif 1973; Tajfel & Turner 2004; Hogg 2016). As individuals spend more time in their group, they develop a stronger ingroup identity which can lead to ingroup bias and outgroup prejudice (Brown & Pehrson 2020).

The strength of individual identity can be predictive of outgroup views and how individuals respond to threats (Al Ramiah, Hewstone & Schmid 2011). Group-level threats (realistic and symbolic) challenge the group's power or belief system (Stephan, Diaz-Loving & Duran 2000). Studies have shown that individuals with stronger group identities are more likely to display outgroup hostility when the group is threatened (Bizman & Yinon 2001). Studies in NI show similar results with Protestant and Catholic groups (Tausch et al. 2007). That high-level identification associated with group-level threats is consistent with self-categorisation theory (SCT), which argues that as individuals develop stronger ingroup identity, they go through a process of de-personalisation, adopting the groups' values and concerns (Turner 1988). Thus, if the group is threatened, they feel personally threatened, creating stronger hostility towards the threat. High affinity with the ingroup does not necessarily predict negative behaviour or attitudes toward outgroup members (Brewer 1999; 2001). However, if group-level threats are present, highly-identified individuals are more likely to adopt extreme behaviour to reduce these threats (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Tausch et al., 2007).

BREXIT AND THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

SIT has been used to explain the NI conflict using sectarian identities. In the years following The St Andrews Agreement, promising signs indicated that the region was moving away from having perpetually divided communities (Lowe & Muldoon 2014). However, it appears that Brexit has triggered re-polarisation (O'Neill

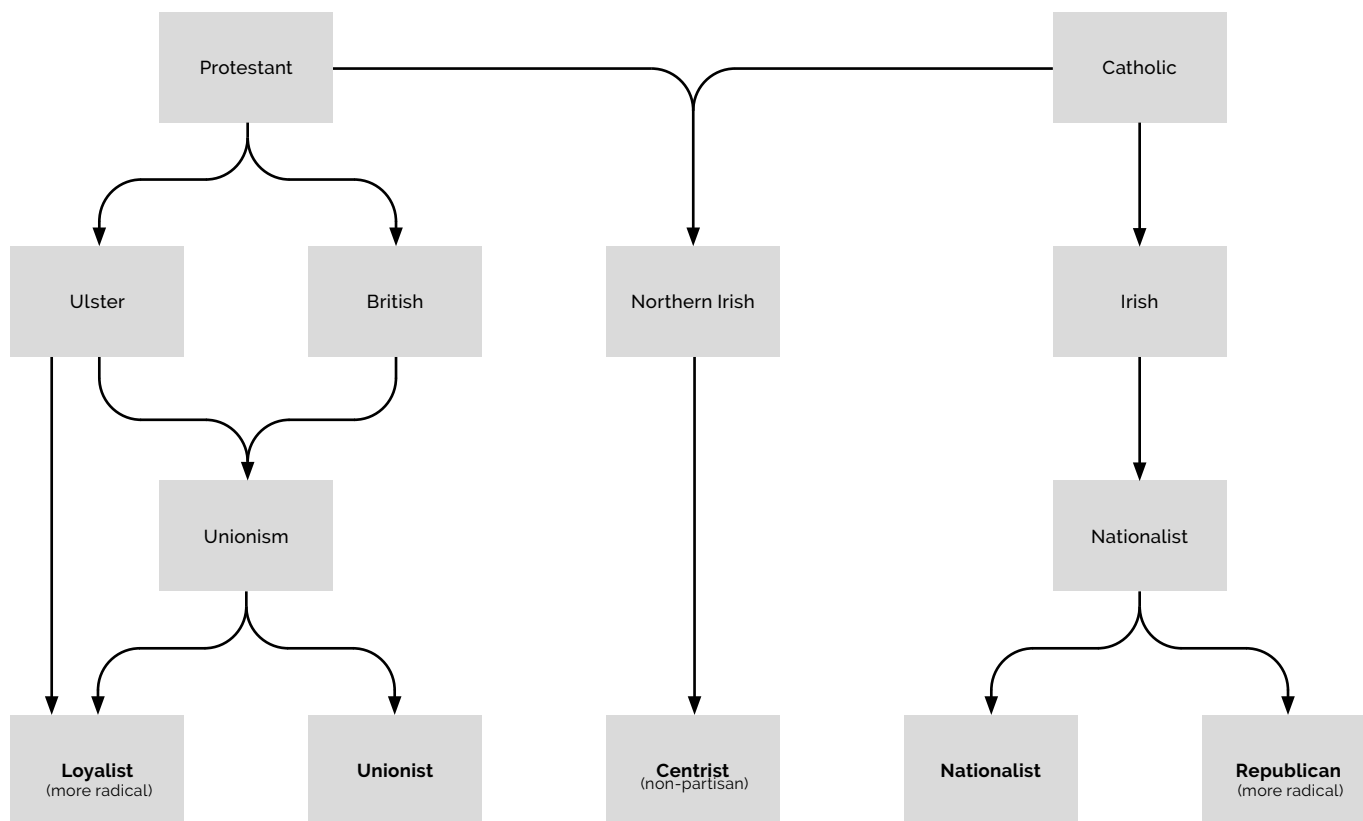


Figure 1 | Relationships between different identity groups in NI.

2022).

The European Single Market allows products and workers to flow freely between EU member states. Brexit necessitated an economic border between ROI and the UK (European Union 2022). A land border between ROI and NI threatened Nationalist identities, risking violence re-emerging from Catholic communities, and was therefore ruled out (Phinnemore & Hayward 2017; Shelly & Muldoon 2022). Instead, the Northern Ireland Protocol created an economic sea border between the island of Ireland and the UK (Parker & Brunnsden 2019). This outraged the Unionist community, resulting in rising tensions, leading to political demonstrations and violent protests in 2021 (Carroll 2021; O'Carroll 2021; O'Neill 2022). In September 2021, the DUP threatened to collapse the government if the protocol was not changed, leading to the resignation of the First Minister (Preston 2021; Edgar & Flanagan 2022). A further threat to Unionist identity came in May 2022 when Sinn Féin won their first-ever majority in the Assembly. Still protesting the protocol, the DUP refused to restore the government after the elections (Davies 2022).

SIT and SCT offer explanations as to why the different communities responded to the positioning of the border in the way they did. Wherever the border was placed, it would isolate one identity group, enhancing group salience, once again making identity a central issue in NI (Shelly & Muldoon 2022). The sea border creates a physical and symbolic barrier, with NI citizens living under different constraints to other UK residents, threatening Unionist identity. A land border would undermine the Good Friday Agreement, potentially restricting the movement of people between ROI and

NI, a central issue for Nationalists. The current political situation has caused dangerous polarisation between communities.

IDENTITY GROUPS IN NI

The Catholic and Protestant identities act as catch-all groups housing multiple identity groups in NI (Trew 1998). Group distinctions may be critical to understanding the actions and views of different communities. The following section will discuss religious, national, and political identities in NI, which are also summarised in Figure 1.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The Protestant and Catholic identities act as fundamental reference groups (Trew 1998). They comply with critical tenets of SIT, with individuals categorising themselves and others as Protestants or Catholics. These groups demonstrate functional salience (Cairns & Duriez 1976; Stringer & Cairns 1983), and can lead to ingroup favouritism and outgroup bias (Kremer, Barry & McNally 1986). These categorisations are still relevant in contemporary NI, where communities remain segregated. In 2022, only 7% of schools officially offered integrated education (Meredith 2022), and over a hundred 'peace walls' still separate Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods (Black 2022). Even individuals who do not attend church categorise themselves as Catholic or Protestant (Niens & Cairns 2001). In the 2021 Northern Irish census, of the 1,903,200 citizens, 1,475,800 identified as Christian (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2022). Most research examining SIT and hostile attitudes has focused on

these religious groupings.

Studies in NI demonstrate that individuals with stronger affinities to their respective identities displayed higher ingroup bias and outgroup prejudice (Cairns et al. 2006). Identification strength also predicts the impact of group threats on outgroup views (Tausch et al. 2007). Further, research-based interviews with former members of Northern Irish paramilitaries indicates that individuals with stronger religious identities were more likely to engage in politically-motivated violence for both denominations (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood 2005; Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood 2008; Ferguson & Binks 2015). However, post-Good Friday Agreement, ex-combatants and individuals with strong group identities were more actively involved in community violence disengagement and conflict transformation (Shirlow & McEvoy 2008, Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood 2015). This supports Brewer's (1999) theory that strong ingroup identity does not equate to outgroup hate. It demonstrates support for SCT, because when group-level threats are posed to highly identified individuals, they react in a hostile manner; but when no threat is present individuals are less likely to be hostile.

NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Traditionally, national identities were linked with religious denominations, with Catholics identifying as Irish and Protestants identifying as British (Ferguson & McKeown 2016). However, unlike religious identities which are ascribed at birth (Cairns 2010; Ferguson 2006), national identities are more fluid. Over the last forty years, a new 'Northern Irish' identity has emerged, inclusive of both Catholics and Protestants, creating a shared identity group (Gaertner & Dovidio 2014; McNicholl 2017).

Shared identity groups have been shown to reduce prejudice between conflicting social groups (Riek et al. 2010). The Northern Irish identity may act as a superordinate group, moving away from the dichotomy of British and Irish identities, leading to a less polarised society (Tonge 2020). Some studies have demonstrated that the Northern Irish identity is more strongly associated with British (Protestant) identity than Irish (Catholic) identity (McKeown 2014).

POLITICAL IDENTITIES

There are multiple political identities in NI, with differing goals concerning the constitutional status of NI, while also linked to the national and religious identities discussed. Unionists wish for NI to remain in the UK, whilst Nationalists wish to unify NI with ROI (Ruane & Todd 1996). A centrist political identity developed alongside the Northern Irish identity (McNicholl 2017), aiming to reduce dichotomist viewpoints, and concentrating instead on improving NI.

Nationalists and Unionists can be further divided into Nationalists, Republicans, Unionists and Loyalists (Smithey 2011). Nationalists seek reunification of Ireland through moderate means, such as political negotiation, whilst Republicans would use more extreme actions such as violence (Wilson 2021). Political parties in NI represent this spectrum of extremism. The more extreme Republican party Sinn Féin was the political arm of the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Flackes & Elliott 1994). The moderate Social

Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) traditionally represented Nationalists.

There is greater nuance between the Unionist and Loyalist identities. Unionists view their national identity as British, whilst Loyalists identify with Ulster, considering 'British' a secondary identity (Ruane & Todd 1996). The Ulster identity used by Loyalists refers to the region in the north of Ireland where Protestants were placed during the reign of James I, known as the Plantation of Ulster (Smithey 2011; 'Ulster' 2013). Loyalists ally themselves with the British *monarchy* as opposed to the British *government* (Alison 2010). The British identity is secondary, being conditional on the Union, or the UK, protecting their unique Ulster identity (Cochrane 2001). Loyalists are seen as more extreme, willing to use more violent measures to maintain the Union (Bruce 1999; Smithey 2011; Wilson 2021).

There are several parties which represent Unionists in NI, the most moderate Unionist party being the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Like the SDLP, the UUP wished to work across sectarian divides to create an effective government in NI post-Troubles (Cowell-Meyers & Arthur 2022). The DUP, who are considered more hard-lined, initially refused to sign the Good Friday Agreement due to their more hostile views of Nationalist parties (Sproule 2022).

Radical Loyalist parties include the Progressive Unionist Party, which is connected to the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (Graham 2004). The Traditional Unionist Voices (TUV) party has become the modern face of hard-line Loyalism (Bradfield 2021), arguing that the DUP and Westminster betrayed the Loyalist community by partnering with Sinn Féin (whom they claim are 'unrepentant terrorists') to create the Northern Irish Assembly after the St Andrews Agreement (TUV n.d.). The TUV have continued this rhetoric of betrayal over the Northern Ireland Protocol (Allister 2020), being the most outspoken group against the Northern Ireland Protocol and its handling by the DUP and Westminster. The TUV and Loyalist identity may be a rallying point for Protestants who feel threatened by Brexit. Loyalists and Unionists appear to have become more extreme, with the TUV increasing its share of the vote from 2.6% in 2017 to 7.6% in 2022 (Russell 2022), potentially signalling rising tensions from this community (Lowry 2022).

Multiple group threats from Brexit and the current political climate appear to have contributed to increased Loyalist riots and protests. In 2015, Loyalist paramilitary groups backed the creation of the Loyalist Community Council (LCC), which seeks to reverse what they describe as the political and economic neglect of working-class Loyalist communities post-Good Friday Agreement (BBC 2015). A letter from the LCC to the DUP leadership and Westminster warned there would be 'dire consequences' if the Northern Ireland Protocol issues were not resolved (Bradfield 2022). The Loyalist community has become increasingly hostile since Brexit. This study focuses on this group and its relationship with support for violence.

GAPS IN RESEARCH, RESEARCH AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

This study investigates the relationship between the strength of different political identities and the impact

of group threats on support for violence in NI, focusing on the Loyalist identity. It also examines the impact of betrayal, as this emotion is frequently discussed within the Loyalist community.

The NI conflict has previously been studied utilising SIT (Hewstone et al. 2006; Tausch et al. 2007; Hewstone et al. 2008; Hughes et al. 2013). These studies have primarily focused on the split between Catholics and Protestants and the impact of intergroup contact in improving relations. SIT theory has demonstrated that stronger ingroup identity can be linked to more hostile action and outgroup views (Kremer, Barry & McNally 1986; Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood 2005; Cairns et al. 2006). This study supports this hypothesis but posits that distinctions between political identifications critically influences outcomes like support for violence.

The study focuses specifically on the Loyalist identification, as it is considered the radical Unionist group (Bruce 1999; Smithy 2011). As tensions within the Loyalist community have risen since the introduction of the Northern Ireland Protocol (Carroll 2021; Bradfield 2022; Webber 2022), this study hypothesises that strength of Loyalist identity will correlate and predict support for violence.

Betrayal has been an important emotion in the context of the NI conflict. It has increasingly been utilised by the Loyalist community since the introduction of the Northern Ireland Protocol (Withnall 2019; Carroll 2022; Pollak 2022). This study aims to investigate the relationship between the feelings of betrayal by political groups and support for violence.

Finally, this study examines the impact of group threat on support for violence. The presence of group threats has been shown to enhance hostile actions (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood 2005; Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood 2008; Ferguson & Binks 2015). This study hypothesises that group threat acts as a positive predictor for supporting violence.

The study utilises mixed methods to test these hypotheses using quantitative surveys and statistical analysis. Qualitative interviews are used to help explain the results.

H1: Strength of Loyalist identity positively correlates more highly with support for violence compared to identification of other identity groups.

H2: Stronger feelings of betrayal by the DUP predict a higher support for violence.

H3: Strength of Loyalist identity positively predicts support for violence.

H4: Fear of Union breakup positively predicts support for violence.

H5: Strength of Loyalist identity mediates the relationship between group threat and support for violence.

METHODS

STUDY 1 – SURVEY

Procedure

This study conducted a two-part longitudinal survey which was exclusively released to residents of NI. The first survey (Appendix D) was released in November

2021, when there were high levels of uncertainty surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol. The second survey (Appendix E) was released in May 2022 the day after the Stormont election results. Participants were recruited through the research platform Prolific which has demonstrated high-quality participants (Peer et al. 2017). Participants were paid 77p per survey completed.

Participants

Survey 1

126 residents of NI completed the initial survey (mean age 39.40 years, SD = 12.12, age range = 18–75 years). The sample comprised 49 Catholics (27 males, 22 females) and 68 Protestants (34 males, 34 females). 9 participants (2 males, 7 females) did not disclose their religious denomination. To determine religious identity participants were asked what religious denomination they grow up with. If participants came from a mixed household, they were asked which religion was more prominent in their upbringing.

Survey 2

111 of the original respondents completed the second survey (mean age 39.77 years, SD = 12.40, age range = 18–75 years), comprising of 45 Catholics (26 males, 19 females) and 58 Protestants (28 males, 30 females). 8 participants (2 males, 6 females) did not disclose their religious denomination.

15 participants only completed the first survey, 8 males, 7 females, 10 Protestants, 4 Catholics, 1 no religious denomination (mean age = 36.67 years, SD = 9.78, age range = 18–48).

Measures

Outcome variable: support for violence

Support for violence was measured using three questions (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). Using a 5-point Likert-type scale [1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so)], participants were asked to what extent recent violence was understandable and justified, and to what extent violence was justified to protect their community's interest. Support for violence significantly departed from normality ($W = 0.802$, p -value < 0.001). This was tested to ensure that appropriate statistical methods were chosen.

Predictor variable: betrayal

Feelings of betrayal were measured using a single item for political institutions and parties. Participants were asked 'To what extent do you feel betrayed by x in regard to the handling of Brexit'. The response format used the same 5-point Likert-type scale used to quantify support for violence.

Predictor variable: group threat

Threat to the Unionist identity was measured by a single item. Participants were asked 'To what extent are you worried about the break-up of the UK due to Brexit'. The same 5-point Likert-type scale was used.

Predictor variable: strength of identity

Strength of identity was measured using a single item for both national (British, Northern Irish, Irish and European) and political (Unionist, Nationalist, Loyalist and Republican) identities. Participants were asked 'To what extent do you identify with the following groups.'

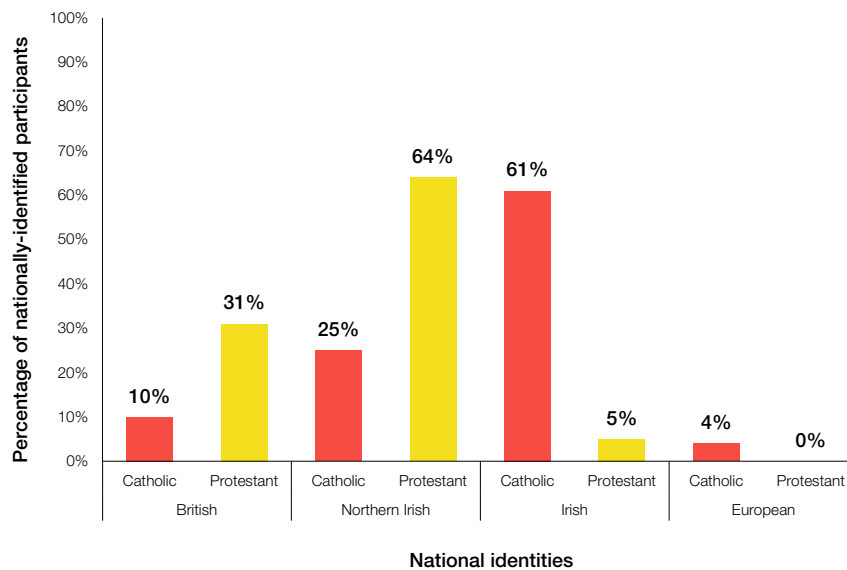


Figure 2 | Forced national identity percentage frequencies between communities.

The response format was a 5-point Likert-type scale [1 (do not identify with at all) to 5 (very strongly identify with)].

STUDY 2 – INTERVIEWS

Procedure

Opportunity sampling was utilised. The researcher contacted various political groups, asking if members would be interested in being interviewed about the current political situation in NI. Snowball sampling was then used to find more participants. Participants were asked a series of questions relating to identity, political views, and feelings of betrayal (Appendix F). Interviews were conducted between May and November 2022.

Participants

6 interviews were conducted (4 males, 2 females), comprising of 3 Protestants and 3 Catholics (mean age = 27.17 years, age range = 21–34).

ETHICS

Both studies received ethical approval from the University of St Andrews (PS15841; PS16086) (Appendix C). As the project discussed support for violence and the political situation in NI, participants were clearly informed about the contents of the study before giving consent. Questions were chosen to minimise potential triggering of participants. The debrief included contact details for support groups in NI and the researchers' contact details if they needed to discuss the contents of the project (Appendix F).

RESULTS

This study set out to test changes of identity and political thought over time. However, there was high stability of responses between Surveys 1 and 2, and therefore longitudinal result analysis is not discussed. There are several potential explanations for this stability between surveys. Overall, respondents displayed low engagement with political views at both time points. The region had been in a state of political crisis throughout the period, with uncertainty caused by the Northern Ireland

Protocol and the DUP threat to not form the Stormont Executive until the protocol was changed. The analysis therefore does not focus on differences across time. Instead, it utilises correlation and regression analysis to investigate the relationships between strength of identity, group threat, and betrayal with the outcome variable, namely support for violence, using one time point.

The study utilised data from Survey 1, for several reasons. The sample size was larger for Survey 1 and the political situation was more stable. Survey 2 took place directly after the Stormont election, when the motivations of political parties and the political situation were still unclear. The political situation at the time of writing in November 2022 was more similar to timepoint 1, with ambiguity over the status of the Northern Ireland Protocol and increased levels of unrest in Loyalist communities.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Figure 2 shows the frequencies of national identities between communities. The largest identity group is Northern Irish, which supports theories that this identity group is becoming increasingly important in NI, with a movement away from the traditional dichotomy of British and Irish identities (Muldoon et al. 2007). Protestants form most of this identity, supporting the theory that this identity group is more representative of Protestants than Catholics (McKeown 2014). Less than a third of Protestants identified as British, potentially indicating that, for this sample, this identity label is becoming less relevant for Protestants.

Figure 3 (next page) shows frequencies of political identities between communities. The table shows that political identity mostly corresponds to traditional ethnic dichotomies, with Catholics choosing Irish political identities and Protestants choosing British. This supports the argument that ethnicity corresponds to political identity (Ferguson & McKeown 2016). The more extreme identities are less populated, but still form a significant percentage.

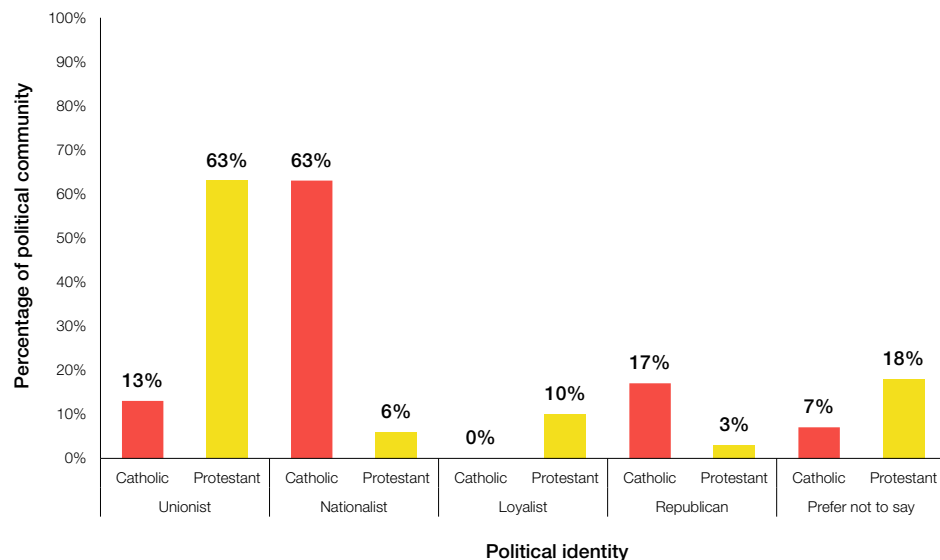


Figure 2 | Forced political identity percentage frequencies between communities.

Figures 4A to 4H (next page) show independent *t*-test results between Catholic and Protestant communities on various political views. Shapiro-Wilks tests were used to ensure normal distribution between groups.

t-tests demonstrated significant differences in opinion on issues such as the fear of breakup (Figure 4A), support for a re-unification referendum (Figure 4B), and feelings of betrayal from political institutions (Figures 4C to 4E). This illustrates that a dichotomy of political views between communities is still present in NI, especially on the constitutional status of the nation.

However, there are no significant differences in opinion on issues like trust in Stormont (Figure 4H) or feelings that Westminster considered the interests of NI during Brexit negotiations (Figure 4F). It is important to note that the variables shown (and other tested responses) were generally negative, indicating that participants were not happy with political decisions and representatives of the NI population.

An interviewee of this study described this phenomenon as ‘crisis apathy ... everything is a crisis in Northern Ireland, and people stopped caring about politics.’

TESTING STUDY HYPOTHESES

H1: Strength of Loyalist identity positively correlates more highly with support for violence compared to identification of other identity groups.

Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between identity strength and support for violence across different national and political groups in NI (See Appendix A for full table).

Four identities had significant relationships with *support for violence*. There were negligible negative relations for *Irish and European identity strength* and *support for violence* [$r(121) = 0.19$, $p = 0.034$ and $r(120) = 0.23$, $p = 0.010$]. There was a negligible positive relation for *strength of Republican identity* and *support for violence* [$r(120) = 0.19$, $p = 0.033$]. There was a low positive

relationship between the *strength of Loyalist identity* and *support for violence* [$r(120) = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$]. All other identities had no correlation with support for violence. This supports **H1**, that a higher *strength of Loyalist identity* results in *increased support for violence*.

H2: Stronger feelings of betrayal by the DUP predict a higher support for violence.

Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between *betrayal of political institutions*, *fear of Union breakup* and *support for violence*.

Three other variables beyond *strength of Loyalist identity* had significant positive relationships with *support for violence*. These are shown in Table 1 (p. 85), and their intercorrelated relationships explored further in Appendix B. In short, *fear of Union breakup* had a low positive relationship with support for violence [$r(119) = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$]. A low positive relation between *DUP betrayal* and *support for violence* [$r(106) = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$] is reported, and there was a negligible positive relation between *Westminster betrayal* and *support for violence* [$r(122) = 0.17$, $p = 0.042$].

H3: Strength of Loyalist identity positively predicts support for violence.

H4: Fear of Union breakup positively predicts support for violence.

A multiple linear regression model was used to test if *strength of Loyalist identity* and *fear of Union breakup* positively predicts *support for violence*. The data was screened for assumptions and outliers. Scatterplots demonstrated positive linear relationships with these variables and *support for violence*. Assumptions of linearity and multicollinearity were met. There was a singular bivariate outlier, which was removed from the analysis. *Support for violence* was not normally distributed. To account for this, bootstrapping (5,000 samples)

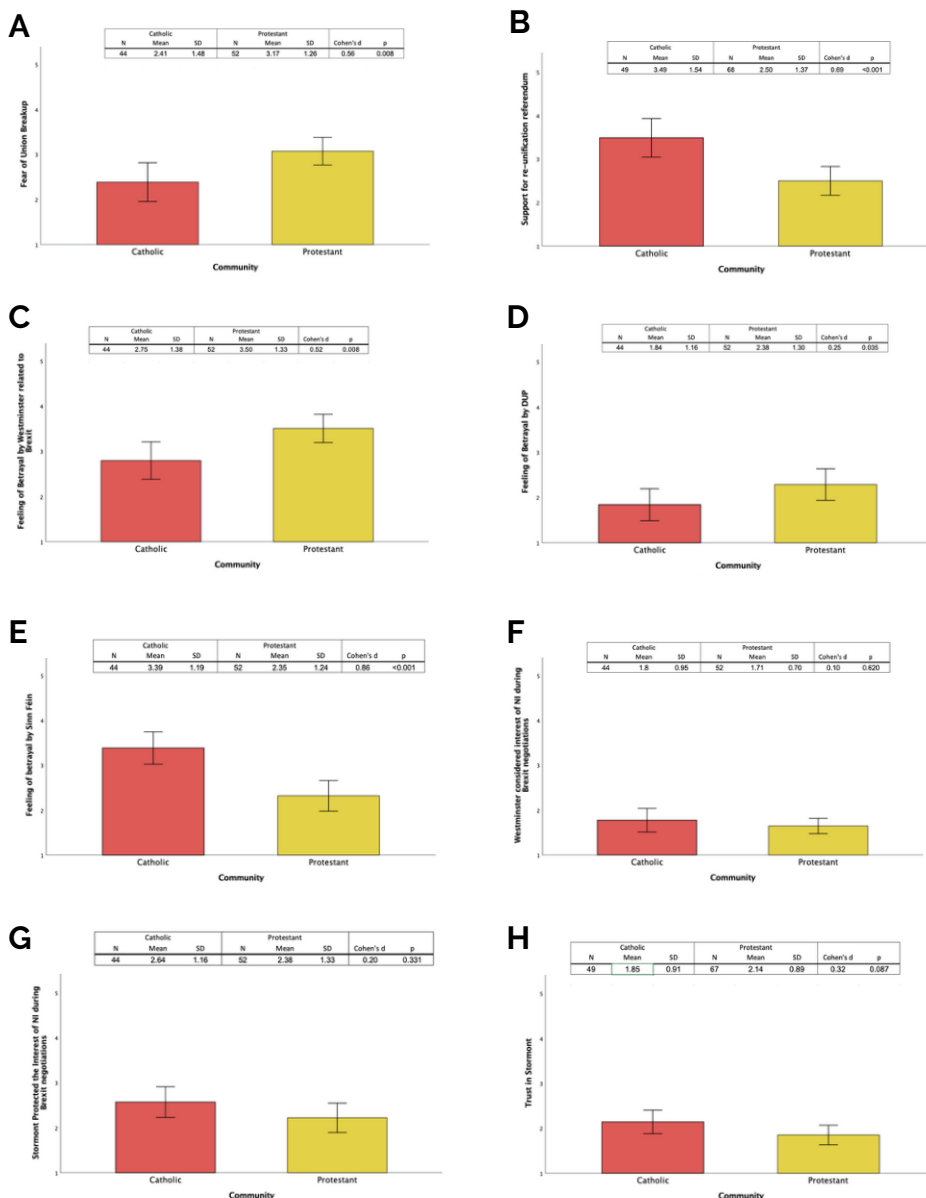


Figure 4 | Bar plots showing differences in the political views (listed from A to H below) between Catholic and Protestant groups. Data measured on Likert-type scale between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Mean differences are significant if $p < 0.05$ as computed by independent t -tests.

- A. Fear of Union breakup ($p = 0.008$; $p < 0.05$).
- B. Support for reunification referendum ($p < 0.001$).
- C. Feeling of betrayal by Westminster related to Brexit ($p = 0.008$; $p < 0.05$).
- D. Feeling of betrayal by the DUP ($p = 0.035$; $p < 0.05$).
- E. Feeling of betrayal by Sinn Féin ($p < 0.001$).
- F. (Feeling that) Westminster considered the interests of NI during Brexit negotiations ($p = 0.620$; $p > 0.05$).
- G. (Feeling that) Stormont protected the interests of NI during Brexit negotiations ($p = 0.331$; $p > 0.05$).
- H. Trust in Stormont ($p = 0.087$; $p > 0.05$).

was applied to the model.

A significant regression equation was found [$F(2,118) = 9.718, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.141$], meaning that these two factors collectively account for 14.1% of the variance in the *support for violence* outcome variable. Analysis determined that *strength of Loyalist identity* ($\beta = 0.173, p = 0.006$) and *fear of Union breakup* ($\beta = 0.105, p = 0.043$) were positive predictors of support for violence (see Figure 5, next page), supporting H3 and H4.

H5: Strength of Loyalist identity mediates the

relationship between group threat and support for violence.

The study examined a simple mediation model (Figure 6A, p. 86). A mediation model was created using PROCCESS version 4.2 (Hayes 2022). Model 4 was used, applying bootstrapping of 5,000 samples. The outcome variable was *support for violence*, the predictor variable *fear of Union breakup* as a variable for group threat, and the mediator *strength of Loyalist identity*. The indirect effect of *strength of Loyalist identity* was statically significant [effect = 0.0560, 95% C.I. (0.0074,

	1	2	3	4	5
Support for violence (1)	-	0.36**	0.29**	0.18*	0.33**
Strength of Loyalist identity (2)		-	0.39**	0.26**	0.55**
Fear of Union breakup (3)			-	0.49**	0.30**
Feeling of betrayal by Westminster (4)				-	0.17
Feeling of betrayal by DUP (5)					-
Mean	1.65	1.74	2.78	3.19	2.12
SD	0.78	1.21	1.39	1.38	1.28

Table 1 | Intercorrelations between variables which positively correlated with support for violence.

0.1215)], indicating that *strength of Loyalist identity* acted as a partial mediator for *fear of Union breakup* when predicting *support for violence* (Figure 6B, next page).

It is also plausible that the effect could be happening in the opposite direction. To test if *strength of Loyalist identity* mediates the predictive relationship between *fear of Union breakup* and *support for violence*, a new model was tested (Figure 6C, next page). This model was tested with the predictor and mediator variables reversed. The indirect effect of *fear of Union breakup* on *strength of Loyalist identity* was statically significant [effect = 0.0488, 95% C.I. (0.0088, 0.0995)] indicating that *fear of Union breakup* is acting as a partial mediator for *strength of Loyalist identity* when predicting *support for violence* (Figure 6D, next page).

DISCUSSION

H1

Hypothesis 1 (H1) aims to ask questions on the relationship between *strength of Loyalist identity* and *support for violence*. Previous research has demonstrated that strength of identity can determine more hostile views in NI (Cairns et al. 2006). As political identities are used in NI to assess an individual’s level of extremism, and Loyalism is considered a more extreme identity (Smithey 2011; Wilson 2021), the study theorised that higher affiliation with the Loyalist identity would result in higher support for violence, compared to other identities. This was demonstrated.

The current political climate in NI is most threatening to the Unionist identity groups, especially Loyalists who rely on the Union to protect their unique identity. This study found positive correlations between identity strength for Loyalists and Republicans and *support for violence*. This supports arguments that these identities are linked to a willingness to conduct more extreme actions to accomplish political goals (Flackes & Elliott 1994; Bruce 1999; Smithey 2011; Wilson 2021) and reflects trends seen in NI. Loyalist have been the most outspoken community against political changes resulting from Brexit, conducting protests, riots, and demonstrations against the Northern Ireland Protocol (Carroll 2021; Bradfield 2022; Webber 2022). Consistent with this observation, a Unionist interviewee noted that ‘Loyalists are more hard-line and less likely to compromise with Nationalists’.

Strength of Unionist identity did not correlate with support for violence, demonstrating the importance of distinguishing between political identity groups in NI. According to the same Unionist interviewee, ‘Unionism is what you’re born into, Loyalism is a political outlook. You can say every Loyalist is a Unionist, but not every Unionist is a Loyalist.’ Although Unionists and Loyalists are categorised using the same wider identity (Protestant/Unionist) and are indeed related, they are distinct from each other (Smithey 2011). Future SIT studies in NI should account for this distinction in political identity, with each identity being studied as distinct groups.

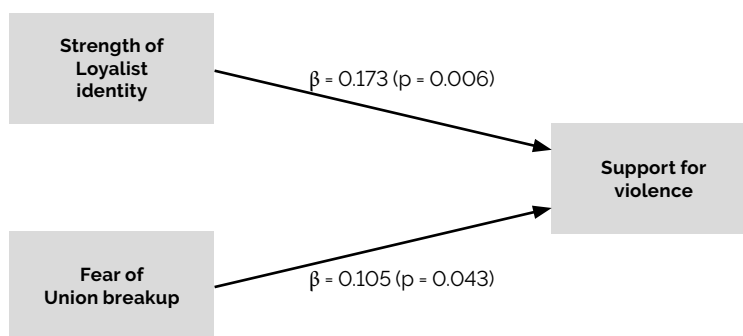


Figure 5 | Multiple linear regression diagram demonstrating that strength of Loyalist identity and fear of Union breakup are positive predictors of support for violence.

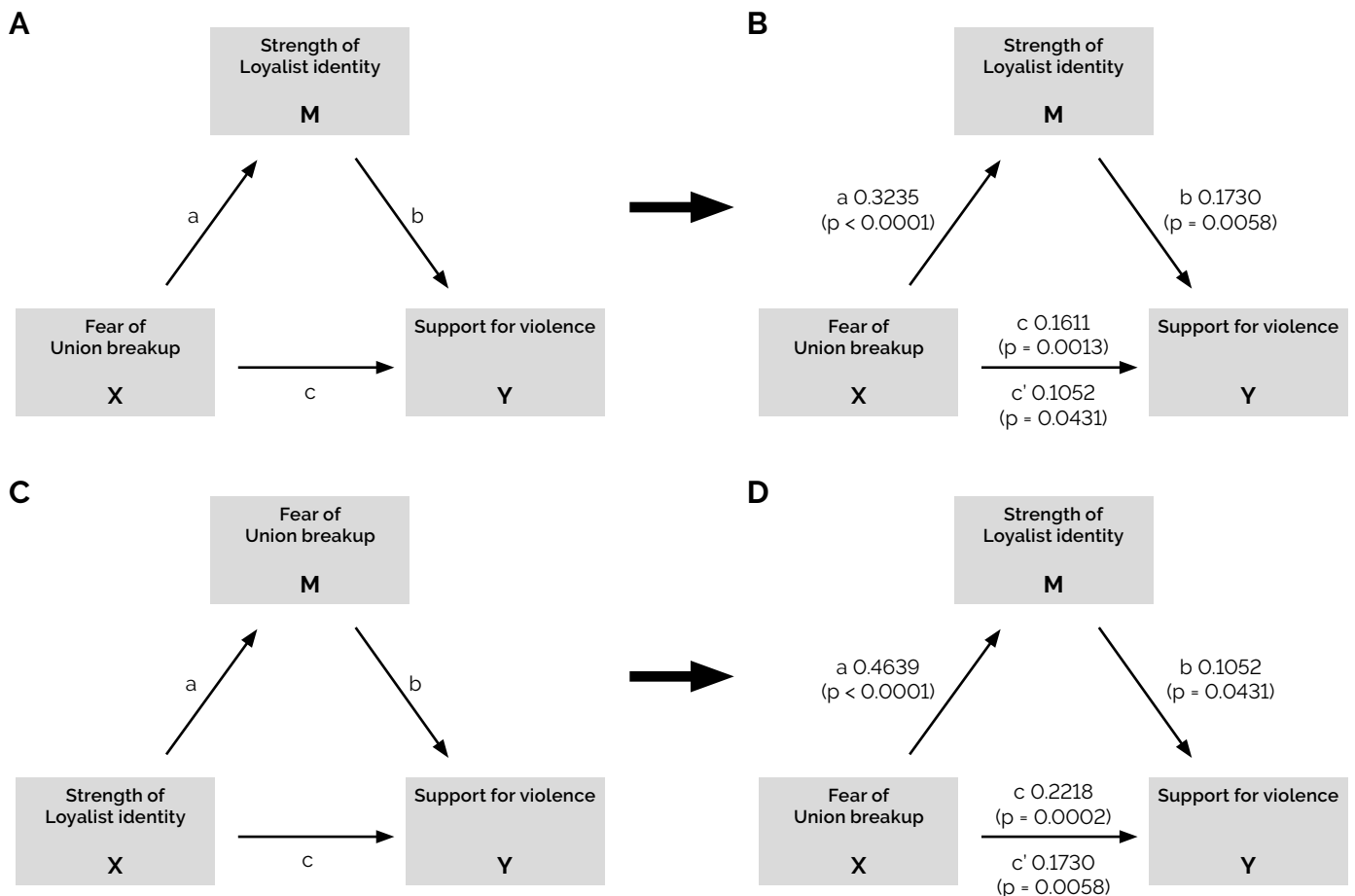


Figure 6 | Mediation models show that strength of Loyalist identity and fear of Union breakup partially mediate the other's relationship with support for violence.

- Theoretical mediation model with strength of Loyalist identity mediating the relationship between fear of Union breakup and support for violence.
- Mediation model showing partial mediation between fear of Union breakup and support for violence by strength of Loyalist identity.
- Theoretical mediation model with fear of Union breakup mediating the relationship between strength of Loyalist identity and support for violence.
- Mediation model showing partial mediation between strength of Loyalist identity and support for violence by fear of Union breakup.

H2

Hypothesis 2 (H2) aims to examine the relationship between betrayal and support for violence. Betrayal is an emotion discussed frequently within the NI context, especially within the Loyalist community (TUV n.d.). Mervyn Gibson, a prominent Loyalist leader, called Boris Johnson a 'lousy unionist' who 'betrayed' Northern Ireland over the Northern Ireland Protocol (Young 2020). This study investigated the connection between betrayal and support for violence, focusing on Unionist institutions because Brexit presents a larger threat to these communities.

The study found positive correlations between betrayal by Unionist institutions (the DUP and Westminster) and *support for violence*. This indicates that the more an individual felt betrayed by these institutions, the more they were likely to support violence. Feelings of betrayal by the DUP had a stronger relationship with *support for violence* than the group threat variable *fear of Union breakup*. This is interesting as stronger feelings of group threats have been shown to positively predict more hostile actions (Burgess,

Ferguson & Hollywood 2005). This result may indicate that betrayal could be a critical emotion in determining hostile attitudes. Further analysis was conducted on the relationship between betrayal and support for violence (see Appendix B), but as this was an unexpected result, there was insufficient data to explore this further. Future research should further investigate *betrayal* and the relationship with *support for violence*.

As a Unionist interviewee put it, 'betrayal is a big and emotive subject in Northern Ireland, and it's definitely the one word that I would use to sum up why people have reacted in the way they have'.

H3 AND H4

Previous SIT research demonstrates that individuals with stronger identification hold more hostile views towards outgroups (Brewer 1999; 2001). Prior research has demonstrated that increased feelings of group threat facilitate individuals adopting more radical behaviours (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood 2005; Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood 2008; Al Raffie 2013). Hypotheses 3 and 4 (H3 and H4) tested the predictive relationship

between strength of Loyalist identity and perceived group threat (in the form of potential Union breakup) on *support for violence*.

Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that both variables had a positive predictive relationship with support for violence, consistent with previous SIT literature. Loyalists have a history of supporting more extreme actions to protect their community (Flackes & Elliott 1994; Smithey 2011). That the *strength of Loyalist identity* positively predicts *support for violence* agrees with literature arguing that this community is more extreme than other Unionist groups. This indicates that this identity may be critical in understanding current tensions and protests in NI.

The analysis also demonstrated that *fear of Union breakup* positively predicted *support for violence*, but to a lesser extent than *strength of Loyalist identity*. This corresponds with the literature (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood 2005; Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood, 2008; Al Raffie 2013).

Fear of Union breakup is strongly emotive for Unionists. NI leaving the UK would most likely result in a united Ireland, increasing the risk of Unionist and Loyalist identities being lost, as these are protected by the union. Consistent with this, a Unionist interviewee stated 'I am a Unionist by default, because the Unionist way of thinking preserves the individuality of Northern Ireland. The only way that it exists is through the UK'. Individuals may therefore be pushed to more extreme actions to protect their identity. H3 and H4

H5

The final hypothesis further investigated the predictive relationship between these variables, testing for possible mediation.

A simple mediation path model demonstrated that *strength of Loyalist identity* partially mediated *fear of Union breakup* when predicting *support for violence*. Although slightly weaker, another partial mediation occurred when the path was tested with the predictor, and mediator variables reversed. This indicates that *strength of Loyalist identity* enhanced the predictive power of *fear of Union breakup* on *support for violence* and vice versa. Both mediation effects were small, but this is likely due to the small study sample.

The mediation pathway suggests that individuals who fear Union breakup identify more strongly as Loyalists and that individuals with a stronger Loyalist identity support more extreme action, like violence.

A significant indirect effect also occurred when the variables were reversed, indicating that Loyalists are more afraid of Union breakup and this fear may make them support violence to neutralise this threat. The indirect effect was smaller but still significant, suggesting that *strength of Loyalist identity* is a stronger predictor of *support for violence*.

These results highlight a weakness in the study: due to small sample sizes and the use of cross-sectional analysis, it is difficult to define the direction of the relationship. However, this could help explain recent unrest in the Loyalist community in response to the Northern Ireland Protocol. To understand the importance of these variables in predicting *support for violence*, future research should utilise larger samples.

LIMITATIONS

These hypotheses provide interesting results but also highlight critical weaknesses in the study.

The small sample size means that findings cannot be extrapolated to the wider population. Due to the exploratory nature of the initial survey, it used multiple single-item variables. This makes it difficult to assess if the variables are acting the way the analysis suggests, as other factors, which have not been measured, could be having an impact. Findings would have been more robust if multiple measures examining the same variable had been combined to assess factors such as group threat and betrayal. However, as an explorative pilot study examining novel identities and emotions, it is acceptable.

IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrated that there were significant differences between political identity groups and the outcome variable, *support for violence*. Previous studies in the region have focused almost entirely on the dichotomy of Protestants vs. Catholics. However, this study demonstrated that political identities are also important in determining hostile views. Future studies should expand and incorporate these identities when looking at prejudice and support for violence in NI. Utilising these political identities would strengthen context and help develop tools for improving intergroup relations.

It also demonstrated that *fear of Union breakup* due to the Northern Ireland Protocol was an important variable in understanding why Loyalists may partake in more extreme actions. If a solution is not found to this issue, it could result in Loyalist tensions increasing further. This would threaten other identity groups in NI, potentially leading to conflict escalation as both groups attempt to protect their interests (Shelly & Muldoon 2022). Indeed, one Catholic interviewee remarked that 'I can see it [the Northern Ireland Protocol] reigniting things', and that 'increased tensions are already being seen between communities'. Another interviewee, identifying as Protestant, stated that 'violence has been, like, extremely real and still present throughout our lives ... this violence is madness, like, we need to stop but Brexit is re-establishing it'.

Finally, the study demonstrated that the feeling of betrayal may be an important variable in predicting hostile actions. Although the study did not collect sufficient data to test this thoroughly, initial analysis indicated a positive relationship between betrayal by Unionist institutions and support for violence. As this emotion is often referenced by the Loyalist community, feelings of betrayal may be critical in developing more extreme attitudes and stronger feelings of identity. Future research should investigate this further.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study demonstrates that Brexit-related group threats and strength of political identity are important variables in understanding recent unrest in NI. There appears to be a rise in tensions and a shift to Loyalist identity groups as Brexit places doubts around the future of the region. Psychological explanations for these phenomena are critical to understand and help mitigate potential rising intergroup violence.

If the strength of political identity can lead to support for violence in NI, then community and political leaders

may have significant influence in propagating tensions in the region. Indeed, the DUP and other Unionist political parties have been successful in rallying Unionists to protest the Northern Ireland Protocol (Carroll 2022). Further, extreme Loyalist groups such as the LLC continue to warn of unrest amongst Loyalist paramilitaries and communities if the new protocol deal does not meet their standards (Kula 2023). Political tensions and uncertainty give community leaders significant influence. It is therefore essential that the continued negotiations of the protocol are handled with extreme care, as this study demonstrates that strength of political identity, betrayal and fear of breakup are potential indicators of support for violence.

However, as this is an explorative study, future projects should attempt to validate these results using larger sample sizes and more robust measures to garner more representative evidence. It should examine the differences between political communities and what pushes individuals to more extreme action. Future studies could look at how betrayal relates to the Loyalist identity. Such sentiments could be important within the NI context and should be examined alongside group threats, the strength of identity and support for violence. If we can better understand these variables, more might be done to prevent the re-emergence of conflict in the region.

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