The Two Types of Ulster Unionism: Testing an Ethnic Explanation for the Unionist/Loyalist Divide

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ABSTRACT   *Whereas there is an obvious ethnic explanation for the deep divisions between the nationalist and unionist communities in Northern Ireland, Ulster Protestants are often treated as a uniform group. It has been noted that there are more than two ethnic traditions in Northern Ireland; academics have distinguished between British Unionists and Ulster Loyalists. This is also linked to a divide in party support within the Protestant community. These two groups, it has been suggested, may have ethnic or religious bases derived from different migrations to Ulster in the last 400 years. The proposition is tested on surname data that have been shown elsewhere to allow us to see through the 'fog of history'. Evidence is found to support the ethnic explanation for divisions between the nationalist and unionist communities, but the ethnic explanation for the divisions within unionism is rejected. This leaves a continuing puzzle for scholars as to what explains the two traditions in Northern Ireland's Protestant community.*

Keywords: Ulster Unionism; Ulster Loyalism; Northern Ireland party system; Plantations

Introduction

The divide between the nationalist and unionist communities in Northern Ireland is well known and remarkably deep, the product of three reinforcing cleavages (ethnic, religious and political). The cleavages correlate so strongly that Whyte (1990: 73) described the relationship as 'extraordinary'. Less well known or well explained are the divisions *within* nationalism and unionism, which, since at least the early 1980s, have seen two parties each compete for the nationalist and unionist vote. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) represent unionist voters and the Social Democratic and Labour (SDLP) and Sinn

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Féin represent nationalist voters in Northern Ireland. We might expect that there are some bases for these divisions that go beyond mere valence.

Particularly within unionism there are thought to be two traditions: Ulster Loyalist and British Unionist (Todd, 1987; Gallagher, 1995; Tonge & Evans, 2001). These differences were not politically represented in organisational terms until the civil rights movement fragmented the coalition of liberal and fundamentalist unionism. Since then the DUP has grown to represent the loyalist outlook. There are suggestions that loyalism is based on a strong connection with Scotland (McAuley, 2010: 141). If so, the division within unionism may be based on an underlying ethnic or religious divide between a Scottish and English influence. Gallagher (1995: 734) asked (sceptically) whether the intra-unionist divisions may originate in the Plantations of Ulster, which took place from the early seventeenth century. These saw separate migrations from Scotland and England, usually underpinned by religious differences as Scottish migrants tended to be Presbyterians whereas the English tended to be Episcopalians.

Evans and Sinnott (1999: 450–452) found in an analysis of survey data that Anglicanism or whether one was another type of Protestant was a significant explanatory variable even when controlling for class, education, attitude to redistribution, and attitudes to the role of the Dublin government for vote choice between the DUP and UUP.

Religion might represent underlying ethnic difference. Given the ostensibly strong religious roots of the DUP, it is plausible to expect that it attracts support from Evangelical Christians in Northern Ireland. If this is the case we might see that support and representation of the two unionist parties could be based on centuries-old migrations. Elsewhere it is shown that the much less obvious division in the party system in the Republic of Ireland has roots in much older migrations in Ireland (Byrne & O'Malley, 2012a). Using an analysis of surname patterns, we test whether ethnicity can explain the different political cultures *within* the Protestant population and whether that difference explains party competition within unionism in Northern Ireland.

Surname analysis has been used to great effect to study population movements (see, for instance, Taeuber, 1966; Dipierri *et al.*, 2005) and social mobility (Clark & Cummins, 2011), and as a way of finding subjects of certain ethnicities (Himmelfarb *et al.*, 1983). Surnames carry a good deal of genealogical and genetic information (Byrne & O'Malley, 2012b). Given the ancient nature of surnames in the British Isles and the genealogical record of these, we can see whether the DUP and UUP represent groups originating from these migrations. We test this proposition using the surnames of candidates for both parties in local elections from 1977 to 2011. If the traditions within unionism are based on population movements, we expect that the DUP candidates will contain a higher proportion of Scottish surnames, and UUP candidates, English surnames.

Historical, Political and Religious Differences within Protestantism

Todd's distinctions between Ulster Loyalist and Ulster British (or now more commonly British Unionist) see two different types of Protestant in Northern Ireland.

These distinctions were not new. Rose (1971: 32–33) differentiated between Ultras and Allegiants, and Wright (1973) distinguished between liberal unionism and extreme unionism. British Unionism values liberty, rationalism and progress, where it does not matter who governs, Catholic or Protestant, as long as government is based on the rule of law and liberal principles (Todd, 1987: 14). Ulster Loyalism views the state as first and foremost the protector of Protestantism against ungodly attack. For the loyalist, according to Todd (and later interpretations), fundamentalist evangelicalism makes it difficult to accept sharing power with Roman Catholics. An example of the different attitudes within Protestant Northern Ireland is given by Ó Dochartaigh (2011: 324).

The north of Ireland differed in so many ways from the south that in 1912 when Home Rule for Ireland was being seriously considered in the British parliament, and later when some form of independence was inevitable, there was an acceptance that partition was necessary for Home Rule to work. The coalition of Protestants against integration into a united Irish state (whether within the UK or completely independent) served to create in people's minds the idea that there is a single Protestant people.

The differences between the north and south of Ireland emanate from the Plantations of Ulster, which took place in the early seventeenth century as a way of controlling and anglicising the then most rebellious part of Ireland and also because they provided a means of paying for ongoing wars in the islands. Unlike the plantations in the other parts of Ireland, the Plantations of Ulster were more intensive, took place later, and included Scottish settlers who were more likely to have been 'landless and hungry' (Dudley Edwards with Hourican, 2005: 240). Dudley Edwards with Hourican (2005: 241) notes that there were not enough settlers in Ulster for them to assume complete control and expel the Gaelic population, but that, unlike in the other parts of Ireland, the settlers were so populous that they could not easily be absorbed. By 1641 Ulster was markedly different from the rest of Ireland. According to Clarke (1986: 65, 67), 'the English and Scots were at the heart of the scheme that evolved . . . [but] it had been naïve, perhaps even disingenuous, to introduce Scots to Ulster as agents of anglicisation – for they were not themselves anglicised and did not become so . . . [T]he Scottish Church was in essentials, Presbyterian . . . it differed sharply from the Church of England'.

Throughout the eighteenth century the distinctions between Scottish Presbyterians and Anglicans can be seen in Ulster, and for a time in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Catholics and liberal Presbyterians coalesced against the more conservative English elite in Ulster (see Connolly, 2008: 459–484). It was religious division and their treatment by Anglicans that led to the emigration of up to 200,000 Ulster-Scots Presbyterians to North America in the eighteenth century (Fischer, 1989: 606). We can still see today that the Protestant population of Northern Ireland is evenly divided between Presbyterians and Anglicans – 25 and 20 per cent of the population, respectively, declare themselves as being from that religious background (calculated from ARK, 2011). The geographic segregation at the local level of the different sections of Northern Irish society is well known, but we still see variation

in the location of the different Protestant denominations at the regional level that can be linked to the original plantations. The 2001 census (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2003, table KS07a) reports that the 20.7 per cent of the population stating their religion as Presbyterian account for 27–28 per cent of the total population living in the outer Belfast region and east of Northern Ireland but just 11 per cent in the west and south of the province. Anglicans are more evenly spread through the province. In language the ethnic differences brought in by the plantations are extant. McCafferty (2007: 122) reports that it left Ulster with 'three major vernacular varieties, Irish Gaelic, Scots and English . . . [and even still t]here is a broad distinction between the more English-influenced dialects of Mid and South Ulster and the more Scottish varieties of eastern and northern coastal areas'.

Whyte's (1990: 26–30) survey shows that a number of studies found hostility between Anglicanism and Presbyterianism, although we might expect this to be more muted today. Ganiel and Dixon (2008) noted that one of the more important dimensions within Protestantism is the distinction between fundamentalist or evangelical and other forms of Protestantism. Although fundamentalism is not necessarily linked to a particular branch of Protestantism, Ganiel and Dixon (2008: 423) argue that it is linked with Calvinism, which is more common in Presbyterianism and not accepted by High Church Anglicans. However, there are reasons to be sceptical of the association of Presbyterianism and party politics, not least because Presbyterianism was historically the more liberal of the two main Protestant Churches.

Although there are historical and religious differences within the Protestant community, to what extent do they manifest themselves, if at all, in contemporary politics in Northern Ireland? Given the founder of the DUP's (Ian Paisley) status as a founder of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, we might conclude that it is a fundamentalist party, or at least a party with fundamentalist links. Pádraig O'Malley (1997: 170) wrote of Paisley that he was 'the embodiment of the Scots Presbyterian tradition of uncompromising Calvinism'. The UUP, on the other hand, has historical links with the Conservative Party in Britain (Foster, 1988: 420, 464), and though it had the support of a broad coalition of Protestant interests throughout much of the twentieth century, it was led by a commercial and then increasingly professional elite. Evans and Tonge (2009: 1,023) reported a strong, positive correlation between membership of non-Anglican denominations of Protestantism and support for the DUP between 1989 and 2006. This differs, however, from the more common class-based explanation of voter behaviour (Tilley *et al.*, 2008; Tilley & Evans, 2011).

Gallagher (1995: 732) noted that the division in Protestantism 'has long been present, but obscured under the Stormont regime by the appearance of near-universal Protestant satisfaction with the Ulster Unionist Party'. However, he observed the 'rise in the 1970s of the Democratic Unionist Party . . . has made the cleavage clear'. If, as Hechter and Levi (1979: 262) argued, '[e]thnic distinctiveness results from the imputation of meaning and honor to linguistic, religious, or phenotypical markers', then there are good reasons to believe that the Scottish/English divide in Ulster was and perhaps is an ethnic one. Gallagher says it would be stretching the point to argue that the religious differences within Protestantism emanating from the Scottish

and English Plantations constitute an ethnic difference. However, it is one we can now test.

Data and Methods

In order to test whether the modern Northern Ireland party system is based on centuries-old population movements we rely on an analysis of the distribution of surnames. Northern Ireland is an ideal subject for this type of analysis as surnames on the British Isles have maintained a patrilineal heritage for many centuries, long before the population movements studied here. There also exists a wealth of genealogical knowledge and the ethnic origin of most surnames is known, opening up the possibility of using surnames as a proxy for ethnic heritage.

As survey data do not provide surnames for reasons of data protection, we need to find an alternative, public, source for surnames with evident links to partisan preference. To this end we use as our unit of analysis individual candidates in local government elections in Northern Ireland. Party candidates are obviously declared partisans for their party, and using local election candidates we have a sample large enough to be confident with our results. The results are very similar if we examine just elected candidates (not shown).

Using genealogical sources, we coded the origin of the surnames of every candidate in local elections from 1977 to 2011. We chose 1977 as our start date as it was the first election that both the UUP and DUP contested as largely cohesive parties (note that Sinn Féin only features from the 1985 election onwards). However, the results of our analyses were similar across all nine elections, and as many of the same candidates feature in all or many elections, pooling over the 35 years adds few extra data, so instead we focus on presenting the results from the 2005 election ($N = 919$).

The data were taken from the Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive (www.ark.ac.uk/elections). The 596 unique surnames found in the data set had one or more of the following origins: Gaelic; Scottish; Old English; New English; Welsh; Viking/Norse; French (e.g. Huguenot refugees in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries); Other (names of known origin, but of small frequency, e.g. Jewish families originally from Eastern Europe); and Unknown. The vast majority of surnames' origins are known (871 of 919 candidates; 95 per cent). The three major surname cohorts in Northern Ireland are the indigenous Gaelic, the Scottish and the Old and New English (from here on referred to simply as 'English'). These surnames pre-date the population movements we study and have ethnic information embedded in them. Over three-fifths (579 of 919) of the local government candidates bear a surname that is exclusively of Gaelic, or Scottish or English origin (see coding protocol in the Appendix). Only politicians with surnames with these exclusive origins feature in our analyses. Those with surnames with multiple potential origins are excluded (Gaelic/English, 9 per cent; Scottish/English, 9 per cent; Gaelic/Scottish, 7 per cent; Gaelic/Scottish/English, three per cent), as are those of unknown origin (5 per cent) or of other potential origins (less than 3 per cent).

On the basis of our theoretical expectations, we examined the political affiliation of the candidates to see whether there were any biases between the representatives of the four largest political parties from the two major political traditions, unionism and nationalism. First, as a validation exercise we looked at the differences between the ethnic blocks. If our surname data were useful we expected that there would be significant biases in the distribution of surnames between the parties, and that nationalist parties (Sinn Féin and the SDLP) would have a bias in favour of Gaelic surnames, and unionist parties (the DUP and the UUP) a bias in favour of Scottish and English surnames. We then concentrated on the surname patterns within unionism. If the hypothesis is correct we would expect to see a bias in favour of Scottish surnames among DUP candidates and more English surnames among UUP candidates.

Results

For all our results there are striking differences between the two ethnic blocks. Gaelic surnames are the most common among the Northern Ireland politicians, with 30 per cent of the 2005 local election candidates bearing a name of exclusively Gaelic origin. Surnames of exclusively Scottish and English origin account for 18 and 15 per cent of the politicians, respectively. The two nationalist parties have a much higher proportion of candidates with Gaelic surnames (57 per cent; see Figure 1A) compared with very low levels in the two unionist parties (10 per cent). On the other hand, unionist politicians are much more likely to bear either English (21 per cent; Figure 1B) or Scottish (25 per cent; Figure 1C) surnames than nationalists (less than 9 per cent for both).
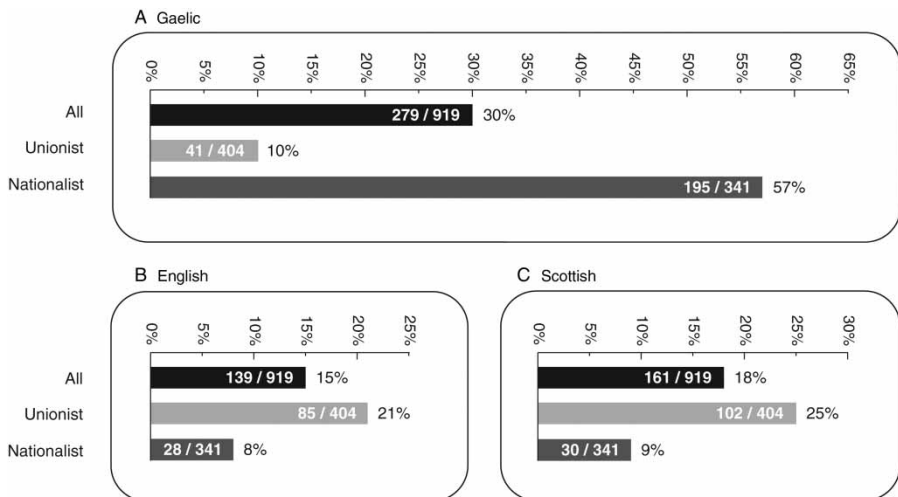

Figure 1.   The ethnic division between political blocks

The directions of these biases show the two main political traditions to be significantly polarised ($P < 0.00001$ for chi-squared tests between the traditions for all three surname types). This polarisation of Gaelic and Scottish or English surnames is illustrated in the completely inverted patterns of the unionist (light grey) and nationalist (dark grey) bars in Figure 1. Although the links between Northern Ireland's political and population history are well known, and the biases we observed are as expected given those established links, these results are a dramatic demonstration of the ethnic roots of the province's political system.

While the two inter-ethnic blocks show the expected surname patterns between blocks, we also test to see whether differences within the unionist block can be explained by the different origins of the Protestant population in Northern Ireland. These origins, Scottish and English, are linked to religion, which is arguably connected to political preferences in the general population. We expect to see a bias among UUP candidates for English surnames and DUP candidates in favour of Scottish surnames. In fact, we see from Figure 2 that the unionist parties have virtually identical patterns of surname distribution. What differences there are are non-significant for all three surname types (centre of panels in Figure 2).

Voting patterns have changed over time as parties once regarded as extremists have come to dominate Northern Ireland's politics. We might find, then, that the DUP has become 'less Scottish' over time as it moved to occupy the centre ground of unionist politics. Using the data for each of the nine elections from 1977 to 2011, we see the biases are remarkably consistent over the three-and-a-half decades that these parties have dominated Northern Ireland politics (Figure 3), despite variations in support levels. Nationalist parties (diamonds; Figure 3A) always have a higher proportion of candidates with Gaelic surnames than either unionist parties or the candidates at large, whereas unionism (circles; Figure 3A) always has fewer than overall. The situation is inverted for English (Figure 3B) and Scottish (Figure 3C) names, with nationalist parties always having a lower proportion than either unionist parties or the full candidate list, while unionist parties in turn have a higher proportion than that seen among the candidates at large. Examining these surname origin levels over the full
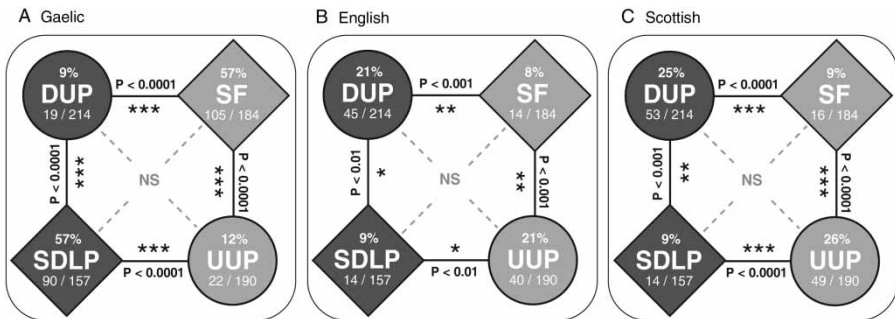

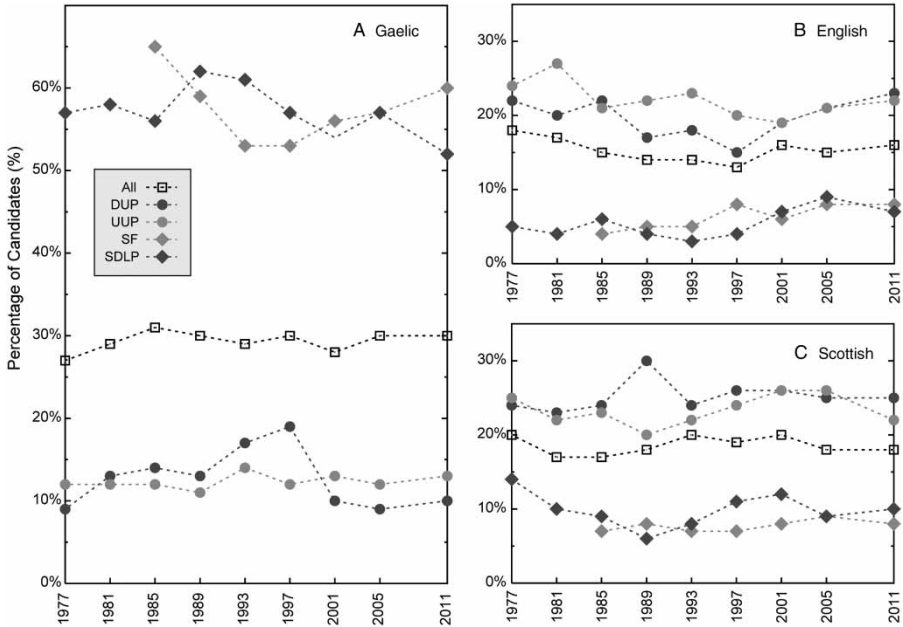**Figure 2.**   Tests of difference between the parties (chi-squared)

Figure 3.   Timeline analysis (1977–2011)

34 years shows that these consistent differences are also highly significant ($P <$ 0.00001 for paired *t*-tests on all comparisons between parties, and of parties with the full candidate lists).

The highly significant and persistent differences in the ethnic background of union-ist and nationalist politicians are overwhelmingly clear. Their role as the bases of Northern Ireland party politics is apparent and strong. Given the age of these origins, this is a notable example of the continuing impact of centuries-old population movements. This cannot be said for the differences within the blocks. In particular, within unionism there are some reasons to suppose that the divisions between British Unionism and Ulster Loyalism had origins in the seventeenth-century planta-tions. The method of surname analysis is a valid one, as can be seen in the way it confirms the 'easier' case of the unionist–nationalist ethnic division, and more diffi-cult cases elsewhere (Byrne & O'Malley, 2012a). Yet there is no evidence in the data set for the hypothesised relationship.

Conclusion

This note confirms the historical ethnic bases for the divisions between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. We also set the more difficult task of explaining differences within the blocks. If long-standing ethnic differences cannot explain

the divide in Northern Ireland's Protestant politics, what, if anything, might? Survey research has pointed to class, but this is a weak and weakening relationship (Evans & Tonge, 2009). Some studies explain variation using attitudes to Dublin, to Catholics and to power-sharing (Evans & Sinnott, 1999; Tonge & Evans, 2001). But these beg the question, what accounts for variation in these attitudes?

Scholars of unionism/loyalism and Protestants agree that there are divisions within this group; they also agree that unionism is a continually changing ideology adapting to different political situations usually imposed on the population (Mitchell, 2003; Ganiel, 2006; McAuley, 2010). It is possible that in the constant need to adapt and compete on a variety of different dimensions – constitutional, economic, religious and cultural – that the differences within unionism have lost links to any original migratory heritage.

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Appendix. Coding Protocol

We used *Grenham's Irish Surnames* (Grenham, 2003) database as the source for the coding. This was recommended to us by professional genealogists and includes all surnames common on the island of Ireland. Where Grenham had no information we used MacLysaght's (1985) book on surname origins. Where surnames had multiple potential origins, names were given multiple codes. So, for instance, candidates with the quite common surname Kennedy, which has two potential origins (Gaelic and Scottish), were coded for both.

At times surnames have been changed for political purposes. So as different groups assume power, people adapt their surname to suit the new regime. It is not unusual for Sinn Féin members to Gaelicise their surname. Gaelicised and anglicised versions of surnames were coded to represent their original synonym. By taking the root name we ensure we are not misled by the adaption of surnames for political/economic purposes.

Only surnames that had exclusive Gaelic origins, English origins (i.e. coded as Old and/or New English), or Scottish origins were used in the analyses presented here. For double-barrelled names we coded both and where both were in agreement we kept the candidate in the analysis, otherwise it was dropped from the analysis.