

**Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that an Irish reunification is advantageous for Republicans and Protestants of Northern Ireland. Whereas Republicans support the establishment of a unified Irish Republic, Protestants support a union with Great Britain. I support the case for an Irish reunification with the following arguments. First, the Good Friday Agreement paves the way for a successful reconciliation between Republicans and Protestants. Second, the economic fallout of Brexit in Northern Ireland sets favorable economic conditions for reconciliation and socialization policies to be implemented successfully. Third, the opposing identities and affiliations currently found in Northern Ireland can be reconciled because of the shared moral values and principles between the locals of Northern Ireland. I also address opposing arguments presented by critics of an Irish reunification. Those arguments mostly consist of concerns over the reemergence of the Troubles, and concerns over Protestants and Unionists losing social and political status in case of reunification. Although these arguments do have merit, I show that the political framework established by the Good Friday Agreement can be expanded to accommodate the Protestant and Unionist segments of the population, as well as the prospect for maintaining similar status within a united Ireland. I conclude the paper by recommending more expansive and comprehensive research aimed at identifying an optimal social, economic, legal, and political framework for an Irish reunification following the precedent of the Good Friday Agreement.

*Keywords:* Northern Ireland, United Ireland, Irish reunification, Unionists, Republicans, The Good Friday Agreement

## **The Island of Ireland Should Be United as One Country**

In this paper, I argue that the island of Ireland should be united as one country. Although it is routinely referred to solely as Ireland, the island is partitioned into two: Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland is a sovereign, independent country. According to Weaver (2021), following the end of the Irish War of Independence and the ensuing Irish Civil War, the Anglo-Irish treaty and the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 divided the island into two separate political entities. The island was divided into an Irish Free State, later known as the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland, which would remain a member of the union with Great Britain (Weaver, 2021). Northern Ireland is predominantly composed of Unionist Protestants who prefer to be a part of the United Kingdom, and Republican Catholics who desire Northern Ireland to be a part of the Republic of Ireland (Todd, 2021). The contrasting views of the people of Northern Ireland resulted in conflict and violence between the two groups, also known as the Troubles (Weaver, 2021). As such, in this paper, I argue that the island of Ireland should be united as one country.

I support my position on uniting Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with the following three arguments. First, I argue that the Good Friday Agreement has already paved the way towards a union. According to Hassan and Ferguson (2019) the Good Friday Agreement has ended the conflict between the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland that lasted nearly 80 years. Second, I argue that the negative consequences faced by the Northern Irish after Brexit caused them to be either in favor or more tolerant of a union with the Republic of Ireland. Creighton (2019) reports that Brexit could result in damage for a vast number of economic sectors in Northern Ireland and could put the peace and well-being of the citizens at risk, creating a more favorable atmosphere for a reunification. Finally, I argue that the divided identity of the Northern Irish Protestants and Irish citizens is not an impediment to union. Despite the various differences between the two distinct groups and the

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

differing national identities, the citizens of Northern Ireland and those of the Republic of Ireland share similar values (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019).

I also consider alternative positions against uniting Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As reported by Todd (2021), critics of a proposed reunification posit that Northern Ireland has more power and sovereignty when it is a part of the United Kingdom, and therefore they would not want to be united with the Republic of Ireland. Additionally, people argue that any reunification efforts could further reignite violence and conflict in Northern Ireland by older Protestants who are fervently against reunification. Finally, opponents claim that the Protestants of Northern Ireland would not want the union of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland because the Protestants of Northern Ireland want to retain the numerical majority they enjoy in present day Northern Ireland. While these positions have merit, I demonstrate that the union of Ireland will result in positive outcomes for the Protestant citizens of Northern Ireland. In addition, the reunification will support Northern Ireland's recovery from the negative impacts of Brexit (Weaver, 2021). Furthermore, it should be noted that the results of the Good Friday Agreement, which ended the Troubles, would form a solid political framework for a new reunification and reconciliation (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019).

The paper is important because the advantages of the union of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are often discussed but without any progress in the pursuit of reunification. That is, uniting Ireland will result in significant advantages to the people of Northern Ireland regardless of their allegiance or affiliation. In order to support my position on Irish reunification, this paper also addresses several important questions. These questions include "How can the decisions laid out by the Good Friday Agreements pave the path towards a union?" "How will the people of Northern Ireland, specifically the Protestants, feel about the union of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland?" and "How will the divided

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

identity of the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland work within the union?”

### **The Vitality of a Reunified Ireland**

Northern Ireland is undergoing a radical change in terms of its demographic distribution and its economic well-being. The options available to Northern Ireland to maintain its status are not limited; however, the most prominent and most viable of those options is to pursue a reunification policy with the Republic of Ireland. In the following sections, I argue that the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit have paved the way towards an Irish reunification, all while being unimpeded by the oppositional national identities.

#### **The Good Friday Agreement**

The Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. According to Kelly (2022), this agreement would maintain peace between the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland after nearly 30 years of violence during the Troubles. Kelly shows that the Troubles were sparked mainly by the opposing political affiliations and the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) pursuit of independence from the United Kingdom. Kelly further explains that while the Good Friday Agreement determined that Northern Ireland was to be a full part of the UK, an Irish reunification would be possible and applicable if backed by a majority democratic vote in Northern Ireland and political willingness in the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, as McDonagh (2004) explains, the Good Friday Agreement established a political framework for reconciliation following the Troubles. Likewise, the agreement established an understanding between the UK and the Republic of Ireland on how to manage the affairs of the people of Northern Ireland and their position with either of the two nations. Therefore, the agreement can be further expanded into an overarching political framework that governs an Irish reunification, all while allowing unionists to maintain their connection with the UK in a similar manner to the current situation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

The Good Friday Agreement is especially important when considering the demographic change in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency conducted a census in 2011, in which it concluded that 42% of the citizens of Northern Ireland are Protestant, 41% are Catholic, and the other 17% identify with another religious or political party (Weaver, 2021). Therefore, Protestants are no longer a majority in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, the prospect of a democratic vote ending in the exit of Northern Ireland from the UK and the reunification of Ireland is not only possible, but highly probable in the future. As such, considering that the Good Friday Agreement has ended the Troubles, the agreement is a roadmap towards a future reunification process in a manner that preserves the integrity and well-being of Protestants in Northern Ireland. In particular, the agreement could be expanded to include a full set of protections and stipulations to prevent any violence against Protestants and minorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Todd, 2021). That is, a similar peaceful transition and reconciliation to that following the Troubles could be emulated in the case of a full Irish reunification.

### **Brexit**

The departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU) with Brexit has placed Northern Ireland's economy in an unenviable situation. Northern Ireland is highly dependent on EU funding for essential services and economic infrastructure with an estimated 3.55 billion euro received between 2014 and 2020 (Creighton, 2019). Likewise, while Great Britain remains the leading trading partner of Northern Ireland, much of Northern Ireland's trade and international interdependencies are with other EU countries. Additionally, Northern Ireland faces various rising challenges resulting from Brexit in terms of regulatory dependency (Birnie & Brownlow, 2021). The most notable of these challenges is the integrated nature of Northern Ireland's economy with other EU economies. In effect, while the UK has left the EU and lost any vote or say in EU regulations, the economy of Northern Ireland remains bound by EU regulations. Therefore, Northern Ireland effectively

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

lost its representation when it comes to its essential economic regulatory and decision-making processes.

Similar to Northern Ireland's economic relations with the EU, trade relations between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are especially threatened by Brexit. This concern becomes particularly important when considering the volume of trade passing between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, reaching an estimated seven billion Euros as of 2017, with the volume gradually increasing over the past several decades (Creighton, 2019). Furthermore, considering the funding and economic support the Republic of Ireland receives from the EU, the Republic of Ireland is likely to out-compete and gain competitive advantages over Northern Ireland in their trade relations, even if a special protocol was carved out from Brexit (Birnie & Brownlow, 2021). Therefore, by opting for an Irish reunification, Northern Ireland can counteract any negative impacts that Brexit would trigger, all while maintaining economic prosperity and regaining EU support and funding.

### **Identity and Confessionalism**

A key issue with the prospects of a reunification between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is the differing identities between the majorities in each state. While the Catholics hold a purely Irish identity, the Protestants hold an identity that is mixed in nature. On the one hand, a large majority of Protestants in Northern Ireland are Unionists at heart in that they support and have an allegiance for the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (Connolly, 2000; MacDonald, 1990). On the other hand, contrary to Protestants in Great Britain, Protestantism in Northern Ireland is fundamentally antagonistic and antithetical to Catholic beliefs common on the island of Ireland. As explained by Kunze (2015), while the Northern Irish Protestant identity has developed substantially since the 16th and 17th century plantation era, their identity was, fundamentally, born out of English colonization efforts through the relocation of English and Scottish protestants to settle the island following the

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

failure to convert the Irish to Protestantism. As such, the origin of their identity is antagonistic to the Catholic Irish.

Although a substantial difference in national identity exists between the Republican Catholics and the Unionist Protestants, the two populations share a remarkably similar set of civil and ethical values (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019). These similarities were demonstrated by Maiangwa and Byrne (2015) in their study on the reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland. Specifically, while their initial findings showed mixed results in population centers, the results show a remarkable success of the reconciliation efforts in border counties where the population was exposed to and interacted with people of both belief systems. Accordingly, the reconciliation between the varying identities can be fast tracked during a reunification between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland through the implementation of policies aimed at encouraging and increasing socialization between the opposing communities.

The Good Friday agreement provides an effective legal framework for a union between Northern Ireland and the republic of Ireland. More specifically, the Good Friday Agreement can provide a satisfactory set of protections, legal rights, and political rights for the Northern Protestant Irish after reunification (Todd, 2021). For this reason, an Irish reunification would provide substantial civil, economic and political benefits, and would also ensure the reconciliation of Irish identities.

### **Opposition to an Irish Reunification**

Although an Irish reunification has the potential to greatly benefit the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, some argue that it could have serious repercussions. These opposing views range from fears that a reunification could cause a resumption of violence to concerns that Protestants could lose their status and political power in Northern Ireland. Although these concerns have merit, I show that the benefits of an Irish reunification far outweigh these concerns.

### **The Troubles**

A key issue that plagues the prospect of Irish reunification comes from Protestant opposition to the process. As detailed by Todd (2021), the Loyalist Protestants in Northern Ireland remain firmly in support of the union with Britain, with up to 40% describing an Irish reunification outside of the UK almost impossible to accept as of 2019. Additionally, identity politics and ethno-political tensions persist in much of the political landscape of Northern Ireland (Holland, 2021). Furthermore, social segregation, disunity, and tensions likewise persist between Catholic Republicans and Protestant Unionists in much of Northern Ireland with the tensions and hostility more prominent among older generations who were either present during the Troubles or were born shortly after (Herrault & Murtagh, 2019).

The conditions of the Troubles are amplified in their effects by the lack of a fully encompassing legal and constitutional framework aimed at reconciliation and ending the conflict once and for all. As detailed by Leahy (2018), while the Good Friday Agreement has managed to put an end to the conflict, the constitutional and legal frameworks necessary for reconciliation, such as anti-discrimination and anti-segregation laws, remain politically unfavorable. Likewise, although political radicalism and partisanship is gradually decreasing in younger voters, the memories of the conflict and the generational trauma suffered by either side remain influential in shaping the political leanings of either group. Consequently, critics of Irish reunification maintain that an attempt at forcing reunification, even under a democratic vote in the north, would most likely lead to a reinvigoration of tensions and a possible resumption of the conflict.

Although these concerns have merit, recent events in the form of Brexit and the COVID-19 economic downturn could highlight a new opportunity for a peaceful conflict resolution and an Irish reunification. As explained by Ruane (2021) in his analysis of the conflict resolution in the Republic of Ireland following the civil war, the conflict was mainly resolved through expansionary economic development policies adopted in the Republic of

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

Ireland since the 1950s. In addition, Ruane highlights the influence of the European common market and expanding trade relations with the Republic of Ireland during the later decades of the 20th century in strengthening social ties and bridging relations between Catholics and Protestants in the country. Although the opportunity for reconciliation on a similar scale and pace may be difficult in Northern Ireland, the current economic downturn may open the door for another opportunity to use economic development as a means for conflict resolution. In particular, the economic impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland (Birnie & Brownlow, 2021), and the economic downturn and supply chain crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for reconciliation similar to what the Republic of Ireland had in the 1950s.

Improving people's living standards and opportunities prevents segregation and promotes inter-community commerce. The social and political tensions currently present in Northern Ireland could be bridged in a fairly expedient manner at best, and conflict made counter-productive or undesirable by the public at the worst of outcomes (Bell 2018; Marc, 2018). Therefore, while reunification is undesirable for a good portion of the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland, the circumstances that the country is going through presents an opportunity for a long-term reconciliation and reunification, especially if supported by a democratic majority vote.

### **Political and Social Status**

A key contention with Irish reunification that Unionist Protestants mostly put forward is the power and economic prosperity that the United Kingdom gives Northern Ireland. As detailed by Todd (2021), the most prominent contentions by Unionists to an Irish reunification can be divided into three distinct categories. First, the majority status of Protestants within the United Kingdom is threatened by the reunification of Ireland. Second, remaining within the UK confers some economic advantages to Northern Ireland, which could be threatened by joining the Republic of Ireland. Finally, the political, cultural, and

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

strategic influence that the citizens of Northern Ireland enjoyed on an international level through their affiliation with the UK, and the potential for losing any such influence could be an impediment to the union. With Brexit, the first and second concerns have been addressed in much of the literature and in previous sections of this paper, but the third issue remains unanswered for the most part. However, Holden (2021) reports that the international standing of the UK has been severely damaged by Brexit because of the sudden and rapid break up of its membership in the EU. Although such endeavor would not have caused such a deep impact in the past, the 21<sup>st</sup> century UK stood as an economic and financial center within the EU and derived much of its international power from this alliance.

The UK also expressed security and strategic interests, and economic influence from its cooperation arrangements with the wider European community. Consequently, the sudden departure of the UK from the EU without a sufficient degree of preparation and independent arrangements and treaties made it so that the UK lost a significant degree of influence on the international arena. Likewise, the UK has become vulnerable to unfavorable treaties and arrangements when it comes to major powers such as the US and China, as well as with its direct neighbors in the EU following Brexit.

The Northern Irish Protestant position is made even weaker by the decline of Christianity in general within the UK. Sherwood (2021) reports that less than half of the population of the UK identifies with Christianity, with confessionalist factions in general facing a rapid decline. Accordingly, while the Protestants in Northern Ireland traditionally favored a union with Great Britain as it would grant them a favorable position in terms of internal power structures favoring Protestants and an internationally advantageous position, the paradigm nowadays has shifted. More specifically, Northern Irish Protestants are actively becoming weaker internally as fewer people see themselves through a confessionalist banner within the UK, and weaker internationally because of the negative impact of Brexit on the UK. Furthermore, demographic change within Northern Ireland shifting towards Republican

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

Catholics may imply a loss of political power even within Northern Ireland in the not-so-distant future (Gordon, 2018). Therefore, a safer route that can safeguard Northern Irish Unionists and Protestants in general would be to reintegrate with the international community through a fair power sharing system similar to that operated by the EU, with the main path to do so through a general Irish reunification.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presented arguments in support of an Irish reunification under an expanded legal framework based on the Good Friday Agreement. These arguments include that the Republicans and Protestants share similar values, and that Brexit and the legal framework that the Good Friday Agreement paves the way toward a union. Most importantly, a substantial body of literature was identified showing that the Good Friday Agreement represents the key to Irish reunification. Specifically, there seems to be a partial consensus that an expanded legal and political framework based on the Good Friday Agreement would facilitate a reunification and would also address much of the current political and social tensions within Northern Ireland.

Opposing arguments to an Irish reunification have also been considered. Most prominently, arguments regarding the reinvigoration of the Troubles, and the loss of power and majority status by Protestants and Unionists in general. Although these arguments have merit, they are mostly based on unwarranted grounds since the Good Friday Agreement can be expanded to provide a comprehensive and encompassing political framework for the integration of Protestant Northern Ireland. Furthermore, remaining within the post-Brexit United Kingdom could result in many of the same repercussions cited by those opposed to the reunification. Most notably, remaining within the UK could increase Northern Ireland's risk for a substantial loss of economic and political power as a consequence of the UK itself losing international footing. Furthermore, the rapid decline of Confessionalist factions in the UK could jeopardize their social position and status internally within the UK. As such, while

## UNITING THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

the main opposing arguments have importance, they can be addressed and are also based on a false sense of security within the UK.

Although the case for an Irish reunification is solid at its core, the reunification itself remains politically difficult. A substantial volume of research and analysis by administrative experts is required to formulate a satisfactory social, economic, legal, and political framework for an Irish reunification, even when using historical precedents as a guide. This research is needed mainly because of the complexity and intertwining factions present in Northern Ireland, and the required political consensus to achieve a satisfactory settlement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Additionally, the existing public opposition by a notable portion of the Protestant and Unionist population makes it so that an outbreak of violence could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the opposition chooses to take that route. Accordingly, an Irish reunification may very well be improbable in the near future, even if it was deemed favorably by a large portion of Northern Ireland's population.

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