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'Seismic' or stalemate? The (bio)politics of the 2021 Northern Ireland Census

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ABSTRACT
This article provides a critical reading of the 2021 Census of Population in Northern Ireland. A close examination of the available data on religion and nationality leads us to suggest that the Census provides a distorted portrait of Northern Irish society in two crucial, and connected, senses. First, the operation of the Census creates incentives for many residents to identify in ethnoreligious terms who might not ordinarily do so. Second, the forms of inter-communal competition generated by the decennial poll serve to obscure the degree of cultural diversity that exists in an increasingly secular society.

KEYWORDS
Northern Ireland; Census; demography; secularisation; Good Friday Agreement

Introduction

In many societies with sharp ethnic divisions, the Census of Population is not merely a routine bureaucratic operation of the state but a critical political event. North Macedonia, Ethiopia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are all cases in point (Cooley, 2020). Northern Ireland is, of course, another. While the decennial Census is always keenly anticipated in the region, the instalment conducted in March 2021 was especially so. In advance of results being released, one prominent commentator had gone so far as to suggest that ('cultural') Catholics would emerge as a majority of the population (O'Leary, 2021, p. 2). Most other commentators were more circumspect, predicting that the Catholic community would instead form the largest minority in Northern Ireland. And so it was to prove.

The news that there are now, ostensibly, more Catholics than Protestants among the region's record population of 1.9 million was celebrated across a range of nationalist opinion as a herald of imminent constitutional change. Professor Colin Harvey of the civil society group *Ireland's Future* – which campaigns for a 'border poll' in the region – insisted that the outcome of the Census was truly 'seismic' (Nolan, 2022). Although typically based on the most cursory of glances at the data, such commentary would, nonetheless, become the dominant frame through which the 2021 Census

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would come to be read. A more sustained engagement with the information suggests, however, a rather more complex demographic picture. The data released thus far indicate that rather than being on the verge of a radical change of direction, Northern Ireland will most likely remain on the same course it has been following for quite some time now. The immediate future of the region, in other words, will, in all probability, be marked not by 'seismic' constitutional change but rather by a continuation of the cultural and political stalemate that has been the hallmark of the quarter century since the advent of the Good Friday Agreement.

While the Census of Population tends to overstate certain processes of cultural and political transformation at work within Northern Irish society, it serves, at the same time, to underplay certain others. As an instrument of the (bio)power of the state, the Census is invariably cast as a simple, faithful narrator of demographic change when it is, of course, a key author of that putative change. It is, in the terms of Michel Foucault (1978), a discursive practice that, in part at least, constitutes the social realities it claims merely to record. As is the case in other societies with deep ethnic fissures, the political effect of the Census of Population is to regenerate and reward certain debilitating versions of inter-communal competition (Kertzer & Dominique, 2002, p. 30). In particular, it acts to reproduce the 'two communities' model of Northern Irish society, generating a centripetal force that induces many residents to define themselves in ethnoreligious terms who may not ordinarily do so. The inevitable outcome is that the Census data simply fail to capture fully the secular and progressive currents that have come to define Northern Irish society in the era of the peace process.

It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that we should approach the 2021 Northern Ireland Census in a more critical frame of mind. In the discussion that follows, we provide a close reading of the available data on two critical cultural variables, namely religion and nationality. This examination leads us to the conclusion that, in certain crucial regards, the decennial Census provides a profoundly distorted portrait of Northern Irish society, one that tends to compound the many political difficulties still facing the region.

The sectarian headcount, part one

In mainstream commentary, Northern Ireland is typically represented as home to 'two communities' distinguished as Catholic and Protestant, respectively, in their religious affiliation, Irish and British in their cultural orientation, and nationalist and unionist in their political ambition (Bjarnason et al., 2022). While all three binaries are assumed analogous and used interchangeably, it is perhaps the one that demarcates 'Catholics' and 'Protestants' that is employed most regularly to capture the ethnic fissures in the region. It is entirely inevitable, then, that the aspects of the decennial Census of Population that attract most attention are those pertaining to religious affiliation. The questionnaire that Northern Irish residents were required to complete in the spring of 2021 featured two separate, but connected, questions on their religious identity. The first simply asked the religion to which they belong. Those who answered 'none' to that initial inquiry - or who failed to answer it all - were then required to respond to a supplementary question about the religious tradition in which they had been raised. In this section, we will consider the data arising from the first question, and in the following section we will turn our attention to the second.

The most eye-catching facet of the 2021 Census was, of course, that it documented a reversal of the historic demographic balance between the putative 'two communities' in Northern Ireland. That transformation is especially marked in responses to the first, longstanding question on religion which invites individuals to select the tradition to which they belong – see Table 1, below. Those completing the questionnaire in March 2021 were offered the opportunity to tick one of four boxes designating the four largest denominations in Northern Ireland – Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists – or to take a fifth option of writing in their own selection. That only Christian options are predesignated in the Census form would seem peculiar in many other contexts, but does reflect pretty accurately the very specific ethnoreligious composition of people living in the region. If we consider what are usually considered the four other major 'world religions', for instance, we discover that the combined number of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews in Northern Ireland is just 17,041, not even 1% of the total population (NISRA, 2023, MS-B21).[1] As we shall attest later, Northern Ireland has become rather more culturally diverse over the course of the peace process. That diversity exists, however, within what remains, nominally at least, an overwhelmingly Christian context.

Those who identify as Presbyterians (316,103), Episcopalians (219,788), and Methodists (44,725) are combined with the members of literally dozens of other smaller denominations – many with only a few hundred, or even a few dozen, followers – to create a single composite category that is officially termed 'Protestant and Other Christian' but more commonly referred to simply as 'Protestant' (NISRA, 2023, MS-B21). The latest Census findings document once again the long-running decline in the population subscribing to the myriad denominations of Protestantism. In the decade that preceded 2021, the number of people who belong to one or other of the Protestant churches fell more than 40,000, with the total Protestant population declining 4.2% to a record low of 37.4%. In contrast, the Catholic community in Northern Ireland has continued on the upward trajectory that has defined the era of the peace process (NISRA, 2022, MS-B19). Between 2011 and 2021, the number of people belonging to the Catholic church grew more quickly than before, by a figure of almost 70,000. Catholics are now clearly the most substantial ethnoreligious minority in Northern Ireland, representing some 42.3% of the region's population (NISRA, 2022, MS-B19).

The advance of the Catholic community had been so widely anticipated in advance of the Census that it tended to be reported as though simply a matter of empirical fact. If we take a more critical eye to this ostensibly most crucial aspect of demographic change in Northern Ireland, however, it proves rather more problematic than often assumed. A comparison with the previous Census of Population is instructive here. In the period between 2001 and 2011, the number of people specifying membership of the Catholic Church increased by 59,571 (NISRA, 2001, CAS308; NISRA, 2012, KS211NI). That

Table 1. Religion stated, Census of Population, 2011 & 2021.

Religion stated	Protestant	Catholic	No religion/Not stated
2011	752,555 (41.6%)	738,033 (40.8%)	305,146 (16.9%)
2021	710,992 (37.4%)	805,151 (42.3%)	361,512 (19.0%)

growth in the Catholic community reflected two principal demographic trends then working in its favour. First, in the decade leading up to the 2011 Census, the number of births in Northern Ireland increased every single year, and was up 15% across the entire period (Registrar General, 2022). That spike in the birth rate appears to have worked primarily to the advantage of the Catholic community and ensured that at that time a majority of school pupils in the region, albeit a slim one, would come from that ethnoreligious background (Coulter & Shirlow, 2021, p. 211). Second, the expansion of the European Union in 2004 led to the arrival of migrants from the Accession states who were predominantly from Catholic backgrounds. The 2011 Census records, for instance, that there were 26,787 people who identified as Polish or Lithuanian resident in Northern Ireland, of whom 21,747 were Catholic (NISRA, 2012, DC2239NI).[2] In other words, migrants from the Accession states were responsible for more than a third of the growth in the Catholic community registered in the 2011 Census.

Neither of these demographic advantages that the Catholic population enjoyed in the decade prior to 2011 would, however, last, in full at least, into the one that followed. The period documented in the 2021 Census actually witnessed a 13% fall in the number of births registered in Northern Ireland (Registrar General, 2022). Although it went largely unnoticed in mainstream commentary, that decline in the birth rate was, in fact, relatively pronounced within the Catholic community. This becomes readily apparent if we examine the religious affiliations of children born between the last two Censuses. Among nine year olds, for instance, there are in total 12,344 children who are Catholics. As we move down through the age categories, however, that number dwindles appreciably, with just 9,657 of those yet to reach their first birthday hailing from Catholic backgrounds. That sharp fall of 22% has ensured that Catholics actually represent a declining proportion of the very youngest sections of Northern Irish society. While 48.4% of children aged nine hail from the Catholic community, the same is true of only 45.5% of those under twelve months.[3]

In addition, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union has had an inevitable impact on the number of people arriving from the Accession states, although one less dramatic perhaps than might have been anticipated. The 2021 Census reveals that the number of Poles and Lithuanians living in Northern Ireland has continued to grow but at a much more modest rate than in the immediate aftermath of EU expansion. There are now 37,504 people in the region who identify as Polish or Lithuanian (NISRA, 2023, MS-B29), of whom 27,026 consider themselves Catholic. In other words, the 2021 Census identifies around 7,000 more Catholics from those backgrounds than was the case a decade previously.[4]

There is, therefore, something puzzling about the headline figure that emerged from the 2021 Northern Ireland Census. Given that two of the demographic trends previously working in its favour are no longer (fully) doing so, it could reasonably have been expected that the rate of growth within the Catholic community would have fallen. And yet, precisely the opposite has happened. Against a backdrop of falling birth rates and declining migration from the Baltic states, how is it that the Catholic population has grown at a faster rate than before? If we are to unravel that particular puzzle, we need to reflect on the fact that in Northern Ireland, as with many other ethnically divided societies (Cooley, 2020, p. 8), the Census of Population has always been seen as an explicitly *political* event.

During the three decades of wholesale political violence that predated the Belfast Agreement – often designated by the curious euphemism 'the Troubles' – the republican movement sought to cast the Census as merely another critical expression of the (bio)-power of a state with which it was at war. Republicans' antipathy to this bureaucratic exercise was expressed most gravely in April 1981 when members of the Provisional IRA shot dead Joanne Mathers, an enumerator from a Protestant background who was gathering Census forms in Derry (Deeney, 2021). Most of the attempts to disrupt the Census were, however, restricted to campaigns of civil disobedience. The republican movement organised boycotts during both the 1971 and 1981 Censuses which resulted in many people in working-class Catholic neighbourhoods refusing to complete the form and, in particular, to respond to the question on religious affiliation (Coakley, 2021, p. 33). This strategy of abstention would prove particularly successful on the latter occasion, when the poll was conducted in the febrile atmosphere of the hunger strikes. In the 1981 Census, almost one in five of the population – 274,584 people – failed to complete the question asking the religious denomination to which they belonged.

The boycotts organised by republicans during the Troubles created an aversion among many Catholics towards the Census that would survive the end of the conflict. As recently as 2011, for example, there were 122,252 Northern Irish residents, 6.8% of the population, who declined to state their religious affiliation (NISRA. 2012, KS211NI). The commonplace assumption that these individuals hail predominantly from Catholic backgrounds is borne out in our analysis of the disaggregated 2011 Census presented below. As we are unable to ascertain the ethnoreligious affiliation of those in the 'not stated' category in that instalment, we have introduced the proxy variable of place of residence. In Table 2, below, we can see the distribution of those who refused to answer questions on religion across quintiles marking the spatial concentration of Catholic and Protestant residents. As anticipated, there are rather more people who fall into the 'not stated' category in wards with high concentrations of Catholics than in those with a preponderance of Protestants.

One of the most significant developments in the 2021 Census – although one that has barely been acknowledged to date – is that the previously very substantial body of people refusing to complete the religious identity question has all but disappeared. In that poll, only 30,529 people fell into the 'not stated' category, amounting to just 1.6% of the population (NISRA, 2022, MS-B19). It is impossible to say, of course, where those 90,000 or so people who have lost their reticence about answering questions on religion might now appear in the Census categories. It seems reasonable, however, to assume these individuals may well have had a hand in the key demographic shift that caught the headlines when the 2021 Census results were released.

Given that most of those who have refused to disclose their religious identity in the past hail from Catholic backgrounds, it is entirely possible that the sharp decline in the 'not stated' category has entailed tens of thousands of people identifying themselves as Catholic for the

Table 2. Percentage 'not stated' by quintiles of spatial segregation by religion, 2011.

	1 (Low)	2	3	4	5 (High)
Catholic	6.24	6.17	5.89	6.83	7.98
Protestant	8.39	6.62	6.15	6.15	5.78

first time. That apparent change of heart might be attributed to the very specific context in which the most recent Census of Population took place. Long in advance of the poll, there was widespread speculation that Catholics would, for the first time, represent the largest grouping in Northern Ireland. That change in the standing of a community that had in the past been treated as subordinate might well have been sufficient to persuade some people harbouring an historical mistrust of the Census – and, indeed, some who might not otherwise embrace the term – to disclose themselves as 'Catholics.' Furthermore, in the heightened political climate post-Brexit, a cogent campaign has emerged insisting that demographic change is among the critical forces that might prompt a referendum on Northern Ireland's future. The prospect that the outcome of this particular Census could bring a 'border poll' closer might well have convinced some that this was the time to abandon their reticence and declare themselves as Catholics for the first time.

The virtual disappearance of the 'not stated' category in the 2021 Census might be said to have a further significance. While the decision of those who were previously averse to specifying their religion almost certainly augmented the size of the Catholic community, it may also have given a certain misleading impression. The migration of a substantial body of people out of the 'not stated' category registers in the Census data as recent demographic growth, when it is, in fact, something else entirely. Many of those who abandoned their reluctance to answer the religious question may well have been in the system for several decades. Hence, while their change of heart registers as fresh growth within the Catholic community, it is, in fact, growth from previous decades which has finally been captured in the Census data. This distinction suggests that we should perhaps approach current demographic trends in Northern Ireland with a little more care. Although elements of the Census data indicate a Catholic community growing faster than before, it is entirely probable that the opposite is, in fact, the case.

The origins of that critical paradox are to be found less in developments over the last decade than in those that went before. In plain terms, what might in fact be the marked decline in the growth of the Catholic community has been obscured by the reallocation of people who previously refused to disclose their membership of it. Given that those falling into the 'not stated' category have now all but disappeared, it is simply not possible that such an occurrence could happen again. As a result, it might well transpire that the optimism with which some political figures greeted the 2021 Census data will prove a little misplaced. In view of contemporary demographic trends, it is entirely possible that the latest Census will signal the demographic high-water mark of a Catholic community now moving into a plateau likely to prove a prelude to gradual decline. Indeed, the fall in the number of Catholic children attending primary school in Northern Ireland that has occurred since 2018 would suggest that process is already under way (DENI, 2023). That potentially significant development acts to remind us of one of the more stubborn realities of contemporary Northern Ireland, namely that wherever the solution lies to the region's perennial cultural and political stalemate, it is unlikely to be found in the realm of demography.

The sectarian headcount, part two

The seemingly inexorable advance of the Catholic community in the era of the peace process has been mirrored in the apparently irreversible decline of its historical

ethnoreligious rival. Although Northern Ireland was constructed precisely to ensure it would remain a majority in perpetuity, the Protestant community has long since lost that status. In the 2021 Census, as we saw earlier, a mere 37.4% of the population identified themselves as belonging to one of the dozens of denominations that represent the diverse traditions of Protestantism. There are, of course, clear demographic reasons for this decline. Protestants are, after all, over-represented both among the elderly and among those who choose to attend British universities, most of whom never return after completing their studies (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 169). The dwindling of the Protestant community might also be attributed, however, to a certain cultural transformation that has gained momentum since the Troubles drew to a close.

When the conflict was at its height, Northern Ireland clearly constituted a profoundly religious society. The advent of the peace process would, however, signal a period of rapid secularisation in the region (Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018). This has been indexed most vividly in the steep decline in patterns of religious observance. At present, around three in ten Northern Irish people claim to go to church weekly, a level of attendance that remains phenomenally high by European standards, but which pales in comparison to those of a generation ago (Coakley, 2021, p. 34). While the process of secularisation has become ever more apparent within both of Northern Ireland's principal ethnoreligious traditions, it might be said that its impact became evident first among the region's Protestants (Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018, p. 738). There is, of course, a certain logic to this pattern. The composition and culture of the Protestant community are, after all, rather more amenable to the process of religious disaffiliation. That those who share the name 'Protestant' are scattered across literally dozens of often radically divergent denominations means that their faith often leaves them prone more to schism than solidarity. Furthermore, the lesser emphasis on church attendance ensures that religion plays a less pervasive role in the everyday lives of many Protestants, rendering it rather easier perhaps to turn their backs on it altogether.

That Northern Irish Protestants have proved more amenable to the process of religious disaffiliation is borne out in two forms of data garnered in the Census of Population. The 2001 edition saw the introduction of a supplementary question to the longstanding enquiry on religious affiliation. Those answering 'none' to the initial query would, as noted earlier, then be directed to provide information on the religious denomination in which they had been raised. The introduction of this supplementary question originated less in the needs of those constructing the Census than in the pressures on those tasked with monitoring the often vexed issue of fair employment in Northern Ireland. Republican politicians, in particular, had been keen to ensure that as many Catholics as possible appear in the Census in order to maximise the labour market opportunities afforded to members of that community (Cooley, 2020, p. 5). While the supplementary question was, therefore, designed in the first instance to identify those who might be termed 'cultural' Catholics, it would, in fact, reveal the existence of a rather larger body of Protestants who had drifted away from their religious upbringing.

The 2021 Census confirmed an established trend when it reported that the overwhelming majority of those who indicated they had no religious faith – either by ticking 'none' or refusing to answer the question at all - but then went on to disclose that they had been socialised in one were in fact from Protestant backgrounds. Some 116,552 'cultural' Protestants fell into this category, compared to 64,600 'cultural'

Catholics (NISRA, 2022, MS-B24). That those who have no religious faith but were raised in one are almost twice as likely to hail from Protestant backgrounds underscores that the headline Census data need to be read with a more critical eye. In particular, the perennial preoccupation with the first religion question in the Census is problematic in that it tends to understate the true magnitude of the Protestant community, or, more precisely, of the community that has traditionally been designated primarily as 'Protestant.' The introduction of the supplementary question has, of course, gone some way to correcting this underestimation – see Table 3 below. When the 6.1% of the population who might be termed 'cultural' Protestants and the 3.4% who might be considered 'cultural' Catholics are added, the previously stark gap between the 'two communities' falls to a rather less emphatic disparity of 2.2%, a little over 42,000 people (NISRA, 2022, MS-B24). And even that diminished demographic advantage on the part of the Catholic community may not, in fact, really exist. There is, certainly, another set of data contained in the Census that would give grounds to doubt its existence. In order to appreciate that information fully, however, we need to leave the discussion of religion and turn our attention to one of the other critical variables that feature in the Census, namely that of national identity.

National identity

In 2011, a question on national identity appeared for the first time in the Northern Ireland Census. Its inclusion was primarily a response to a range of bureaucratic pressures, not least the demands of the EU that member states monitor the citizenship of all residents after the incorporation of the Accession states (Cooley, 2021, p. 463). This rather mundane rationale goes some way perhaps to explaining why the inclusion of a question on so sensitive a political issue in Northern Ireland passed with remarkably little comment at the time. In the last two editions of the Census, people in the region have had the opportunity to choose one or more of six pre-designated national identities – British, Irish, Northern Irish, English, Scottish, and Welsh – and/or to write in another option. Of the half dozen nationalities specifically mentioned, it was, needless to say, the first three that would be selected – either alone or in combination – most frequently when householders were completing their questionnaires. These responses were then aggregated into two distinct classifications of national identity. The first captures where people have selected just one of the available identities, as was the case with four out of five respondents. The second quantifies the number of times a specific identity is mentioned whether on its own or in combination with another possibility. Hence, for example, in Classification One we discover how many people feel themselves to be 'Irish only', while in Classification Two we encounter people who are 'Irish only', plus those who feel 'Irish and British,' 'Irish and Northern Irish,' and 'Irish, British and

Table 3. Religion stated/religion stated plus religion brought up in, Census of Population 2021.

	Protestant	Catholic
Religion stated	710,992 (37.4%)	805,151 (42.3%)
Religion stated plus religion brought up in	827,545 (43.5%)	869,753 (45.7%)

Northern Irish.' The former metric might be held to offer a sense of the depth of specific national identities, while the latter provides a sense of their breadth. The key data on nationality across the last two Censuses are summarised in Table 4, below:

The most dramatic change in terms of national identity recorded in the latest Census is a steep decline in the number of people defining themselves as 'British only.' Between 2011 and 2021, the proportion of the population selecting that option fell from 39.9% to 31.9% (NISRA, 2022, MS-B15). In part, the decline of Britishness disclosed in the Census might be attributed to the specific demographic profile of the Protestant community. That identity has traditionally been most popular among those Protestants who are over-represented in older age groups. It is to be expected that as that generation continues to pass away, the number of people in Northern Ireland who define themselves as British will dwindle further. It is unlikely, however, that the decline in Britishness recorded in the 2021 Census is attributable solely to the higher mortality rate within the Protestant community. After all, the fall in the number of people who regard themselves as 'British only' (8%) is rather greater than that in the Protestant population as a whole (4%). There are evidently other forces at play here, two of which will be drawn out for closer consideration.

The seemingly precipitous decline of Britishness in Northern Ireland might be traced to the notoriously fractious relationship that exists between the Protestant community and the polity to which many of its members often claim allegiance. In his analysis of the Census results, Nolan (2022) suggests that the supposedly liberal and secular pulses that animate Westminster politics have alienated many conservative Northern Irish Protestants, prompting them to question their Britishness and to seek refuge, perhaps, in other forms of national identity. We would suggest that precisely the opposite is more likely to be the case. During the peace process, Northern Ireland has belatedly undergone a rapid secularisation that took root first perhaps in the admittedly unlikely ground of the Protestant community. A succession of survey data intimates, for instance, that younger members of that community are especially liberal, strongly supportive of issues such as gay marriage and abortion rights (University of Liverpool, General Election Surveys, 2015, 2017, 2019). It is likely then that what is alienating many Northern Irish Protestants is not that Westminster operates as a secular, modern polity but rather, precisely, that it regularly fails to do so.

Those increasingly numerous members of the Protestant community – whether practising, 'cultural,' or lapsed entirely – who are secular and progressive in their views will have been disturbed by the chaos that has recently overtaken mainstream British politics and, most crucially, the turmoil engendered by a Brexit project that was evidently hatched with no regard whatsoever for the region of the United Kingdom in which they happen to reside. It is among these people, arguably, that some of the most critical reflections on Britishness have taken place. The data furnished by the 2021 Census (NISRA, 2022, MS-B15) suggest that some have chosen to qualify their sense of British

Table 4. National identity, 2021 (2011 in brackets).

	British	Irish	Northern Irish
Classification One	31.9% (39.9%)	29.1% (25.3%)	19.8% (20.9%)
Classification Two	42.8% (48.4%)	33.3% (28.4%)	31.5% (29.4%)

national identity – hence the almost 2% increase in those combining it with Northern Irishness – while others have gone one step further and dispensed with it altogether in order to join the ranks of the Northern Irish, an elusive and heterogenous category to which we will return shortly.

While the decline of Britishness signalled in the latest Census results might reasonably be expected to reflect shifts among Northern Irish Protestants, it might, however, transpire to be the outcome of changes in the other main ethnoreligious community in the region as well. In order to understand this seemingly counter-intuitive proposition, we need to acknowledge one of the more peculiar findings of the previous Census in 2011. In that edition, a quite remarkable – although rarely remarked upon – total of 109,444 Catholics identified as wholly or partially British (NISRA, 2011, DC2240NI). The most plausible explanation as to why more than one in eight members of the Catholic community would select an identity conventionally deemed anathema to them is that they interpreted it as signifying citizenship rather than nationality. In identifying as British, in other words, they were offering a pragmatic acknowledgment of the state in which they happen to pay their taxes, rather than a ringing endorsement of those funds being used to maintain the opulent lifestyles of the House of Windsor. A great deal has, of course, changed in the period since the residents of Northern Ireland completed their questionnaires for the 2011 Census.

The most crucial of these changes is, needless to say, Brexit. As a recent special issue of *Space and Polity* makes clear, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union has transformed the entire political environment in which the region resides (Boyle et al., 2018). The prospect that Brexit might necessitate the return to a 'hard' border on the island of Ireland evidently radicalised political opinion and drew some within the Catholic community to the cause of radical constitutional change (Anderson, 2018). One significant outcome of this period of ideological flux has been a sharp decline in the willingness of Northern Irish Catholics to acknowledge a sense of Britishness. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of Catholic respondents identifying as 'British only' fell from 86,761 to 56,946, while those indicating they felt British in whole or in part dropped from 109,444 to 77,999 (NISRA, 2023, DT-0002). It would appear, therefore, that the marked decline in Britishness revealed in the last Census originates not only in changes afoot within the Protestant community, but also in those at play within the region's other principal ethnoreligious tradition.

The apparent waning of British national identity that has occurred in Northern Ireland in the last decade has coincided with a marked increase in the number of people designating as Irish in the region. In the 2021 Census, 29.1% of the population specified that they were 'Irish only' – a rise of 3.8% from 2011 – and 33.3% stated that they considered themselves Irish either in whole or in combination with another national identity – 4.9% up on ten years earlier (NISRA, 2022, MS-B15). In total, some 633,986 people in the region disclosed feelings of Irishness, compared to 513,390 a decade before. The seemingly sharp ascent of Irish national identity owes its origins, needless to say, to a seminal political moment that occurred precisely midway between the last two instalments of the Census. One key outcome of the Brexit referendum, as noted earlier, was to alienate yet further large swathes of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, heightening their sense of difference from the rest of the United Kingdom and kindling a belief that constitutional change might be at hand. That acute alienation has

inevitably nurtured feelings of nationality that have been reflected not only in the rise of Irishness recorded in the 2021 Census, but also in the phenomenal growth in the popularity of Irish passports documented therein.

Across the decade either side of the Brexit referendum, the number of people living in Northern Ireland holding an Irish passport rose from 375,826 to 614,250 (NISRA, 2022, MS-A22), close to one third of the entire population. That steep rise has, as one might anticipate, occurred primarily among the ranks of the nationalist community. In 2011, those who identify, or were raised, as Catholics were only slightly more likely to own an Irish passport (330,777) than its UK equivalent (313,386) (NISRA, 2012, DC2252NI).[5] Over the following decade, however, that disparity would grow substantially. The most recent Census data show that only 238,622 Northern Irish Catholics now own a British passport, while 496,450 are in possession of an Irish one, an overwhelming majority of whom (448,210) hold *only* that document. While this significant development almost certainly reflects a strengthening of national feeling among Catholics living north of the Irish border, it may well also have been driven by other, rather more prosaic, instrumental concerns.

With Brexit now a reality, possession of an Irish passport, after all, entitles UK citizens living in Northern Ireland to retain some of the advantages of EU membership, not least the right to freedom of movement and free public health care. It has been suggested by some commentators that the practical advantages of the document might have persuaded people from Protestant backgrounds who might not otherwise deem themselves Irish to acquire one (Payton, 2016). There is some evidence of such a trend in the most recent Census data, although it is rather less significant than anecdotal reports have, at times, implied. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of people who identify, or were raised, as Protestants that own an Irish passport grew from 35,786 to 87,181. Although that rate of increase might appear substantial at first glance, it has, of course, happened from a very low base, and it is worth marking that, even in the very specific circumstances that obtain post-Brexit, the proportion of the Protestant community owning an Irish travel document remains small, barely one in ten.

It should also be noted that the overwhelming majority of the growth between the last two Censuses would appear to have involved Protestants acquiring an Irish document as an *addition* to their UK passport rather than as a replacement. That suggestion is affirmed in the fact that while the number of people from Protestant backgrounds who *only* possess an Irish travel document increased in the period between the last two censuses (from 24,003 to 37,217) the total owning *both* Irish and British passports advanced rather more appreciably (from 11,445 to 49,426). This serves to remind us that the UK passport retains a strong cultural significance for the unionist community in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is worth noting that, for all the anxieties and alienation that have come in the wake of the Brexit referendum, the proportion of Protestants in the region who hold the document remains more or less unchanged, down a mere half per cent between the last two Censuses at 77.3%.

The data furnished in the 2021 Census suggest, then, an important shift in the balance between what are often considered the two principal national identities in Northern Ireland. The waning appeal of Britishness and the burgeoning attraction of Irishness would, predictably, prompt many of its advocates to insist that the conditions of the possibility of a constitutional referendum are falling into place. A closer examination

of the data does not, however, bear out that particular reading. The assertion that the findings of the 2021 Census advance the case for a ‘border poll’ rests upon a familiar assumption that religious affiliation, national identity, and constitutional aspiration are mere analogues of one another. The data, however, suggest that rather than being interchangeable, these modes of being are often in profound tension with one another. In particular, the most recent Census underlines that a certain critical dislocation between religious affiliation and national identity exists in Northern Ireland. Or, at least, it does in the case of one of what are commonly denoted as the ‘two communities’ in the region. So much attention was afforded to the fall in Britishness recorded in the most recent Census that it would be easy to forget that it remains, quite clearly, the most popular national identity in Northern Ireland. In 2021, no fewer than 814,629 people acknowledged that they were British (NISRA, 2022, MS-B17). Among those who belong to, or were raised in, the multiple traditions of Protestantism, some 76% disclose that they feel British in whole or in part (NISRA, 2023, DT-0002). Although that sense of Britishness may well have waned over the preceding decade – the comparable figure in 2011 was 80% (NISRA, 2012, DC2238NI) – it quite clearly remains the principal definition of self among Northern Irish Protestants. Fewer than five per cent of that community, in contrast, regard themselves as Irish.

The headline figures from the 2021 Census tend, therefore, to obscure that the Protestant community has retained a very emphatic sense of its own national identity, in spite, or maybe even because, of the many injuries its members feel have been inflicted on them by the British political establishment. In contrast, the data garnered in the most recent edition suggest that members of the Catholic community are, counter-intuitively perhaps, a little more ambivalent in their sense of nationality. Given the marked rise in the number of people identifying as Irish, it would be easy to overlook the fact that a very significant minority of the Catholic community still do not appear to identify in those terms. In 2021, among those who belong to, or were raised in, the Catholic Church, some 65% indicated they felt themselves to be Irish in whole or in part (NISRA, 2023, DT-0002). It would seem, then, that even in the charged atmosphere generated by the Brexit referendum, more than a third of members of the Catholic community remain reticent about acknowledging a sense of Irishness.

The data yielded by the 2021 Census underline, therefore, that there is a critical, though often unacknowledged, disarticulation between religious affiliation and national identity in Northern Ireland (Cooley, 2021, p. 459). Those who hail from Protestant backgrounds are rather more reluctant to identify with their ethnoreligious lineage than those from Catholic backgrounds are with theirs. When we come to consider national identity, however, that relationship is reversed. While members of the Protestant community routinely appear less confident or articulate about their cultural identity, they are nonetheless rather more likely to identify as British than Catholics are to designate as Irish. While the gap between those propensities has certainly declined – down from 23% in 2011 to 11% in 2021 (NISRA, 2012, DC2238NI; NISRA, 2023, DT-0002) – it remains intact nonetheless. That enduring paradox of Northern Irish cultural life has a critical political significance that cannot be gleaned from any of the data furnished in the Census returns. The elation with which the 2021 Census results were greeted in some quarters reflects the assumption that religious affiliation can simply be mapped onto national identity and that, in turn, can be transposed onto constitutional aspiration.

While the data published in the autumn of 2022 indicate a great deal of slippage between religion and nationality, they tell us nothing at all about the third category of identity under consideration here. If we are to ascertain the constitutional aspirations of people living in Northern Ireland, we need to move beyond the Census and consult the seemingly endless sequence of opinion polls conducted in the region.

These tend, mainly, to disclose a certain anomaly of Northern Irish political life that we have encountered already. While members of the Protestant community often appear divided and despondent over their political future, they are in fact rather more emphatic about what they want than their Catholic counterparts (Cooley, 2021, p. 456). In a recent major IPSOS poll (Leahy, 2022), for instance, some 79% of Protestant respondents wished to remain within the United Kingdom, with only 4% signalling a desire for a united Ireland. Among Catholics in the same survey, only a bare majority, 55%, indicated that they supported the reunification of Ireland, while 21% aligned themselves with the constitutional status quo. These findings, read in conjunction with the latest Census results, remind us that although commentators on Northern Ireland are often willing to conflate religious affiliation, national identity and political aspiration, there is in fact no straightforward equivalence between these very different sensibilities. That realisation should counsel caution when reading the runes of the latest Census. While the 2021 edition certainly has a great deal to tell us about where Northern Ireland stands at present, it remains a rather less reliable guide to where the region, in a political sense at least, might be headed in the near future.

The 'rise of the Northern Irish'?

Among the many idiosyncrasies of the political deal that brought the Troubles to an end is the strangely oblique manner in which it identifies those groupings it seeks to protect and advance. The text of the Good Friday Agreement refers to the 'two main communities' in Northern Ireland but at no point becomes more specific (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 165). It was widely understood, however, that the twin collectivities alluded to in the document were those usually designated as being 'British' and 'Irish' respectively in their national identity and 'unionist' and 'nationalist' respectively in their constitutional aspiration. While the presumption that there exist two, and only two, communities might well have seemed reasonable to those who signed the peace deal in April 1998, it has become increasingly inappropriate for the society that has emerged in the quarter century that has elapsed since. A growing body of evidence suggests that the traditional binaries of Northern Irish political life have begun to dissolve. In recent years, for example, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey has disclosed that perhaps as many as two in five people in the region no longer recognise themselves in the terms 'unionist' or 'nationalist' (Coulter et al., 2021). That the familiar 'two communities thesis' has become a little threadbare is confirmed further when we consider the data on national identity available in the last two editions of the Census of Population.

When the question on nationality was added to the 2011 Census, many commentators were taken aback by the number of people choosing to identify as 'Northern Irish.' In that instalment, one in five of the population (20.9%) specified that they were 'Northern Irish only,' while three in ten (29.4%) volunteered that Northern Irishness formed some element, in part or in whole, of their national identity (NISRA 2012, KS202NI,

KS203NI). These largely unanticipated findings were read in some quarters as the first tentative signs of a progressive shift in the political culture of Northern Ireland. What the *Belfast Telegraph* declared as the 'rise of the Northern Irish' (McNicholl, 2019, p. 30) was held to be emblematic of a growing willingness of people in the region to dispense with the traditional cultural binaries in order to search for some common political ground. At a time when the historic power-sharing arrangements between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party were still at a relatively early stage, the advance of Northern Irishness was regarded as a cultural development that might shore up that experiment in devolved consociational government.

Much of that optimism would, however, prove ill-founded. While those who designate as 'Northern Irish' are often taken to represent a specific and discrete community – as the newspaper headline above intimates – they are, in fact, anything but. The phrase itself means a great many different things to different people (Tonge & Gomez, 2015, p. 278). For some, 'Northern Irish' expresses a sense of being connected to, but a little distant from, the rest of the people living on the island of Ireland. For others, it articulates a more profound feeling of difference, the conviction that the border represents a fundamental and legitimate cultural distinction and the hope that Northern Ireland will survive as a separate political entity. In view of these profoundly different readings of what it means, it is hardly surprising that Northern Irishness gives rise to none of the shared political institutions or emblems that are the conventional hallmarks of national identities. Those who regard themselves as Northern Irish are unable to agree an anthem, a flag, a sports team, or even a personage that might express that ostensibly common sense of being in the world. Indeed, insofar as this diverse body of people might be said to share anything, it is perhaps a sense of the vernacular culture of the place: that gallows humour, that peculiar turn of phrase, those multiple oddities that pass for local cuisine.

While the quintessential diversity of those who call themselves 'Northern Irish' might well represent one of their cultural strengths, it has also served to limit their political impact. The rise of Northern Irishness might not unreasonably have been expected to lead to the advance of those parties who seek to transcend the traditional binaries associated with national identity in the region. And there is, of course, some evidence of the strengthening of the 'middle ground' in Northern Irish politics over the last decade or so (Coakley, 2021). Most significantly, the Alliance Party, which had seemed likely to become a casualty of the era of devolved government, has experienced a revival in its fortunes and now constitutes the third largest party in Northern Ireland. While it is tempting to connect this turn of events with the rise of Northern Irishness, the available research suggests a more complex picture. The work of McNicholl (2019), for instance, indicates that although individuals designating as Northern Irish are more likely to vote Alliance than those who identify as British or Irish, this propensity is much less marked than often assumed. He presents data to suggest that the electoral preferences of the Northern Irish tend to be closer to those of people who share an ethnoreligious lineage but not a national identity than to those who hail from a different ethnoreligious background but express the same national affiliation. This goes some to explaining why the emergence of the Northern Irish has clearly altered the local political landscape but to a rather lesser extent than their numbers might initially have suggested.

The unexpectedly large volume of people expressing a sense of Northern Irishness in the 2011 Census – some 533,085 in total – gave the impression of a community that was

in the ascendant and that would continue to expand as the peace process unfolded. That is not quite, however, how things have played out. In the 2021 Census, the proportion of people identifying solely as Northern Irish actually fell slightly, from 20.9% to 19.8% (NISRA, 2022, MS-B15). That decline as a core identity was, however, accompanied by a growth in the number of residents mentioning Northern Irishness as an element in a broader, composite identity. Hence, when we consider Classification Two, we discover that the proportion of people in the region who feel *some* sense of Northern Irishness actually grew from 29.4% to 31.5%, an addition of around 65,000 individuals (NISRA, 2022, MS-B17). It would seem, then, that while the Northern Irish identity has waned somewhat in its depth, it has gained something roughly equivalent in the breadth of its appeal.

At least one further change in this particular affective category appears to have occurred between the last two instalments of the Census. In 2011, an almost identical number of those who identified, or were raised, as Catholics (251,301) and Protestants (246,458), respectively, stated that they felt either partly or entirely Northern Irish (NISRA, 2012, DC2240NI). In the subsequent decade, however, there seems to have been a significant shift in the meaning of Northern Irishness, one initiated perhaps by the protests against the December 2012 decision to limit the flying of the Union flag over Belfast City Hall (Tonge & Gomez, 2015, p. 284). Over time, many younger Protestants, in particular, appear to have drifted away from the British national identity, either qualifying it with the appendage of Northern Irishness or dispensing with it altogether in order to embrace the latter as their principal self-identification. That potentially critical turn might be read as expressive of a wider conviction within the Protestant community that the Westminster élite rarely, if ever, has their interests at heart. As the meaning of Northern Irishness has altered over the last decade, it was predictable that some Catholics who previously subscribed to that identity would begin to reconsider their options. Both of these ontological shifts are clearly indexed in the most recent Census data. While Northern Irishness once appeared an identity that appealed equally to both of the region's principal ethnonational traditions, that no longer seems to be the case. In 2021, more than one third of people belonging to, or raised in, the Protestant churches (292,524) indicated that they consider themselves to be Northern Irish, in whole or in part, but barely a quarter of their Catholic counterparts (224,236) suggested they feel the same way (NISRA, 2023, DT-0002).

Beyond the religious divide

The almost hegemonic discourse of the 'two communities' has served to conceal that Northern Ireland has become rather more culturally diverse in the 25 years that have passed since the Good Friday Agreement. There are now, for instance, a quarter of a million people living in the region who were born elsewhere. While most still hail from the Irish Republic or other regions of the UK, a growing minority, 124,283 people, come from rather farther afield (NISRA, 2022, MS-A16). The new migrant communities that have emerged during the peace process have brought a range of cultural – though, as we saw earlier, not necessarily *religious* – experience and expression that has invigorated Northern Ireland. That 'almost ninety' (Rutherford, 2018) different languages are now spoken in local schools underlines that what had, even in the

recent past, been the 'narrow ground' of Northern Irish cultural life has, in the last generation, begun to flourish into something rather richer and more diverse.

The burgeoning heterogeneity of Northern Irish society is evinced further in another, perhaps even more critical, disclosure that appears in the most recent Census of Population. While the operation of the Census tends, as we have seen, to underwrite the 'two communities' narrative, the data that it generates also, ironically, reveal just how increasingly problematic that discourse has become. When asked for their religious affiliation, some 330,983 people – more than one in six of the population – stated that they simply had none (NISRA, 2022, MS-B19). Those individuals were, as we saw earlier, asked a further question to ascertain the religious tradition in which they had been raised. More than half of them - some 173,698 people, who were joined by a further 3,663 individuals who had not answered the first question on religion but then, curiously, opted to respond to the second[6] – indicated that religion had, in fact, played no part at all in their upbringing (NISRA, 2022, MS-B23). Those figures invite some quite fundamental questions about the narratives that have traditionally framed the cultural and political life of Northern Ireland. Although the principal tension in the region has been always been cast as that between communities of Protestants and Catholics, the Census data confirm something that has been patently apparent for quite some time, namely that there is a substantial and growing minority of people living there who simply do not recognise themselves in those familiar ethnoreligious categories.

While many people have come to reject the religious differences seemingly engrained within Northern Irish society, they clearly remain drawn to the other distinctions that continue to animate the cultural and political life of the region. More specifically, those who are resistant to being categorised in religious terms, even after being prompted twice, prove rather less reticent about being defined with regards to nationality. In Table 5 below, we set out the national identities (Classification Two) claimed by the 128,615 'nones' who were born specifically in Northern Ireland and who are, therefore, more likely perhaps than their fellow atheists and agnostics from elsewhere to have some sense of affinity with the wider ethnocultural affiliations in the region of which religion has traditionally been a dominant element.

The data presented above disclose that those who were raised in Northern Ireland but have no religious affiliation have, as one might expect, a very distinctive cultural profile. Individuals in this category are rather more likely to identify as British and/or, especially, as Northern Irish than people in the wider population, bur are markedly less likely to call themselves Irish. To anyone familiar with the cultural terrain of Northern Ireland, it would be readily apparent that those born in the region who have no religion are not drawn equally from both of its main ethnonational traditions. To take perhaps the most pertinent instance, that Northern Irish atheists and agnostics are 3.6 times more likely to identify as British than Irish – the ratio in the wider population is 1.3 – indicates quite clearly that a

Table 5. National identity, classification two, of those with no religion, born in Northern Ireland, 2021.[7]

	Number of People	Percentage of 'nones' born in NI with this nationality	Percentage of total population with this nationality
British	67,072	52%	43%
Irish	18,606	14%	33%
Northern Irish	65,023	51%	32%

substantial majority of them are likely to share *some* cultural lineage with the Protestant community, and not least its constitutional preferences. That highly distinctive profile invites us to make two further, connected observations on how the Northern Ireland Census reflects – and, at times, distorts – the society on which it reports.

The first of these takes us back to an issue raised earlier in the article. We contested previously that a process of religious disaffiliation has been at work in Northern Irish society that has been most immediately apparent among the ranks of the Protestant community. That thesis is clearly affirmed in the responses of those who have neither religious faith nor background to questions of national identity. Given that they are *so* much more likely to identify as British than Irish, it seems reasonable to suggest that a majority of Northern Irish atheists and agnostics are people who may not call themselves 'Protestant' but nonetheless share some cultural lineage with others who do. Let us assume that among the 128,615 people with no religion who were born in Northern Ireland there are twice as many individuals who have Protestant roots as Catholic ones – the data on nationality suggest that is, if anything, a conservative assumption – and allow also for the fact that some of those who eschew religious affiliation altogether simply have no cultural associations whatsoever with either of the 'two communities' in Northern Ireland. If we were to do so, we might then speculate that among those who disavowed both religious faith and background in 2021 there were, say, around 70,000 people who might trace their roots to the unionist tradition in the region and approximately 35,000 who might owe their origins to the nationalist one.

That very specific profile underlines a serious issue with how the Census data tend to be interpreted that we have encountered already. While the findings reported in the 2021 edition may well have captured accurately the decline of the Protestant community, they tend to overstate the decline of the wider community that has conventionally been tagged as 'Protestant.' If we choose to consider only those willing to allocate themselves to a religious tradition, as most commentators do, the numerical superiority of the Catholic community seems quite substantial. However, if we elect to consider also the national identities of those who answer 'none' to both questions on religion, the issue of demographic advantage becomes, for the time being at least, essentially meaningless. The numerical difference (35,000) that emerges even from the deliberately conservative calculation above is, after all, very close indeed to the demographic advantage (42,000) that the Catholic community appears to enjoy after the second of the pair of religious questions that feature in the Northern Ireland Census. A closer examination of the data suggests, then, that the gap between the 'two communities' that so dominated initial popular discussion of the 2021 Census may not even exist in any meaningful sense. While popular commentary has given the impression that there has been – in the words of Sinn Féin MP John Finucane (Young, 2022) – an 'historic' and 'irreversible' change in the balance of forces within Northern Irish society, the more likely prospect is that the region has now entered a prolonged period of demographic stalemate.

The second observation we should make here leads us to precisely the same conclusion. What is most remarkable about the data on those with no religion is how so few appear to hail from culturally Catholic backgrounds. That only one in seven atheists and agnostics born in the region identify as Irish certainly suggests this to be the case. While members of the Catholic community may have drifted away from religious faith a little later perhaps, that trend has clearly accelerated in the last decade, with patterns of church

attendance now converging with those of Protestants. That this process of secularisation is not reflected adequately in the official data derives precisely from the modes of demographic competition that the Census tends to promote. The recurrent claims that the latest instalment would mark an historic reversal of the balance of forces within Northern Irish society evidently persuaded many people who might not otherwise consider themselves Catholic to designate in those terms. As a consequence, we are faced with the paradox that while chapels across Northern Ireland have never been emptier, there have, apparently, never been more Catholics living in the region.

It is entirely likely, therefore, that the data garnered in the 2021 Census may well seriously understate the true degree of secularisation in Northern Irish society. While the Census suggests that 17% of people in the region have no religion, the latest Life and Times Survey (2022), for example, puts the figure rather higher at 28%. If the next instalment in 2031 is to provide a more accurate estimate of religious (dis)belief in Northern Ireland, that will depend on whether a certain, hitherto largely successful, discursive project will continue being so. While those seeking to emphasise demographic change as the catalyst of constitutional change may well continue to convince some lapsed Catholics to designate as something they are really not, it is hard to shake the conviction that their moment has passed. The 2021 Census that they heralded as 'seismic' has, after all, turned out to be merely another interlude in Northern Ireland's seemingly eternal cultural and political stalemate. What seems more likely to happen over the next decade is that the process of religious disaffiliation will deepen further and that the true extent of people with no religious belief will be reflected, finally, and perhaps even fully, in the Census to be conducted in the spring of 2031. The data that appear in that instalment are likely, therefore, to underscore the growing folly of talking about Northern Ireland solely in terms of 'two communities' when those very categories are themselves well into the process of dissolution.

Conclusion

The discussion set out above discloses the profoundly contradictory nature of the Northern Ireland Census of Population. On the one hand, the Census is simply a bureaucratic function of the state which generates valuable, reliable data on the social and cultural life of the region. On the other, it is a discursive project that produces some of the realities it claims merely to record and, in the process, provides a rather distorted impression of contemporary Northern Irish society. The most significant of these distortions is that the Census encourages forms of demographic competition that reproduce the ever more time-worn narrative of the 'two communities.' In particular, the mantra of 'historic opportunity' that preceded the most recent poll clearly persuaded many people to designate as Catholic who might not otherwise see themselves in those terms. As a result, the 2021 Census appears to overstate a level of demographic change of which it is, in part, the author. That distortion leads inevitably, of course, to another one. While the 2021 Census certainly gives an indication of the secularisation at work in Northern Ireland, it almost definitely understates the advance of that critical process. As a consequence, the data released in the autumn of 2022 might be said to underplay seriously the liberal and progressive currents increasingly prevalent in the region. When we read the findings of the latest Census, the impression is of a society that remains largely trapped in its traditional

ethnonational binaries and that has changed a great deal less than is, in fact, the case. It might be reasonable to conclude, then, that among the many problems that face the people of Northern Ireland, the decennial Census of Population might well not be the least of them.

Notes

1. All of the primary Census data in this article were published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Some of the information is presented in tables constructed by the agency and when this is the case it is cited using the NISRA acronym, the year of publication, and the relevant codes identifying specific tables. NISRA also provides a facility for researchers to create their own cross-tabulations of a range of different forms of information from the Census (https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/). These tables have no identifying code and, hence, when data generated this way are being cited they will be set out in a footnote with a link to the source.
2. In this instance, the definition of national identity used is Classification Two. As explained in more detail later in the article, this counts both when people mention a nationality – in this case, Polish or Lithuanian – on its own and when they mention it in combination with one or more other identities. Note also that 'religion' here is Classification One which acknowledges only those who claim membership of a church and not those who were raised in a faith but no longer subscribe to it. This is also explained more fully later.
3. These data were generated using the facility on the NISRA website: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=AGE_SYOA_85&v=RELIGION_BELONG_TO_AGG4
4. Please note that there is a small discrepancy in the data recorded here. The figure of 37,504 Poles and Lithuanians living in Northern Ireland was calculated by NISRA using national identity Classification Two, explained in a previous note. The calculation of the number of people with these nationalities who are Catholics derives from a table generated by the authors: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=NAT_ID_1000&v=RELIGION_BELONG_TO_DVO_1000 The modules available in the NISRA 'flexible table builder' currently only include national identity Classification One (for nationalities other than Britishness, Irishness, and Northern Irishness) and hence excludes those who say they are Polish and Lithuanian in combination with another nationality. This explains the small discrepancy between the number of people from these backgrounds who appear in the table we generated (35,745) and the actual number in the population (37,504). This discrepancy means that the number of Poles and Lithuanians who identify as Catholic that is specified in our table (27,026) will be a small, but meaningful, under-estimate. To compensate, the difference between the number of people who fall into this category in 2011 and 2021 Censuses has been rounded up from 5,279 to 7,000, which is likely a small, but not as meaningful, over-estimate.
5. The data for 2011 in this paragraph are drawn from the NISRA published table DC2252NI. The data for 2021 derive from a table generated by the authors using the facility on the NISRA website: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=PASSPORTS_HELD_1000&v=RELIGION_BELONG_TO_OR_BROUGHT_UP_IN_DVO
6. These data were derived from a table generated using the facility on the NISRA portal: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=RELIGION_BELONG_TO_DVO_1000&v=RELIGION_BELONG_TO_OR_BROUGHT_UP_IN_DVO
7. The data presented here come from a table generated by the authors using a facility on the NISRA website: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=RELIGION_BELONG_TO_OR_BROUGHT_UP_IN_DVO&v=NAT_ID_1000&v=COB_1000

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