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ARTICLE

Polarisation and inequality: 'peace' in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper examines why, some 25 years beyond the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland (NI) remains a highly polarised society despite the return of devolution (in February 2024) after a 2-year hiatus. Using the theoretical lens of social capital, it draws on the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey and the World Values survey (the latter conducted for the first time in NI) to examine levels of trust as a pre-requisite to reconciliation between the two main communities. The research finds a high degree of trust towards people of another religion and limited affective polarisation across the main political parties. Yet government community relations policies appear to have had limited impact over time and may contribute to 'bad social capital' through bonding within communities at the expense of 'the other'. The paper considers tackling social and economic inequalities, common to both communities, as a means of bridging social capital.

Keywords: polarisation; segregation; social capital; inequality; Northern Ireland

Introduction

Northern Ireland, more than 25 years beyond the signing of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement (1998), remains a polarised society. There is clear evidence of a decline in political violence, and the 'peace dividend', improved quality of life for those most impacted by the conflict, has yet to be realised. Former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, in a speech to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement, argued 'we have to show that devolved government within the United Kingdom works for Northern Ireland. The fact that the institutions have been down for nine of the last 25 years should be a source of profound concern' (Sunak, 2023). Two years beyond the current hiatus, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive was restored (February 2024). The collapse of the institutions followed the resignation of the (then) Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) First Minister Paul Givan, citing ongoing disagreements with the UK government over the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol. The protocol was part of the EU–UK withdrawal

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agreement intended to ensure that a hard border was avoided on the island of Ireland after the UK left the EU in January 2020. However, the DUP argued that the protocol imposed checks on British items being sold to consumers in Northern Ireland, hence weakening its place within the United Kingdom internal market. The protocol was amended under the Windsor Framework (February 2023), agreed between the UK and EU, but continued to be met with resistance from the DUP. Opposition to the protocol continued until the DUP secured further safeguards from the UK government which simplified domestic imports and encouraged trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, paving the way for the restoration of devolution in February 2024 (Knox and Carmichael, 2005; Hayward, 2020; Murphy and Evershed, 2022; Whitten, 2023; Hayward & Komarova, 2022).

Since 1999, the year following the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement, there has been an average of four deaths per year due to the security situation, down from a high of 470 in 1972 at the height of the conflict (Police Service of Northern Ireland [PSNI], 2023). However, paramilitary organisations still retain a grip on working class communities. Scholars have argued that their persistence can be explained by three key features: their legitimacy against external 'enemies', utility in 'getting things done' in communities and threat or use of coercive means in their areas (Sturgeon et al, 2024). An independent commission set up to report on progress towards ending paramilitarism noted: 'We remain concerned about the risks posed to society by the continuing existence of paramilitary structures and groups which can be harnessed for the purposes of violence or the threat of violence' (Independent Reporting Commission 2022:5). Since 1999 there has been an average of 128 paramilitary style attacks/shootings per year, tactics used to 'police' working class communities, demonstrating the ongoing presence of paramilitarism and their involvement in criminal activities (PSNI, 2023).

Although Northern Ireland has acquired a semblance of peace, or at least the absence of violence, the two main communities (Unionists and Nationalists) have failed to be fully reconciled. This is evidenced in the degree of polarisation that still exists amongst the 1.9 million people in Northern Ireland. For example, the education system is emblematic of several segregated public services (segregated social housing, public leisure centres, community youth services, cultural events) comprising a medley of school types to accommodate different religious identities. In the secondary school sector, 'controlled schools' attract pupils largely from the Protestant community (72%), whilst 'maintained schools' are the preserve of Catholics (92%). Enrolment in primary schools reflect similar divisions, with some 45% pupils attending controlled schools and 45% attending Catholic maintained schools. Integrated schools represent 7.5% of the entire nursery, primary and post-primary schools' population (Department of Education NI, 2024), despite the long-standing efforts of its proponents as a way of assimilating young people and a panacea for systemic polarisation in Northern Ireland.

Social housing remains largely segregated, a legacy of the conflict where communities felt a sense of security 'living amongst their own' (Murtagh, 2011 & 2018). The 2021 Northern Ireland Census data show that out of eleven local council areas, four are populated by two-thirds or more Catholics and three with over 70% Protestant (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: NISRA, 2023). Housing segregation is compounded by paramilitary control exerted through

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sectarian or racist intimidation as a means of excluding families from housing estates or as a deterrent from moving in. An independent human rights group has argued: 'it is no exaggeration to suggest that housing is an area of public policy in Northern Ireland that is still extensively shaped by paramilitary control and coercion' (Committee on the Administration of Justice, 2022:1). Segregation is underpinned by a political system which supports closer links to Britain (Democratic & Ulster Unionists: DUP & UUP) and Irish nationalism (SDLP and Sinn Fein) with a slowly growing Centrist Party (Alliance Party of Northern Ireland) which claims neutrality on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. In the Northern Ireland Assembly elections (May 2022) 87% of DUP and 78% of UUP voters self-designated as part of the Protestant Community; 82% of Sinn Fein and 65% of SDLP voters as part of the Catholic community (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2022). The bifurcation of Northern Ireland along ethno-national divisions has therefore resulted in research conducted largely through this lens.

This paper takes a different approach to examining polarisation in Northern Ireland. We begin with a brief overview of social capital theory and how it might apply to the analysis of segregation, in particular bridging across the two main communities. Drawing on survey data, we examine polarisation by analysing trust between people of another religion; affective polarisation across the political parties; and the policy instrument, building better community relations, used by government to tackle polarisation. Finally, we propose a different policy approach which moves away from tackling differences through national identity to one which focusses on social and economic inequalities that beset both communities. Through a process of exploratory analysis, we seek to address the following research question: can bridging social capital impact on polarisation in Northern Ireland?

Social capital

As a theoretical concept, social capital has been examined from different sociological and rational-choice perspectives. Bourdieu (2018) considered social capital as power relations operationalised in the form of networks or institutions which were used to maintain and reproduce social stratification/hierarchies and inequalities in society. Examples include membership of exclusive clubs or societies which facilitate access to high-end jobs or opportunities. Coleman (1994) focussed on the role of social capital in the family and educational settings that helped cognitive and social development, particularly amongst children. Parent–teacher associations demonstrate how social capital can enhance the educational environment; similarly, religious congregations provide support which fosters trust and cooperation. Nan Lin (2002) saw social networks as a conduit of resources. Hence, platforms such as LinkedIn connect professionals to information and job opportunities which can enhance their careers. Fukuyama (2001) conceptualised social capital in terms of trust and the norms of reciprocity in society, linking this to the performance of political and economic institutions. For example, communities working with local governments to implement public projects depend on shared norms and trust to achieve common goals.

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Putnam, however, considers social capital from the viewpoint of democratic and civic engagement. He defines it as 'connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000:12; Putnam, 2001). Similarly, Whitely (2000:450) defines social capital as 'the willingness of citizens to trust others including members of their own family, fellow citizens, and people in general'. Social capital therefore results from social interaction when people develop relationships that can result in trust and norms – social connections, in turn, foster community and societal wellbeing (Claridge, 2018). There are three basic functions of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding social capital is where strong relations develop between people of similar backgrounds and are more inward looking – where people belong to the same networks, are interconnected and meet regularly. Membership of loyalist bands in Northern Ireland is an example in which groups of people from the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist community meet on a regular basis to practice music and participate in parades and events that celebrate their Protestant heritage. Bridging social capital describes connections that link people across societal cleavages such as religion, race or social class. Bridging depicts social relationships between people with shared interests or goals but different social identities. Perhaps strangely, sport in the Northern Ireland context is an example which can exaggerate both divisions and bridging. Gaelic games, almost exclusively the preserve of the Nationalist community, are an example of the former; rugby football, golf and ice hockey, which attract followers from both Nationalist and Unionist communities, are examples of the latter. Linking social capital extends the bonding/bridging distinction and describes relationships amongst people or institutions at different levels of the societal power hierarchy (Healy, 2004).

Putnam's work has been the subject of criticism on several fronts (Foley & Edwards, 1999). Multiple definitions of social capital and ambiguity of the concept render it difficult to measure, not least because of the complexities associated with capturing social relationships (Portes, 1998). Moreover, establishing trust and norms via bonding within communities may result in perverse outcomes such as embedding sectarianism in the case of Northern Ireland. Other critics have questioned the causal relationship between social capital and positive societal outcomes: do higher levels of social capital lead to increased civic engagement and community wellbeing or vice versa? (Fafchamps & Minten, 1999; Portes & Landolt, 2000; Di Falco & Bulte, 2011). One critic went so far as to describe it as 'vulgar scholarship': 'social capital purports to reign over a domain that ranges . . . from twelfth century Italy to twentieth century United States. Concepts with such scope of ambition should be treated with caution if not contempt' (Fine, 2002:18; Fine 2010). More generally, social capital has been described as an umbrella concept rather than a functioning theory because of problems with measurement causation and the possibility of positive or negative outcomes (Haynes, 2009).

Notwithstanding these limitations, social capital theory has been used in scholarly research in countries which have experienced political conflict. Examples include the positive role which entrepreneurs played in generating social capital across ethnic groups in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia (Kopren and Westlund, 2021). In the same context of the Western Balkans, women's groups engaged in bridging initiatives during the conflict

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(collecting and delivering food and clothing, help in finding work, offering legal advice) aimed at establishing bonds across ethnic boundaries. These practices 'did not imply abandonment of one's own roots or sense of identity and belonging. In this sense bridging and bonding are not 'either-or' categories' (Korac, 2008:118). Yet the role of social capital in peace building has been described as paradoxical in both creating and resolving conflict. Research has shown the positive impact of social capital initiatives in Sri Lanka, Mali and Cyprus, and on the contrary, examples in Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Colombia, Honduras and Russia that imply 'dark social capital' linked to political instability: 'the two faces of social capital, its virtuous and malevolent' (Cox, 2008:2). The negative impact of social capital in the Northern Ireland case is illustrated by examples from civil society (the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Orange Order) which 'reflect the dynamics of communal conflict and contributes to perpetuate it' (Belloni, 2008:9). The World Bank also embraced a social capital approach in supporting conflict resolution initiatives in Cambodia, Rwanda, Guatemala and Somalia (Colletta & Cullen, 2000).

There have been additional eclectic examples of research on the Northern Ireland conflict which frame attempts at reconciliation within social capital theory. An examination of the role of the UK City of Culture (2013) in Derry/Londonderry found that it generated 'both bonding and bridging social capital, however, exclusivity was also fostered' through a range of music, arts, youth festivals and historical events (Devine & Quinn, 2019:1495). The role of a social housing community network as a consultative forum for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive aimed at tenants' engagement demonstrated increased social capital although that was not its intended purpose (Muir, 2011). Researchers compared two segregated and two mixed communities in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland and found high levels of bonding social capital. Intra-community ties were much more pronounced in the two segregated communities. The study concluded: 'the potential of social capital as a mechanism for building a sustainable society in Northern Ireland is not disputed, however, the challenge remains to devise strategies that facilitate the emergence of bonding, bridging and linking social capital in ways which allow complementarity both within and across communities' (Campbell et al, 2010:35). This challenge is enduring and forms the basis of the current study where we consider, using recent empirical evidence, how bridging efforts might be better targeted to tackle polarisation and contribute to reconciliation in the divided society that is Northern Ireland.

Methodology

We use two key sources of empirical evidence to investigate the potential of bridging social capital and complement existing efforts at improving community relations and building a reconciled, less polarised, society. The first source is the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey data (NILT 2022). NILT is an annual survey to monitor the attitudes and behaviour of people in Northern Ireland. The 2022 survey involved 1,405 participants randomly selected from addresses in the Postcode Address File database and used computer assisted web interviewing with adults aged 18 years or older. To provide a random sample of Northern Ireland households,

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the sample was stratified proportionately by District Council area. Field work was conducted between 5 September and 20 November 2022 from an overall sample size of 9,500 contacts, with a response rate of 15%.

The second source is data from the World Values Survey (2022), which was conducted for the first time in Northern Ireland during 2022. The survey was aimed at capturing changing values and their impact on social and political life. The World Values survey is conducted in almost 100 countries using a common questionnaire. The fieldwork in Northern Ireland was carried out between March and September 2022 using a variety of methods: face-to-face, video, postal and online. The sample was drawn from postcode sectors using a stratified random probability proportional to size approach. Stratification controls the sample of postcode sectors so that it is representative of the full population for the measures (stratifiers) used. The final sample was 447 participants, a response rate of 31% from a total overall sample size of 1,400 contacts.

There are, of course, limitations to using survey data. Although both were probability surveys, the sample size for the World Values survey in Northern Ireland was relatively small, in part as a result of attempting face-to-face interviews after the coronavirus disease (COVID) crisis. These sample sizes indicate a sampling error of approximately 4.6% (World Values) and 2.6% (Northern Ireland Life and Times), respectively. Both surveys have been long running: World Values since 1981, as part of the European Values Study, and Northern Ireland Life and Times since 1998. Survey responses, by their nature, do not allow for the depth of responses associated with qualitative research. There is therefore research under way to supplement the World Values Northern Ireland results using targeted focus groups to interrogate the survey findings further.

These survey data allow us to examine the following sub-research questions:

- Is peace dependent on reconciliation in Northern Ireland?
- Is trust a barrier to reconciliation?
- Is affective polarisation or the extent to which individuals from the different political parties view each other with negative emotions, such as dislike or distrust, an obstacle to reconciliation?

We address these questions using descriptive, cross-tabulation and non-parametric inferential statistical analysis and argue that existing policies have failed to tackle polarisation and require an alternative approach in the form of bridging social capital.

Trust

We turn to the first two sub-research questions: is peace dependent on reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and is trust a barrier to reconciliation? The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (2022) provides a window into examining the issue of trust, which is central to the concept of social capital, across multiple relationships (personal, family, neighbours, religion and other nationalities). The survey poses two questions:

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Table 1. Trust and reconciliation

Lack of trust and respect a barrier to reconciliation? (n = 1,405)		Peace dependent on reconciliation? (n = 1,405)	
	%		%
Yes, definitely	43	Strongly agree	55
Yes, probably	41	Agree	36
No, probably not	7	Neither agree nor disagree	5
No, definitely not	0	Disagree	1
Don't know	9	Strongly disagree	0
		Don't know	3

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2022.

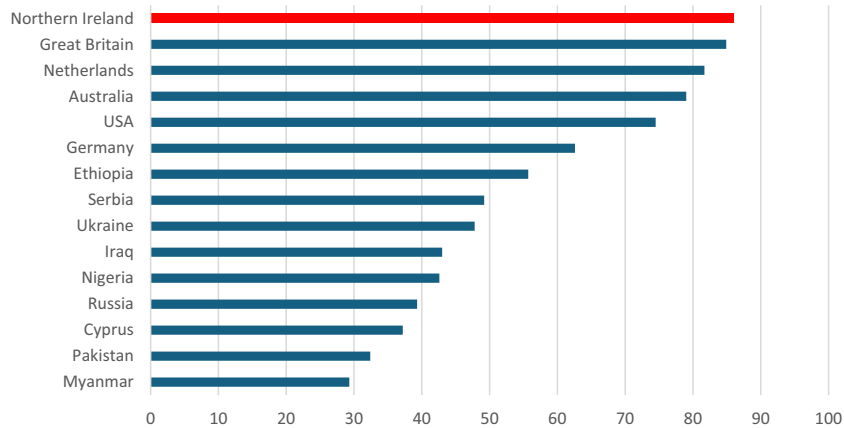


Figure 1. Extent to which you trust people of another religion (%). *Source*: World Values Survey Cross National Wave 7.

- Is the lack of positive, trusting and respectful relations within Northern Ireland a barrier to reconciliation?
- Is long-term peace dependent on reconciliation between individuals, communities and/or institutions?

The results (see Table 1) show there is strong agreement that the lack of positive trust and respectful relations are barriers to reconciliation, which in turn are a prerequisite for long-term peace in Northern Ireland. Given the centrality of trust to reconciliation and long-term peace, we were interested in exploring trust towards people of another religion in a comparative context.

Figure 1 therefore shows cross-national results to the question posed in the World Values survey over the period 2017–2022: 'To what extent do you trust people of another religion?' Country survey sample sizes are different, hence results

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are shown in percentage terms. Respondents could select from the options: 'trust completely', 'trust somewhat', 'don't trust very much' and 'don't trust at all'. The results show the combined response for 'trust completely' and 'trust somewhat'. The countries included in the graph were selected because of their ethnic and/or religious tensions. Other countries are included for comparative purposes only, although not without societal divisions: Great Britain (immigration and integration), the Netherlands (cultural and ethnic diversity), Germany (East–West economic and social inequalities) and Australia (Indigenous disparities). What these data show is that Northern Ireland respondents have a high level of trust towards people of another religion, perhaps surprising after almost 30 years of violent conflict.

If lack of trust and respect is a barrier to reconciliation (Table 1), yet the extent of trust towards people of another religion is comparatively high (Figure 1), this suggests that trust could be the cornerstone for building social capital in Northern Ireland on common values or needs which people of all religions and none can get behind. Notwithstanding these comparatively high levels of trust, we were interested to find out whether trust levels in Northern Ireland extended to other areas of life beyond religion.

The World Values survey asked about the extent to which respondents, disaggregated by religion, trust people, from the following groups: your family; your neighbourhood; people you know personally; people you meet for the first time; and people of another nationality. The results are presented in Table 2. The values show respondents' scores on the scale: 'trust completely' = 1; 'trust somewhat' = 2; 'do not trust very much' = 3; and, 'don't trust at all' = 4. The highest levels of distrust were towards 'people you meet for the first time', followed by 'people of another nationality', rather than 'people of another religion'.

To elaborate further, we were interested to examine whether trust levels were significantly different across the two religious communities. Since trust was measured using a Likert scale (ordinal data), we use the Mann–Whitney *U* test to compare the differences between the two main communities. This test is appropriate as the two groups compared (Catholics and Protestants) are independent – the data are not paired, we do not assume equal variances between the groups and the variables are not normally distributed. The data are from responses to Q58–Q63 inclusive, World Values Survey 2022.

The null hypothesis (H_0) is: there is no difference (in terms of central tendency) between Catholics and Protestants in relation various trust factors in the population (set out in Table 3).

The alternative hypothesis (H_1) is: there is a difference (with respect to the central tendency) between Catholics and Protestants in relation to various trust factors in the population (set out in Table 3).

The results are presented in Tables 3 & 4.

The mean rank score in Table 3 is the average for Catholics and Protestants on each variable – lower values, given the direction of the scaling, equal a higher level of trust. Examining the mean rank score across each of the variables in Table 3 shows no consistency in terms of the two main religious groups. For example, Catholics are more trusting of people from another nationality, whereas Protestants are more

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Table 2. Levels of trust

	Religious groups	Trust completely	Trust somewhat	Do not trust very much	Do not trust at all
Trust: Your family	Catholic (n = 144)	80.5%	16.7%	2.1%	0.7%
	Protestant (n = 145)	84.1%	13.1%	2.1%	0.7%
Trust: Your neighbourhood	Catholic (n = 144)	25.0%	68.1%	6.9%	0%
	Protestant (n = 146)	29.5%	59.6%	7.5%	3.4%
Trust: People you know personally	Catholic (n = 144)	48.6%	49.3%	2.1%	0%
	Protestant (n = 146)	49.6%	49%	1.4%	0%
Trust: People you meet for the first time	Catholic (n = 144)	1.4%	47.2%	35.4%	16%
	Protestant (n = 143)	0.7%	51.7%	37.1%	10.5%
Trust: People of another religion	Catholic (n = 143)	20.3%	67.8%	11.9%	0%
	Protestant (n = 143)	15.4%	72.7%	7.0%	4.9%
Trust: People of another nationality	Catholic (n = 141)	14.9%	72.3%	12.8%	0%
	Protestant (n = 143)	14.7%	64.3%	15.4%	5.6%

Source: World Values Survey, Northern Ireland (2022).

Table 3. Test of differences between religious groups on trust factors

	Religious groups	*N*	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
Trust: Your family	Catholic	144	147.10	21183.00
	Protestant	145	142.91	20722.00
	Total	289		
Trust: Your neighbourhood	Catholic	144	146.15	21046.00
	Protestant	146	144.86	21149.00
	Total	290		
Trust: People you know personally	Catholic	144	147.25	21204.00
	Protestant	146	143.77	20991.00
	Total	290		
Trust: People you meet for the first time	Catholic	144	148.04	21318.00
	Protestant	143	139.93	20010.00
	Total	287		
Trust: People of another religion	Catholic	143	140.00	20020.00
	Protestant	143	147.00	21021.00
	Total	286		
Trust: People of another nationality	Catholic	141	136.86	19297.50
	Protestant	143	148.06	21172.50
	Total	284		

trusting of people they meet for the first time (lower values equal a higher level of trust). Catholics are more trusting of people from another religion than Protestants.

However, the differences are not significant across each of the trust factors. Table 4 presents the *Z*-values and significance levels (*p*). *Z*-values show how far, in standard deviations, the Mann–Whitney statistic is from the mean of the distribution. The *p*-value indicates whether the difference between the groups is significant. Since the probability value (*p*) is not less than or equal to 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference in each of these trust factors across the two main religious groups (Catholics and Protestants). We therefore fail to reject the null hypotheses H_O.

Affective polarisation

We turn to the third sub-research question: is affective polarisation an obstacle to reconciliation? There is also limited evidence of deep political polarisation despite the general perceptions of such in the Northern Ireland context. Respondents in the World Values were asked to express their feelings towards the two largest political parties (Sinn Fein and the DUP), and separately, towards Unionists and Nationalists on a 'feelings thermometer'. The thermometer measures across a range from 0 to 100,

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Table 4. Test statistics (grouping variable: religious groups)

	Trust: Your family	Trust: Your neighbourhood	Trust: People you know personally	Trust: People you meet for the first time	Trust: People of another religion	Trust: People of another nationality
Mann–Whitney *U*	10137.000	10418.000	10260.000	9714.000	9724.000	9286.500
Wilcoxon W	20722.000	21149.000	20991.000	20010.000	20020.000	19297.500
Z	−0.639	−0.155	−0.404	−0.909	−0.890	−1.398
Asymp. sig. (two-tailed)	0.523	0.877	0.686	0.363	0.373	0.162

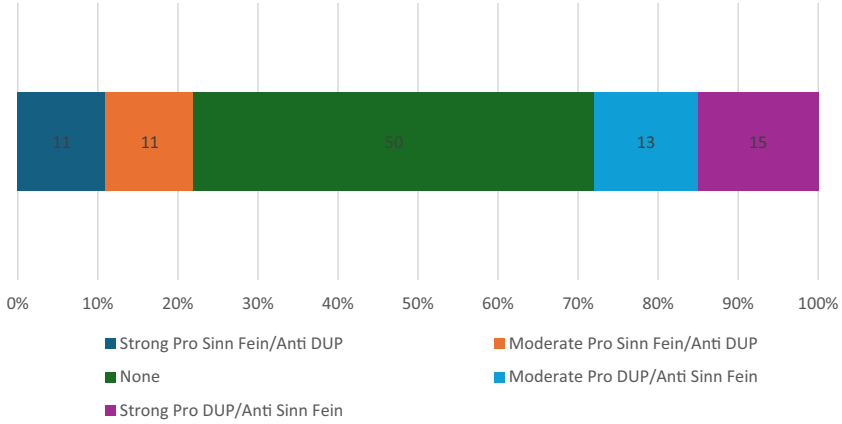


Figure 2. Affective polarisation – Political parties. *Source*: World Values Survey, Northern Ireland (2022).

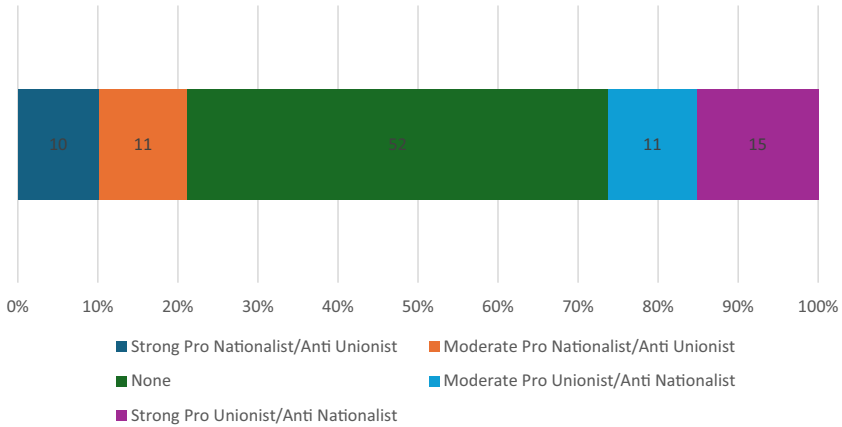


Figure 3. Affective polarisation – Identity. *Source*: World Values Survey, Northern Ireland (2022).

where 0 = negative feelings and 100 = positive feelings towards 'the other'. By contrasting how people feel about those voting for the two main parties or those from a Nationalist or Unionist viewpoint, we obtain a measure of affective polarisation or the extent to which respondents from one political party view the other with negative emotions such as dislike, distrust or even hatred (Bettarelli et al, 2023); in other words, the tendency to identify positively with one's own group whilst viewing the other group negatively. Affective polarisation can increase social and political divisions and make it difficult to find shared goals across communities. The questions to and results from survey respondents are shown in Figures 2 & 3.

Survey Question: How do you feel towards DUP voters and Sinn Fein voters on a scale of 0–100 (where 0 is as cold and negative as possible and 100 is as warm and positive as possible)?

A majority of Northern Ireland respondents are neutral in relation to their feelings towards the two main political parties (DUP and Sinn Fein) or feel only

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moderately pro- or anti-'the other' (Figure 2)[1]. The profile of respondents ($n = 369$) was 26.6% DUP and UUP, 21% Alliance and 24.4% Sinn Fein and SDLP).

Survey Question: How do you feel towards Nationalists and Unionists on a scale of 0–100 (where 0 is as cold and negative as possible and 100 is as warm and positive as possible)?

The results show (see Figure 3) that the majority of respondents in Northern Ireland are either neutral in relation to the two main traditions (Nationalists and Unionists) or feel only moderately pro- or anti-'the other'. The overall composition of respondents ($n = 369$) was 26.5% DUP and UUP, 21% Alliance and 24.2% Sinn Fein and SDLP. Overall, the data therefore suggest that affective polarisation is not a major issue in Northern Ireland – a combined 26% and 25% indicate strong levels of dislike for the 'other' party or tradition, respectively (Hodkinson and Quirk, 2023). These results therefore indicate limited evidence of deep-seated negative feelings towards 'the other' political party or identity, which would otherwise pose problems for promoting social cohesion and a more inclusive society. In other words, opposing political parties or opposing national identities in Northern Ireland do not exhibit strong levels of distrust or animosity towards each other experienced in some European countries (Orban's Fidesz Party in Hungary and the emergence of the far-right populist parties in Germany and the Netherlands).

Thus, if there are comparatively (cross-country) high levels of trust amongst people living in Northern Ireland, no significant differences between Catholics and Protestants across the various trust categories and low levels of affective polarisation, this would suggest the basis for long-term peace and reconciliation and the ingredients for a less polarised society. What policy instrument(s) have the government used to reduce polarisation?

Tackling polarisation

Government efforts towards community bonding–bridging and a reduction in polarisation in Northern Ireland is through the *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* (TBUC) (2013). The strategy focusses on building positive relationships on the basis of mutual understanding and respect and is delivered through several funded programmes with key priority themes: children and young people, a shared community, a safe community and cultural expression. This approach taken within the strategy is based on the contact hypothesis which holds that intergroup contact, under certain conditions, can reduce prejudice and improve cross-community relations (Allport, 1954; Hewstone & Swart, 2011). Hence, numerous projects were funded to support cross-community contact through interface projects (barriers which separated the two communities), victims and survivors support groups, youth engagement, cultural exchanges and grassroots community development projects.

Many of these initiatives are based on head-counting participants from the two main communities, and increasingly, from minority ethnic groups. For example, the most recent report on TBUC delivery notes, inter alia, that 4,000 participated in youth programmes, twenty-two young people became 'good relations ambassadors' and forty-two schools became 'schools of sanctuary' (The Executive Office, 2021).

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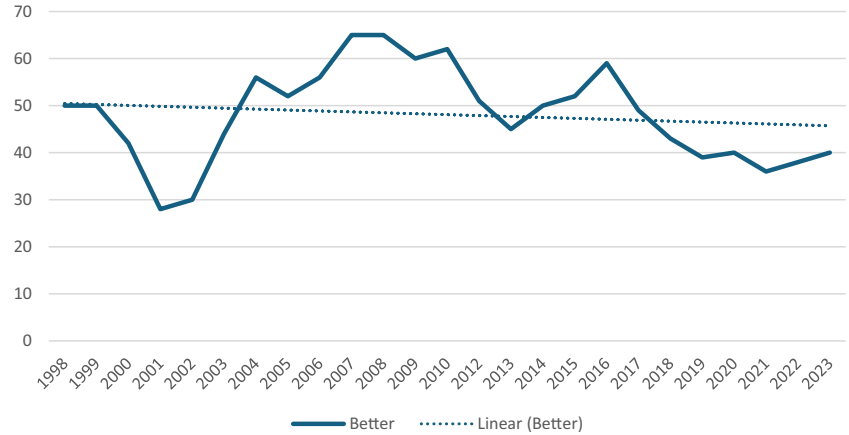


Figure 4. Are relations between Catholics and Protestants better than 5 years ago? *Source*: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2023.

Evidence is flimsy regarding the impact of these programmes. For example, a review of the very well-resourced EU Peace Programme in Northern Ireland, now in its fifth iteration, found that funders were wedded to supporting projects on the basis of a strict formula of 40:40:20 participants (Catholic, Protestant and minority ethnic) with ambiguous policy outcomes (Knox et al, 2023). This, despite the fact that the USA, Northern Ireland Government, Republic of Ireland Government and the European Union have invested heavily in efforts to promote peace and reconciliation both before and since the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement (Hayward, 2006). More generally, critics of this approach have argued that community relations projects are 'geared towards creating an imagined middle ground' which conceived the Northern Ireland conflict as one of two ethno-national warring groups and ignored the role of the British state as a partisan stakeholder (McEvoy et al, 2006:98).

It appears that existing cross-community programmes have been instrumental in strengthening social capital bonding within segregated areas of Northern Ireland. Community groups have consistently advocated for single-identity work within their own areas as a precursor to cross-community work. Thus, whilst trust may exist within the two main communities, bridging social capital remains weak. This can be illustrated by evidence from NILT data (Figure 4). The trend overtime shows a marginal decline in relations between Catholics and Protestants. This decline cannot be directly causally linked to the limited impact of cross-community funding or indeed wider political instability. For example, the first period of devolved government (1998–2002) witnessed a fall in perceptions of community relations and conversely a rise during the period of suspension (2002–2007). The steady decline over time may be a result of multiple factors: Unionists still feel threatened over the 'hard border' Brexit arrangements and the ascendency of Sinn Fein (Birrell and Gray, 2017); sectarian divisions flare up around key cultural events (parades and marches); economic disparities are still evident; sectarian attacks in the form of riots, paramilitary beatings and shootings have not gone away; and political rhetoric

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can stoke up tensions between the main communities. However, the trend shows that cross-community programmes are having limited impact on this decline in relations.

Survey Question: Are relations between Catholics and Protestants better than 5 years ago?

The data on relations between Protestants and Catholics may be a proxy for these wider constitutional issues. Participation in contentious issues such as the current debate on Irish unity has the potential to increase polarisation, although recent research has concluded that involving those who are disengaged through their shared everyday experiences is likely to positively impact on the constitutional process and outcomes (McEvoy and Todd, 2023).

Other research in the Northern Ireland context points to the potential for cross-community initiatives to strengthen social capital bonding at the expense of bridging. Citizenship education has been promoted in schools as a way of teaching pupils about human rights, social equality and democratic participation that transcends national, ethnic and cultural boundaries in Northern Ireland (Smith, 2003; O'Connor et al, 2020). Yet research showed that the introduction of citizenship curricula into segregated schools in Northern Ireland 'may be useful to promote citizenship values and positive attitudes to the other but insufficient to promote the development of bridging social capital and, ultimately social cohesion in the long term' (McMurray and Niens, 2012: 207). Some research has labelled the potential for bonding within communities as 'bad social capital' or the dark side of social capital (Warren, 2008; Baycan & Öner, 2023; see also Leonard, 2004).

What appears missing from the implementation of the contact hypothesis, adopted as the basis for TBUC in Northern Ireland, is a focus on superordinate goals or overarching objectives that transcend the two main communities. These are issues which impact on both communities (common needs) rather than those which divide them, as in national identity. Social and economic inequalities represent superordinate goals and have the potential to influence polarisation. Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and privileges amongst individuals and group in society. These affect access to social goods such as healthcare, education and employment (Giddens & Griffiths, 2006) Economic inequality involves disparity in the distribution of income, wealth and economic resources amongst individuals and groups (Piketty, 2014). These goals require cooperative activities to achieve, and in so doing, foster inter-group relations. We now consider some of these issues as an alternative way of tackling polarisation.

Social and economic inequalities

One area of importance for those most impacted by the conflict in Northern Ireland is social and economic inequalities (Knox, 1999; Borooah, 2000; Osborne, 2003). These transcend sectarian boundaries. The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (2022) asked respondents:

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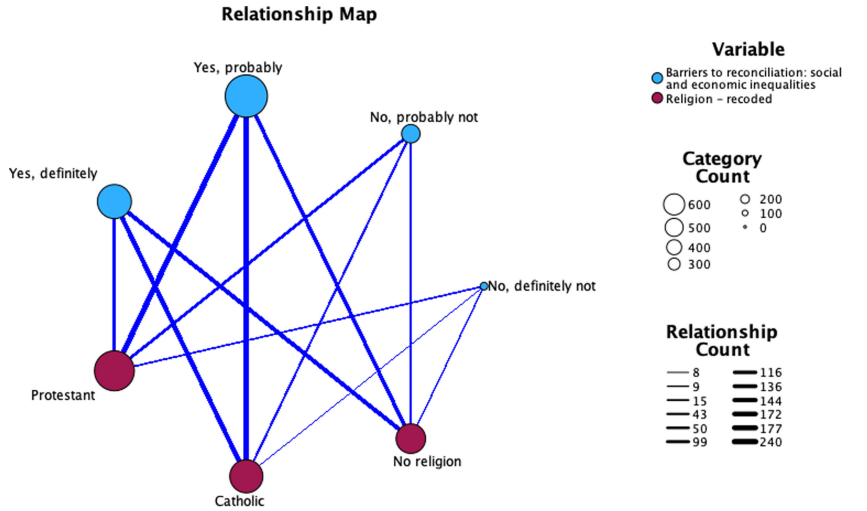


Figure 5. Social and economic inequalities: a barrier to reconciliation? *Source*: Author calculations.

Survey Question: Do you think social and economic inequalities within Northern Ireland are a barrier to the progress of reconciliation?

Overall, 72.8% of respondents replied 'yes definitely' or 'yes probably'. There was a significant difference between Protestants and Catholics (chi-squared test for independence: χ^2 [6, n = 1,209] = 47.76, p = < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.141). We illustrate the strength of the relationships in Figure 5. Large nodes represent strong connections; small nodes represent weak connections. Links represent the strength of influence between nodes. Thick link lines represent strong influence; thin link lines represent weak influence. The relationship map therefore confirms that both main communities see social and economic inequalities as a barrier to reconciliation, with Catholics more likely to think inequalities were a barrier to reconciliation than Protestants.

We select a small number of social and economic issues that have a differential impact on those communities most affected by the conflict in the fields of education, health and income inequality.

Education: There is a large differential between the performance of children from socially deprived backgrounds. The data show the GCSE qualifications of school leavers disaggregated between those who are entitled to free school meals (a proxy measure of poverty) and those who are not (see Figure 6: Department of Education, NI, 2023). Although overall education performance has been improving over the 10-year period since 2012/13, the performance gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds remains lower than others. In 2021/22, for example, 59.1% of school leavers entitled to free school meals had at least 5 GSCEs A*- C including English and Maths, compared with 84.2% of non-FSM pupils, a performance gap of 25.1%.

Health: There are also inequalities in health. We consider the statistics for 'potential years of life lost', which quantify the burden of premature morality within

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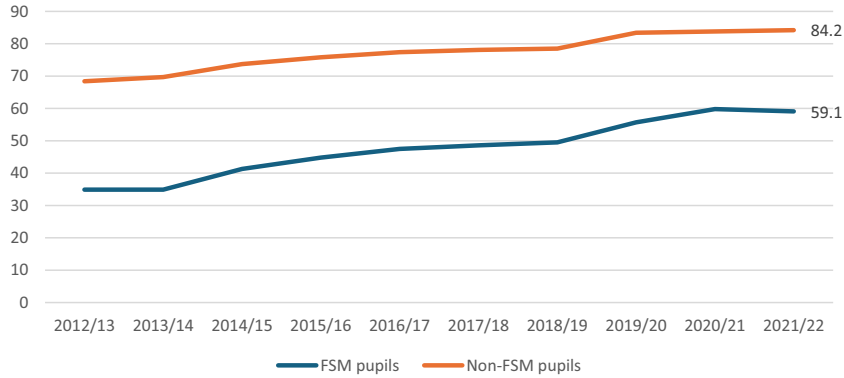


Figure 6. NI school leavers with 5+ GCSEs A*- C (including English and Maths). *Source*: Drawn from Department of Education School Leavers qualification data.

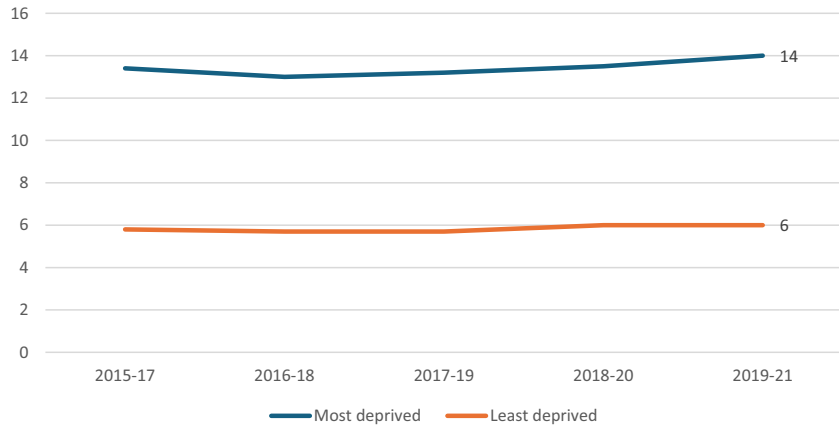


Figure 7. Potential years of life lost per 100 persons. *Source*: Department of Health Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland. The measure is the difference between the actual age at death and the standard age of death. This offers an insight into the overall health and longevity of the population of Northern Ireland. The potential years of life lost for most and least deprived is shown in Figure 7 (Department of Health, NI, 2023). The equality gap is increasing with a gap of 8 years in the period 2019–2021.

Income inequality: Figure 8 shows data on income inequality using the Gini coefficient in percentage terms (0% represents perfect equality and 100% is perfect inequality). In Northern Ireland in 2021/22 the Gini coefficients before and after housing costs were 27% and 29%, respectively (Department for Communities, NI, 2023). The equivalent figures for the United Kingdom in 2020/21 were 34% and 38%, respectively. Those in the top 20% of the population in Northern Ireland earn 3.4 times higher than the bottom 20% (before housing costs) and 3.6 times as much (after housing costs).

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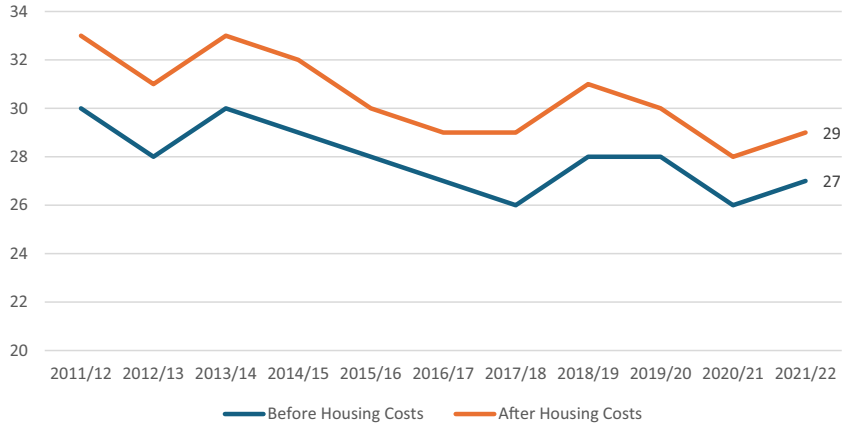


Figure 8. Income inequality. *Source*: Department for Communities Northern Ireland.

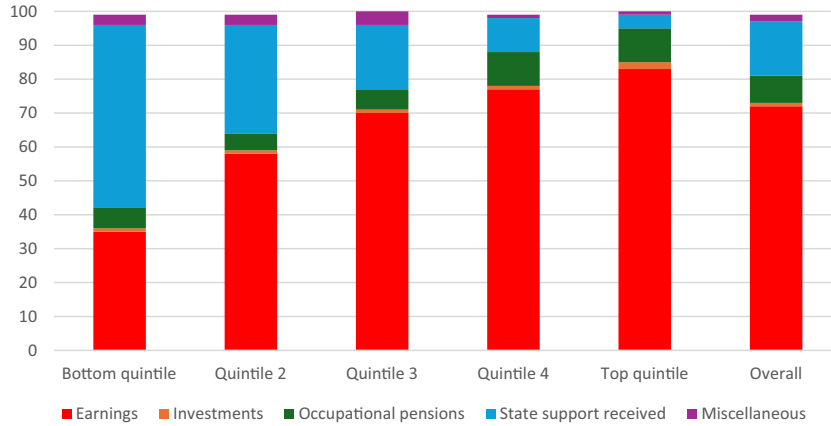


Figure 9. Source of income by quintile: 2020–21. *Source*: Department for Communities Northern Ireland.

Figure 9 shows the source of income in 2020–2021 for each quintile of the population, and the overall population in Northern Ireland (Department for Communities, NI, 2023). For the lowest quintile, 54% of their income derives from state support and for the top quintile, 4% comes from state support (Gray et al, 2023).

We do not claim that this is a comprehensive examination of social policies and their impact in Northern Ireland, but rather indicative of some of the key areas which could offer a peace dividend to segregated and socially deprived communities if these issues become superordinate goals. Social and economic inequalities make an important contribution to the quality of people's lives, their life choices and those of their children, as well as to their lack of mobility out of polarised and deprived communities.

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Discussion and conclusions

The empirical findings from the survey data would suggest that there is evidence of trust in Northern Ireland between the two main communities, much more than one might anticipate. There are, however, systemic barriers that mitigate against bridging social capital. It would be speculative to suggest that government policy 'towards building a united community' (TBUC) represents 'bad social capital' by exacerbating bonding within communities at the expense of 'the other', but it does not appear to have improved community relations over time (Figure 4), its stated goal. The education system at primary and secondary school levels embeds polarisation. Integrated education, despite its long history since 1981, has developed slowly and has some way to go in terms of competing with other schools on education performance standards, particularly the Catholic maintained sector (Borooah & Knox, 2015). The geography of the schools' system is built to accommodate segregated housing, particularly social housing, which compounds polarisation. Other public services follow suit: doctor surgeries, social care facilities, leisure centres and council amenities are all located to serve segregated communities.

Those living in single-identity housing estates are vulnerable to control by paramilitary groups, which maintain a tight grip on communities and whose focus has shifted from 'defending the Union' to criminality in drugs, prostitution and racketeering (Independent Reporting Commission, 2022). The most socially deprived single-identity residents cannot afford to move to more affluent mixed housing areas. Thus far, many of the government's policies aimed at bridging social capital and tackling polarisation have invested in cross-community contact programmes. Yet there is evidence that community groups have become adept at using these monies in a tokenistic way to support work within their own areas and placate funders with large cross-community showcase events (Knox and Carmichael, 2006; Knox et al, 2023). All of this is overlaid by a political party system that is built upon polarisation and segregation, although the centre ground Alliance Party has made recent gains in the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, becoming the third largest party (after Sinn Fein and the DUP) for the first time.

This research might suggest a change in approach aimed at bridging social capital on the basis of common needs that straddle the communities rather than divide them. Both communities' perceived experience of disadvantage is a zero-sum game – resources going to one community is at the expense of another. Yet the evidence points to disadvantages in single-identity working class communities (republican and loyalist) who simply do not see any tangible benefits from the 'peace dividend'. Their daily lives have not improved since the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement and political stalemate has become the norm. The common (bridging) problem is that their health, education and economic prospects are bleak and much inferior to those living in middle-class mixed communities.

It should be noted that there are alternative and parallel theoretical discourses to bridging social capital in conflict societies. Galtung (1969), for example, makes the distinction between negative and positive peace. The former refers to the absence of direct violence through a peace process exemplified in the Northern Ireland case as

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the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement (1998), generally seen as a formal end of the conflict. Positive peace goes beyond simply the absence of violence and is aimed at addressing the underlying causes of conflict. Lederach (1997) expanded on the concept of positive peace as a way of building sustainable reconciliation, arguing that strengthening cross-community relationships and a shared vision were integral to the process of conflict transformation. Whilst the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement may have 'settled' the ethno-national question on the future political trajectory of Northern Ireland, deep-rooted inequalities exist in both main communities. The role of inequality in reconciliation processes has been explored further, particularly within the context of education and social policies where scholars argue education systems can play a transformative role in post-conflict societies (Novelli et al., 2017). In this context, education is seen as a tool for social change, which promotes engagement on issues of inequality and injustice. Ellison's work adds to this discourse by arguing that tackling structural inequalities is crucial to creating the conditions for social justice (Ellison, 2006). Involving communities most impacted by the conflict and inequality is central to this process. Social policies can either mitigate or exacerbate inequalities, hence equitable access to key services such as education, health and housing are fundamental to social cohesion and community reconciliation. In that sense, bridging social capital can be seen as integral to a wider framing of tackling inequalities through core social policies, the impact of which have been felt most in single-identity deprived communities in Northern Ireland. Such an approach goes beyond the narrow confines of contact theory and its limited systemic impact on reconciliation and social injustice.

Whilst the structural impediments to polarisation cannot be easily transformed in the short run, a change in government priorities could facilitate bridging social capital given the evidence above that there is a baseline of trust on which to build. Monies allocated to cross-community programmes on the basis of religious identity could be redirected to tackle social and economic inequalities across both main communities. Tackling paramilitarism and its punitive grip on socially deprived communities would lift the oppressive environment in which they live.

In light of the evidence presented, we return to our main research question: can bridging social capital impact on polarisation in Northern Ireland? The findings show that the conditions for reduced polarisation are possible. There is a level of trust for people of another religion and low affective polarisation across the main political parties and national identities, somewhat surprising given their very different views on the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland. The main policy instrument used by government to tackle polarisation simply is not working. The model of cross-community contact is process driven and used formulaically – equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants at events with limited regard for positive policy outcomes. Indeed, the policy has the potential to develop 'bad social capital' through exacerbating bonding within communities at the expense of bridging social capital. Adopting super-ordinate goals on the basis of the common social and economic needs of those most impacted by the conflict, single-identity communities in the grip of paramilitaries, provides them with choices in the face of systemic barriers to polarisation (segregated housing, education and healthcare). Bridging social capital therefore offers the potential to reduce polarisation, but a

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rethink of government policy on Together Building a United Community (TBUC) is necessary to achieving this goal.

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Note

1 Responses in Figures 2 & 3 on 0–100 scale are grouped into strong dislike (0–30), moderate (31–69) and strong like (70–100)

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