‘Stuck in the Centre with you’: Navigating identity and constitutionality among Alliance and Green Party activists in Northern Ireland

Title: ‘Stuck in the Centre with you’: Navigating identity and constitutionality among Alliance and Green Party activists in Northern Ireland

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

Signed: Louisa Barry **Date:** 20/8/26 **Student Number:** 20215743

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Table of Contents

Declaration ..... *iii*

Acknowledgements ..... *iv*

Acronyms ..... *x*

Abstract ..... *xii*

Introduction *1*

Chapter 1: Conceptualisation Framework *9*

Introduction **9**

Conceptual option 1 – Individual-level **10**

Conceptual option 2: Moderate Parties - Beyond the Northern Ireland context **17**

Conceptual option 3: Issue-orientated parties **20**

Conceptual option 4: Civic parties **22**

Conceptual option 5: Only the constitutionally neutral civic parties (i.e. 'centrist parties') **27**

Conclusion – the 'Intrinsic Case Study' **30**

Chapter 2: Case Study Selection and Methodology Overview *33*

Introduction **33**

Section 1: Case Study Selection and Context **33**

Section 2: Methodology **73**

Conclusion **85**

Chapter 3: Conceptual markers of Alliance activists: 'Less-aligned' rather than non-aligned and the role of Alliance values *87*

Introduction **87**

Conceptual marker: Non-alignment **88**

Conceptual Marker – Constitutional Neutrality and Constitutional preference at the 'people-level' **115**

Conclusion **135**

Chapter 4: Identity versus pragmatism: Understanding the constitutional deliberations of the practical Alliance activists *137*

Introduction **137**

Factor 1: Identity as a factor? **137**

Factor 2: Back to Alliance's early justification - Better economically and socially **146**

Factor 3: Not many unionists or British-only in Alliance – but still care for unionist accommodation in a united Ireland?..... 150

Factor 4: Brexit – not such a game changer?..... 158

Factor 5: The logistics: What Alliance activists want in terms of a border poll – when, how and who? 164

Factor 6: Stability and reconciliation – fitting these within activists' constitutional perspectives 175

Factor 7: Wooing or winning over Alliance? 182

Conclusion 187

Chapter 5: GPNI activists' conceptual markers: Just a Bunch of Civic Environmentalists? 189

Introduction..... 189

Manifestation 1: The intersection of class and ethno-nationalism in the GPNI 189

Manifestation 2: Interactions between the overlapping elements of the GPNI's 'issue-based' orientation..... 196

Manifestation 3: Time to move away from constitutional neutrality? 207

Conclusion 220

Chapter 6: Constitutional mind-set of the constitutionally neutral activists 223

Introduction..... 223

Factor 1: The environment under each constitutional set-up: Do you need a UI to achieve all-island policy and climate transformation? 223

Factor 2: Dealing with the 'shock' of leaving the EU: How Brexit impacts GPNI's activists' constitutional thinking at different ends 229

Factor 3: Who should run the UI? The GPNI don't just want Irish Tories..... 233

Factor 4: Not everyone is 'undecided' – being not so neutral in a constitutionally neutral party 242

Factor 5: Non-violence – Legitimacy of the party taking a stance, and the non-legitimacy of violence 252

Factor 6: Hyper-support for citizen assemblies? 256

Factor 7: Building a New Ireland – a 'Utopia'? 260

Conclusion 263

Conclusions 265

Summary and Contributions 265

Limitations and Avenues for Further Research 272

Concluding Reflections **273**

Bibliography ***277***

Appendix A – Ethical Materials ***303***

Appendix B – Example of Interview Guide – GPNI ***308***

Acronyms

Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA)

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Constitutional Issue (CI)

Constitutional Question (CQ)

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

European Union (EU)

First Minister/Deputy First Minister (FM//DFM)

Good Friday Agreement (GFA)

Great Britain (GB)

Green Party (GP)

Green Party of Northern Ireland (GPNI)

Ireland's Future (IF)

Irish Republican Army (IRA)

Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)

National Health Service (NHS)

New Ulster Movement (NUM)

Northern Ireland (NI)

Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP)

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT)

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)

People Before Profit (PBP)

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)

Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL)

Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)

Republic of Ireland (ROI)

Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)

Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)

Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP)

Sinn Féin (SF)

Secretary of State (SoS)

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV)

Ulster Defence Association (UDA)

United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC)

Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)

United Ireland (UI)

United Kingdom (UK)

Abstract

Title: ‘Stuck in the Centre with you’: Navigating identity and constitutionality among Alliance and Green Party activists in Northern Ireland

Candidate: Louisa Barry

Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has experienced a striking growth in the level of support for centrist, non-aligned political parties with support for such parties more than doubling from the first NI Assembly elections in 1998 by the latest Assembly elections in 2022. There has simultaneously been a notable decline in strong unionist and nationalist identification and a growth in aligned voters voting for these centrist parties, both contributing to corresponding electoral gains for centre-ground parties. Brexit has intensified debate around these shifts, particularly in relation to a potential border poll and Irish unity. Yet the internal dynamics of centre-ground parties including how their activists navigate identity, ideology, and the constitutional question remain poorly understood. This thesis addresses that gap. The thesis examines the two parties constituting the contemporary NI centre-ground: the Alliance Party and the Green Party of Northern Ireland (GPNI). Drawing on forty-four semi-structured interviews with party activists, supplemented by archival research, media analysis, and polling data, it offers an intrinsic case study of what occupying the centre-ground means from the inside. The conceptual framework defines the centre-ground through two markers: civic orientation and constitutional neutrality on Northern Ireland's status while issue orientation is also critical for the GPNI. This framework identifies Alliance and the GPNI as the core instances of the centre-ground while preserving meaningful distinctions between them. Three central findings emerge. First, the centre-ground is populated by the less-aligned rather than non-aligned: activists who negotiate with, rather than transcend, inherited ethno-national identities. From Alliance, this manifests as residual communal attachments and a decline in British identification driven less by Brexit than by discomfort with unionism's inflection of Britishness. Second, Alliance and the GPNI approach constitutional neutrality differently. Alliance activists are heterogeneous on Irish unity, but broadly support organisational neutrality; GPNI activists, shaped by an eco-socialist ethos and operating as an issue-based party, are increasingly open to constitutional deliberation as a party responsibility, assessing options through the lens of environmental governance and post-growth economics. Third, both parties exhibit distinct conditionality cultures linked to commitments to inclusion and effective

deliberation shaping the scope for future constitutional engagement.

Introduction

Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the introduction of institutionalised power-sharing, Northern Ireland (NI) has seen strikingly significant growth in support for centrist, non-traditionally aligned parties. The Alliance Party and the Green Party of Northern Ireland (GPNI) have experienced a growth in their share of the first preference vote from a combined 6.6% in the first NI Assembly elections in 1998 to 15.4% in the last elections in May 2022 (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News, 2022). While there are a variety of factors at play in these changing dynamics including the impact of wider changes in United Kingdom (UK) politics and the impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, this growth in support for the centre-ground of NI politics is linked to wider domestic social changes in NI since the GFA. Since 1998, Northern Ireland has seen more individuals who no longer choose to self-identify strongly, or at all, as Irish/Nationalist or British/Unionist. Specifically, in 2018 50% of Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) respondents identified as neither nationalist nor unionist, compared to just 33% in 1998[1]. Of course, the degree of detachment during this period is not equally drastic. For instance, there was a comparable percentage pattern in 2018 to that in 1998 of respondents identifying as Irish, British and Northern Irish (Devine, 2021). However, by the 2000s, research had already found[2] significant '*distancing from conventional practices and understandings of ethno-religious and national divisions*' including from two-thirds of Northern Irish respondents[3] (see Todd, 2017, p. 68).

[1] Notably, those identifying as Neither dropped in 2019, but it remained the most favoured of the three political identity categories (Hayward and Rosher, 2020).
[2] Follow-ups interviews on identity processes were also conducted in 2014 as part of Todd's research, which revealed some repolarisation in NI, but still a lot of distancing.
[3] And one-third of respondents from the South of Ireland.

Although this change did not generally translate into respondents' political preferences, distancing from group divisions could (partly) explain the *changing* voting patterns and constitutional dynamics in contemporary Northern Ireland. As more voters no longer align to traditional unionism or nationalism, this opens space for the growth of centrist parties while at the same time, there are more aligned voters who are supporting non-aligned parties, particularly Alliance. Considering this, this thesis seeks to better understand the emerging space in NI politics that does not neatly fit into the 'two communities'. Significantly, post-2016 questions exist as to whether said ideological dealignment or Brexit, which Alliance opposed, holds more explanatory power in the centre's rise (e.g. Tonge 2020). This is also at a time when there is increased focus on the potential for a border poll referendum on a United Ireland and with the nationalist and unionist blocs balanced at roughly 43% each, centrist parties' voters will be the deciding voters in any referendum and therefore their views and the views of the parties they vote for are crucially important. Within this scholarly context, this research does not re-visit the 'identity-vis-a-vis-Brexit' debate in explaining political centrism's growth (see for example, Gormley-Heenan and Aughey, 2017). Rather, it profiles the centre's identity (including internal dealignment) and recognises Brexit as one (of many) factors which could shape centrist party activists' constitutional thinking.

Despite increasing research on those who do not strictly sit within the two political traditions, this group was largely forgotten during Brexit even as exemplified by a lack of public imagery that targeted them in their visual narratives (Armstrong et al., 2024, p. 1400)[4]. However, the non-aligned centre was 'forgotten' or (at least) marginalised in NI's socio-political context long prior.

[4] Some of the Brexit-themed images were, however, framed in terms of UK national politics, but this is different than speaking directly to the middle.

Individually, when trying to understand identity change, Todd recognised the essentialist assumptions around the fixed nature of ethnicity and that ethnic identities require accommodation over transformation (see McBride, 2020). However, these primordialist ideas partially underpin the consociationalist framework which informs Northern Ireland's power-sharing governance. Despite suggestions that consociations can help foster new identity dimensions - and hence may partly explain the degree of group 'distancing' in NI (e.g. Garry, 2009) - the accommodation of the main ethnicities (arguably) leads to the entrenchment of ethnic divisions in post-conflict societies (see McCulloch, 2014)[5].

Although the labels and indicators vary, 'not' ethnic parties benefit from operating in centripetalism institutional systems, albeit advocates of consociationalism may view centripetalism as leading to instability and deadlock, despite suggestions it incentivises moderation, non-ethnic or cross-ethnic voting. '*Exclusion amid inclusion'* ('EAI') proponents explain that in an effort to institutionally include the main cleavages, other non-dominant interests and identities – which 'civic parties' mobilise around – can be excluded from power-sharing (see Agarin et al., 2018). Alliance and the Green Party in Northern Ireland ('GPNI') are often exemplars within EAI studies and this thesis seeks to explore these parties of the centre in depth. The focus, counter to much previous work however, is not specifically on examining their marginalisation in institutionalised power-sharing. Rather it conducts an '*intrinsic'* case study *'to understand particularities'* of the centre since Brexit, including the centre's engagement with the constitutional issue of whether Northern Ireland should unify with the Republic of Ireland

[5] Although different forms of consociations may be more likely to facilitate such break down in divisions. For instance, it has been argued that the flexible set up of liberal consociations do just that and can facilitate the move towards *'a non-sectarian democracy'* (see Nagle, 2016, a, p.1157 for this debate). Some advocates of consociationalist approaches would also argue that they do not view ethnic identities in divided societies as essentially unchangeable, but just not so easily changeable or transformed in the short-term (see Lyon, 2012, p. 86).

or remain in the United Kingdom (Mills et al., 2010). It explores the internal dynamics and 'conceptual markers' as they shape the vision, strategy, organisation and articulation of what being a party of the centre-ground involves internally and externally in a post-conflict divided society such as Northern Ireland. The term 'conceptual markers' is used to signify the defining criteria that structure what it means to be a party of the centre-ground. Of course, considering these features of the parties and their relationship to consociational institutions are not mutually exclusive areas of study – even the seminal book studying the party itself as the unit of analysis *The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland: Beyond Unionism and Nationalism* dedicates sections to discussing consociational institutions. While this provides part of the context, this thesis fits more comfortably with debates on what counts as a non-ethnic party, drawing on, for example, Horowitz (2000) who differentiates an ethnic party from a non-ethnic party based on if it receives at least 85% of its electoral support from one ethnic group.

In examining non-ethnic parties of the centre-ground, this dissertation explores Alliance and the GPNI as the core case studies. These parties share certain similarities in their positioning and articulation of identities and interests distinct from traditional ethno-national affiliations in NI but with alternative profiles and positions internally and in terms of the wider political landscape in NI. Relatively-speaking, the GPNI closed the gap on Alliance in the 2016 Assembly election with Alliance retaining the same number of seats as 2011, but the GPNI successfully taking home two seats, one more than previously (Ark, 2016). More broadly, Alliance outperforms the GPNI, acting as a cross-segmental party that can appeal across the NI divide, due to its specialised focus on issues[6] that cut across the entire electorate (Agarin and Jarrett, 2022, pp.

[6] Namely, *'Europe and Brexit'; 'public services'; 'government transparency'* (see Agarin and Jarrett, 2022).

723-4)[7]. Therefore, while Alliance is clearly the largest party of the centre-ground and primarily responsible for the growth of the centre-ground in purely voting terms, in the lead-up to the fieldwork for this thesis conducted between July 2022 and March 2024, the GPNI grew the fastest in terms of voters and seats.

Although the GPNI considers environmental social justice as a cross-community issue, and despite indications 73% of NI's public held concerns about the environment (DAERA, 2025) – this does not translate to electoral gains for 'the Greens'. This civic or non-ethnic (or even post-ethnic) party operates in a different context to Alliance. The 'left-wing' GPNI is likely more conscious and critical of the so-called *'double transition*' that followed the GFA - from conflict to peace, from peace to the neoliberal model - which could explain NI's prioritisation of the economy over eco-sustainability (McCabe, 2012; Hwang, 2022). Also, it is part of the European Greens and an all-island framework, which may interact with its framing of unification, especially given the eco-impacts from NI now being outside the European Union (EU). For instance, EU infraction fines previously pressurised NI to (slowly and poorly) update its eco-systems and environmental approach (Brennan et al., 2017, p. 134), but said progress is now under greater risk with Brexit. Therefore, while Alliance and the GPNI are both the 'political centre-ground' their individualism should not be downplayed. Hence, individual fieldwork chapters on them are included in this dissertation. In this way, the thesis provides insights into the commonalities but also the distinctiveness of these parties and speaks to the diversity of parties that together fall within the non-ethnic party rubric.

[7] Nevertheless, Alliance's electoral growth since 2010 does not correlate with the proportion of potential voters who would identify as neither (Agarin and Jarrett 2022, p. 737).

Nearly a decade since the Brexit vote, the identity and constitutional impacts are not fully realised. Shelly et al (2023) explain the '*strategic political functions'* attached to identities and how political contextual changes can cause group members to attempt to take advantage of *'new political opportunities'* (pp. 2-3). Quite clearly, many nationalists see Brexit as an opportunity for unity, but in less readily apparent and complex ways, Brexit also confused the centre's own constitutional dynamics and political goals. Brexit's fall-out and the new interconnections between Irish unity and EU membership has seen both more internal division and greater fluidity in how the centre view and engage with this debate. Amid this period of flux, this research examines in depth the evolving constitutional mind-set of the political centre and the dynamics shaping the thinking and strategies of these parties – albeit it reveals Brexit is only one (maybe minor) issue that currently informs their constitutional deliberations.

Against this backdrop, Chapter 1 asks who or what is the political 'centre-ground' in contemporary Northern Ireland. The conceptual framework justifies this research's conceptualisation, ruling out the individual-level and selecting a party-based definitional scope. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological approach, but also thoroughly re-examines the narrative that Alliance evolved from a small 'u' unionist party and explores the GPNI's approach as an all-island, pro-Remain party. Chapter 3 profiles the identity of Alliance activists showcasing how in reality a party that considers itself non-aligned is better understood as 'less aligned' but with a residual role for identity backgrounds. Chapter 4 examines the factors that shape Alliance activists' attitudes towards engagement with and positioning on the constitutional question and a potential border poll. In particular, it emerges that Brexit is not as significant a factor as one may expect in a pro-Remain party while identity continues to exert an influence. Chapter 5 considers the manifestation of party-level conceptual

markers within individual-level party activists in the GPNI and notes specifically the interplay between issue ownership and ethno-national identity. Chapter 6 examines the issues themselves as they condition GPNI activist' perspectives on the constitutional question and how these fit into the Greens' vision of the future. Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation summarising the key findings from the empirical examination of the centre-ground, points towards potential future developments in line with the takeaways from the project's analyses and identifies avenues for further scholarly investigation into the internal dimensions of non-ethnic parties and the political centre in post-conflict divided societies.

A number of key findings follow. First, in terms of identity, although non-alignment is core to the self-presentation of the Alliance Party, activists illustrate it is more of an ongoing aspiration than an achieved condition. Less alignment appears to be more the reality. Second, despite historic associations with British identity, Alliance activists demonstrate a decline in Britishness and an increased propensity to identify as Irish (in a civic sense), but this does not appear to be solely or primarily driven by Brexit. Third, in terms of personal preference on the constitutional question, there are different types of undecided within the Alliance Party as well as a specific Alliance brand of 'decided'. Fourth, there are different degrees of apprehension among activists about the party taking a position on the constitutional question and different envisioned roles the party could play in a border poll process. Fifth, due to the realities of lesser alignment as opposed to non-alignment, there is a role for identity affiliations in constitutional deliberations within Alliance, but pragmatic material considerations will take precedence. Sixth, despite a historical belief within the party that the best economic and social interests of NI were served by remaining in the UK, Alliance activists are now less convinced by this, albeit they are not necessarily advocating for Irish unification as the alternative either. Seventh, despite prominent

public discourse, Brexit is not necessarily a clear determining factor in shaping constitutional preferences of activists and has not awakened a new sense of 'Europeanness' within Alliance as such.

For the Green Party of Northern Ireland, the findings indicate class tends to dominate over ethno-nationality for activists although the two intersect in how activists understand themselves and the constitutional issue. Second, the party's leftism is not the only or a strictly static factor in encouraging activists to join and stay in the party, but this leftism is itself key in structuring how it competes with other parties such as Alliance and PBP. Third, the GPNI's issue-based party status conditions how activists evaluate their party now engaging more with the constitutional question. Fourth, in terms of developing constitutional preferences, the activists present different logics as to why a United Ireland as opposed to just an all-island approach is required for better environmental outcomes. Fifth, due to the greater Euroscepticism but ultimate pro-Remain preference of GPNI activists, some are indifferent about a United Ireland within the EU while at the other extreme, some other activists' constitutional deliberations are instead strongly shaped by returning to the EU via reunification. Finally, it is observed that key Green principles such as commitments to non-violence and deliberative democracy are weighed to different degrees and inform a variety of perspectives among activists on the constitutional issue.

Chapter 1: Conceptualisation Framework

Who or what is the political centre-ground in contemporary Northern Ireland?

Introduction

This chapter reviews possible conceptions of the 'political centre-ground' in NI today. At the individual-level (e.g. people's identity formations), there are 'established' descriptions of the middle (e.g. often used in literature or as a survey option) - but not all may be deemed political, or centrist and neutral[8]. Also, party type conceptions - moderate parties, issue-based parties and constitutionally neutral civic parties - hold associated 'conceptual risks' such as being too all-encompassing or limiting (e.g. if multiple aligned parties are bracketed as centrist, or only including issue-based parties excludes Alliance, the largest non-aligned party). Given the limited literature on centrism in NI, the chapter reflectively presents a constructed (and non-exhaustive or mutually exclusive) 'menu' of 'centre-ground' conceptions, before outlining this thesis' case focus – the Alliance Party and the Green Party in Northern Ireland.

[8] Centrism is deemed equivalent to being neutral on the constitutional question unless stated otherwise.

Conceptual option 1 – Individual-level[9]

A. *The 'Neithers'*

Established conceptions of the 'middle-ground' exist, often associated with persons with unconventional distancing from group divisions, or alternative identities in NI (see Coakley, 2021). The *'neithers'* (not unionist nor nationalist) are a category of 'Other' as they embrace a non-ethnic or civic identity, maybe because they come from mixed families - albeit this is not a pre-condition[10] - or they just reject ethnicity as a means to identify themselves (Stojanovic, 2018, p. 346). Those 'neithers' resemble those Sarajevo citizens in a comparable post-conflict society who resonate with civic, nonethnic, alternative identity forms for reasons including opposition to the *'ethnic collectivism'* coupled with the well-established *'cosmopolitan conception of citizenship'* found particularly in urban Sarajevo (Piacentini, 2020, p. 718). However, given the increase in *neithers* saying they don't know which party they *'feel closest to*' in the NILT survey (Hayward and McManus, 2019, pp. 149-150), this grouping is potentially too apolitical to 'represent' the political centre, especially as *neithers* are synonymous with non-voting (Hayward and McManus, 2019). For instance, Sinn Féin (SF)'s pre-Brexit rise would not be explained by those *neithers* (or Others) moving to back this explicitly nationalist party, especially as nationalists were much more likely to generally vote in the 2011 Assembly elections than the *neithers* were (Evans and Tonge, 2013, pp. 52-53).

[9] Other definitions at the 'individual-level' were also researched including 'moderates' on the traditional left-right spectrum. However, the most established conceptual options in the Northern Ireland context are included here, and relevant collected research was integrated back into these conceptions 'A-D'. The conceptual difficulties also existed in these non-NI specific debates. For example, although 'undecided' means something specific in the NI context (unsure how would vote in BP), it also is a term that describes voters in USA, but being undecided, a moderate or independent are often and inaccurately grouped as the same categories do not have the same meaning, albeit they overlap (ABC News, 2019).

[10] As the empirical chapters on Alliance also reveal to some degree.

Additionally, the *neithers* are not obviously 'centrist' between the aligned parties. Of course, centrism here is defined differently to how this dissertation defines centrism which is based on neutrality on the constitutional question. Although most would not vote for an aligned party, some would vote for a nationalist, not a unionist party or vice versa (see Tonge and Loughran, 2024, p. 602). Also, if centrism is associated with constitutional neutrality (which will be the more common usage in this chapter), although *neithers* are more likely to support non-aligned over aligned parties, they are not personally neutral. As Pow (2023) notes *'it is perfectly compatible to be a neither and to still hold a preference on Northern Ireland's constitutional status - as most clearly do'* (p. 5).

Moreover, supporting non-aligned parties could indicate, not a support for a centrist vision, but just a rejection of other parties. This reflects a similar idea that significant numbers of non-nationalist identifiers supporting nationalist parties could illustrate how party support in NI may be about rejection over acceptance – you support nationalist parties only as you reject unionist parties (Evans and Duffy, 1997, p. 63). According to Piacentini (2020) many civic Sarajevo citizens are supporting nonethnic and civic political parties (e.g. Naša Stranka) out of political disappointment and dissatisfaction. Similarly, those non-aligned in NI came out to vote in 2019 in force primarily for the centre, partly motivated by their frustrations with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)-SF stalemate and flawed devolution system (and their pro-remain position) (Hayward, 2020, p. 55). If so, some might consider whether those 'neithers' (or holding civic identities) are voting for Alliance or civic parties because they are pulled to their vision, or because they reject the other parties on offer. Hayward and McManus (2019) highlighted that being neither does not mean you will definitely support the centrist parties – and again, most have

tended to not vote at all. Overall, the *neithers* are often labelled the 'middle' in NI but are not sufficiently politicised in general or centrist 'enough' in the first instance to effectively and neatly represent 'the political centre-ground'. The Northern Irish identity - another established 'middle' identity – may be a potential alternative.

B. *Northern Irish*

Northern Irish appears more 'neutral' given it has fewer ideological connotations than Irish or British. However, studies reveal the Northern Irish identity is taken as neutral in terms of religious background, but not necessarily as constitutionally neutral, given some nationalists see it as an identity legitimising the Northern Irish state i.e. it is seen as more unionist-coded[11] (McNicholl et al., 2019, p. 494). Of course, whether Northern Irish is deemed unionist-coded is subjective, but this perception is commonly held given that being British-Protestant is also associated with being Northern Irish (e.g. McKeown, 2014). This link is tighter when an age element is added in, given the pre-Brexit time series analysis by Tonge and Gomez (2015) reveals that young Protestants are now more likely to identify as Northern Irish (p. 294). It should also be noted that even if 'Northern Irish' is more unionist-coded, it was not always the preferred 'somewhat neutral' identity (to just British or Irish) for this group[12]. Initially, it was the Ulster identity which performed this function before it dipped in its

[11] This term Protestant-coded, unionist-coded, nationalist-coded etc is used in this thesis to signify if the aspect being referenced is traditionally perceived as more associated or aligned with the tradition mentioned in the hyphen.

[12] However, potentially Northern Irish in particular is associated (at least by some GPNI activists interviewed for this project) with socialist roots but also with classism (albeit it is not unexpected that Greens made these associations given the parties working-class and socialist nature are central to its party identity). GPNI activists (15; 16) show how the Northern Irish identity is both shaped by the socialist tradition, particularly Belfast's industrialisation, but alternatively Northern Irish identity can also be interpreted as functioning as a middle-class privilege of being able to 'rise above' identities tied up with sectarianism. These somewhat contradictory views even from within the same party of the centre illustrate the challenges of affording 'neutrality' to the Northern Irish identity.

uptake in the late 1970s and 1980s, when Protestants moved towards the 'British' label and when Northern Irish became an option in NILT surveys (Moxon-Browne, 1983, p. 6; Moxon-Browne, 1991). Recognisably, some 'articulations' of Northern Irishness present as less ideologically contentious, or at least more inclusive. For instance, compared to *'Northern Irish as a People' 'Northern Irish as an Identity Claim'*[13] means the minority *'who actively choose to claim the identity'* not just those who live or were raised there (McNicholl et al., 2019, p. 493). This is a narrower conception of Northern Irish which is less 'tradition-blind' than the former that includes all peoples in NI regardless of their political tradition. Alternatively, the 'neutral' aspect of Northern Irish identifiers could be interpreted not by said identity in itself, but by its comparatively lower 'identity prominence/importance' to other identities for those who use this label - i.e. the value or worth of an identity subjectively felt by the individual themselves (Ervin and Stryker 2001).

Overall, if Northern Irish is to be considered as representing the 'centre-ground', this presents challenges given it is not without non-neutral connotations, and ultimately being Northern Irish does not equate to being non-aligned in terms of the traditional divide. Therefore, the next option for the political centre-ground is 'non-religious.'

C. *Non-religious*

Religion and constitutionality often overlap in NI. Emerging research from 2002-2022 reveals that unification attitudes are predictively linked to religious affiliation despite increased secularisation[14] e.g. Catholics are more likely to be pro-United

[13] The related study also explores 'Northern Irish as a Political Project' and 'Northern Irish as an Indicator of Place'.
[14] i.e. decline in church attendance (p. 54).

Ireland (UI) (Rock, 2024). Similarly, if non-religion and neutrality (non-preference on the Constitutional Question (CQ)) are overlapping, the 'non-religious' could be the 'ideal' centre-ground - albeit there are intra-religious differences on constitutionality that are not routinely engaged with, such as between Catholics around whether unification is a goal in the medium or long-term (Smith and Chambers, 1991). Theoretically, the non-religious appear 'less constitutionally biased' given Hayes and McAllister (1995)[15] suggest their *'religiously independent'* group could form the foundation (p. 79) for Ruane and Todd's (1992) *'middle ground'* in NI which they view as '…*constitutionally pragmatic or agnostic…'* (p. 94). However, given the previous 2002-2022 research also found unionist Protestants' anti-UI position appears to have softened over time (p. 54), potentially the 'religion-constitutionality' dynamic is open to temporal flux. Therefore, using this conception means accepting that even if the non-religious are generally more neutral or agnostic, this could change (potentially by the time of a border poll). Illustratively, post-GFA, Hayes and McAllister (2004) assessed that religious independents' support for unification appears to be trending up: *'It is not inconceivable that at some future point, independents will represent a key group capable of determining the constitutional future of Northern Ireland'* (p. 10).

Furthermore, the directional relationship between religious and political beliefs in NI is more complex than 'religious affiliation determining political support' – meaning the link between religion and 'the political' is not conceptually straightforward. For instance, does being in a bi-confessional party (e.g. Alliance) intensify a supporter's movement away from a set of religious beliefs, or does

[15]Although, Hayes and McAllister (1995) were rightly pessimistic (given the level of re-polarisation following the GFA) that forming a middle-ground would face barriers, the barriers may have lessened since. For instance, although the authors suggest that both religions do not just wipe away their individual communal views and beliefs when they co-operate together (p. 79) – potentially Alliance's growth shows more people are becoming willing to be in a party that supports a vision that is not just combination of moderates from both, but an alternative distinct agenda.

being in a bi-confessional party reflect their existing non-religious beliefs? Similarly, the influence of party support and religion may be weighted differently. For example, SF's Catholic base is more pro-same-sex marriage, despite the Catholic Church being against it (i.e. party wins over Church). Although it is less clear whether unionist party supporters' anti-same-sex marriage attitudes reflect that of the Protestant Church or unionist parties' conservative position, particularly in the case of the DUP (Evans and Tonge, 2018, p. 344). Nevertheless, it appears supporting a bi-confessional party interacts differently with religious beliefs. Alliance's reconciliatory goals between the two religions, and unionist wariness towards unity with the Catholic dominated Republic of Ireland[16] appeared to be linked to the religious belief systems of their politicians (MacIver 1989, p. 369).

In turn, within contemporary NI, what is meant by 'religion', and how it guides political behaviour in itself needs revisiting. For example, the non-ethnic Greens may have a relationship with faith in the form of 'Green Spirituality' which the GPNI considered formally exploring in a working group during the Troubles (Green Light, 1992, a). Also, it cannot be overlooked that some may not perceive being 'non-religious' as the 'ultimate alternative' to being Protestant or Catholic. There are also groupings whose religious alignment does not 'match' their constitutional preference (e.g. Protestants who support a UI). Exemplarily, Graham and Shirlow (1998) suggested the Catholic middle-class[17] who were generally less pro-UI could form the basis for the middle-ground during the period. However, if defined in this way, the middle would still be constitutionally aligned (in this case pro-union), which neglects 'neutrality' as a criterion for the centre-ground. Therefore, the best

[16] Although in reality the decline of the Catholic Church's influence in the South had little impact on unionist attitudes to a key issue for this project - unity.
[17] Alongside the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) which represents working-class Protestants (Graham and Shirlow, 1998).

marker could be those who are truly neutral on the constitutional question – the 'don't knows'.

D. *Don't know*

When conceptualising the centre-ground at the individual-level, the most 'neutral' grouping is likely those who do not have a strict loyalty to unification or NI remaining in the UK. A respondent being a 'don't know' / unsure (or undecided) on how they would vote in a referendum is a well-established survey marker, but the meaning of said answer may not simply be 'uncertainty'. For instance, '*DK'* responses can be motivated by respondents' refusal to pick from the other unsatisfactory options or is a *'cost-saving heuristic'* selected because they required more 'thinking time' on the question (Purdam et al, 2024, p. 220). Therefore, a respondent being undecided on their referendum vote choice could reflect how they would prefer a different (albeit non-legal) constitutional permeation to just a UI or remaining in the Union (e.g. an independent Ulster) or needed more time to reflect upon their preferred constitutional outcome. Similarly, being undecided may reflect a certain 'conditionality' such as the respondent would support a UI or Union specifically if 'X, Y, Z' options were offered in the question[18]. As an example, Pow et al (2018) found that Catholic support for a UI was *strongly conditional upon the outcome of the negotiations between the UK and the EU-27 and on economic expectations* (p. 10). In addition, it should be noted that being don't know' / unsure may not translate to respondents' ignorance of the constitutional issues, but rather potentially an *'ambivalence'* (having both negative and positive affect), rather than *'indifference'* (lack of positive or negative affect) (Yoo, 2010). Both indifference and ambivalence are forms of 'neutrality', but

[18] Noelle-Neumann (1984) recognised how question wording and format can impact decisions to select 'DK' answers.

they should be treated differently. Broadly, not offering a 'don't care' option in the NILT survey may mean missing out on alternative meanings such as the respondent is uninterested in, or equivocal about, the question topic or does not hold a position on it (Devine, 2012, p. 27). Often, there is commonly an option for the respondent to select they will not vote in a referendum which, if selected, could imply the respondent does not care either way about the constitutional outcome. However, this is not a definite, as it may show a general lack of interest in partaking in the democratic process in general rather than anything specific about a lack of constitutional preference. Ultimately, it is subjective to determine whether being a DK or a don't care on the CQ is perceived as 'more' neutral. Nevertheless, choosing either of these options accepts conceptualising the centre by the individual. As detailed above, there are significant challenges with conceptualising the political centre-ground using any single, or any straightforward combination of, individual-level identifier(s) without risking reductive assumptions and/or failing to fulfil the criteria of being political and neutral. However, as the next conceptual options reveal, the centre can be defined by categories of parties, not people.

Conceptual option 2: Moderate Parties - Beyond the Northern Ireland context

The centre overlaps with 'moderates' in the 'moderate-radical' dichotomy (e.g. referenced in Islamist group research), albeit this binary itself is contested. Scholars debate whether Islamists should be categorised as 'moderate' or 'radical' based on their objectives (e.g. whether they want to change existing power relations) or their tactics to achieve said objectives (Schwedler, 2011, p. 350). Within pre-GFA NI, the 'extremes/radicals' were the DUP and SF, while the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) were the 'moderates' without

obvious paramilitary associations (i.e. tactics) and were primarily against disruptive politics (i.e. objectives). Conceptually, confusingly, radicals can 'moderate' themselves (making them not a radical anymore) such as via political system integration in which they downplay their ideological positions to gain in other ways (e.g. electorally) (see Tezcür, 2010). Within post-GFA NI, the extremes/radicals gradually moderated their platforms with the DUP conditionally opening itself up to power-sharing with SF and SF softening its' own anti-British positions (McGlynn et al., 2014, pp. 275-276). However, when exploring 'centrism' in NI, the moderate-radical dichotomy only partly categorises the Alliance Party. Alliance candidates in an early survey evaluated their party as more of a moderate party as it too supported power-sharing in government. This was the *'operational distinction'* they made from extreme parties (McAllister and Wilson, 1978, pp. 220-221). Yet, Tonge (2003) applied similar power-sharing (pro-GFA) criteria to label Alliance as a moderate pro-Agreement party alongside the SDLP and UUP, but also separated it as a non-aligned centrist party. Notably, the early candidates in 1978 did see their party living in the middle between the extremes of both party sides (p. 220), but Tonge (2003) emphasised how Alliance did not see itself as just a combination of or compromise between, the two traditions. Alliance's centre space occupation itself can be contested – is it centre because it is a party made up of two sides without being aligned to either, or because it has a vision beyond just a mix of the traditional blocs? Of course, Alliance should not be considered completely alien to both sides. For instance, Evans and Tonge's (2003) Alliance membership survey study illustrated how Alliance can fit along the nationalist-unionist spectrum, being closer to one side or the other on different issues. However, for this 'radical third tradition' the main conclusion is the party *'cannot be comfortably accommodated within either' of the ethnic pillars'* (p. 48) and as such is more than a moderate version of either, or blend of both, traditional bloc(s). Importantly, lexically this idea of Alliance being

'radical' as a third tradition is very different to what it means to be 'radical' in the initially mentioned 'moderate-radical' dichotomy.

Recognisably, Alliance itself does not just evaluate what a 'moderate' party is based on whether it supports power-sharing. Alliance doubted the SDLP's and UUP's 'moderate' credentials also because these parties prop up ethnic politics, appeal to just one traditional side, and do not strive for a shared future like Alliance does. For example, former Alliance leader David Ford stated *'That is why Alliance stands in a fundamentally different position to the so-called moderates. We believe in the need to build a united community, to establish liberal values. We oppose any attempt to impose ethnic politics...'* (Party News Archives, 2003, a). By seemingly equating 'moderate' with 'non-alignment' Alliance combines Tonge's (2003) two categories (moderate pro-agreement party and non-aligned centrist party) into one mutually exclusive category (to be moderate is to be non-ethnic/non-aligned, and vice versa). Now, of course, Alliance might not be the best determinant of what a 'moderate' really is given it may always struggle to evaluate initiatives by aligned parties to build a shared future without suspicion. For instance, back in 2011 Ford was not convinced that the then leader of the DUP's proclamations of building a shared future in NI had real party backing (Belfast Telegraph, 2011, a)[19].

Both Alliance and GPNI have mentioned they represent 'anti-sectarian' politics or called for the construction of more than a non-sectarian but instead an anti-sectarian society as, for example, in the GPNI 2015 Westminster election manifesto (see CAIN, 2015). However, anti-sectarian implies an active opposing to

[19] Although Alliance did recognise some progress in how the UUP's Mike Nesbitt – who transferred his vote to the SDLP - suggests people should vote based on government workings over tribalism. Therefore, maybe Alliance does recognise 'sometimes' when the aligned parties look to move beyond ethnic politics (Belfast Telegraph, 2017).

unionism and nationalism, which would suggest that being 'aligned' is something that should not be strived for at all and is difficult to straightforwardly categorise as 'moderate.'

Ultimately, as a framing device, the 'moderate party' concept is difficult to measure and justify. Defining the 'centre-ground' broadly by 'moderate parties' risks downplaying the distinguishing characteristics of the SDLP and UUP (aligned) and Alliance (non-aligned). However, defining the 'centre-ground' as only 'issue-orientated' parties - which mobilise on issue agendas, trying to move beyond the ethnic cleavage – avoids conceptual stretching and contestation on what is a 'moderate' in and outside the NI context.

Conceptual option 3: Issue-orientated parties

Although consociations do not lend themselves to new policy dimensions (e.g. the economic left-right) a moral liberal-conservative political dimension exists in NI that impacts voting - albeit people are not necessarily voting for parties different from their community (Garry et al., 2017, p. 507). Therefore, (limited) spaces exist for issue parties, some of which are 'niche' parties in wider theory that have a non-centrist 'niche', or extreme ideology (Adams et al., 2006, p. 513). Similar to 'moderates', how 'niche parties' are defined and measured is critically varied. For instance, defining them against 'mainstream' parties based on party ideology could downplay distinctions between and within party families (Meyer and Miller, 2015, p. 259). Importantly, the 'niche' category is not conceptually matched in NI's context. While the DUP and SF are more 'extreme' nationalist (not just Irish nationalist) parties, which leans them towards a 'niche' definition, they are 'mainstream' within NI's ethnic-based political system. Now, if niche and mainstream parties are differentiated by relative issue

salience (not party position per se), then a niche party could switch to being a mainstream party[20] by changing the degree of attention paid to each issue (Meyer and Wagner, 2013, pp. 1248-9). Therefore, theoretically, the one exemplar of a 'niche' party in NI – the Green Party - is becoming 'less niche' in NI because many mainstream parties now include environmental and sustainability policies in their manifesto, i.e. mainstream parties are becoming 'more niche' [21], albeit they are not suddenly 'niche parties'.

Of course, the Greens themselves may argue it is not a niche party which implies a single-issue focus on environmental justice and the climate. The Greens would rather see themselves as 'eco-socialist' (environmentalism mixed with social justice). But even Kovel (2002) would separate green politics and ecosocialism as, for instance, demands for labour emancipation and issues around the means of production are not build into the fundamental pillars and values of the Green Party (GP). The GPNI is conceptually grouped then as a niche party because it is 'green' not 'socialist' per se, but the eco-socialist dimensions are seen internally as more interlinked in the GPNI ideology according to interviewees as a decision that is good for the environment is seen as a good one socially. Ultimately, the 'niche' category overlooks another issue-based party in NI, the socialist People Before Profit *(*PBP). Murtagh (2020) groups the GPNI and PBP as non-ethnic, integrationist civic parties as they *'tend to campaign on alternative issues and cleavages, such as class or the environment, and attempt to transcend the ethnic cleavage moving towards a more 'normal', issue-based politics'* (p. 76). Arguably, PBP is 'less non-ethnic' compared to the GPNI which makes greater attempts to

[20] Or the other way around (i.e. mainstream to niche).

[21] Niche parties' studies would suggest that the success of green parties as issues owners of the environment results in the main mainstream parties de-emphasising environmental issues (see Abou-Chadi, 2016, p. 417). However, the green parties do not appear to have much to electorally gain from diversifying beyond the 'owned' environmental issue (see Bergman and Flatt, 2020).

'…transcend the ethnic cleavage…' (p.76) given PBP supports unification while the GPNI (until recently) has avoided constitutional language in its policy positions (also PBP's pro-UI position is itself 'less ethnic' than the nationalist parties given it is underlined by socialist - not republican – motivations)[22].

Labelling issue parties like the Greens or PBP as 'centre' requires downplaying their non-ethnic, issue aspect to fit a 'Northern Ireland specific context' – being centre in NI might mean not being unionist or nationalist, but these parties are certainly not ideologically centrist. This reflects one thesis interviewee (7) who does not like the centre-ground term, '*…but I understand why it's being used in terms of between, unionism and nationalism…if you're in the centre, you get run down in middle-of-the-road…so pick a side and we do pick a side, we're on the left, we're not on the centre in that respect…'.* Ultimately, as a conceptual frame, issue-orientated parties face opposite issues to 'moderates' as the basis for the political centre, because it narrows the definition of 'centre-ground' to exclude the most commonly perceived 'centrist' party in NI which is Alliance.

Conceptual option 4: Civic parties

A broader party-level conceptualisation which includes the previous issue-based parties, but also Alliance would be 'civic parties', *'which attempt to draw support from and represent all significant groups in a divided society, to the exclusion of none'*

[22] PBP replaced similar parties such as the disbanded Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) which was regarded as a non-sectarian alternative when formed in 1949, although Rose (1971) thought the party was more of an 'inter-confessional' entity made up of aligned Catholics and Protestants, but even this label is doubtful given Catholics in the party view some actions by it as more Presbyterian-coded (p. 232). Also, the NILP itself was not 'neutral' albeit it is an Other given it moved from not committing to a CP when formed in 1924 to a pro-union stance in 1949 (Walker, 1984, p. 21; Edwards, 2013).

(Murtagh, 2020, p. 76)[23]. Of course, defining the 'political' centre means overlooking alternative types of 'Others' that are not parties frequently discussed in the literature (e.g. gender or sexual minorities) whose inclusion/exclusion (as the introduction alludes to) is often dependent on the type of consociation they are operating in (liberal, corporate, or hybrid). For example, Nagle (2016, b) examines how Lebanon's corporate approach institutionalises homophobia and excludes non-salient minorities, while Northern Ireland with its more liberal consociation is a more fruitful framework for the LGBTQI+ community offering a better space for the movement to achieve equality and recognition (p. 868). However, following from this section, civic parties, are often placed 'in contrast' to ethnic parties and squeezed in as 'non-ethnic' alternatives. Although Chandra builds on Horowitz's (2000) definition of an ethnic party, such as by recognising a party can be non-ethnic and ethnic at different times, both are criticised for downplaying how parties may not fit into just one or the other category (Hamza and Maeda, 2025, p. 3). As with previous labels (e.g. moderates), debate persists on what counts as an ethnic versus a non-ethnic party. For instance, Ishiyama and Breuning (2011) differentiate these categories depending on how the party portrays itself to the electorate (i.e. ethnic group name in title) albeit this name-based indicator is criticised for downplaying a key ethnic party characteristic – *'their culturally-defined electoral base'* (Debus and Schulte, 2024, p. 129). Although there may be a 'conceptual question' around which 'alternative' to ethnic party is more representative of the 'centre' – i.e. is it 'multi-ethnic' parties that are 'centre' as they promote without exclusion all ethnic identities in a society or 'non-ethnic' parties that are 'centre' as they do not champion any specific ethnic interests (Chandra, 2011, p 155). The best understanding potentially is non-ethnic, only because ethnicity is not at all part of the party campaign. Even in

[23] For emerging conceptualisations of civicness, see Murtagh (2025).

itself, the difference between ethnic and multi-ethnic should not be overstated as ethnic parties can champion more than one ethnic group's interests but do so *'by identifying the common ethnic enemy to be excluded'* (Chandra, 2005, p. 236).

Within Northern Ireland specifically, those 'not ethnic' or 'civic parties' may benefit from how the consociational setup also combines centripetal elements through its use of STV (Bogaards, 2019, p. 525). Civic parties have been given opportunities to effectively operate, for instance, in balance of power-roles, such as Alliance holding the Justice Ministry[24] role, albeit civic parties might find it easier to navigate amongst liberal over corporate rules (Murtagh, *in* Agarin and McCulloch, 2019). These types of parties are also referred to as 'non-nationalist' with studies exploring why they attract support in ethically saturated societies. For example Pickering (2009) explores reasons for greater support of non-nationalist parties – i.e. those which are open to cross-ethnic cooperation, although this willingness is situational and temporally varied (p. 572). There is greater support for such parties in Macedonia over Bosnia, with Pickering casting doubt on the assumption that support comes from voters' engagement in civil society and social tolerance (p. 565). Within NI, Mitchell (2018) is less than convinced that Alliance's non-nationalist politics has been constrained politically by the GFA consociational setup.

Ultimately though, Northern Ireland is not the most fertile ground for civic parties, hence, the new-found focus on studying their relevance. Within the NI Assembly, cross-ethnic parties battle formal institutional barriers (e.g. cross-community voting procedures) and informal constraints (e.g. NI political culture has been defined by ethnicity for a long time) to inclusion in power-

[24] Also, in popular media Alliance often has been accused of having disproportionate representation in the quangos.

sharing (Murtagh, 2015). Murtagh (2015) appears to blame the informal over the formal barriers but ideological dealignment in the post-Brexit era indicates that some of these informal structures may have broken down to a degree to allow cross-ethnic parties to rise and a generational change (e.g. post-GFA babies) has eroded some of the enduring ethnic-based political culture in NI. Also, there are still unanswered questions in terms of these barriers for cross-ethnic parties which speak to the complexities of how these parties navigate the NI system and how it may change. For example, if the formal institutions are dealt with (e.g. reforms removing designation are enacted) what happens to the smaller minorities like the issue-based parties? Do they become even more micro? There is the potential risk that without designation and with the emergence of classical left-right mass party politics, this could squeeze the space for these smaller or alternative types of parties. In turn, potentially the 'barriers' themselves are overstated in the first place, and there may be scope for greater cooperation and engagement between civic parties and ethnic parties themselves for mutual benefit. Ethnic parties in NI have made certain efforts to engage with Others ('non-dominant groups') in different arenas within the power-sharing arrangement motivated by both *'principled and strategic concerns'* (Murtagh and McCulloch, 2021, p. 547). Questions remain as to how cross-ethnic parties view their relationship to these traditional blocs. Also, Murtagh reveals how parties can 'evolve out' of civic party categorisations. Alliance moved from its cross-ethnic accommodationist position when it was a mediator between the two sides in peace negotiations and bridged the position between them, to a more post-ethnic integrationist party as it is issue-based with its own specific agenda (2020, p. 78). This is suggestive that these signifiers may themselves be more flexible than is sometimes understood.

However, the categories of civic parties or, more broadly, party-level Others sometimes do not fit neatly onto the parties. For

example, Agarin et al (2018) Alliance slotted in as an 'Issue-oriented Other' over being an 'Ethnic-rejecting Other.' While this potentially follows, it does not allow for much distinction between Alliance and issue-based parties like the GPNI or PBP, specifically given the definitions of these two types of 'Other' are similar. For instance, 'Ethnic-rejecting Others' includes those who seek political participation *'on a socially relevant identity other than ethnicity'* and *'*Issue-oriented Others' '*includes those rejecting all identity-driven labels and who instead pursue ideologically underpinned forms of political participation'* (p. 4). However, the authors' justification was framed around comparison to other parties on the NI political spectrum and did not allow another clear categorisation for non-orange/green parties[25]. Again, this reinforces the conceptual difficulties in placing civic parties in boxes, that ultimately this chapter does, which is that different parties can fit into many definitions depending on how the 'box' itself is defined. Even in practical terms, although initially differentiating them, Coakley (2008) recognises the political centre as '*the terrain not just of underbidders, but also of counterbidders'* (p. 784). Ethnic underbidders define themselves '*as centrist and abjure all ethnic loyalties'* (i.e. Alliance) and *'nonethnic counterbidders who seek to impose an alternative, nonethnic cleavage'* (i.e. GPNI) (pp. 766-767). Therefore, the broader centre space can be formulated by both Alliance and the GPNI, even if they often are deemed different types of Others.

Ultimately, as a framing device, civic parties would direct a study on the 'Other' parties in NI, like Alliance, the GPNI and PBP, but it would remove an arguably essential component marker of 'being centre' – not taking a 'binary' position on the constitutional question. Also, certain supporters of the SDLP and some previous

[25] This insight was garnered from email correspondence with the academics who wrote this article.

pro-Union parties may at least claim that they were civic in their approach to nationalism and as such, limitations remain with this classification of the political centre-ground.

Conceptual option 5: Only the constitutionally neutral civic parties (i.e. 'centrist parties')

The next conception, which puts constitutionality as the key marker, and is aligned with Murphy (2023) who says '*instead the label 'middle ground' or 'centre party' implies—first and foremost—neutrality on the constitutional question'* (p. 95)[26]. However, there is a built-in conceptual assumption that the 'opposite' to alignment is 'neutral' but potentially supporting 'joint authority' or federalism could be the 'centre' between pro-union and pro-unity. At one stage in 2000, even the non-aligned Alliance recognised in an internal document that joint authority was one optional alternative to collapsing the GFA (Belfast Telegraph, 2000). Given this, joint authority is not 'logically centrist' because it still puts NI in the Union, even if it could be considered a stepping stone towards a united Ireland. Secondly, there is a question of what counts as 'taking a constitutional position', could advocating for Northern Ireland to move towards a more conventional democracy be seen as Alliance's or the GPNI's 'constitutional' agenda? Similarly, certain interviewees[27] also motivated a re-evaluation of what it means to take a CP, given some considered that 'technically' the party currently has a valid 'non-binary' CP and this binary way of thinking about it (i.e. that a party has to pick one side or the other) is itself problematic (e.g. activist 10). Of course, it is suggested that

[26] As Colfer and Diamond (2023) summarise, Murphy explores how '*Brexit has contributed to, and coincided with, major alterations in the electoral landscape of NI'* including the growth in Alliance, as the political centre-ground (p. 83)

[27] Recognisably, this thesis' conceptualisation of the 'centre-ground' may not always match the conceptualisation held individually by those interviewed as a part of this study. For example, one GPNI activist (2) considered putting the interviewer in contact with an 'independent' who does not want to align with a particular party as the activist (2) thought the independent might be part of what is defined as the middle-ground in NI.

civic parties are not truly neutral because supporting the status quo is seen as supporting the Union. However, as Jarrett (2016) suggests there is a difference between unionist parties which advocate for remaining in the UK, and those neutral parties who do not challenge the constitutional status quo (p. 313). Indeed, now that unionism is no longer a majority, agreeing with whatever the people of NI want does not any longer implicitly support a pro-union stance (see Ó Dochartaigh, 2021, p. 7). In turn, there is evidence that voters for non-aligned parties are now transferring to nationalist parties, which provides certain partial evidence that 'civic parties' (or at least their voters) may be increasingly willing to align with a particular bloc over another in support of a wider policy agenda rather than remaining scrupulously 'neutral' between traditional blocs down the ballot (McGuinness, 2024). Thirdly**,** there is a question of what counts as 'constitutional change'. For example, 'constitutional change' could be defined as the Assembly being given devolved powers by Westminster or the removal of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution. Indeed, within Alliance archives the party itself call these examples of 'constitutional change'. However, an analysis on the CQ in contemporary NI, would likely revolve around 'the' constitutional choice at the heart of the GFA and no other (important) questions of possible reform within the UK.

Notably, Alliance and the GPNI constitute the 'contemporary' political centre-ground, but a disbanded neutral party often mentioned in the literature was the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). Referring back to the 'moderate-radical dichotomy', Tonge (2003) labelled the NIWC as a *'moderate' pro-Agreement'* party and another *'non-aligned centrist party'* with Alliance. However, the NIWC should be differentiated from Alliance given both followed different approaches. Unlike Alliance, the NIWC adopted a 'cross-community' rather than 'one-community' approach promoting reconciliation between the sides

and embracing diversity (Tonge, 2005). For example, while the NIWC would promote quotas in the police service, Alliance argue that trying to build a 'cross-community' body via quotas was actually itself more a hinderance in creating a representative police force as quotas *'can fail to reflect the diversity within the monolithic blocks that people have based public policy around, particularly in the Catholic, nationalist section of society'* as they sought to see those from much more republican backgrounds come forward, not just those on the more moderate end of the political spectrum (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2010, c). In this way, Alliance favoured representation of the NI community in its totality rather than an approach seeking to build structured cross-community balance.

Furthermore, illustrating the complexities of conceptualising different parties as issue-orientated or not, the NIWC could be considered specifically issue-based too with its 'issue' being gender rights. Unlike the GPNI, the NIWC drew a close association between their 'issue' (i.e., women's issues) and the national question, based on the view that the continuation of the ethno-religious cleavage propels the patriarchy forward in society. As one of the NIWC founders, Monica McWilliams, explained '*The traditional link between nationalism, both green and orange, and their respective churches has ensured that the ultra-conservative view of women as both the property of, and inferior to, men remains strongly entrenched in Irish society'* (Sunday Times, 2000). For the GPNI it would be a greater stretch to suggest that ethno-nationalism directly propels the lack of attention to climate action in NI, although indirectly the focus on sectarian issues has meant that 'normal' issues like environmentalism have traditionally been de-prioritised.

Ultimately, as a framing context, defining the ‘centre-ground’ as the ‘centrist parties’ incorporates two component markers – these parties are both ‘Other’ and constitutionally-neutral.

Conclusion – the ‘Intrinsic Case Study’

This chapter has reviewed a non-exhaustive menu of conceptions of the political centre-ground in contemporary Northern Ireland, moving from individual-level identifiers through to party-level frameworks. Each option was assessed against three criteria: whether it is sufficiently political, genuinely centrist in the NI-specific sense, and sufficiently neutral on the constitutional question to anchor this research.

Individual-level identifiers (Conceptual Option 1) offer an intuitive starting point. Survey categories such as the ‘neithers’, those identifying as Northern Irish, the non-religious, and constitutional 'don't knows' all map onto a recognisable middle space. Yet none can reliably anchor a study of the political centre. The ‘neithers’ are disproportionately non-voting; Northern Irish identity carries Protestant-coded connotations that render it non-neutral in nationalist eyes; the non-religious category is temporally fluid; and 'don't know' responses reflect a mix of ambivalence, conditionality, and strategic non-response that resists interpretation as centrism. Individually and collectively, individual-level identifiers lack the political agency and organisational coherence this study requires.

Party-level conceptualisations resolve the agency problem but introduce fresh difficulties. The 'moderate parties' frame (Option 2) offers useful historical perspective, illuminating how the pre-GFA moderate-radical dichotomy mapped onto the party system. However, it is too elastic to serve as a precise conceptual

tool, applying simultaneously to Alliance, the SDLP, and the UUP and thereby flattening the meaningful distinction between ethnically-aligned parties that moderate their strategies and genuinely non-ethnic parties that reject the ethno-national framework altogether.

The 'issue-oriented parties' frame (Option 3) has the opposite problem: it is too narrow. Focusing on parties mobilising around non-ethnic issue agendas captures an important dimension of NI's pluralism but excludes Alliance, the largest non-aligned party and the primary electoral beneficiary of post-Brexit dealignment. Defining the centre by issue salience alone obscures the constitutional neutrality that gives the centre its distinctive character. The 'civic parties' frame (Option 4) recovers Alliance and is analytically more productive, encompassing parties that prioritise and receive cross-community support. It connects the research to a rich comparative literature on non-ethnic parties in divided societies. However, it does not necessarily entail constitutional neutrality. Supporting the constitutional status quo can itself be read as implicit pro-union alignment, and parties conventionally described as civic, including elements of the SDLP or UUP at various points, have retained discernible constitutional orientations.

Conceptual Option 5, constitutionally-neutral civic parties, here termed 'centrist parties', addresses this gap. It combines two component markers that are, taken together, most analytically precise for this study: these parties are civic in that they do not champion any single community's ethnic interests and seek cross-community support, and they are constitutionally neutral in Murphy's (2023) sense, whereby the centre-ground label implies, first and foremost, non-alignment on the constitutional question. This combined criterion deliberately excludes even moderate aligned parties and individual-level groupings whose political

engagement is too attenuated to sustain systematic analysis. It includes, with clear justification, the two parties at the core of this research: Alliance and the Green Party in Northern Ireland. The empirical chapters examine carefully the differences between Alliance and the GPNI rather than treating them as interchangeable and this framework does not homogenise individuals within these parties, whose personal constitutional views frequently diverge from official non-aligned positioning. Instead, this is key to what the empirical chapters seek to map.

Conceptual Option 5 is therefore adopted as the working definition of the political centre-ground for the remainder of this dissertation. By holding together the civic and the constitutional, it provides the most analytically coherent foundation for examining what it means to occupy the centre-ground in Northern Ireland today. Chapter 2 sets out the thesis' methodological approach and contextualises the two case study parties whose activists form the basis of the empirical investigation.

Chapter 2: Case Study Selection and Methodology Overview

Introduction

The chapter is divided into two components. The first section provides an overview of the case selection criteria and context for the intrinsic case study, parties that are conceptualised as the political centre-ground in the previous chapter, and whose activists are studied in the empirical design. The second section covers 'traditional' methodological decisions, including the research design, the ontological and epistemological approach, the qualitative interpretative interview strategy, sampling, and ethical and positionality issues.

Section 1: Case Study Selection and Context

Rather than reciting the histories of either party[28], this section maps Alliance's movement away from a pro-union (but, not unionist) party and the GPNI's position as *not just* a pro-Ireland party (despite being part of an all-island framework). Prior to the fieldwork chapters on the identity and position on the CQ of party activists, it contextualises these parties' key markers which mark them as the 'centre-ground'. In the case of Alliance, the central self-identifying markers are the party's non-alignment and constitutional neutrality while the GPNI similarly shares the non-alignment and constitutional neutrality identifiers but is distinct in its nature as an issue-based party.

28 For a detailed history of Alliance, please see Eggins, B. (2015). 'History and hope: The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland'. *The History Press*.

Alliance Party of Northern Ireland ('Alliance'):

Stage 1 of evolution: A pro-union (not unionist!) party

Alliance's pro-union (not unionist) origins

Given Alliance's pressure group predecessor, the New Ulster Movement (NUM) established in 1969 was explicitly pro-union, Alliance's origins, at least, are more unionist-leaning. However, this requires some contextualisation. The NUM was not 'disgusted' by a united Ireland, but outlined minimum conditions on which it may be *'workable'* even though it did not accept unity in *'principle'* (McQuaid, 2012, p. 82). More broadly, the NUM itself identified not as moderate 'unionist' but '*on the most moderate-wing of those who support'* Northern Ireland's maintenance in the UK (NUM, 1972). Similarly, even to argue that Alliance was more union-leaning precisely because the NUM was, downplays that Alliance, founded in April 1970, was not a replica of the NUM and carved out distinct positions from early on. For instance, some in the NUM were *'content with direct rule from Westminster*' (a very unionist position, albeit the NUM itself was opposed to direct rule), while Alliance continuously supported the region having its own devolved Assembly (Eggins, 2015, p. 38). Also, while both ultimately favoured devolved government, the NUM by 1971 came to, reluctantly, support Stormont's suspension for three years with commission rule. However, the justification for said support was 'Alliance-flavoured' (i.e. aligned to Alliance's own ethos) given suspension was seen as a means to address the lack of progress in Northern Ireland's politics and political sectarianism in the region (NUM, 1971). Overall, despite differences and overlaps, Alliance would take the NUM's pro-union preference with it as it continued to establish itself as a party in the early 1970s but the nature of this preference, already complex, would continue to evolve and be subject to refinement.

The big border poll 'test' in early establishment

Early on, Alliance was challenged to differentiate itself from the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC), a unionist party coalition which shared Alliance's pro-union stance. However, unlike the UUUC, Alliance was pragmatically, rather than ideologically, pro-union; not for reasons of nationhood and because of 'British Unionist allegiance', but because it was in the best social and economic interests of Northern Ireland's people[29]. Illustratively, Alliance's position against internment in 1971 was not 'very unionist'. Specifically, one of the party's unionist founders, Sir Bob Cooper, was later commended by the leader David Ford for rejecting the Unionist government's approach to internment, despite Bob's own background (Party News Archives, 2005, a). However, in turn, this is not to suggest that Alliance's interment approach was 'green' as unlike the SDLP who initially refused, Alliance wanted to participate in negotiations on forming power-sharing, despite the continuation of internment. The example of the position on internment does though indicate the iterative process by which Alliance came to stand out from other 'pro-union' entities.

Already not helped by prominent names in unionism defecting to Alliance[30] (e.g. in 1952 Phelim O'Neill was elected as a UUP MP to Westminster, but switched to Alliance in 1972), Alliance's early pro-union position is difficult to deny, given its 'active campaign' for it in the 1973 border poll. Alliance's Denis Loretto wrote *'It was one thing to have a party principle which supported the British link as the majority view but quite another to*

[29] Refer to number 5 under the heading titled 'Underlying realities, identity, allegiance and constitutions' in *Alliance News -Inter-Party Talks Supplement (1992, a)* for details on how Alliance separates these two 'pro-unions' positions.
[30] Although one such defector, Tom Gormley, was previously an independent nationalist, meaning Alliance was not only an attractive option for unionists.

campaign in its favour in a referendum' (2001/02, p. 35)[31]. This decision was thought not 'so easy' for Alliance to decide upon but required some deep reflection on the party's part. As alluded to by N.I.C.R.A. the moderates like Alliance were expected to do '*…much soul searching, leading ultimately to abstentions…'* (Irish Times, 1973). It is reasonable to assume that the lack of planning around the referendum and the absence of a real proposal for it was not something Alliance wanted. Moreover, Alliance's pro-union position was 'moderate-coded' in that it wanted the shape of the 1973 border poll questions to reflect a moderate perspective, so structured in a way which was appealing to 'moderates' who were prepared to look at the long term, issue of consent, and devolved government rather than direct rule (see Hansard, 1972). Nevertheless, regardless of desired question modifications, Alliance's 1973 pro-Union support is still used as evidence of its more unionist-leaning credentials.

Prioritising the Ulster dimension first

Dating back to 1974, Alliance entirely accepted the people's right to aspire towards a united Ireland, but it also supported the dropping of the ROI's territorial claim to NI, calling the continued existence of Article 2 and 3 in the Constitution as *'nonsense'* (see NAI, 2005/7/622). However, Alliance did not prioritise the British dimension (it recognised it and the Irish dimension) but prioritised the Ulster dimension meaning it supported the internal power-sharing governance within the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement. Its position on the proposed Council of Ireland however was not 'so green'. It strongly rejected any notion of direct control of the police being given to the Council which the SDLP supported. Alliance

[31] Although it is not as if Alliance has never strayed from its party policy in decision-making when it thought it would make sense for the stability of the institutions. For instance, to mitigate the burden on the fragile peace process, Alliance was open to the postponement of the than upcoming Westminster and local elections in 2001 which it itself deemed not party policy (see Belfast News Letter, 2001, a).

knew pushing for this would doom the COI and Executive given most unionists would not buy into it (see NAI, 2004/21/476). Yet, unlike hardline unionists, Alliance's support for a more integrative approach to governance intensified for a period after the Executive collapsed in mid-1974. In speeches, it started using the phrase *'partnership'* rather than *'power-sharing'*, indicating that it was less focused on mandatory rigid power sharing and instead concentrating more on voluntary cooperation between communities to form the basis for governance (NAI, 2006/131/1400). Despite both being open to power-sharing, after the Executive fell Alliance was not enthusiastic about joining any proposed centrist coalition with Faulkner Unionists (and the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), NUM and others). Both wanted to maintain their distinct identities, and Alliance leaders knew that Catholics in Alliance did not want to be associated with the Faulkner Unionists even in an electoral pact (NAI, 2006/131/1400). Through this period, it becomes clear that in its positions, perspectives and strategy Alliance should not be 'grouped directly' with moderate unionism. Indeed, this is a label that both Alliance itself and moderate unionism would also reject.

Alliance settling in as 'not nationalist?

Ultimately, Alliance settled in as 'not nationalist in the early 1980s. While most nationalists supported the prisoners' demands, Alliance was against the 1981 hunger strike, although it framed this lack of support as proof of its 'courage' to not pick the popular option despite knowing it would hurt party support[32]. Former leader John Cushnahan stated, *'We were opposed to the hunger strikes and this doubtless lost us some support…But we deal in reality and*

[32] Alliance made a habit out of putting 'what it believed is right' before even party survival or at least party growth. For instance, Alliance saw it as the right move to abolish the Department for employment and learning (to form a new Department for the economy), even though it would mean it would lose its own ministry (The View, 2014).

will not merely swing the way which we think will be most popular' (Guardian, 1984). Despite generally doing well in Western parts of Ulster in the 1970s, the hunger strikes undercut this as with increased polarisation of Catholic opinion during this fraught period, Alliance Catholic moderates moved away to support nationalism (Mitchell, 2002, p. 36). Yet, in its wider operations and positioning during this period, Alliance was not against building cooperative and more inclusive links across the islands in contrast to the scepticism of strong unionists. Of course, Alliance did not support any Irish dimension that was perceived as an all-Ireland institution which could or might be a route to unification, but the former leader Sir Oliver Napier still was said to have *'welcomed the "UK-Republic of Ireland" dimension which has been recognised in the establishment of the AIIC*' (NAI, 2012/90/1008).

Alliance's next 'not nationalist' move was its decision to decline to partake in the ROI-organised New Ireland Forum (1983-1984). This was not though simply because it was an 'Irish-organised' event[33]. Rather, Alliance disagreed with how the event framed unity as the 'sole' solution to NI's problems. As *The Alliance Principles and Analysis* reveals, its primary objective was/is to support and protect minorities, but Alliance saw that unity solved the nationalist minority's problem *'only at the cost of creating an even larger minority of non-nationalists in the new framework'* (NAI, 2021/93/48). However, this was not necessarily a particularly 'anti-South' perspective given even certain Republic of Ireland parties disliked the Forum's premise while some (alongside Alliance) met as an 'alternative Forum' and some (not all) of these parties too were critical of the Forum's *'maximalist demand'* for a form of unity (Keatinge, 1985, p. 166). More broadly, the decision not to attend the Forum should not straightforwardly be read as an 'anti-South'

[33] Alliance went on to accept more invitations to 'Irish' events including the Republic's constitutional convention in December 2012, despite unionists declining the invite.

position from Alliance given Napier still maintained that Alliance was enthusiastic about keeping up '*close links and contacts'* with ROI parties in an April 1983 meeting with the Irish government (NAI, 2013/100/1055). Of course, Alliance would later want to build closer links with 'British parties' namely the SDP-Liberal Party Alliance, and Cushnahan's attempts at building informal links is credited for encouraging the first British party leaders since 1945 to visit NI during their general election campaign period (see Guardian, 1987).

As a comparative side note, the links were / are less 'tight' with ROI parties[34]. For example, although both Fianna Fáil and Alliance are part of the 'Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe' ultimately FF partnered with the SDLP in 2019 (although even this partnership collapsed in 2022 after poor Assembly results (Belfast Telegraph, 2022)). However, even if the connections between Alliance and the ROI government and political parties may not be as strong as those with British politics and despite taking certain positions that did not always endear Alliance to Catholic moderates it courted, the framing of Alliance as a 'soft unionist' party during this period is clearly reductionist and overlooks the variety and complexity of its positions and their rationale. This is even before the mid-1980s when Alliance would face a much more significant test of its unionism as it responded to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) (1985).

<u>Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) and Talks – Siding with unionists or always with devolution?</u>

As some Catholics moved their support away from Alliance during the hunger strikes, those that remained were more 'British-

[34] Given this, Arlow (2025) finds that Alliance's (and the SDLP's) *'issue preferences'* look like the ROI's party system agenda, albeit crime and justice are bigger issues for Alliance, unsurprising given it holds the justice ministry (pp. 853-4).

coded'. Compared with those supporting either of the two main nationalist parties, among the mainly middle-class Alliance supporters, Catholics were much more likely to self-identify as British (see Moxon-Browne, 1983; Moxon-Browne and Munday, 1984 *in* Moxon-Browne, 1991). However, not until Alliance's delayed support for the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement can it be suggested it 'understood' (although of course not necessarily agreed with) unionism's dissatisfaction with it. Within Alliance, at the lower levels there was a sense of greater ideological resistance to the AIA among soft unionists who were concerned by the Irish dimension, but party elites were more divided over whether to support it. This is because the AIA negotiations were secretive[35] and conducted without Alliance or Unionist consultation. These concerns regarding the conduct (if not the ultimate outcome) of negotiations were points of consensus for Alliance people on both sides of the AIA debate (see Eggins, 2015, p. 84). Ultimately Alliance voted to support the AIA placing the party at odds with major strands of political unionism. However, former leader John Cushnahan suggested that much of the Alliance support for the AIA even in 1988 was wavering given the perceived *'lack of goodwill on the devolution issue'* by the SDLP or the Irish government (see NAI, 2018/68/19). Moving into the 1990s, Alliance continued to promote devolution during further talks including the 1991 Brooke / Mayhew talks. Alliance's greater prioritisation was giving Northern Ireland's people power over themselves, rather than fighting for said people to be under British or Irish 'rule'. In June 1991, Alliance reiterated that Northern Ireland's people were a community despite their differences, with the right to self-governance and to determine their own future (NAI, 2021/101/1). In this sense, the devolution and 'NI dimension' is a consistent through-line in Alliance's

[35] Alliance continued to monitor the 'transparency' of party talks even after the 1998 GFA. For instance, former leader David Ford suggested that negotiations on a deal to address the lack of political progress just between SF and UUP in 2003 collapsed due to their secretive and exclusive nature (Irish News, 2003, a).

preferences and priorities for much of this period and should be understood as a distinct feature of the party's identity when considering the party's evolution from its (partial) small 'u' unionist origins.

With the waning success of the Brooke / Mayhew talks, Alliance's desire for devolution was even prioritised over all-party consensus. Specifically, Alderdice called for the SoS Peter Brooke to move the peace process along and table proposals for devolved government regardless of all party agreement (Alliance News, 1991, a). Of course, Alliance remained sceptical of 'secretive-style' talks (as in the case of the AIA) including the 1993 Hume-Adams talks, which as Alliance's former chairperson Dr Philip McGarry alluded to warranted concerns. However, he also made clear that a UUP MP's use of the term 'pan-nationalism' which had been used by loyalists after attacking SDLP councillors for their party's engagement with SF were also unwarranted (Alliance News, 1993, b). Overall, as the 1998 GFA drew closer, so did Alliance's persistent call for devolution and progress, despite attempts by both sides to stifle talks.

Another Forum, Another Test

Alliance's next opportunity to refute that it would never partake in 'Irish-organised events' came when it engaged in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. Although some accounts suggest that the leader Alderdice defended the absence of unionist parties (see Associated Press, 1994) which again shows an understanding, although not agreement, with unionists' ideological position; others reveal that the leader was critical of their decision to stay away (Tonge et al., 2024, p, 84). Even if Alliance was more 'critical' of unionist absence, it would treat an equivalent choice by nationalist parties in the same way. Previously, Alderdice called upon the SDLP leader not to support

nationalists' boycotting of the initially proposed 1996 Northern Ireland Forum, which the Alliance leader said would *'mimic the Unionist party's attitude to the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation'* (Sunday Times, 1996). Overall, instead of considering joining any unionist (or later nationalist) boycott, Alliance took the Forum as an opportunity to consider how to pragmatically move Northern Ireland forward. For instance, Alderdice used Alliance's attendance in 1994 to question the economics of a future unification model, foreshadowing the party's practical, rather than ideological, concerns around constitutional change which is a major theme discussed more in later chapters (Irish Times, 1994, a).

Alliance's engagement with SF - not so 'orange'

Alliance's interactions with SF and paramilitary ceasefires in the 1990s also separates it further from unionism. Alliance was ever the optimist in terms of ceasefires. For instance, even though the British government and Unionist side were fairly sceptical about the Irish Republican Army (IRA)'s 1994 ceasefire, Alderdice welcomed it[36], encouraging Britain's' PM to not get bogged down by the wording used in the ceasefire statement (see NAI, 2021/48/205). Even more telling, in terms of SF's inclusion in the peace negotiations, unionist parties continued to demand that the IRA start disarming first, but Alliance was prepared to meet with SF during the IRA's cease-fire. Alliance's approach, contrary to that of unionism, helps to explain why the SF leader, Gerry Adams himself seemed to think of Alliance as more courageous in dealing with issues than the British government and other unionist parties, despite also seeing Alliance as approaching security and policing in the same way to unionists (see CNN, 1994). However, even if

[36] Alliance tended to welcome the IRA's statements of decommissioning throughout 2000's, calling the loyalist paramilitaries Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to follow suit.

Alliance's approach to SF was different to unionists, this is not to say it sympathised with SF, but rather actively challenged it as seen when Alderdice confronted SF's national chair on the BBC2 programme Hearts and Minds after the IRA ceasefire ended in 1996[37]. Similarly, following (inaccurate) allegations that Mary McAleese was sympathetic towards SF, Lord Alderdice went as far as calling for her to consider withdrawing from the Presidential race in the ROI (see Times, 1997). However, as the GFA drew closer, other parties came to recognise the need to include SF in negotiations, albeit Alliance was a greater pioneer in this regard amongst the more 'unionist-coded' parties[38]. In this way, Alliance already showed a willingness to move and engage in a manner that marked it out as distinctive.

Stage 2 of evolution: Settling in as 'neutral' not pro-union

Sudden change up

Prior to the GFA, Alliance's most 'anti-orange' move was that it moderated its view on whether NI was better off in the UK, towards a more open position in its 1997 manifesto expressed as '*the people of Northern Ireland [are] to decide their own future, with no change in the constitutional position without their consent*' (see Agarin and Jarrett, 2022, p. 731). This 'sudden' change may be partially attributable to how in the 1997 local government elections, unionists lost control of Belfast City Council for the first time, and Alliance held the 'balance of power' between the main blocs. Therefore, Alliance wanted to more firmly position itself as the more neutral option between unionists and nationalists. This was a

[37] Full transcript is available at Alliance News - March 1996, https://www.dividedsociety.org/journals/alliance-news/issue-march-1996/hearts-minds. It also reveals that Alliance recognises its own openness to engaging with SF and its leadership, and willingness to partake in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.
[38] Alliance also differentiated its approach to amnesty from the Unionists and the Conservatives as a *'more pragmatic form of opposition to the amnesty'* in terms of so-called 'On the Runs' (Party News Archives, 2002).

'sudden change' given only months previously in May 1996, Alderdice outlined Alliance still agreed that NI people's best interests were served in the UK (Belfast Telegraph, 1996, c). However, even at this stage Alliance was already less 'steadfast' in its pro-union support. At its 1995 annual conference, Alderdice was unsure on whether NI's best interests would be served in the UK in 100 years' time, particularly given the direction of the UK and its democratisation (Irish Times, 1995, b). Again, Alliance only remained 'steadfast' on welcoming devolution and went as far as to warn unionists the trade-off was between de facto joint authority or negotiating on the Framework Document and building a devolved Assembly (Irish Times, 1995, b).

Still could not escape the unionist accusations

Despite the party's softening of its constitutional stance, Alliance continued to be accused of being 'secretly unionist'. Although Alliance rejected the Mitchell draft of the GFA, given it knew unionists would never realistically accept such a 'green' (nationalist) document, the then Deputy leader said it would also have called out a perceived 'orange' document too (Farry 1999 *in* Leonard, 1999, p. 53). Alliance acted as an 'impartial' critic during the document negotiations; although Alliance maybe could have bargained for a 'whiter' final document in 1998 that included, for instance, more integrative governance elements. Of course, Alliance was critical of aspects of the GFA[39], but it also appreciated how the party's own ideas were reflected within it. Alliance regarded the Heads of Agreement Paper - a document from both governments in early 1998 that would form the GFA's basis - as mirroring what the party always wanted in a deal, one which called for compromises from both sides of the debate. At a party meeting,

[39] Please see 'Beyond the "Band-Aid" Approach: An Alliance Party Perspective Upon the Belfast Agreement' (1998) for Alliance's full assessment of the GFA including criticisms of how designation institutionalises division (p. 1237).

apparently a member said, *'if the Framework Document was Sunningdale for slow learners, the Heads of Agreement was 'Governing with Consent'* [Alliance's own 1988 governance document] *for slow learners'* (Alliance News, 1998, c). Ultimately, despite not getting the more integrative power-sharing framework preferred in the GFA, a membership survey showed general acceptance of the '*less ideologically favourable consociational form of segmentation'* (Evans and Tonge, 2001, p. 117).

Not flopping to one 'side' over another: roles during the GFA

Rather than positioning on 'one side', during the GFA negotiations, Alliance leaned more into its role as a middleman between the two main blocs, likely as it wanted to prove its worth given the fear (partly realised) that both governments would sign up to anything agreed by SF and the UUP. Leonard (1999) famously suggested two models that Alliance people have for their party - bridge-building (i.e. Alliance's role is to help nationalism and unionism find common ground) and civic liberalism (i.e. Alliance's civic liberals see unionism and nationalism as incompatible and need to be replaced by liberal, non-sectarian values, which Alliance strives for). Notably, each model has been emphasised at different times internally. Alliance currently leans towards its civic liberalism approach, but it may be emphasising the 'liberal' aspect more than the 'civic', in that it is more focused on promoting its socio-liberal approach while the non-nationalism, non-sectarian aspect is comparatively less to the fore. This would reflect insights from several interviewed activists like activist 6 who suggests '*what we have probably seen is the party not change its fundamental principles, but perhaps a bit of change in focus... it's very much been about becoming a more kind of liberal and progressive party…it's always been there…but…that is much more to the fore now'.* Alliance is also attracting younger people who are getting

involved in politics more generally and would be attracted to this 'liberal' approach.

As Leonard also reveals, Alliance played several roles during the GFA negotiations including 'policing' any violations of the Mitchell Principles[40]. Again, Alliance was unbiased about 'which side' it tabled indictments against. For example, it did so against the Ulster Democratic Party for the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) cease-fire breach and SF for the IRA cease-fire breach in 1998 (p. 51)[41]. However, what is less referenced is during the negotiations Alliance also positioned itself more fully as the party of 'the people' and the party of 'the truth'. For example, the Alliance leader called for then UK PM Tony Blair to open up the multi-party talks to the public, through televising plenary sessions (Alliance News, 1997, d) and it set up a public truth commission (information hot line) on the Agreement to deal with misinformation about it (Associated Press, 1998). Ultimately, after the GFA brought in devolution, Alliance moved specifically towards growing as a liberal force.

Just like unionism?: Policing

With the GFA signed, dealing with policing in NI moved higher up Alliance's priority list. Alliance's view on the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was very similar to mainstream unionism and as early as 1987, Cushnahan threatened to pull party support for the AIA unless the SDLP called for Catholics to join the RUC (Doyle, 2010, p. 177). However, Alliance's support was always subject to human rights standards. Alliance always prioritised its

[40] Although Alliance itself was accused of breaching the Mitchell principles after certain remarks on a parcel bomb (see Belfast News Letter, 1997, b).
[41] Ultimately, this role would in itself be short-lived given, during the review of the GFA in 2004, Alliance called for said review to be collapsed if the British and Irish government did not take the same sort of action that Alliance did against Sinn Féin to try make the IRA end paramilitarism (Irish Times, 2004, e). Only the governments could take this sort of action.

'rule of law' party principle, suggesting that RUC courage and, for instance, holding RUC officers accountable for illegal actions, needed to be differentiated (see Irish Times, 2007, c). Of course, internally within the party, the 'Protestant-side' remained more skewed against RUC reforms. Specifically, it was later found that Alliance Protestants were significantly more hostile towards changes to the RUC as set out in Patten reforms (Tonge and Evans, 2002, p. 64). Also, it is difficult to overlook how heavily critical Alliance was of the SDLP's refusal to join the new Policing Board into the 2000s (Press Association, 2001). Nevertheless, unlike a hardline unionist or nationalist position, Alliance's post-GFA position on the RUC would better be deemed a 'happy medium' between completely disbanding the RUC and making no adaptations. For example, the then Alliance leader Sean Neeson criticised aspects of the Patten Report 1999 on NI policing, for instance it did not acknowledge enough the sacrifices of RUC officers during the conflict but also welcomed aspects, such as the proposal to re-name the RUC (Irish Times, 1999, d)[42].

Redesignating and Reforming the GFA – basically siding with the DUP?

Although Alliance moderated its pro-union position, its perception as 'pro-unionist' intensified when Alliance MLAs re-designated as unionist to preserve the Agreement in 2001 and establish an Executive. But unionists criticised Alliance too when it, after SF effectively convinced the IRA to begin decommissioning, backed a SF Lord Mayor candidate in Belfast in 2002 in the name of strengthening the long-term viability of the peace process (see Party News Archives, 2002, b). Therefore, in this sense, Alliance's 'bias' was its desire and commitment to save the GFA.

[42] Alliance leaders were considerably less 'sanguine' in their attitudes towards the UDR than Alliance voters who tended to be much more supportive based upon attitude surveys (Soule, 1989, pp. 736-737)

Recognisably, when it came to reforming the GFA, Alliance's support for a change to 'voluntary coalition' was explicitly the post-1975 unionist view on power-sharing. However, Alliance was not blindly copying the DUP but also saw the same reforms (e.g. around collective responsibility) as practically necessary. Former leader David Ford did not see making GFA reforms as a choice between giving in to DUP demands and keeping the GFA exactly the same, but rather it was about making sensible reforms to prevent the Agreement collapsing (Belfast News Letter, 2004, c). The core goal for Alliance throughout is support for and adherence to the agreement. While Alliance was wary of direct or indirect election of Seanad members from NI (Party News Archives, 2003, b), which had been seen as a method of providing space for Northern perspectives in ROI politics by some parties in the ROI but was seen by Alliance as contrary to the core of the GFA approach, it did support a bill along with nationalists (and the NIWC) to allow members of the Irish parliament to also become Westminster MPs (Press Association, 2000) to provide for Irish perspectives as this was not seem as a challenge to the agreement in the same way.

Building a 'shared future' no side likes Alliance's flag policy

As the post-GFA period evolved, Alliance's manifesto focused less on ending violence and more on bringing about a 'shared future'[43]. Following from its one-community approach, Alliance (pessimistically) wondered without a 'common' regional identity could NI communities be united through loyalty to the GFA, similarly to how the USA is united through its loyalty to the constitution and rule of law (Party News Archives, 1999, f). Alliance's pessimism was in some ways warranted given 'GFA

[43] Comparatively Alliance rejected the 'separate, but equal' idiom which is less about building an integrated society and more about managing parallel blocs (Alliance Manifesto 2005).

support' was not even a 'shared value' in the 1998 election (transfers from UUP voters tended to go to the anti-GFA DUP and not the pro-GFA SDLP). On questions of the appropriateness and representativeness of symbols developed in the post-GFA era, from 2002 Alliance preferred 'common' flags being used more (e.g. the EU flag), but without this, supported flying the Union flag on designated days. Arguably it is more 'unifying' (or representative) to fly the Union Jack and tricolour together, but Alliance saw this as not representing the current constitutional status, believing that it *'would reduce them to symbols of single political/national identities rather than symbols of sovereignty'* (see Party News Archives, 2013) albeit more nationalist-leaners may see this as a fairer solution and unionists would want the flag flown all-year round. Alliance's approach to flags serves to de-couple it from unionism in a similar way to how the earlier re-designation put it 'back in the unionist box' (although it received criticism from both sides). Exemplarily, in 2012 Alliance was attacked after Belfast City Council voted to support its flag position and '*it exposed an emerging fault-line in NI between the liberal cosmopolitan middle classes in Alliance and elements of loyalism over a wider range of issues*' (Melaugh, 2013 in Morrow, 2023, p. 53). Subsequently, not long after Alliance realised that other parties were not willing to deal with the flag issue as part of the 2014 Haass agreement, Ford explained Alliance refused to support the document that avoided this issue as Alliance felt it needed to be addressed. This of course pushed it into the unionist camp, given unionists did not endorse the document and nationalist parties did (Irish News, 2014).

Of course, achieving a 'shared future' pushed Alliance's focus on breaking down the 'division' in NI even bargaining for this issue to be engaged with when sectarian agendas clashed. For example, Alliance used the SF and DUP's preference for the party to take the Justice ministry to bargain for greater efforts to push its own shared future vision. It demanded that the programme for

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) be dealt with before it would take the ministry and the party ultimately walked out of the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Working Group, partly because the inclusion of a clear flags policy in the Shared Future strategy was refused by unionist parties (Belfast News Letter, 2012, j). Moreover, Alliance expected, in exchange for exploring shared services as favoured by Sinn Féin, which it considered a constructive move, that SF should consider Alliance's own proposal for tackling costs of division in NI (see Northern Ireland Assembly, 2009, p). In this way, Alliance sought to extract concessions from each traditional party although arguably it could be said to be more representative to demand both communities halve[44] their position[45].

Stage 3 of evolution: Part of a 'pan-nationalist front' with the other pro-remain parties?

Solution first, but not the nationalist solution

Post-2016, NI leaving the EU dominated Alliance's agenda. Brexit raised considerations regarding Alliance's place on the moderate nationalism-unionism spectrum. Despite their different constitutional aspirations, Alliance and the nationalist SDLP shared similar anti-Brexit positions, albeit the SDLP message was always 'nationalist-coded'. Lexically, both questioned the consent of NI being dragged out of the EU, but the SDLP leader referred to 'the people' as the people from the *'North of Ireland'* as opposed to using the legal and neutral[46] name 'Northern Ireland' (see Northern

[44] Alliance did not appreciate the delays in appointing a Victims Commissioner, and the decision to hire four over one (CAIN, 2008). Alliance maintained that the purpose of the role was to provide a single, strong voice for victims rather than a "Victims Executive."
[45] Alliance faced backlash from the SDLP for accepting the justice ministry (although the SDLP did eventually support the transfer of policing and justice powers in the Assembly in 2010)
[46] Although this in itself could be disputed dependent on your political and cultural identity.

Ireland Assembly, 2016, a). Beyond rhetoric, both parties also deemed Brexit or the DUP and the UK's approach to it and the Protocol as jeopardising the Union and eroding support for it in NI (e.g. when the UK unilaterally walked away from the Protocol agreement). However, with Brexit's unfolding, Alliance was less 'adamant' that it was now the ultimate end of the Union than the SDLP was (although the SDLP was not triumphalist in this belief). For example, the SDLP leader declared that *'My firm view now is that the United Kingdom is coming to an end'* (House of Commons, 2020, a). As opposed to a 'Union doomsday narrative' which aligned with nationalist aspirations, Alliance held a 'solution-based narrative' i.e. that finding a workable solution to the Protocol could actually help the Union's longevity (see House of Commons, 2022, a). Of course, what Alliance defined as a 'solution' was not very nationalist-coded. Even the SDLP supported a pragmatic approach[47] to the Protocol, but Alliance never saw unification as a 'favourable solution' to the Brexit issue. For example, the leader Naomi Long criticised an evaluation that unity would address 'no-deal Brexit' economic problems: *'If you remove the border tomorrow and Ireland is united, we would still be impacted hugely by Brexit as the UK and Irish economies are so interlinked'* (Belfast News Letter, 2019, e). Similarly, Alliance would continuously try to 'neutral-code' Brexit-related issues, that is, promoting that dealing with Brexit did not have to be about dealing with the 'domestic' constitutional issue. Specifically, Alliance supported 'decoupling' of issues such as the challenges of Brexit, or promoting the special status issue, from the constitutional issue and the wider aspiration of a united Ireland (for example, see Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016, c). Overall, while Brexit certainly added fluidity to Alliance's approach to constitutionality the SDLP and Alliance's solution to Brexit was not to dramatically overlap in the sense of generating

[47] It is reasonable to suggest that most NI parties made proposals to make matters better. Even the nationalist, SF proposed a special position for NI, beyond the protocol to include Erasmus, MEPs access to Horizon etc

an Alliance move to align with the SDLP on support for a united Ireland as the solution despite their broader shared anti-Brexit position. Again, Alliance sought to navigate a distinct and more neutral and 'non-aligned' approach to dealing with Brexit fallout.

Not completely 'anti-DUP'?

Alliance's firm and consistent pro-remain position puts it in a contrasting place to unionism[48]. Alliance always put the blame for Brexit, particularly a hard Brexit - and hence the need for the Protocol - back on the choices made by the DUP (or the UK government)[49]. As Alliance's Stewart Dickson Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) remarked, *'It is not our* [Alliance] *protocol; it is the DUP's protocol… It is the responsibility of a party that chose extreme Brexit, and that is where we are'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021, b). However, it was not that Alliance advocated that the DUP's views around the Protocol (and the Protocol Bill) should be ignored, but rather Alliance did not want it to dominate in mapping what happens to the majority of NI (such as in terms of said Bill). As Alliance's Stephen Farry noted, '*…we have to address the views of the DUP, alongside the views of others…but it is not consistent with democracy to allow that view to dictate what happens to the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland'* (House of Commons, 2022, c). Although, of course, Alliance's evaluation of what the majority wanted aligned also with what it wanted as a party, that is, the majority do not want the Protocol scrapped, but want the problems associated with it fixed so it can deliver for NI (see House of Commons, 2021, f).

[48] Although the UUP and DUP's position on Brexit was not as close as that of the SDLP and Sinn Féin. For example, former UUP leader Doug Beattie said he never supported the Protocol, but unlike the DUP did not support collapsing the Assembly in response to it, and the subsequent withdrawal of the First Minister (FM) (see Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022, h).

[49] It is also reasonable to suggest that Alliance was more strained in its criticism of the EU's approach to the Brexit negotiations, over the UK government (see House of Commons, 2022, b).

Nevertheless, neither was it that Alliance 'never' admitted when it had common ground with the DUP in certain areas around Brexit, as for example in terms of their agreement on ensuring the need for unfettered access from NI into Great Britain (GB) (see House of Commons, 2020, d). Ultimately though, even if there are instances of Alliance expressing that a DUP voice should be included on Brexit-related issues, or that they agreed with the DUP on some specific details, out of all the NI parties, Alliance's Brexit position contrasted most with the unionist DUP. In this way, Brexit provides the context for a striking contrast between Alliance and the main party of political unionism during this period.

Cleavage within (and made up of) cleavages

Alliance was pro-remain like the SDLP (and SF and the GPNI) without viewing a UI as the favourable alternative and was critical of the DUP's approach to Brexit and the Protocol, while still recognising the need for its perspective (and agreeing with it in parts). However, Alliance emphasised another overlapping, but more specific cleavage between (and made up of) Leave-Remain and Unionism-Nationalism – i.e. between those who Alliance saw as the 'fantasists' who put forward 'unicorn solutions' to Brexit (e.g. Borders 2.0) and 'pragmatists' who saw that the issues of the Protocol and similar concerns could only be dealt with through negotiated, legal and practical solutions. Therefore, related to the 'decoupling' of Brexit-related issues and constitutionality, from a political standpoint Alliance needed to play down 'the constitutional' to allow 'the pragmatic' - the side it was on - to survive. The reality is though that in NI it is impossible to fully separate identity politics from economic or other issues as the Protocol does impact on unionist identity as did police reform and as do Irish language signs. However, Alliance was not ignorant of, or towards, those (mainly everyday unionist people, rather than unionist politicians) who potentially sat closer to the 'fantasist' side in terms of not

wanting an Irish sea border for emotional/identity reasons – albeit Alliance, as 'pragmatists' still accepted this sea border was a necessary evil. For example, Alliance's John Blair MLA stated *'Any border drawn across the island or down the Irish Sea brings emotional and political implications. However, in pragmatic terms…there is more movement on the island than across the Irish Sea...'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2020, g). Alliance has continued to take the 'mature approach' that while 'pragmatically' something is needed in NI (e.g. institutions, frameworks etc) it recognises the emotional and political relevance of some practical governance aspects for identity communities. Of course, Alliance arguably bordered on 'fantasist' or at least uncompromising when it called for the 'rigorous implementation' of the Protocol. However, it ultimately shifted to a more flexible position in May 2022, likely in recognition that the majority did not want the Protocol scrapped but wanted changes to how it was implemented. Although Alliance recognised the challenges associated with the Protocol, it also came to realise how it could bring opportunities and a competitive advantage for NI.

<u>An equivalent to the 'Forums' today</u>

Brexit prompted more civic discussion events on constitutionality, including those organised by Ireland's Future (IF). Mimicking its non-attendance at the New Ireland Forum (1984) due to its maximalist demand for unity, Alliance did not attend a 2022 IF conference, which it called a '*rally to endorse a united Ireland'* (Irish News, 2022, k). However, as Alliance's attendance at the Forum for Peace also revealed, the party partakes in 'Irish-organised events' but assesses them on an individual basis (it later accepted invitations to other IF events). Also, similarly to how Alliance would not support any boycotting by either side of the earlier Forums, in NI currently it expects unionists and nationalists to engage in civic discussions at equal rates. For instance, while

leader Naomi Long would see it as a good idea for unionists to engage in New Ireland conversations, she maintains '*It's equally important for nationalism to engage in the wider conversation about devolution...'* (Irish News, 2022, j). Alliance also would assume a 'weathervane' role like it did with the GFA in similar events. For example, Stephen Farry said Alliance would take on a *'critical voice'* if needed when participating in Ulster centenary events (Belfast Telegraph, 2020, Q). In principle Alliance could label 'all' IF events as advocating a path to a UI that Alliance would strongly oppose; one where NI as a community need not be reconciled in advance. Specifically, IF's document '*Proposals for the period between 2024 and 2030'* argues that there should be no preconditions, such as reconciliation before a referendum is held and, reconciliation will only follow after reunification (Ireland's Future, 2024, p. 6). This clashes strongly with Alliance's position which seeks a united NI before a united Ireland. Nevertheless, Alliance will not stay completely away from IF's conversations, especially given the public support for them from parts of the community. Even more than the issue of Brexit, legacy is considered the biggest bugbear in NI. As Stephen Farry noted, *'Dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland is an even more thorny and difficult issue than Brexit, to put it in some context.'* (House of Commons, 2020, e). In a February 2020 LucidTalk poll (TheDetail.tv, 2020) substantial proportions of Alliance (35%) and GPNI (32%) voters believe that legacy issues such as unsolved conflict/troubles related deaths, outstanding court cases, and inquests, should be "left in the past" Comparatively, fewer believe legacy issues should be resolved before a border poll is called (26% Alliance and 13% GPNI). However, Greens would like to see these legacy issues dealt with under a new structure in a new Ireland. Alliance recognises the legacy issues that particularly without effective prior engagement would likely poison a referendum and dealing with these issues for Alliance is likely a legitimate justification to postpone a poll. This desire to postpone a

referendum, potentially to deal with conflict legacies and build a more united NI or for other reasons, is probably best understood as the core view within the party.

U-turn not a unionist-turn

Alliance saw a border poll referendum as a distraction from what should be the core goal of restoring power-sharing in 2017 (Belfast Telegraph, 2017, M). This illustrates again Alliance's central commitment to prioritising devolution over any referendum issue. However, it revived the 'distraction' itself in 2022 when it publicly asked the SoS to clarify the conditions for calling a referendum (Irish News, 2022, L). Alliance likely saw the return of more stable power-sharing in 2020 as providing a less hostile context to explore the Constitutional Issue (CI). Even more 'distractingly', leader Naomi Long in 2022 suggested Alliance would *'undoubtedly'* take a Constitutional Position (CP) in the future – a more 'non-neutral' position – at least if taking the broad view that being neutral means setting aside any discussion of the party taking a CP. However, by 2025 Long had again U-turned, saying it might *'make sense'* for it not to take a position, and the membership may decide to treat a referendum as a conscience issue (Belfast News Letter, 2025, o). Although it was not as drastic as in 1997 when Alliance moderated its pro-union position, 2022 showcased Alliance stepping beyond a position of not engaging with referendum calls or saying it is up to the NI people, but then later 'reverted' back to a more explicitly 'neutral' position in 2025. Although this may reflect genuine uncertainty in the party on its position and a lack of sufficient internal discussion on what language Long and the party should use, it still illustrates that Alliance's approach to the CQ is open to development and change. These dynamics within the party are explored in depth in the later chapters.

While the post-Brexit context showed some flux in its approach, Alliance ultimately softened the assessment that discussing a referendum is a 'hostile act'. In 2013 Alliance's Stewert Dickson MLA criticised SF's calls for a referendum as contradictory to efforts for reconciliation: *'He will find it hard to reach out across the divide when he continues to use the inflammatory language of a border poll.'* (Party News Archive, 2013, I). Broadly, Alliance is striking a better balance between being 'very' closed off or open to engaging with a referendum by not raising fears around a referendum (e.g. partaking in conversations on it), but also not wanting to 'over-engage' with the prospect currently (e.g. bringing back the ambiguity on whether it will take a CP in the future). Alliance often uses the narrative that people are not woken up by border or Protocol issues, but rather real issues. For example, Long said, '*Whilst people may have aspirations, either to remain in the UK or for a united Ireland, at the moment those are not the things that are waking them up in the middle of the night'* (Press Association, 2022). Although it should be questioned to what extent this is distinct to Alliance voters or those it seeks to represent, given most SF voters also choose issues like the cost of living as the current priorities. At centre though, this issue is ultimately not Alliance's priority as a party and the party's position and rhetoric would not suggest the UK government should deal with the CQ as a priority, even if it could.

Ultimately looking across its history as a party, Alliance is far more complex than a small 'u' unionist party if it ever was one. It has consistently been willing to take distinct stances from unionist parties from its earliest days and reinforced a clearly distinct identity. Through the pre-GFA talks period and the agreement negotiations itself, it sought to understand and challenge the perspectives of the traditional green and orange parties in a context-specific and issue-dependent way while emphasising one-community, pragmatism, and putting the broader public interest

first. From the post-agreement period to Brexit, Alliance increasingly emphasised its liberal credentials. As the questions of symbols and representation became increasingly fraught, Alliance sought to chart a balanced and neutral middle ground as a pragmatic step, all the while not relinquishing a preference for more encompassing and unifying symbols. Brexit and the associated fallout presented the most significant changepoint for Alliance since the GFA. Despite its strong Remain stance, Alliance sought to build its own pragmatic approach to address the core issues for NI without compromising its neutrality on the CQ. In sum, Alliance has evolved from an initial grounding as the most moderate of the pro-union parties to represent for much of its existence and more than ever a liberal, centrist, non-aligned and constitutionally neutral party and the most successful party of the centre-ground in NI.

What was/is the Green Party of Northern Ireland?

A. 'A bit' Irish and 'a bit' British – Transboundary Origins

While SF is cross-jurisdictional, the GPNI uniquely recognises all jurisdictions that it works in[50]. Historically, the GPNI's origins appear more 'British' given its predecessor, the NI Ecology Party was a branch of the British Ecology Party which used the label[51] in NI first in the 1981 local elections (Ark, 2003, a). Yet, this suggestion downplays how, as the GPNI grew, it looked to incorporate ideas from both British and Irish GPs in its strategic development. For example, the *Green Light* (1990, a) listed that step 1 of 7 for a new GPNI working group was to collect copies of strategy or policy from other GPs in the ROI, UK and Euro Greens to help guide the groups' own paper on the particular interest area.

[50] Although technically the GPNI is a separate party so it only officially operates in NI in the UK although it has 'all-island' status.
[51] By the 1996 Forum Elections and the Peace Process elections, the NI Ecology Party had become the GPNI (Ark, 2003, b).

Modelling from your cross-regional counterparts is common for 'issue-based' NI parties. For example, Walker (1984, p. 21) explains the goals and approach of the ultimately independent NILP emulated the British Labour Party, and it had indirect links with the Irish counterpart (due to Irish Trade Union Congress affiliated connections). From early on, the GPNI positions were not strictly a 'mix' of the UK and ROI Greens; rather each GP held its own issue stances, while also welcoming mutual policy positions between them. Illustratively, one of the GPNI founders, Peter Emerson's report on the NI policy weekend in January 1992 showed, amongst discussions between those of the GP from NI, UK and ROI on the NI policy statement to hopefully replace the 1983 joint statement, that there was consensus on matters around human rights legislation, but less so on the importance of the CQ or on engagement with SF in talks (Green Light, 1992, b).

Beyond just sharing positions with the UK and ROI GPs, the GPNI welcomed GP support[52] (e.g. when out campaigning) and fielded GP representatives from cross-regional GPs. For example, in the 1996 Forum Elections[53], members from the GP ROI, Scotland, and England and Wales were among the 50 candidates that the GPNI fielded (Green Newsletter, 1996). Similarly, it was a GP delegation with those from NI and ROI that met with parties involved in peace talks to present a position on the POC. Ultimately, the party was undeterred from being associated with the UK or ROI. As a further note, the GPNI has 'without biases' recognised the initiatives and efforts of GPs from the ROI or broader UK (due credit is given regardless of where the GP operates). Speaking on targets, former GPNI MLA Brian Wilson

[52] It appears that the GPNI downplays the extent of its collaboration with global GPs beyond just the GPs in the ROI, England and Wales, and Scotland often cited in media. For example, it has formed cross-regional ties with the Jersey Green Party which was added to the membership of the Green Isles Network (formerly Western Isles) in 1995 (Green Newsletter, 1995).

[53] The GPNI came 11th in the 1996 Forum elections, one above another 'left' and 'issue' party - the Workers' Party (Ark, 2003, b).

stated, '*In both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, the main reason for the more stringent CO2 targets is the input from the Green Party'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2007). The GPNI's bedrock reflects its own downplaying of the significance of national borders, to prioritise spreading the GP message. Of course, this did not mean the party wanted itself as a NI party to not be the 'loudest' emerging voice for NI specifically. There were calls within the *Green Light editorial* (1990, b) for the party to be more disciplined from then on, partly[54] due to developments[55] in the UK Greens which had struggled to retain members due to a perception of ineffective leadership. GPNI needed to be ready to put forward amendments to a draft discussion paper on NI by the UK Greens, which could form the foundation for a new NI policy after going to Party Conference. However, the 'border issue' did not guide its early interactions with other GPs.

B. Defender of Consensus-building 'Method' rather than 'Outcome'

Given the GPNI's small size, it struggled to significantly shape the seminal peace talks. Alliance - the other centre-ground party – is somewhat to blame for successfully preventing the electoral system for the new NI Assembly that had a list top-up mechanism being introduced, which would have benefited smaller parties like the GPNI (Leonard, 1999, pp. 55-56). Also, the then GPNI chairperson Stephen Judge suggested that the party saw its role as a facilitator of the mediation process, as well as an advocate for consensus decision-making (Belfast Telegraph, 1996). However, as previously described, Alliance became synonymous with playing this 'middleman' role between the two blocs. Even in

[54] Also so it can get itself ready to partake in the then upcoming local Assembly elections.

[55] Finding its feet, the GPNI decided to focus its efforts on contesting the 1993 local elections, rather than the 1992 GE, believing the party would make the most impact at the local level (Green Light, 1992, c).

this high stakes' context of conflict resolution, Alliance monopolised the 'centre-ground' for strategic reasons (to keep rivals out) and did not create the space for the GPNI to share the 'honest broker' role during talks[56]. Given this, the GPNI carved a space for itself as the 'Defender of Consensus'. Specifically running up to the GFA, the GPNI cared about how consent would be measured, and promoted anti-majoritarian means of measurement, rather than advocating for a particular constitutional outcome. Holding firm to this position sometimes pushed the GPNI into alignment with SF albeit their rationale differed. For example, only SF and the GPNI rejected the key Forum report in 1996, but SF did so as a rejection of the Principle of Consent, while the GPNI specifically disagreed with the proposal for a referendum to measure the level of consent for any all-party talks' settlement (Irish Times, 1996, a). During the peace talks, the GPNI's Peter Emerson heavily campaigned for a 'preferendum' (or multi-option ballot) which the GPNI thought could better satisfy a broader majority in NI over simple majority rule (50%+1) (Irish Times, 1997). Motivated by achieving consensus but also including civic voices (a theme returned to later), the GPNI proposed that an independent panel of chairpersons could be involved in all-party talks, and that public/outsiders' submissions should be allowed (Irish Times, 1996). Even post-GFA, the GPNI advocated for a more consensus-driven system. Former party leader Steven Agnew defended his amendment in the Assembly on using multi-option referendums in councils from those such as the DUP's Peter Weir who suggested this consensus-based decision-making system risked skewing votes. Agnew argued that the

[56] Based on Peter Doran's letter to the Guardian (1993), it appears the GPNI saw the Hume/Adams talks and resulting proposals as an opportunity for dialogue and commitment for all to non-violence. Unlike Alliance which was more suspicious of the Hume-Adams dialogue and would have preferred the peace talks to follow the traditional all-party trajectory, the GPNI as a radical in the political system was more open to these new, innovative approaches to conflict resolution.

‘either/or’ or ‘Yes/No’ majoritarian system would in actuality do that (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2014, a).

The GPNI preference for direct democracy as a method was also long-standing. Even after the GFA, the GPNI advocated for a constitutional convention of citizens and politicians to review and reform the GFA. Unlike the GPNI, the nationalist Sinn Féin was previously against such reform based on an assertion that the people already had spoken in 1998. However, Agnew rebutted this suspecting that SF would not be happy if the border poll could only be called every 20 years, as opposed to seven years (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2017, a). In this sense, a greater regularity of public endorsement, input, and consensus-building around the institutional and identity provisions of the societal settlement is a core Green philosophy. Indeed, if there was to be an authority, the GPNI expected it to be one which prioritised the well-being of the civic-level and as such be representative and engage the wider public, which the former UK PM, Boris Johnson did not. As former MLA Rachel Woods notes, ‘*Once again, as my colleague Clare Bailey pointed out in the Chamber in February, we are being held hostage to the fortunes of a Prime Minister who this House does not trust, and who is putting flawed, ideological rhetoric ahead of the well-being of our citizens*’ (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2020, f). Having ‘a say’ at the grassroots level within the party was also part of this approach. This extended into many of the GPNI’s calls during Brexit negotiations, in particular the need for a sunset clause to be incorporated into, for example, any Environmental or Agriculture bill brought in to replace legislation post-Brexit (e.g. see Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021, n).

C. Leftist, as well as environmentalist: Was the party open to an alliance?

Although the GPNI is a 'niche' party it is not a single-issue pressure group, even if it is primarily associated with environmentalism. The GPNI does not even assume that all its supporters are diehard eco-warriors. Back in 2014, Agnew answered that those core environmentalists who always vote GPNI make up 2% across NI, but John Barry's re-election in North Down was a result of groundwork (Belfast Telegraph, 2014). Fundamentally, the GPNI sees environmental and social justice as intrinsically linked in that a whole social transformation is required to address environmental crises, and vice versa tackling social issues requires starting with eco-concerns. This means that in a way even if 'environmentalism' is their 'single-issue', due to these intrinsic ties between the environment and the social, 'environmentalism' is then made up of linked 'sub (social) issues'. Environmentalism is not then a 'single-issue' in reality. For the GPNI, the only true 'single-issue' parties are the outdated ethnic parties.

GPNI's Dr John Barry stated previously '*The unionist and nationalist parties are real single-issue parties, and it is time for a new generation of parties to rise and take their place'* (i.e. a new progressive centre) (Irish News, 2003, b). Of course, some view green and 'red-er' socialist perspectives as 'incompatible'; that is, only by replacing the capitalist framework with a socialist one can environmental measures work, and they cannot succeed by just creating legislation in the current capitalist structure (Socialist Standard, 1990). However, even if tension exists between the ideologies, the GPNI saw left-wing/socialist parties as closer allies. Early on, the GPNI considered downplaying its niche uniqueness to form a left-wing alliance for the purposes of survival. After the resignation of Sara Parkin, considered a major asset to the GP in

GB, Peter Doran, the GPNI representative on the UK regional council was pessimistic for the GPs in Britain and NI who failed to attract active support. The suggested next moves were either the prospect of continued decline, or radical reform like a party formation that brought together Red and Green (Green Light, 1992, k). Even early on, this was not a one-sided allyship. Leftist parties also saw electoral benefit in joining with green forces. For instance, in the 1994 European elections, the GPNI, some Labour groups and the Democratic Left supported the Peace Coalition (i.e. June Campion's candidacy) (Ark, 2002). Notably, it is unclear whether the GPNI would have accepted their active base, becoming 'active' for leftist party allies. Specifically, an early membership form (1991) stated *'You can join the Green Party if you accept and wish to further it's [sic] aims and do not belong to any other UK political party' (*although this was a rule for many UK parties). Of course, if the GPNI actually became part of a 'left alliance' this may impact the perceived constitutional neutrality of the party (if like the PBP it is pro-UI, rather than the smaller socialist parties which are constitutionally-neutral' albeit electorally irrelevant). However, while debates might exist on whether GPNI's ideology can align with socialism, or whether these electoral coalitions risked the party losing its niche brand, it is difficult to argue that the GPNI did, or does, prioritise constitutional change if it undermines the leftist mission (to whatever degree this is held internally). Illustratively, former leader Steven Agnew viewed SF's call to cut corporation tax (undermining public services) to equalise it with the ROI as evidence that its priority is to get closer to unity, not to protect the poorest and most vulnerable in NI society as it claims to do (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2014, b). The Greens instead have always prioritised these groups and goals ahead of constitutional issues.

D. Transboundary in origins and structure, but more 'Ireland-leaning'?

The GPNI saw significant changes to its electoral fortunes, and structure in the 2000s. In 2007 Brian Wilson won the party's first seat in North Down, and the party made big wins in the 2009 European election with 15,764 votes up from just 4,810 in the first stage in 2004 (CAIN, 2004; 2009). By 2011, reflecting its membership growth, and new confidence (alongside probably wanting to be taken more seriously as a party) the GPNI elected its first Northern Ireland leader (spokesperson) to specifically lead its operations in Northern Ireland (Belfast Telegraph, 2011, c).

Additionally, the GPNI's transboundary origins extended deeper into its structural configuration. The GPNI's 2005 vote to become part of an all-island organisational framework with the GPROI suggests it was 'Ireland-leaning'.[57] Policy-wise, all-island or cross-border environmental/sustainable development approaches are interpreted as more ideologically attuned to nationalism by unionism (at least politically) (see Barry, 2009, p. 47)[58]. However, this downplays that the party became 'all-island' to personify the GFA's cooperative principles not to symbolise constitutional 'unification'. At the time, GPNI's Dr John Barry said, '*The motion passed yesterday is based upon an evolutionary logic of greater co-operation and allows the Green Party to be unique in not just supporting the Good Friday agreement but actually living it though its new organisational structure.'* (Irish Times, 2005). Of course, arguably, the GPROI becoming a region of an all-island(s)

[57] Actually, reinforcing how the GPNI is not always perceived or interpreted as more 'Irish-leaning', in 2011 following a debate during the 2010 AGM on how to best promote the language, the then leader Steven Agnew was accused of being unsupportive of Irish language rights which the leader strongly contested (see Irish News, 2011, c; d).

[58] This has real, practical consequences for the shape of climate policy in NI. In 2021, former leader Claire Bailey introduced a Private Member's Climate Change Bill which noticeably contrasted the unionist-supported DAERA discussion paper on the bill which omitted cross-border or all-island dimensions, focusing more on technical concerns (Chang and Puchot, 2021, pp. 2-3).

framework with the UK Greens, including the GPNI, is the 'most' representative of GFA relationships (North-South; East-West). However, being 'all-island' is not 'all-Ireland' especially as the GPNI wanted, through the new organisation structures, to also strengthen links with the GPs in Scotland, England, and Wales, which GPNI members could now become members of (Irish Times, 2005). By the time Clare Bailey became the new party leader in 2018, the party's all-island status was a lesser talking point (e.g. it re-voted in 2011 to remain part of the all-island framework). Not only representing the cooperative principles of the GFA in its structure, the GPNI would continue to represent its progressive, liberal values though the identity of its candidates. Specifically, in the 2016 Assembly elections, Ellen Murray was the first openly Transgender person to run for any party across the island.

The GPROI decision to enter into the 2020 government coalition with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael resulted in some commentators suggesting the GPNI ensured its own interests were reflected in the coalition deal (Irish Times, 2020). This was seen by some as a potential step 'too far' in terms of the GPNI ignoring regional boundaries and getting involved in ROI politics. In contrast, Arlow (2025) finds that the GPROI manifesto in 2020 provided no discussion of reunification, suggesting these parties were potentially more reluctant to engage in NI issues than the much smaller GPNI (Arlow, 2025 p. 858). However, the Greens have often explicitly and unapologetically emphasised that issues transcend boundaries and require island-wide solutions for example, when making the case that *'the Irish Sea border has always existed for women in Northern Ireland'* who are forced to travel for reproductive healthcare (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021, K). Even while this may look like an 'Ireland-leaning' ethos, it is fundamentally instead driven by the Greens' emphasis on issues and their impact rather than a constitutional outlook. Also, declaring the GPNI as more 'Ireland-leaning' undersells how the

party can take positions that may be interpreted (incorrectly) as 'British-leaning' but are ultimately rooted clearly in issue and policy preferences. Illustratively, the DUP's Jim Wells mocked the GPNI for seeking to align with Westminster's legislation banning foxhunting and distancing from the position of the GPNI despite its all-island structure by saying that this meant it had *'recognised partition'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2010, b). This shows its ability to draw on influences from both its British and Irish sister parties. Even within the GPNI's written outputs, the party 'transcended ideological barriers' moving between 'wordings' (or even included Gaelic Irish alongside English) often associated with constitutional connotations. Within manifestos, the GPNI moves in and out of saying 'Good Friday Agreement' and 'Agreement' or 'Belfast' or 'British/Irish agreement' or 'British-Irish Agreement' (even when the other content is pretty much the same between manifesto years), sometimes adding in slashes or no slashes.

'Transboundary-ness' is inherently linked to the limited weight that the GPNI places on sectarian identities. If anything, it appears the GPNI would prefer to move beyond Ireland-UK boundary issues and to better acknowledge and reflect the diversity within NI. For example, former leader Clare Bailey MLA questioned why initiatives around flying flags in South Belfast were debated as if it is only a unionist-nationalist issue, when other communities like the Chinese, LGBT and Polish population have their own flag-related concerns (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016, U). Unlike flag issues which remain a very 'real' and defining point of contention in NI, the GPNI even advocated for symbolic changes to the structure of NI's constitution, including within a draft paper of the GFA review. GP members in NI and ROI argued for the British government to repeal the 1701 Act of Settlement which enshrines institutionalised sectarianism against Catholics (not allowing members of the monarchy to marry Catholics or be a Catholic). Simultaneously, the GPNI sought to reiterate its anti-classist main

identity that rejects the monarchy, saying it is not endorsing monarchies by proposing this (Press Association, 2004). The GPNI also seeks to push beyond the strictures imposed by the identity underpinnings of NI's governing institutions. Agnew viewed how the Justice Minister is appointed differently to other ministers props up a system of *'sectarian attitudes of keeping the other out'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016, V). For the GPNI, non-sectarianism and normalisation has to allow any party to take on any role in government. This contrasts with Alliance who navigate this differently and holds the Justice Minister role as the 'acceptable middle' even while it too believes in non-sectarianism and normalisation. Potentially this speaks to more of a pragmatic approach to these questions of normalisation from Alliance compared to the Greens, but this also means Alliance strategically benefits from getting such high-profile positions, which may also partly explain why the GPNI as another non-ethnic party criticises this approach.

E. A party of 'pro-Remain' – Firm(er) commitment?

As a party of peace and non-violence, the GPNI admired the EU's contributions to building peaceful relations between states but was against any attempts to form a '*militarised and federal EU superstate'* (NI Assembly Election Manifesto, 2003, p. 20). Also as a party of direct democracy, it previously suggested that the European Parliament should be granted the right to initiate legislation as it is the only EU institution directly elected by the people (Green Party European Manifesto, 2009, p.12)[59]. However, as a party of 'issues' it took ownership of and defended against the undermining of environmental protection after Brexit. Remarking on how provisions of the proposed Environment Bill posed an eco-

[59] Even during the peace processes, the GPNI (and GPROI) called for the EP to appoint an independent commission on NI to help facilitate the build towards peace (Irish Times, 1994, b).

threat to NI, Bailey (and former MLA Rachel Woods in another contribution) asked '*Are we willing to accept a future outside the EU with lower environmental protections? As Greens, we will not.'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2020, T). While the GPNI holds firm to its issue stances, this opens it up to accusations of alignment to the traditional blocs, even by their centre-ground counterpart, Alliance.

Alliance's Dr Stephen Farry referred to the proposed anti-Brexit coalition between GPNI and the nationalist parties in the 2017 General Election as *'in essence a nationalist reaction to a unionist pact'* (Irish News, 2017, W). But this overlooks that the GPNI reached across the spectrum to reject Brexit. Specifically, Agnew also met with Ulster Unionists in attempts to create an anti-Brexit electoral pact (Irish News, 2017, W). Moreover, GPNI also was 'firmer' than Alliance in rejecting Brexit, whereby Alliance appeared quicker to (begrudgingly) accept the outcome of Brexit. In this way, Alliance is a more 'traditional' party in this context (i.e. the decision is made to move on) but the GPNI (unlike in the ROI) see themselves as 'outsiders' in the NI system and embrace the position of standing out on the issue even into the longer-term. In this sense, 'holding firm' against Brexit also led Bailey to opt out of contesting Belfast constituencies in the 2019 Westminster General Elections to prop up the nationalist parties to maximise the pro-remain vote. Unlike 2017, this was a 'firmer' stance against Brexit as it did not previously stand aside, but Alliance called these pacts *'patronising, both presuming you can dictate who your supporters vote for and they cannot decide for themselves if they wish to vote tactically'* (Belfast Telegraph, 2019). However, Bailey notes her endorsement of the SDLP in 2019 in South Belfast, did not equate to her encouraging Green supporters to transfer to the SDLP in the 2022 Assembly elections (Daily Mirror, 2022). Therefore, it was not a matter of promoting Green Party supporters to propel nationalism's electoral fortunes. It was again about taking what was

seen as the strongest and most effective stance in line with the party's position. Also, Alliance was not always so 'anti-pact' if it meant propping up the GFA, a core strategic mission of the party's history. Alliance in 2001 withdrew from the Westminster election contest in North Down to prop up the pro-Agreement Unionist vote, encouraging Alliance supporters to support Lady Hermon.

The GPNI more broadly rejects the framing of Brexit explicitly through an identity affiliation lens. Former leader Agnew disputes, like Alliance, the statistic on 85% of unionism [having voted "Leave"]. Agnew noted, *'I query that and I query continually breaking down this society into unionism versus nationalism — "green and orange", as it is often put, although there are shades of green.'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016, x). Beyond only rejecting the statistic itself, both GPNI and Alliance clearly agree that the underlying idea of constantly framing and breaking down the issues and attitudes by ethno-national camp is reductive and unhelpful when views are actually more complex that than and vary among individuals from these identity groups including on issues like Brexit rather than being fixed or given based on an identity affiliation. Importantly, despite being Remain, the GPNI is a more issue-based, eco-socialist radical party than Alliance which is more economically-centrist and liberal, meaning the GPNI focus in terms of Brexit (and other major issues such as Covid) tended to more regularly stretch beyond business. Illustratively, the GPNI's Rachel Woods stated, *'It is not just businesses suffering as a result of COVID-19, and it is not just businesses that will need to prepare for new arrangements arising out of Brexit.'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2020, f)

F. <u>Issues-Party – 'The Future' defined by 'issues'</u>

When remarking on the party's constitutional position, former leader Steven Agnew generally reverted back to how it was

up to the people in NI to decide on the constitutional question (not the party). However, the party moved away from using the Principle of Consent to 'block' reflection on the CQ. Rather, by 'framing' the future through climate[60] issues, it stood away from debating the CQ from a binary position, but showed it was not ignoring it. Although on board with proper planning ahead of a referendum, when asked as to whether the GP would take a position on a future referendum, former leader Clare Bailey said they have a *'wider vision for the future of these islands'* focused on dealing with the climate crisis (Daily Mirror, 2022). Here, as is revisited in the empirical chapters, the GPNI's vision for the future is directed by its core 'issue' of climate change, in whatever constitutional status. In sum, the Greens are able to talk and think about the constitutional future as a subset of how they are able to talk and think about the future more broadly defined by salient issues, the most significant of which is climate change, and now the constitutional issue has become one of these salient issues (as discussed later in the empirical chapters). Although, it was not a 'quid pro quo' situation given the GPNI expected those of a binary CP to take positions on and generate progress on 'green issues' but did not pressure itself to engage with the CQ directly. For example, Bailey declared '*I want those* [who] *promote the notion of a New Ireland to set out their position on mitigating climate change in this new dispensation, as well as* [etc]…*I'd also ask the same questions of those who avow the protection of the union, particularly in a post-Brexit Britain'* (Irish News, 2019). Here the GPNI is presenting a counter to Agarin et al. (2025)'s observation that the public's concern for the Lough Neagh crisis has become '*ethnicised'* when included in the aligned parties' political programmes to serve their

[60] The GPNI often express a sense that they are not afforded credit for leading on climate issues from the traditional aligned parties. However, potentially, the GPNI does not credit those Assembly representatives who have recognised the party's (specifically former GPNI MLA Brian Wilson) pioneering and radical contributions to green politics in NI like the former SDLP MLA Alban Maginness (see Northern Ireland Assembly, 2010, a).

strategic needs, rather than nature (p. 649). Like Alliance, the GPNI appear to have gone through a period of arguing it will take a position if planned for, but as is discussed in the empirical chapters, they do not appear to have 'backtracked' in the way Naomi Long did in 2025. Bailey states *'We have seen through Brexit, when you throw a referendum out — without a plan — what it leads to is disaster, so if we have a plan for a border poll then we will take a position on it'* (Irish Independent, 2022).

Again, separating the relevance of constitutionalism for climate, the GPNI recognises that borders *'matter little in the face of climate breakdown'* (BBC News, 2019). However, it was not ignorant to the 'reality' of how the success of constitutional settlements can be 'dependent' on green issues. For example, Agnew thought that those higher ups in the SNP came to recognise that had the Scottish referendum passed, Scotland prospering as an independent nation would require capitalising on renewable energy sources (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2012). However, while the GPNI focuses on making 'the future' better for climate progress, regardless of the constitutional status of NI (potentially even if that means changing the constitutional status), the GPNI recognises that the legacy of the past still defines this segregated society, where even gangs still coerce communities and changing the constitutional status of NI does not automatically address these legacy issues. As former GPNI MLA Rachel Woods noted '*We know that this has been a political process rather than a peace process.'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021). The GPNI continues to remain aware of cultural sensitivities, even if these do not guide their decision-making directly. For example, the former GP ROI leader, Eamon Ryan, credited Clare Bailey with pushing for a name change to the 'shared island' unit from the 'united Ireland' unit in the Department of the Taoiseach (Slugger O'Toole, 2020). However, as an 'owner' of green issues, in contemporary NI, it continues to fight to move 'blame away' from climate action and

targets, or climate's perceived enemy (i.e. the farming community), and towards the real 'troublemakers' like policies which do not help NI to meet EU directive targets for ammonia or the leadership of the Assembly failing to set NI up to continue to compete in the green economy, or the uncertainty of Brexit (see e.g. Northern Ireland Assembly, 2020, L).

Section 2: Methodology

Design, ontology and epistemology

Rather than examining culture (ethnography) or building a substantive theory from the ground-up (grounded theory), this research seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Therefore, an inductive research strategy is employed which involves searching for patterns in the data and formulating an explanation from those patterns (Bernard, 2011). The patterns form the foundation of this intrinsic case study which is chosen because of its *'uniqueness',* rather than because it represents other cases (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 5). As a case, the 'contemporary political centre-ground in Northern Ireland' holds a structural core because it exists as an observable entity with people who represent it, rather than strictly as an abstract political position between nationalism and unionism.

Given the interest in party activist perceptions, this research employed an interpretivist paradigm, which stresses the importance of individual views, subjectivity and interpretation. Those from a positivist tradition typically take realism as an ontology which assumes reality is governed by a set of universal laws and is independent of the perspectives of individuals. However, this thesis does not see the world as something stable

and directly observable, rather it is something we actively construct. Following from this interpretivist outlook, the project is built on a premise that there is no singular, fixed, objective reality that can be identified and observed. Instead, reality can be understood as a combination of multiple realities that are dependent on individual people. From this relativist ontological outlook, our views, attitudes, and beliefs are important in the construction of our world and reality (Kriukow, 2022).

From this ontological position, the epistemological approach follows as regards to how knowledge is acquired and how to study the reality around us. Again, positivism often takes 'objectivism' as the epistemological approach where individuals' attitudes and perspectives inhibit our capacity to observe the reality directly. Positivists believe that the world around us is consistent and structured. Positivists seek to employ the scientific method and most commonly utilise quantitative methods. They seek to understand and measure social and political phenomena in a systematised way. However, this project follows from the perspective that the world, rather than being observable and knowable in an objective fashion, is instead constructed and understood through our values, belief systems and interpretations. Therefore, to better understand the centrist party activists, this means listening to their self-constructed views and thoughts in order to explore that reality (Kriukow, 2022; Grix, 2002). Therefore, this dissertation relies on qualitative methods which allow for the exploration of these processes – primarily semi-structured interviews (SSIs).

Unit of Analysis and Unit of Observation

This dissertation focuses on the analysis of the constitutionally neutral parties of the centre-ground. These parties, Alliance and the GPNI, constitute the unit of analysis of this study

but to interrogate these parties, there are a variety of options in terms of the unit of observation. There are a number of distinct options for how to assess these parties and their associated identities, ideologies, and constitutional outlooks internally. There are four major options from existing literature. First, there is the potential use of manifesto and parliamentary speeches data to examine party-level policy positions (e.g. Dinas and Gemenis, 2010), but this does not capture the divergence of views, personal belief systems, and emotions within the party at the people-level. Secondly, there is the option of the use of surveys to capture the attitudes of voters from the centre-ground (e.g. Peterburg and Oshri, 2024). However, this is cost-intensive and logistically challenging but also theoretically, this tends to overlook the party as an independent actor and the role of the supply-side internal party organisation, variety, and debate in shaping both how the party itself approaches questions of identity, issue orientation and the constitutional question and the potential role of the party itself as directing and orienting its voter base on the demand-side. Third, there is the option of examining the attitudes of those within the party membership through the administration of a membership survey. In this case, however there is already path-breaking work from Tonge et al (2024) on the Alliance membership which richly explores the attitudes and preferences of Alliance members on a broad range of issues. Finally, there is the option, selected in this thesis, to examine in depth and systematically the perspectives of party activists who more than voters shape the direction of the party and ultimately constitute the party on a day-to-day, organisational basis. Within this thesis ‘party activist’ is defined as an individual who has a ‘formal association’ to Alliance or the GPNI. Said ‘formal association’ could mean they are an active member, councillor, MLA or MP. Being a voter of either party is not enough for the individual to meet the inclusion criteria. This thesis provides the first such extensive qualitative examination of the identities, ideologies, and constitutional attitudes of Alliance and GPNI activists as the

units of observation and the individuals who, at the ‘people-level’, constitute the parties of the centre-ground in Northern Ireland.

Method

A. Semi-structured interviews

Following from the chosen ontology and epistemology, SSIs allowed for exploration of spontaneous issues introduced by the activist, while pursuing a number of less structured questions (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 310). As opposed to completely unstructured interviews, the semi-structured nature of the interviews ensured that certain relevant themes were consistently asked about. Compared to focus groups, respondents in individual interviews offer more detail into their feelings, thoughts and worldviews and are more likely to raise socially sensitive discussion topics (Guest et al., 2017, p. 693). Given party activists were to be asked about themes which could reveal answers not on par with the ‘party line’, a group setting was avoided to allow for richer discussion on issues of identity and constitutionality. The decision was also taken to make all interviews anonymous and confidential as the identities of interviewees could become clear from the content of the discussions. Also, with a recognition of the sensitive and personal nature of identity and constitutionalism for NI persons, the activists could receive the main questions in advance, and suggestions for alterations were welcomed. For example, one preferred language of border poll over ‘united Ireland referendum’ and that ultimately led to the ‘re-construction’ of the interview guide. Sharing the questions prior to the interview is not without risk of predetermined answers and participant bias (Haukås and Tishakov, 2024), but it also helps with recall and preparing for answers with specificity (Robinson et al., 2021). The interview guide focused on a number of major themes consistently although there were adaptations and consolidation of topics and individual questions over time. The first

of the primary themes typically were questions focused on party appeal and membership, or what personally attracted these activists to the parties or the characteristics of the party that made it unique in their eyes. Second, the activists were asked about their personal opinion on their party's constitutional position. The interview would then generally pivot to the factors that would influence their own preference in the context of a border poll and their perspectives on the factors that would influence other party activists. The interview would discuss the shape of conversations and preparations within the party regarding a future border poll. Following this, activists often would be asked about positive and negative impacts of a potential United Ireland or status quo result moving from a focus on the general to the personal over the course of interviews. Interviewees were typically asked about strategies to accommodate those who identify as Irish in Northern Ireland and British in a United Ireland. The activists were offered an opportunity to share their ethno-national background in the interview and discuss the impact of it on their vote choice in a border poll. The topics of Brexit, the Protocol and their potential influence on activists' constitutional thinking were also raised during the SSIs. Before the broad concluding question, activists were often asked about the issues of the potential timing of a border poll or readiness for a poll. An example of a utilised interview guide is in Appendix B. 'Closed' questions which tend to close enquiry down, rather than open it up were avoided (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 6). This reflected how the aim of the data collection was not to quantify the constitutional preferences and identity make-up of the interviewed activists (e.g. how many GPNI activist were pro-UI), but glean reflections on issues of party participation, centrism, identity, constitutional preferences and lived experiences in NI since Brexit. Of course, these themes are not mutually exclusive and so, the inclusion of overlapping questions in the guide allowed the researcher to revert back to earlier threads to gain more information (Charmaz, 2006, p. 32). This also contributes richness

to the understanding of internal dynamics, interpretive understandings, and diverse perspectives on major identity and constitutionality themes in these parties of the centre-ground as an extension on previous work.

The SSIs were administered face-to-face because the impersonal character of telephone interviews can prevent natural encounters and rapport (Shuy, 2003), which is necessary when looking for private information such as socio-political attitudes towards Irish unity (Frey et al., 1990). However, when active data collection began, decisions were made to change from conducting in-person to online interviews given the escalation in the Covid-19 pandemic. The completed set of interviews then includes a combination of online and in-person interviews (34 online, 10 offline). Despite initial apprehension, allowing interviewees to talk from the comfort of a familiar space (e.g. some were in a home office) allowed for friendly and slower pace to draw out more detailed insights. The shape of the online interviews mirrors findings from Deakin and Wakefield (2014) whose comparison of in-person and Skype interviews revealed '*that Skype aided rapport building and afforded greater flexibility, and cost savings'* (see Oliffe et al., 2021, p. 2).

After the interviews were conducted, and transcribed, the researcher immersed themselves in the data to identify not only the views being put forward, but instances of emotion strain or excitement (e.g. whether they appeared uneasy about their party taking a CP, or excited about the prospect of constitutional changed). As a pragmatic constructivist researcher they tried *to 'make sense out of the data* by '*consolidating, reducing, and interpreting*' what people have said in order to make *'meaning'* (Merriam, 1998). To improve integrity, the researcher practiced ongoing self-reflection and self-scrutiny to ensure that their

interpretations of what interviews found was rooted in the data (Polit and Beck, 2014)

B. Sampling and recruitment

In terms of sample size, the aim of qualitative research is to generate enough data to allow for patterns, concepts, categories, dimensions or properties of the phenomena to emerge (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The sample size was increased until no new themes or codes or insights emerge as is commonly referred to as 'data or theoretical saturation' in Grounded Theory (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1898). Crouch and McKenzie (2006) suggest that less than twenty participants in a qualitative study helps to build interview-interviewee relationship. However, this research kept to this for one party under examination, the GPNI, but more data was needed from Alliance to reflect the proportional party size in Northern Ireland. A total of 44 interviews were conducted (17 GPNI, 27 Alliance). A non-random purposive sampling strategy – '*the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses'* (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2) – was applied to locate Alliance and GPNI activists. Specifically, the websites of the Alliance Party and the GPNI were accessed and the details of all party representatives including councillors, MLAs, MPs, leadership and party offices were collected. The researcher then created a contact list of all of the emails for these potential recruits for the study. Alliance Youth and Youth Greens as well as public blogs of party activists and select social media accounts were also utilised to expand the potential recruitment pool. Certain civil society associations were also contacted to inquire about any potential avenues to access interviewees although of course, there were limitations here due to the non-party affiliation of these bodies.

Potential participants were emailed in 2022 to ask would they be interested in partaking in an interview, and then those who

responded later got an email to confirm would they still like to partake. At this point, the researcher typically outlined the potential options to conduct the interview online or offline, asked respondents whether they would like to receive a list of the main interview themes as well as their availability and schedule for the interview and any other queries they had. Interviewees were informed later about the confidentiality and anonymity details and provided with the relevant documentation. The project also employed 'snowball sampling' (Goldstein, 2002). Interviewees were contacted by email for suggestions on potential additional interviewees who may be willing to participate. This contact was made once a relationship and rapport had been established with the original interviewee. The in-person interviews were primarily conducted in libraries, hotel lobbies, constituency offices, and university premises.

All of the interviews for this thesis were conducted between July 2022 and March 2024. The Stormont Assembly was collapsed for the period between May 2022 until the Executive was restored in February 2024. This means the suspension of the Assembly overlapped with most of the period during which the fieldwork was conducted for this thesis. It is possible that this may have influenced the perspectives that interviewees expressed, and this context is important to consider. However, the interviews were not primarily focused on attitudes towards Stormont itself and the impact on inferences regarding the key themes of this thesis should therefore be limited. The return of Stormont was addressed when appropriate. Given many interviews were conducted via Zoom, the location, identities (communal, gender etc) were very diverse – albeit those conducted in-person mainly (not exclusively) were from Lisburn and Belfast. Here, the value of online interviewing is again realised. The recruitment produced a large sample of forty-four interviewees across Alliance and the GPNI. Based on publicly available information, there was substantial variation by age from

those contacted via youth branches of both parties to those who were very long-serving in the two parties. There were interviewees from all age cohorts from 18-24 through to 60+. Although gender was not assumed, public records clearly indicate that there were men, women and those who identified as transgender among the interviewee pool. There were a greater number of male participants, but a significant minority of women resulting in a diverse gender spread to the sample. Similarly, employment status varied from those at university through to those who indicated they were near to retirement, but most were of working age. In terms of class background, very few interviewees in Alliance referred to their class. Of this small number who did, they typically shared they were middle-class. Proportionally more in the GPNI shared their class background, including those who were middle-class or strongly working-class. A number of activists shared their professional occupations including those who work in academia, former soldiers, researchers, business owners and party employees. Interviewees were from a variety of locations within Northern Ireland from both urban and rural areas and from west and east of the Bann even if predominantly drawn from larger population centres. There were also interviewees who came from the Republic of Ireland, other parts of the United Kingdom and North America although these activists were now living in NI. Activists came from all communal backgrounds including nationalist, unionist and non-NI identity communities, and they varied in their seniority including grassroots activists, councillors and MLAs within the parties. The sample included those who were recent recruits to the party as well as those with decades of service. As reiterated later in the empirical discussions, while those who were more willing to share their specific preference on the constitutional question (beyond undecided) tended to be from a grassroots level within the party, the length of time within the party did not appear to be a major determinant of their views. Overall, while this qualitative sample does not allow for statistical generalisation, the diversity and scope

of the sample allow for the research to make valid inferences about the activist group in both parties.

C. Secondary Sources

Unlike the theoretical framework defined by Creswell (2003), which involves the presentation of a specific theory, the thesis theoretical framework follows from Merriam's description. It is *'the structure, the scaffolding, the frame'* of this study and is derived from the *'concepts, terms, definitions, models and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation'* (Merriam, 2001). Given the limited (but growing) literature on the political centre-ground in NI, the previous conceptualisation from Chapter 1 provides this 'base' before the proceeding focus on Alliance and the GPNI.

Alongside, SSIs the researcher also collected and sieved through analysed media and political debate discourses, the archival research from Linen Hall's online political archive 'Divided Society', and the Lucid Talk polling data. Although the intention was to identify findings that do or do not triangulate interview conclusions, the data mainly serves to inform the case selection. Relevant media and debate sources were identified using key word searches related to the project's core concepts, focus and context (e.g. by party, party leader or united Ireland, Brexit) via LexisNexis and TheyWorkForYou. A major collection of all relevant publicly collected post-Brexit LucidTalk polling data segregated by party or 'Other' identity was constructed and is employed at various points through the case selection discussion and empirical analyses to add context. It should be noted that for the GPNI in particular as a small party, there are small samples and cell sizes for these analyses and therefore, these results should be interpreted with caution. However, this data is primarily a resource for understanding voters' attitudes while the core added value and

emphasis of this project is in its exploration of the attitudes, perspective and interpretations of 'activists' as the embodiment of these parties themselves. The researcher continued to revisit the short-hand reflective research journal that was kept during the examining of media/ debates in NVivo. Similarly using key word searches related to the thesis themes (e.g. "united Ireland", "Irish unity"), the party manifestos of Alliance and the GPNI were reviewed to identify relevant sections that would expand the depth on the two parties. By condensing large data amounts into more manageable amounts of understandable information, qualitative data analysis tries to arrive at lessons, conclusions or inferences (DeCarlo, 2018). Given the sheer quantity of data that this study aims to gather and analyse, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software enhanced the speed and efficiency of data analyses for the additional document and archival materials (Séror, 2005) but this was not employed for interviews as it was more practical and in keeping with the reflective nature of the analysis to use more manual practices. This additional documentary, polling, media and archival data did however provide additional critical information sources to inform whether the perspectives of my interview participants align with the wider political party and help triangulate between diverse forms of data in identifying and deriving the key patterns and inferences.

Researcher Position

Given the researcher themselves is not 'separate' from the process within a 'subjectivist epistemology', there is a recognition that they are influencing the research context and it is influencing them. Similar to McEvoy's own reflection on interviewing in a divided society, the researcher was pushed to *'think about how to manage my identity as a young Catholic female'* when researching in NI. Similarly again, activists sometimes assumed the researcher's own identity along the traditional divide. As McEvoy

also notes '*I was, therefore, alerted to the possibility that my identity had an impact and had to analyse carefully the responses: what the interviewees may have said, or may not have said*' (2006, p. 186). While the researcher does not identify as Catholic or nationalist, activists often contextualised their answers in relation to the researcher being from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) in a Dublin university. For example, one activist who was from the ROI assumed that they had shared similar experiences and perspectives as to how the Protestant community was perceived in the South.

The issue of the researcher's own position on the CQ did not get raised frequently and the interviewer did not ask directly about the interviewee's constitutional preference. Generally, the interviewer and interviewee welcomed hearing about the other's position if they were openly willing to offer it[61]. Despite activists being so-called 'elites' (councillors, MLAs, members), the interviewer never felt compromised and was even complimented on their approach and professionalism. Unlike McEvoy's experience, the researcher did not face any patronising commentary (e.g. being called 'love' or 'lass' as McEvoy e.g. p. 185) and instead felt treated very respectfully throughout the interviewing process. The only interference was the age of the researcher, given some activists would frame their answers around 'your generation' (e.g. they do not want to see a return to violence with a border poll for those younger people like my generation). Similarly to McEvoy, the researcher employed probing as a means to *'challenge stereotypes and get beyond the party line'* (p. 188). While never intrusively engaging with personal, constitutional, or other identities, oftentimes the conversation became more collegial and offered a comfortable space to share their thinking.

[61] It was unusual for the interviewer to be asked directly by an interviewee. If they were, they explained they did not have a firm, fixed preference.

Of course, ethical considerations reinforce the need for reflective practices and a reflexive approach to consent, and human consideration must be revisited throughout the study to ensure ethical interviewing (Sin, 2005). Therefore, any data shared that might have been overly confidential so as to identify the activist was not included in the final study (e.g. certain constituency names). The researcher is also a professional conflict mediator who has been trained in interpersonal communication skills, active listening skills and strategies to encourage parties to speak their minds. This training was useful when gathering subjective perspectives on Brexit and a united Ireland in a sensitive and respectful manner. In light of these considerations, the project received formal ethical approval from Dublin City University on 20th May 2022[62].

Conclusion

Like Alliance, the GPNI has undergone periods of evolution and progress towards articulation of a core philosophy and ethos. Unlike Alliance however, the GPNI's core identifying markers have followed from its status as an issue-based party which generates the expectation internally that it engages with and positions itself on key policy concerns up to and including future constitutional debates. For the Greens this is considered compatible with its non-aligned status and constitutional neutrality as while it engages with the traditional blocs staying true to its consensus-building principles and strong commitment to mediation, this is through the lens of advancing its progressive agenda on key issues as its main priority. In this way, the GPNI comprises a critical but distinct component of the centre-ground in NI to its larger compatriot, Alliance.

[62] See Appendix A for ethics documentation including Informed Consent Form.

Taken together, these two parties, Alliance and the GPNI constitute the centre-ground of contemporary NI politics at a time of uncertainty and major constitutional debate following from Brexit and the striking developments of the last decade. This project proceeds from here to examine these parties, their conceptual markers and internal dynamics and debates from the ground up by exploring the attitudes and understandings of activists that fundamentally embody and actively construct these parties and their particular place in the modern NI political environment they represent.

Chapter 3: Conceptual markers of Alliance activists: 'Less-aligned' rather than non-aligned and the role of Alliance values

Introduction

This chapter examines the conceptual markers of membership of Alliance as the largest and most prominent party of the centre-ground. In particular, the chapter explores the realities of 'non-alignment' which when viewed through the prism of activists' experiences and perspectives is better reconceived as a spectrum of alignment which waxes and wanes rather than a fixed position. The first sections consider how activists came to be non-aligned and the role of background, ideology, openness to other groups and perspectives, the rejection of blocs and labels and then explores the status of many activists as 'less aligned' rather than non-aligned. In this sense, the chapter demonstrates that for centre-ground activists' non-alignment in the truest sense is extremely challenging or essentially impossible in a context like NI. People are still influenced by their backgrounds but not in straightforward ways. It is better to understand this as an ongoing process of 'reduction of alignment' navigated by activists in Alliance in various ways. Due to socialisation and also for logistical reasons existing identities cannot be totally escaped but their impact can be lessened and there are also periods and dynamics through which activists become partially 're-aligned' as these influences tend to reassert themselves. For Alliance activists there are however a true set of 'Alliance values' they seek to embrace such as openness, and tolerance. There is a residual influence of the identity backgrounds activists come from as they have reduced (if not eliminated) their alignment to these identities. Despite these residual effects though, activists still seek to embody these Alliance values.

Conceptual marker: Non-alignment

Alliance's 'civic-ness' is built on its ideological vision for a liberal, united NI, rather than on having representation of both communities in its make-up or support. Given this, the Alliance activists reinforce the party's 'civic-ness' in representation given many come from either (or neither) community. However, the diversity in their identities - at least nationally as many hold mixed affiliations to British, Irish and Northern Irish - makes it difficult to 'group' activists. It is easier to say what many are 'not' in identity terms – Alliance activists are not (really) unionist (in identity which is different to background) or strongly British (albeit they may partly identify as British). Of course, not having a coherent identity (aside from not being unionist or strongly British) could be interpreted as an identity. However, this thesis interprets identity 'positively' by what the activists define themselves as (unionist/Protestant/British or nationalist/Catholic/Irish) rather than not. Ultimately, what neatly binds Alliance activists is their support for the party's ideological vision, as opposed to most fitting into one distinct identity (again, not background) bloc. Also, compared to ethno-nationality, religion was not as discussed in the interviews potentially because as many activists alluded to, religion was not a major thing in their household growing up, and so many are not really used to speaking about it in detail. In general, the activists used the interview space to talk more around their or others' community and national identities.

Conceptual marker: Non-alignment – Being in Alliance means being mixed?

Although Alliance activists do not generally fit into one distinct identity bloc, there was still an innate feeling that being 'mixed' makes people particularly suited to being in the non-nationalist Alliance. Actually, certain activists (9; 24) unprompted told the interviewer that they were still a sort of hybrid in their

‘identification’ or wanted to build the community society they did not have growing up, specifically ‘despite’ not coming from mixed marriages or a cross-community household or area (similar to Stojanovic description of *‘neithers’* who do not necessarily come from mixed families mentioned in the conceptualisation chapter). Activist (9) outlined *‘…I'm an atheist now…so I'm just about the worst protestant that you can find…I was speaking to* [someone] *recently who was shocked that I was a protestant because my name is* [traditional Irish name] …*Although I don't come from a mixed marriage, I am sort of a hybrid there... lived in* [UK] *for four years when I went to uni…’*. These activists likely recognised the ingrained assumption that outsiders may have of Alliance as particularly attractive for those from mixed marriages.

Even in terms of ‘identity’, often activists who came from mixed marriages also shared how they felt stronger affiliation to one identity over another; generally Irish over British, even if they might go by Northern Irish now in their lives (6; 22). These activists may not then truly display category fluidity which *‘involves free movement between two categories with the same range, and, where it is significant, involves the ability to take on the whole identity contents and repertoires associated with each category and to move between them at will’* (Todd et al, 2006, p. 330). These activists may not pass back and forth to their British identity with such ease compared to their Irish identity. For example, despite being mixed, one activist (6) says if they are travelling, they will certainly use their Irish passport and they feel very strongly in their Irish identity. This activist does not appear as attached to unionism or their Britishness, but they also hold attachment – but not necessarily equally – to all identities listed in the interview guide including British, Irish, Northern Irish. Therefore, again, it does not appear that most Alliance activists ‘coherently’ come from mixed backgrounds/marriages or may not even hold equal identification with their mixed background, if they are from one.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned – Openness transcends in relationships

Coming from a mixed marriage is not a prerequisite to support Alliance, but those in Alliance are open to entering into relationships including marriages with people from different backgrounds. They also sometimes frame their opinions on a UI or their own identity 'with reference' to the identity/background of their partner. Although the popular focus is on how being socialised in mixed parentage influences identity make-up, Alliance activists show being in a relationship with an 'Alliance person' could soften the position of the spouse/partner, sometimes enough to move them to support Alliance – the *'openness is infectious'*. For example, one Alliance activist (10) says *'…now I'll say that my [spouse] is an Alliance voter as well and I'm a party member…but I think, for me, my upbringing and my background have influenced me to be more centre-ground and more progressive because that's the way my parents are*'. While here, the relationship is illustrative of the process through which an understanding and application of Alliance values comes to alter the perspective of the parties. However, in turn, there are other relationships which more directly 'embody' the ethos of Alliance in which partners from distinct backgrounds recognise and respect their own personal backgrounds without an expectation of them giving up their pre-existing identity. For example, one activist (26) appears to have entered into a mixed marriage, but has not changed their own identity at all, and sees that ethos as reflected in Alliance – for them their 'Irishness' is a personal choice - *'…come from a large nationalist family…My wife comes from a loyalist background…and we made a conscious decision when we married, we were not going to change religion, because to me, like the ethos of the Alliance, mutual respect…our children were brought up to decide…'.*

Conceptual marker: 'Less-aligned' - Alliance activists and a great resistance to 'pick a side'

Even if they do not come from mixed backgrounds, many Alliance activists are what is called *'less-aligned'* i.e. they do not appear to comply with either the Protestant or Catholic hegemony or support the associated causes, but they are not fully 'non-aligned' without any relationship to an identity background. Considering the patterns across all activists, Kulle's (2003) definition is most useful to apply to Alliance in that generally Alliance activists are not *'non-aligned'* which '*seems a conceptual impossibility since nobody is really non-aligned anywhere' but 'less-aligned'* which allows the space for recognition that activists do have *'some form of alignment, felt or ascribed'* (p. 96). Given activists 'actively' chose a non-binary party - despite often coming from an aligned background - they might be better able to resist pressures to 'pick a side'. Again, if most activists are 'less-aligned' this could be considered a 'coherent identity' but this would be negatively defined by what it is not (i.e. aligned), which goes against this thesis' definition of identity. Notably, sometimes it is difficult to determine whether the activists' 'resisted alignment', that is, some brought up the scenario of being asked in Northern Ireland to pick your identity on a survey or form but the activists themselves do not reveal what identity box they would 'tick' in these scenarios (but they also do not say they would abstain from filling out the survey/form altogether). However, this 'resistance' to re-align could characterise those activists who explain how even though their family or parents have raised them with an Alliance-type ethos or hold similar political values to them, the activists can resist slipping back into binary identities or cultural biases to a 'greater degree'. Somewhat contrary to Kulle (2003), despite these 'less-aligned' activists being overdetermined because they are positioned between conflicting discourses, they may not always conform in situations (e.g., when picking who to vote for, ticking a specific

identity box) to their traditional identity just to avoid sanctions if they fail to align (e.g., risking the upset of their family). For example, activist (1) despite being *'brought up with this kind of very Alliance upbringing'* (this is not that they were from a mixed background just their family has had a lot of experience of both communities), the activist also sees in their parents a need to align with one community, and the activist has felt pressures from them at times to align with their traditional background (e.g. pressuring them into selecting Catholic in the census even though they identify as 'Other'). Additionally, one activist (11) who goes by Northern Irish can see within their own family this bias in them even if they share a lot of the same political thinking as the activist – *'…And to call yourself Northern Irish...means you're moving past those divisions that kind of…I don't want to say plague, but almost haunt the older generations, like I can see it within my own family sometimes, it's a thing of like, even if they are progressive, even if they do feel like they have a lot of the same political ideas as me…they will still always have that like bias in their heads about being British or Irish, and about the other community…'.*

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Re-alignment, even if just when narrativising as an Alliance activist

Positioning is *'the ways that speakers/signers/writers orient themselves toward a community and reflect their degree of involvement in it'* (Zengilowski et al., 2023, p. 2). Use of 'we' implies positioning, belonging to, a sense of groupness. Now, sometimes activist's 're-alignment' with the background they distance from could be 'unintentional'. For instance, within interviews using the 'we' pronoun, activists sometimes 're-group' themselves with their former traditional communities showing a subliminal sense of belonging. For instance, one activist (7) even catches their choice of words - referring to Protestants as a separate group to themselves but pauses at one point to reflect on whether they

should be using the plural pronoun – *'the Protestants because they believe, they, we believe…'.* However, on the flipside, sometimes activists – unintentionally – 'distance too much from' the traditional communities in NI through their use of language (e.g. unionists are a completely other group to themselves). Specifically, Alliance (and GPNI) activists often refer to *'the'* unionists or *'the'* nationalists, othering these two groups from Alliance or themselves and making it that 'unionists' or 'nationalists' are akin to a homogenous group (e.g. not making the distinction between political unionism, or hard versus soft unionists, etc). However, this could have been for brevity purposes (e.g. they could not just list each form of unionism) rather than an indication that they see unionists as all the same. Also, when given the space to reflect, one activist (13) clarified that they know that unionism exists on a spectrum, or there are different strengths of association to nationalist background. However, the activists illustrate the potential, at least when expressing a view on identities they consider to be 'extremes' – activists can realign and distance completely with their own, or the broader communities of Northern Ireland. This can follow from an increased understanding of the 'other community.' For example, activist (36) coming from a Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) background originally has shifted towards support for a UI through an increased awareness of nationalist history and experiences over time and a realisation that they did not understand nationalist '*hurt'*. It is notable though that this activist still articulates that they do not fully understand nationalism even now and still sees themselves as 'middle of the road' despite moving towards a firmer position in support of a UI. However, most activists live in the 'in-between' or, indeed the 'less-aligned. They generally have distanced from strict adherence to either their unionist or nationalist background, but may still identify as British and Irish or Northern Irish, but this is to varying degrees across the group.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Transitioning to 'less-aligned' in Alliance

Of course, the 'transition' to less-aligned has not been the same for all activists. Another potential form of identity change is not necessarily a change in identity, but a change in 'comfortableness' with a sense of self as being non-aligned. For example, one activist (10) guesses that maybe when they were younger they did not feel so confident in their identity as *'not'* being very strongly unionist (not a complete change to nationalist as never was or would be) – *'… but I think as I've matured and…Being a more active Alliance member, I do see that...that is the mature position, that we need to be much more practical'*. For this activist it appears they were always 'less-aligned' but became comfortable with this overtime. For another activist (20) it is less clear whether they started out as not 'less-aligned' and became comfortably so gradually. Specifically, it is less clear whether their feeling of being uncomfortable with being seen as Northern Irish prevented them from getting an Irish passport or their specific job role (and Brexit) was the driver behind why they did not initially, but they do explain that they *'were of a time when to be…Northern Irish was an embarrassment in England, but now I no longer have a difficulty in having both passports'.* At least, there may be an element of feeling more comfortable with being 'less-aligned' than previously.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Who cares! - Lacking emotional attachment to country or identity in Alliance

Although Alliance activists are often 'less-aligned' they do not necessarily view holding dual passports as a uniquely Alliance 'thing'. This is also reflected broadly in the increase in NI people applying for their Irish passports since Brexit. One activist (24) explains they have friends who are to some degree even *'anti-Irish'* that have both passports and use them for practical reasons.

However, often the same activists who admit they use either passport to skip long custom queues also admit that they don't have a very strong emotional feeling either way – '…*there is not a big emotional attachment either way to UK, Ireland'* (e.g. 9). This lack of emotional attachment and apparent lack of care for personal identity is unlikely from the 'anti-Irish' friends of the activist. Notably, it sometimes was unclear whether individual activists identified as 'neither' British and Irish or 'both' British and Irish' as they would switch up their self-identification as the interview progressed. However, this in itself shows a lack of 'care' about their identity labels: they put such little weight on their self-defined labels, that they are happy to define themselves as 'all of the above, and none' even in the same interview (British, Irish, Northern Irish, both, none etc). It is a stretch to argue that that even Alliance activists do not care 'at all' about identity issues given Alliance does not operate in complete binaries. There is no expectation that one should be 100% in favour of the Union Flag or Tricolour being the national flag nor is there an expectation that activists should be 100% against all national symbols.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Where are the unionists in Alliance?

The activists reveal the reality of how Alliance allows openness and cross-culture and community approaches and this variety attracts activists. It is potentially the case that this pull is greater for those from a unionist background. However, there is nothing specific about the nature of Alliance as a supposed home for 'very soft unionists' that attracts these activists in particular. Instead, they explicitly are drawn to Alliance for the cross-communal and openness values it espouses. Even with the degree of 'distancing' amongst Alliance activists from their traditional background, Alliance remains a home for those 'from a unionist background', but critically, nobody is using 'unionist' as their label

(which again shows the difference between background and identity). Even one activist (7) who fitted closely to the unionist bloc, still did not fit into the 'typical' unionist bracket given they *'don't understand the unionists drive for the union above all else'.* In this way, it is best to understand reduced alignment for those from a unionist background in Alliance as a rejection of what they perceive as the obsession over identities and the potency attached by others to these identities rather than a rejection of the identities per se. For some activists (1, 11) they identify that they are able to escape their cultural biases to a 'greater degree' than some of those in their family, but they are still not immune to bias or the potential to be influenced in terms of vote choice. Given the extent of socialisation into these ties in NI, complete rejection of one's identity is highly unlikely but this type of reduced alignment and embrace of a distinct set of values instead is a much more sustainable and acceptable dynamic for many activists.

Of course, if activists were 'typical' unionists then a unionist party would likely have been a better fit for them than Alliance, but this is not the affiliation or set of preferences they hold. Of course, it is not that many activists called themselves a 'nationalist' either. Ultimately rather than a 'soft unionism' they explicitly admire Alliance because of its cross-culture, ideals and faiths. Externally, as the previous chapter explains, Alliance as a 'party' battles images that it is a small 'u' unionist party externally. However internally, the evidence from activists challenges this image by providing a view from the 'people-level' where backgrounds in unionism over nationalism do not stand out and the core role is played by commitment and attraction to Alliance values.

Declining Britishness – A new trend amongst Alliance activists?

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Did Brexit get rid of the 'British' Alliance activists?

Although there is a general 'less alignment' among Alliance activists, in terms of national identity, they appear 'less' aligned to their British identity in particular (i.e. there were not many 'British-only' identifiers). Even as interviews progressed, some of those from another part of the UK illustrated they were not 'strictly British'; that is, they were more English than British and would like an Irish passport even if they cannot get one (e.g. activist 7; again here assuming an Irish passport is an indication about identity which is not always the case) and/or they were English but they see themselves as Irish and Northern Irish in a way too since living in NI (activist 40). Despite Brexit unsettling the question of Northern Ireland's place in the UK, it does not appear to exclusively explain this movement away from Britishness among Alliance. There is a wider perception and perhaps expectation that Brexit specifically changed the connotations of Britishness that drove Alliance members away from affiliating to this identity, but in the interview evidence here this is not the primary pattern that emerges. Brexit may provide partial context but changes in affiliation away from Britishness do not follow from Brexit as a 'sudden shock' specifically. Several activists appear to have distanced from their NI-coded Britishness because they don't like how those in NI present Britishness, or its association to Westminster and 'the English', or some are just 'more Irish' than 'less British' (e.g. activists 24; 36; 40). Of course, there may be an 'underlying Brexit current' to these reasons – that is, they may not want to be associated with versions of English nationalism, because of how the UK government handled Brexit, although this connection is not often explicitly made by Alliance activists in the same way that it is

by GPNI activists. However, beyond this sample, it cannot be overlooked that Alliance has more individuals from a Catholic/nationalist background than in the past, and the English imperialist interpretations of the Brexit agenda has been off-putting for some Alliance persons.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Nobody in Alliance wants to be seen as British?

For most activists, the reasons given for distancing from 'British' may not be so 'new' (i.e. driven by Brexit), but rather reflective of perceived national realities. Some activists question why they would go by British as this is not a label that Scottish or some English people always or often go by (e.g. activist 1) or conversely, certain activists said being British is for the '*mainland'* (e.g. activist 26). Also, using situational fluidity theory to explain how LQBTQ+ people decide which label to use, Holmes and Ghaziani (2025) find certain LGBTQ+ persons select certain labels strategically to buffer against policing and other social conflict (e.g. respondents who identify with established terms, like gay, will use queer instead to hide the stigma they perceive as attached to those more traditional terms). This avoidance of 'stigma' might explain social identification as Irish by activists whereby activists might go by Irish to avoid being associated with the British and English labels in line with a situational constructivist logic to identity utilisation. Therefore, activists seem to, at least, recognise the negative associations of Britishness and Tonge et al (2024) reinforce how these associations exist in Alliance itself stating *'Alliance appears far less British than was once the case, and sometimes British identity can even provoke negativity'* (p. 265) although the source of the 'negativity' is up for debate based on this sample. For instance, activists (9; 15) say depending on where they are, they would say they are British or Irish *'…and most likely Irish and a lot of that is usually due to connotations of how people*

view British people outside of the UK' (activist 9). It appears to be the case that Alliance and the centre-ground generally may have embraced the principles of the GFA agreement and the capacity to select into British or Irish or both identities situationally more than others in NI.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Source of declining Britishness – Just don't want to be seen as a unionist?

For Alliance activists, there is a sense that the meaning of Britishness can be differentially interpreted and reinterpreted to align more closely with the signifiers and values they seek to affiliate to. This is distinct from unionist identity which is considered by activists to be more fixed and as such likely to generate clearer negative reactions and dis-affiliation. This may stem from the understanding that important features of British identity have themselves changed but that unionist identity has been slow to reflect this. Modern approaches to an understanding of the role of the monarchy in British society, the impact of secularity on British Protestantism and the reality of different racial and faith-based communities, have marginalised the importance of monarchism and the Protestant religion on the mainland but these persist at the core of unionist identities (at least from the perspective of Alliance activists who consider themselves more liberal and open in their values) in NI (Southern, 2007, p. 74). While the '…*British identity can even provoke negativity'* (Tonge et al., 2024, p. 265) it appears certain activists were more explicit in separating Britishness and unionism either in meaning or political self, or a Northern Irish version of British often resulting in their less 'negative' view of what Britishness is. For example, it may be that they rather associate themselves, or similarly to these patterns among Alliance activists, ,as one GPNI activist (14) does, also associate their political sense of Britishness to England over unionism. In this case they rather pick England over NI's version of Britishness despite coming from

a unionist background. This GPNI activist's (14) British identity is '*more attached to politics in England versus the politics of the unionists in Northern Ireland'.*

However, a lack of comfort with how Britishness is displayed in Northern Ireland is not necessarily enough to push others away from their personal 'Britishness.' For example, one activist (24) who identifies as Northern Irish says if they had to pick British or Irish, they would probably go with British but also thinks *'the British in Northern Ireland are more British than the British',* that is, *'there are more flags in the Shankill Road then there are in England probably during the 12*th*.'* For this activist, there is a sense that British-leaning, unionist-coded individuals are '*overcompensating'*. Ultimately though, the activist would say they are Northern Irish as for them British identity is more associated with conservative values and Irishness is associated with violence.

Clearly not all Alliance activists have dropped their 'Britishness', but there is a 'lessening alignment' especially if the activist makes a direct link between being unionist and British in NI. Although, it might be the case that a negative association with unionism can also impact on 'Irishness' – albeit this link was less discussed among activists. For example, one Alliance activist (13) who does not now feel tied to a British or Irish identity said throughout their young adulthood they swung between how they would identify when they were at university with the Irish identity, even though they come from a unionist background. Although, it was not apparent whether this activist's understanding of unionism is different now compared to how it was then as they explained their identification as Irish was more a rejection of what they had seen as a unionism that did not represent them, such as at the time, some sections of unionism were saying homophobic things. While Todd et al.'s (2006) key argument is that identities move not only over time but in context, someone's class or gender identity

may come to the fore over their loyalist identity (and so we should never assume absolute binaries, either in analysis or in designing institutions), this activist reveals how identity can change in terms of its meaning. If the activist's (13) understanding of unionism has changed, so might their understanding of their Irishness, but this was left open in the interview. Although again, it is difficult to compare whether it impacted their Britishness as being British was never part of their family experience despite being unionist, which shows how even coming from a unionist 'background' and being or feeling British do not always go hand in hand for many activists.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Sense of belonging for Alliance activists

It was already clarified that an activist's background and identity often do not align (e.g. they come from a unionist background, but no longer identify as such). However, if the feeling of belonging is linked to self-identification, another potential reason that Alliance activists appear 'less British' is because more have grown more comfortable crossing the border. Again, there might be 'underlying' Brexit reasons for any 'new-found' comfortableness. For example, they can see Ireland is evolving, while the UK having left the EU is becoming less progressive (this would be a perception as talked about in the next chapter). For example, as one activist (21) asks *'At the end of the day, what actually is it to be Irish? Like, as Ireland as an island becomes more diverse, it is no longer just, "Oh, you're a Catholic who farms or a Catholic who works in Dublin'.* Irishness in the minds of activists is an increasingly fluid and interpretable concept with potential consequences for constitutional thinking. In terms of preferences potentially following from a sense of Irishness, how an Alliance activist might define Irish means even those not born in ROI/NI can define Irish in a way that allows them to identify with Irishness without tying this to a preference for a UI. For one activist (17) who

was born in another part of the UK, but with Irish parents, they would see themselves as Irish because of how they define Irish which includes the diaspora.

Alliance activists clearly retain identity affiliations but also recognise broadly how the meaning of identities are changing. Depending on the nature and scope of this change, this generates a greater or lesser pull or push towards these affiliations based on how these align (or not) with their core Alliance values. However for most activists in their perception of the ROI (or 'the South') is wrapped up in a nostalgia from their travels there, or they seemed to derive a more relaxed vibe from life and the Southern people (e.g. activists 11; 2; 1). This attraction to the South and Irish identity is not therefore necessarily 'new-found'. For example, in one activist's (1) assessment, Southern life was where their family holidayed, so it has always got this *'sunny kind of glow'* to it whenever they go down. This pull to the South is then rooted for these activists less in a sense of recent change, but in a sense of nostalgia or warm personal feelings. On the other hand, this suggestion that they feel 'less British' because they are more comfortable in the South is not wholly convincing especially as it is not entirely consistent. Specifically, one activist (9) who feels *'…like I'm in a foreign country when I'm in Dublin, and that just sort of is innate to me..'* actually, feels more Irish than British in their dual identity. This contrasts with another activist (24) who would be more British than Irish if they had to pick, but when they go to Dublin or down South, to them it is a different country, it is just they have always been brought up that way with a British community background. In this sense, these feelings are less about identity than they are about personal sense of belonging. There is a continuous 'disconnect' in which that feeling of belonging is not associated with strength of national identification but this does not always match with regional affinities. These two activists feel better in Britain over Ireland, but do not feel a need to be in Britain. They

would not necessarily vote for the Union in a referendum and one of them is '*maybe 51% of the way towards voting for a UI*' (but could 'easily' swing back). Both of these activists (24; 9) feel like the ROI is foreign to them, but one is more British than Irish, and the other more Irish than British, and one is undecided on the CQ, while the other is currently more swayed by a UI. In this sense, there is not a straightforward and linear association demonstrated between national identity, regional affiliations and constitutional voting preferences, again demonstrative of the fluidity of these feelings within the centre-ground.

The declining Britishness within Alliance could also stem more from use of the Northern Irish label, rather than either British or Irish. Even for those who were Northern Irish first, very rarely did any activist express their Northern Irish identity as a subcategory beneath a British superordinate identity (like those in Unionist parties tend to in McNicholl et al, 2019). Of course, this might reflect the general declining sense of Britishness. Interestingly, one activist (1) who now chooses to (partially) go by Northern Irish does so as they no longer define Northern Irish through a British lens – '*So, I see Northern Irish becoming more inclusive that middle-ground other…before, it would have been very much, in my head, associated with band marching, the 12th…*'.

Being Irish in Alliance – sovereignty, geography or even situation?

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Alliance activists are not less British, but more Irish?

Similar to the previous explanation that the declining Britishness within Alliance could also stem from increased identification with the Northern Irish label, potentially it could be that Alliance is attracting more Irish-only, or Northern Irish-Irish or those

whose Irishness is stronger as part of dual identities. Rather than becoming 'less British' Alliance could be becoming 'more Irish.' It is not that they want to avoid negative associations of Britishness but instead they may go by Irish more than British, given their family were mainly from this background or they were brought up this way. Also, for those who are neither totally Irish nor British, some still are more 'not British' than 'not Irish' such as activist (4) who said they do not feel themselves to be *'100% Irish'* but they most *'certainly'* do not feel British. There appears to be more explicit attachment to 'Irishness' amongst the Alliance activists, even if they do not really see themselves as either. However, being 'more Irish' does not equate to being more 'nationalist' – an important distinction, as one activist (1) notes they are not '*Irish enough'* to be Irish nationalist. These testimonies indicate that there is persistence and utilisation of binaries for the 'non-aligned' or 'less-aligned' in the sense that binaries can be a means of determining what you are not and creating a sense of distance from particular identities even if fluidity is retained in determining the positive sense of identity in terms of what you are.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Alliance activists are still Irish in the UK or in a united Ireland

Identity is a personal construct for many Alliance activists. Speaking on British identity, two activists (38; 26) see it as a personal choice; that is, you can identify whatever way you choose. They declare some variation of, if you want to be British be British or if people want to identify with any particular identity, they can choose to do so (activists 26; 38). In this way, for certain activists the individual experience of identity and its alignment with their sense of self is key. This is distinct from the use of identities as broader social labels which can have more negative social consequences than the individual-level utility of a clarity of self-understanding and self-conceptualisation can provide. Given this

breadth of pernicious effects, some have worried that centring social identities inevitably entrenches and amplifies oppression (Brown 1995, cited in Ritchie, 2021). Others contend we would be better off eliminating social labels altogether (e.g. Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 2021). Therefore, relaying a core difference between being in Sinn Féin or the SDLP and being in Alliance, several Irish-only (or Irish-Northern Irish) activists are not pushing for a united Ireland to reinforce their sense of being Irish. Notably, activist (15) supposes a united Ireland might give them a little bit more of a feeling of being whole in being Irish in Ireland, but ultimately it took the activist a long time in the interview to offer this reflection, and for the most part they were very firm in their belief that they are very happy to be Irish in NI 'without' a UI. Awarding themselves the freedom to construct their identity also means activists can 'distance' from how they were brought up, even though the previous activist came from a Protestant background and they know it was a strange move to decide they would go by Irish at the time they chose to.

Ultimately, the majority of activists asked think Irish identifiers and nationalists are already well accommodated in NI currently, which could explain why some are happy enough to be Irish without a united Ireland. Paul Bew (1998) argued that the GFA was a victory for unionism, as it offered Irish identifying people enough inside the UK to not want a UI in any urgent way. This may also apply to Alliance activists who are undecided as it reduces this sense of urgency. There is also a key role for local experiences in this process in which Irishness serves as an everyday reality for people and conditions their existence, but this does not operate as a strong national identity or as 'Irishness' in the sense of constitutional preference. One activist (21) recognises others might feel differently, but they feel welcomed in their own sense of Irishness, but this will mean different things to the sense of Irishness held by others (this could be conditioned by the fact they

are from a nationalist area). They observe things that connect people across this island in which people who might not identify as Irish but still are in some part connected due to Irish history and genealogy. They went on to explain that they do not feel there is anything that they could not do now in NI that they would be able to do in a UI. Another activist (1) feels similarly accommodated saying '*apart…a couple of policies, I think people are included in, in day-to-day life, whether they're Irish or Northern Irish anyway. And I suppose I can say that because I see predominantly a nationalist, republican area…the small minority of unionism here. So, it's kind of, it's built in their culture here.*'

There are also influences of structural and institutional conditions. Another activist thinks this is because the GFA awarded Irish people the right to be Irish in NI, the relevance of the border was diminished, and the 'whiff of cordite' potentially associated with this 'part' of their identity was reduced. It may be that these conditions particularly facilitate Irish identifiers as this was the identity with the more challenging connotations during the Troubles. Activists brought up on a variety of occasions how British identifiers in NI are no longer feeling accommodated, which may be due to a perception that these British identifiers now feel they are on the defensive as this dynamic of identity connotations has been reversed in the post-GFA era. Again, at the structural level, another activist (5) suggests that gradual historical changes, like actions to promote equality for Catholics has allowed Irish people to become better accommodated in NI.

In terms of accommodating Irish identifiers, what came through surprisingly given Alliance as a party was vocally supportive of the Irish Language Act ('ILA') being established as set out in the New Decade, New Approach ('NDNA') deal in 2020, was the ILA itself did not seem to be or at least was not evaluated as a major source of accommodation. Specifically, it reflects a

feeling from some Alliance activists (e.g. 4; 5) that the ILA is not such a revolutionary piece of legislation that is going to change the landscape of Irish learning as it is sometimes portrayed. The legislation may be seen as a relatively minimal change and essentially a basic expectation and change opposed only by hardline unionists. This is potentially also a product of increased confidence among Irish identifiers in itself reflected in the broader patterns discussed above.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Alliance activists' Irishness is not based on symbolism or sovereignty

Although Alliance activists tend to lack emotional attachments to either identity, for those who primarily identify as Irish, their identity is still not built on emotional symbols of Irishness. For example, they do not really care for the tricolour specifically (38; 26). Even if they feel some pride in being 'Irish', they do not need to reinforce their Irishness by 'flag-waving'. For example, one Irish Alliance activist (5) seems to advocate for minimising all symbolic displays of patriotism, including in a UI, even if they admit their own feelings of patriotism in the interview. Of interest here are the inclusive and exclusive roles symbols can play in the formation and maintenance of group identity. As Armstrong notes, symbols can act as 'traffic lights' signalling boundaries to in-group and out-group members (1982: p.7), but this is not the core of identity as interviewees emphasise it. Often Alliance activists promote almost a 'civic' version of Irish identity which is not defined by sovereignty (or national symbols), but 'geography'. That is, they are born in Ireland, so they call themselves Irish albeit there is variation here in the emphasis they place on the island of Ireland versus Northern Ireland as a region within that.

Whether activists define 'geography' by Northern Ireland or Ireland could have greater repercussions should a UI happen and

it may make less sense to identify as Northern Irish if the entity no longer continues. However, given activists are open to constructing their identity independent of constitutional status, they may be relatively open to transitioning their identity as such change would require. One Northern Irish activist (11) suggests this is a possibility as they can see themselves being happy enough to call themself Irish under a UI. This activist expresses that Northern Irish and Irish culture (flags, symbols) in general tend to be quite similar which means it would not be a big 'culture shock' for them personally for things like flags to be changed - *'I can see myself…like if it did happen being…we're part of Ireland…yeah, I'm happy enough to call myself Irish. But like I don't really see myself attached too much to either sides symbols or flags or cultures, if you know what I mean. Like Northern Irish and Irish culture in general tends to be quite similar, and it's not like it would be a massive culture shock for me personally…for that to be a change. I don't think flags play, or symbols play a big part in my life'.* However, those activists (of which there are very few) who do see Northern Ireland and Irish culture as more distinct or care more about the symbolic elements may not be as open to 'giving up' their Northern Irish label. Many activists acknowledge a certain degree of overlap between Irish and Northern Irish cultures both for straightforward components such as ancestry (e.g. 40; 15), but they also recognise that Northern Irish people have had a different life and special bond than a person from Dublin and London. Given many activists recognise a difference between Irish and Northern Irish identities, even culturally there is a striking and somewhat counterintuitive pattern in which activists express certain offence when people from the ROI do not see their Irishness as the same as Northern Ireland's Irishness (e.g. activist 21).

Resonating with national symbols where this does occur does not itself secure an activist's reverence to nationality. For example, an Alliance activist (4) who felt the Union flag

'*represented something*' for them, did not feel close to their British identity and tended to frame this as a somewhat reluctant attachment to express. However, the symbols did not resonate to a sufficient extent for the activist (4) to determine their constitutional preference given they have no issue at all if someone said that the Union Flag is going under a UI, as long as what is replacing it is something they have *'bought into'.* This speaks to an openness to a change in symbols (which many activists would be fine with, even those who are Irish), but a rejection of the idea of NI just being 'consumed' into the Republic as it already is under a UI, where NI becomes just another part of the ROI and its history, culture and uniqueness is 'replaced' with what already exists in the ROI. Such a rejection would reflect the preference of many Alliance activists more broadly even those who may identify as (partially) Irish (e.g. activist 14).

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Alliance activists' Irishness is not based on symbolism or sovereignty, but is 'situational'

Again, drawing on situational fluidity theory to explain how LQBTQ+ people decide which label to use, Holmes and Ghaziani (2025) illustrated people refrained from using labels that they anticipated were unfamiliar or potentially confusing (e.g. calling themselves gay rather than queer) – their decision operated as a so-called 'cultural anchor'. This may similarly explain why some Alliance activists would go by 'Northern Irish' when in Northern Ireland, but 'Irish' when away as it is easier than trying to explain to outsiders the complexities around the Northern Irish and Irish identities. For example, one activist (21) who primarily identifies as Northern Irish says if they were on a foreign holiday they would say '*I'm Irish'* as opposed to getting into the *'political hotbeds'* of Northern Irish identity. As another example, if someone asked them what their nationality is, one Northern Irish activist (2) says when

on holidays they would identify as Irish because people don't understand the localisms. The activist (2) says *'…if someone asked me what my nationality is…that's the thing when you're on holidays, I would identify as Irish because people don't understand the quirks that we have locally, but I would just identify as being Northern Irish.'*

Although identity is a self-construct for many activists, these particular activists showcase how outsiders and scenarios can somewhat influence this self-construction (at least temporarily when abroad). Although some are happy to employ their Irish passport for practical reasons to skip airport queues, this still seems like more of a personally beneficial choice rather than a fundamental change to identity affiliation. Many recognise a difference between being Irish in the ROI and in NI (or British in NI and GB), even if they are both views as valid and equal forms of being Irish. However, by going by Irish when abroad for ease of communication, it appears Alliance activists can feed into a perception that being Irish in NI means the same as being Irish in ROI, given the likelihood is these outsiders would associate being Irish with the Republic. For instance, one activist (21) told a story about how they spoke to a group from the ROI before and got this sense from them that they were not seen as the same kind of Irish, and it is the same in London, or GB, in that they feel distinct from those others around them. In this way, activists relate how the experience of being Irish or British in Northern Ireland is not automatically the same as Irish and British in the ROI or UK respectively and as such, any sense of Irishness is always likely to be partial and situational for those from NI. This remains a concern for such individuals in thinking about how they will fit into a UI personally but of course also points to the limitations of the status quo.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - More permanent – not based on situation and switch back, not based purely on geography

Excluding those activists who are only Irish now in Northern Ireland, some Alliance activists will be open to a 'new national identity' under a united Ireland which 'transcends the boundaries' of being Irish, British and Northern Irish. This might particularly be the case for Alliance activists because this grouping tends to be open to the potential for meanings of identity to change as the socio-political context itself changes. This idea of a 'new national identity' under a UI was prompted by a particular activist (24) who envisions potentially aligning themselves with a new identity that is not quite Irish, not British, but also not Northern Irish under a UI. The activist expresses that being Northern Irish in a New Ireland would not really make sense, but nor do they think they would feel comfortable saying they are Irish but they could get on board with a 'New Irish' identity because they do not associate themselves with the ROI nor do they associate themselves with being British in full either (although British would be the identity they would feel closer to).

It should be noted that, Alliance activists are not naive to how Irishness under a UI could become contentious, as there would be the potential that division is created between the 'original' Irish and those coming from NI (or maybe even this grouping that may be known by activist 24's term 'New Irish'). For example, activists expressed the idea that were was a potential danger that there would be a 'real Irish' (i.e. those form the current ROI) and then 'Northern Irish' (from the current NI) and the latter would not be discriminated against as such but would be considered different and treated with a degree of weariness, distrust, suspicion (e.g.

activist 18)[63]. For the centre-ground, the question of whether an equitable 'permanent' Irishness in the context of a future UI or alternative NI arrangement could be constructed in a way that embraces those from the current ROI and NI respectively remains open, and there are varied ideas about the extent to which this is achievable and which constitutional arrangements would be necessary or sufficient to facilitate it. Notably, many Alliance (and GPNI) activists to varying degrees identify as Northern Irish illustrating that this identity is not strongly associated with any particular constitutional preference.

Conceptual marker: Less-aligned - Being Irish not based on being Irish

With the rise in Irish passport applications in NI, and although Brexit is not clearly the reason for the declining Britishness of Alliance based on the declared views of the activists, potentially some in Alliance are becoming more Irish-focused. This is not because they necessarily identify as Irish culturally, but because post-Brexit that is now more strongly linked to their European identity, and their policy preferences on EU membership with Europeanness. In addition, for those who constitute a party based on lesser alignment/non-alignment in a divided society, an alternative encompassing identity such as Europeanness as a guide could be useful to provide a clearer cohesive tie and Irishness in a post-Brexit era may provide a pathway to this European identity. European identity is also now linked to economic issues, given the post-Brexit impacts on the UK economy, and liberal values have increasingly become associated with support for Europe compared to Britain where liberal values

[63] Similar concerns were raised by GPNI activists. One Green activist (15), who liked the idea of the GPNI articulating a '2-futures' idea' can see a future in NI where Irishness is embraced the same way as the South. The activist explains '*you can imagine a future in Northern Ireland where Irishness is more central or treated equally to Irishness from Cork or Irishness from Kerry*.'

(such as trans rights) have become contested. Europe functions not as a 'national' identity as such, but the activists project a set of values and benefits onto it, consistent with Alliance's focus on "real" issues over symbolic ones. However, very rarely did activists jump to frame their identity initially in the context of being European – most (at least, initially) 'situated their identity' within the Northern Ireland context (e.g. coming from a unionist/nationalist background, albeit distanced from it now). Of course, many saw themselves as 'European', but most saw their Europeanness as just one element of their identity amongst a whole bunch of other national identities that they fit with, that is, it is not the most salient component of their identity. For example, one Alliance activist (36), is all those things, *'I'm Irish, I'm British, I'm Northern Irish, I'm European, but probably the one that could unite all of those would be an Ulster identity'* and they can go by any of those labels, but they appreciate that not everybody can. Interestingly, this was a rare example of someone who strongly accords with the Ulster identity seeing this as even the Northern Irish identity. Similarly, another Alliance activist (6) says *'I genuinely would be happy to identify as British, Irish, Northern Irish, European or generally all the above…'.* For another activist (2) they are European, but it is not the label they would go by in their lives, that is, whenever describing their nationality or identity, they said they would never have said, the words *'oh, I'm European'*. This overlaps with themes explored in Tonge et al (2024), Alliance members consistently express and prefer to hold multi-layered identities as summarised by Stephen Farry, '*I'm Northern Irish, I'm British, I'm Irish, I'm European. I don't see any of them as being contradictory*' (p. 266).

Importantly, this activist (2) also reveals that Brexit and the EU will not be the main factors for them to consider when voting in any border poll. Many like the latter can still associate with their European-ness without NI returning to the EU. Even if it could be argued that Brexit has pushed some in Alliance more towards their

Irish identity - certain activists admit they are now at least going to get an Irish passport since Brexit, albeit again having a passport does not necessarily equate to holding that identity. Brexit has not necessarily 'awakened' activists' feelings of Europeanness. For example, one activist (20) does not regard themselves as fully Irish, but they (and their partner) got an Irish passport when Brexit was on its way (and they resigned from their job) because they regard themselves as European as their *'Irish brethren'.* However, also, things like European security operations are part of the activist's life experience going back to when they were in the armed forces and therefore, they are wedded to European identity going back to before Brexit even happened. Even a decision to get an Irish passport after Brexit is not necessarily due to Brexit. For example, one activist (4) now has an Irish passport so in this way they responded that way to Brexit, but to some degree they speculate this was always on the cards anyway. However, unlike others, this activist seemed more distant from the European label, explaining they are *'not a great European'* and there is a sense that this decision to acquire a passport is partially independent of Brexit.

When it comes to a constitutional change, one of the key elements is the extent to which Alliance activists' sense of European-ness is overwhelming enough to push them to identify more with their Irishness, as the ROI is more 'in' the EU than the UK – do they connect in their heads being European and Irish, even within the context of Brexit? This could mean that if European identity is strongly drawn upon by Alliance activists and those they represent in the context of a border poll that would likely render the referendum a referendum on membership of the EU and generate strong Alliance support for a UI. However, the pattern that emerges here is that European identity does exist, but it is typically not particularly salient and is instead more situationally relevant or a 'nested identity'. The nested identities model (Brandtken, 2022; Beswick, 2020, pp. 26-27) suggests that different identities are

layered where one belongs to a smaller, more local community which is in turn nested within a larger identity, and this ties here to constructivist conceptions of identity where individuals holding multiple identities mobilise distinct identities to greater or lesser degrees in different social contexts. European identity even with the heightened salience of Brexit does not appear to be the central driver and generator of cohesion we may think albeit it does have a role to play for Alliance activists. In this way European-ness is nested within larger identities, and it seems unlikely that this European identity will be sufficiently salient and 'activated' to shape voting patterns in a referendum given the other identities likely to exert greater effects in this context.

Conceptual Marker – Constitutional Neutrality and Constitutional preference at the 'people-level'

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Figuring out what is 'undecided'

This chapter has already discussed how national identity, communal identity, background and feeling of belonging are not always aligned as traditionally assumed. This thesis now moves beyond identity alignment specifically to consider how the centre-ground exemplified by those who constitute it understand and conceive of constitutional neutrality as a key conceptual marker of Alliance as a party of the centre-ground.

First when thinking about constitutional neutrality, a distinction must be made between those who are 'firmly' undecided and those who are 'less steadily' undecided. Some are 'less steadily undecided' given they had very specific conditions that shape their attitudes in which they seek information and context in order to 'firm up' a preference. These include the timing of when the referendum is called, the potential for a hybrid model other than rule from Dublin on offer, and the desire for the decision to be made

in a context back first to the context pre-Brexit. In the latter case, that would mean they would not vote for a UI or would be encouraged against voting for it tomorrow (4; 20). On timing, activist (4) would not vote for a UI in five years but thinks NI might be ready in 10-15 years but only five more years makes a significant difference. Here, factors 'external to the result itself' like the timing or type of UI (which is not specified in the GFA) are determinants. Some activists are more fluid in their preferences. Activist (9) who comes from a Protestant (albeit not strongly unionist) background, may be 51% of the way towards voting for a UI, but that could *'easily swing back'* (so they are torn in the middle). Even at one point in the interview, this activist who is 'currently' more pro-UI refers to themselves as part of a group of *'those of us who would be wanting to keep the status quo' which* showcases just how swiftly some activists' constitutional preference (CP) can float between pro-UI and pro-Union when expressing their perspectives on the possibility of constitutional change. It appears that these 'less steadily undecided' do not have the same long-term attachment to their constitutional preference compared to the activists who would firmly be considered 'decided' (talked about in the next section).

A key question that recurs here is whether those who are undecided favour the status quo or does this only come into play when making an active voting decision between the status quo and a UI. Some activists can complicate this further, appearing to be happy with a UI result, but also wanting a complete consideration of how NI works in the UK. For example, activist (7) is not pro-union straightforwardly but would like a version of direct rule in NI or a model comparable to NI being treated like Alaska. In this sense the goal is to get rid of Stormont rather than to 'choose' a UI. Fundamentally as with the Greens (albeit expressed differently), there is a key role for the options on offer in determining Alliance activists' positions and preferences rather than 'neutrality' in an

unconditional fashion. Activists seek additional context on the nature of a potential UI, the nature of a vote for the Union (which does not assume the current status quo) and the timing and process of any poll or transition. This is a more complex and conditional form of neutrality and so constitutes a challenge for the party to resolve given the variety of positions among its activists. This key marker of 'neutrality' is further complicated as it is highly conditional on these options being revealed.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Figuring out who is undecided in Alliance

The 2014 media storm and backlash towards the late Anna Lo MLA of Alliance publicly sharing her personal pro-unity preferences showcases that it might be fine to 'hold' a constitutional preference in Alliance, but publicly expressing said preference is something different. This might explain why activists who shared a strict preference were typically at a more grassroots level within the party as it might be easier for these less prominent activists to share their personal preference without the fear of implicating how the party is seen. However, this is not to say those who said they were undecided in the interview were being untruthful, or those who did not share a preference at all in the interview were undecided. The role of activists in shaping external perceptions of the party is seen very clearly in how they interact with the CQ. Potentially Alliance does have people with constitutional preferences that make it 'less civic' because the existence of these people suggests the party is not ignoring the constitutional question (as might be expected from a non-sectarian party) - *'it is bit perhaps unfair for people to say that Alliance tries to ignore the constitutional issue as I am sure many supporters, members would be explicit in their views, it is just it is not the priority issue for them'* (activist 6). Some suggest that by attending panel discussions like Ireland's Future (or even engaging with this thesis

project), it can be seen as engaging in the discussion (e.g. activist 22 emphasises it is because the party believes in dialogue) and hence is not deserving of assumptions that it ignores the CI. Select activists explain that given Alliance is not so concerned about what constitutional status NI has and believe this means there is little reason to ask Alliance activists about it even, suggesting the interviewer should instead direct these questions to parties from the traditional blocs or ideological poles (e.g. activist 7). In many ways, this appears to reflect a concern with internal stability and external self-image. Although activists believe the discussion around the issue in the party would be civil (mentioned later), for a party that defines itself as neutral, it could damage the party's external self-image if many in it were publicly seen to be sharing their constitutional preferences with each other. Interviewing the traditional bloc parties on these issues would present little challenge to those parties' activists as their positions on this issue is the basis for their own internal cohesion. Instead for Alliance, even though there are clearly preferences within the party, there is a barrier for some in Alliance to express their opinions on the constitutional question or national issues, given they do not define themselves along the binary, but often in the middle and expressing these views can then challenge their own cohesion which is built on instead remaining neutral.

While activists imply that there are those in Alliance's ranks that are pro-UI, pro-Union and undecided, there is a question of how they come to this assumption given some also say they do not know how others in the party would vote (e.g. activist 13) or do not really focus on the constitutional question in the party and thus imply it does not come up as a topic (at least formally). Several activists return in this context to the party line that the party is not really talking about or focused on the CI or talking about taking a CP as it is dealing with other more pressing issues like the cost-of-living crisis (e.g. activist 22). Assuming this is genuine, it is striking

that there is more willingness to engage this issue (it appears) in the GPNI who are very issue-oriented. It again seems that neutrality and not compromising this internally is a particularly key value for Alliance.

Of course, activists do often suggest that the party casually talks about the constitutional issue. For example, activist (13) said given it is not something that they talk about with others in Alliance to a significant degree, they could not point to people in the party and say what their constitutional preference is. Very few activists were very clear in quantifying precise positions of their colleagues, for example activist (24) said of anyone they have talked to, and they know quite a few in the party, only two would be open about what their position is, or maybe others are scared to say, or they just don't know. Few activists express a preference openly including most grassroots activists but of the small number who do express a clear view, these were only at that grassroots level. This adherence to a form of strict neutrality appears to constitute, in its extreme form, a strategy of 'don't ask, don't tell'. It is possible that if a high-level activist did share their preference, potentially lower-level activists would feel a greater permission to express views themselves but currently the party is quite protective of its external image of neutrality. There is also a concern outsiders could come to confuse personal for party preference, as one activist (36) alludes to. Illustratively, they do not think Alliance should ignore the CP and should allow their members and MLAs a personal vote, and individual members and politicians should be able to express their preference, but they recognise *'…that gives rise to difficulties if you've got very prominent Alliance people coming out one way or the other…'.* Interestingly, there is little evidence from the interviews that activists believe there would be any (or large numbers) of non-voters in a referendum in Alliance and this again suggests many have or would come to a position, but can't express it or avoid having discussions to develop it.

Alliance activists talked about how Alliance has dealt with big issues before and ultimately as above activists trust their party members to make a rational decision at the time of the party deciding to pick a position, but Alliance appears slower to embrace the debate and decision-making process on this issue than the Greens. Alliance in its behaviour over time (e.g. its initial reluctance to support the Hume-Adams talks where the GPNI insisted there was no time to lose) is defined by the need to slowly consider and come to a position given neutrality is a core value. This contrasts with the Greens coming to a position more quickly and decisively as, while they are also 'neutral', engaging with and positioning on issues is ultimately core to their self-image and self-understanding. Within Alliance, many activists reinforce that the party already has experience of discussing, debating and dealing with difficult issues civilly. For example, one activist (23) explains Alliance have had other issues where there has been a difference of views, but have held a respectful debate and discussion and '[*we] have been able to land in a position and people then get in behind it; at the end of the day, [we're] democrats as well'.* Another activist (22) does not label the conversation in the party around taking a CP as a difficult conversation, as the party has had many difficult conversations throughout the peace processes, and while constitutional change is a huge issue, they would not necessarily say it would be difficult because the party has a broad spectrum of people who all get on and it would be a very civil conversation and evidence-led. As in Todd and McEvoy (2023) where some of the women's group participants spoke of the risk of people getting upset or angry in discussions and the need for a supportive environment to help manage these feelings, Alliance feels it is well-placed to create this type of environment internally based on the previous discussion. Again, the activists believe the discussion in Alliance would be civil, but most think extensively discussing it now internally would distract the party from dealing with more pressing issues (e.g. the cost-of-living crisis) impacting the NI people.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Being an Alliance 'brand' of decided

Those with a firmer decided position are the exceptions within Alliance even if some have specific preferences about what should be involved. In particular, most do not want a border poll called now, they would prefer if their party remained neutral on the constitutional question currently, and they are not out cheerleading for their constitutional preference. Even though they were more firmly 'decided' they also still wanted to know the answers to practical or policy questions such as what healthcare will be like under a UI. There are still clear distinctions from those in aligned parties too. Unlike a typical SDLP or UUP activist, these activists are not entirely supportive of their party taking a collective party position, at least currently. Specifically, those pro-UI activists within Alliance are not calling for a referendum now. For example one activist (5) is strongly pro-UI but they still said they *'cringe'* at certain calls for an immediate referendum. Some decided activists seem to have a little 'shame' about the sense of cheerleading for a UI outcome, for example, the same activist (36) said they are invested in change that is probably 'stronger' than simply that they 'want it' but showed a desire to not be seen as succumbing to the jubilant aspect of national identity, given their non-nationalist background. This is potentially reflective of Alliance scepticism or as the Greens sometimes frame it a 'snobbishness' towards traditional identities.

There are also those who frame the referendum as divisive as it constitutes 'change' where the status quo is not framed as such. This potentially has roots in a certain 'soft unionist' thinking classically associated with some in Alliance although this is sometimes distinct from their personal level of comfort with alternative outcomes. For example, a pro-union activist (40) saw a referendum as not a 'positive thing', albeit they may not be overly

concerned about a UI result as they consider themselves an internationalist and do not hold one particular identity.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - De-coupling the political and the constitutional

Most of the time what attracts the decided activists to Alliance is not very different to those who are undecided, as their pull to Alliance is based on admiration for the party's qualities. They are attracted by its non-sectarianism and/or liberalism and/or cross-community dimensions (which is certainly the case for activists 40 and 5), or in some cases this can even be more tactical as in the case of activist (36) who reveals they only recently joined Alliance to contribute to its winning the previously solid unionist seat in their constituency. Activists often highlight what could be called the 'party appeal-constitutional party position' dynamic; that is, there is an apprehension about the party taking a constitutional position because the appeal of the party itself is precisely that it does not take a position and vice versa so the party not having a constitutional position is what makes the party appealing.

Alliance in not engaging with the constitutional issue at large, may give activists 'true freedom' to shape their constitutional thinking without party influence. It appears that some decided activists 'completely decouple' their thinking around the CQ from their political thinking (i.e., supporting Alliance) or initially going into Alliance they already felt one way about the CQ and being in Alliance has not moved their position. For example, one Alliance activist who takes a pro-UI position (5) and another Alliance activist (40) who takes a pro-union position explained how being in Alliance does not majorly influence their thinking around a border poll. Explicitly, the activist (5) explains if a border poll were to be called within the next five years, the things that would influence them personally as an Alliance supporter if they were considering the

issue without being an Alliance supporter would probably be the same. The other activist (40) recognises that Alliance supporters like any other political party supporter come with their own motivations that makes them support that party, so, they '*are going to be unable to disentangle the fact that*…', for example, that they voted to Remain and/or are an internationalist, born in England. However, if Alliance decided to take a position it would change how close the activists feel to the party, rather than their constitutional thinking as it was formed prior to joining the party.

There is an important subset of Alliance activists and the wider centre-ground they represent who do not have traditional aligned backgrounds for the specific reason that they were born, or have lived extensively, outside of NI which has particular consequences for their constitutional views. For example, one activist (4) has lived in many different countries so they feel comfortable pretty much anywhere, and as such the identity issue would not be important to them in a referendum. Another activist (27) also said they have lived abroad, in GB and lived and worked in other countries, so their traditional background will have no effect on them in a referendum. In turn, even though they might have lived in NI for a long time, some 'non-Northern-Ireland-born' activists situated themselves as somewhat separate from those from NI, with these activists coming from 'beyond the binary'. For those with a 'stake' in NI's future, even if you originally are not from there, does not always provide a sense of 'entitlement' to determine whether a UI happens or not. For example, while the previous non-NI activist (40) has got a *'stake'* in NI now and so they would hope to have a say in a referendum, this is not the same feeling held by another non-NI activist (12). This activist (12) expresses that despite how their child is born here and there is a *'stake'* in their future, the activist does not think they personally have as much of a right to determine NI's future as someone who has been brought up in NI and would have more affiliation. It appears that having a

dedication to a party in NI (i.e. becoming an activist) and having a stake in the future on NI (or your child does) in itself does not mean activists always award themselves self-entitlement to determine the constitutional outcome.

Constitutional Neutrality - Leaving it as a conscience vote – terms and conditions apply

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Activist's uncertainty - Leaving is a conscience matter, at least currently

Most activists were interviewed prior to leader Naomi Long MLA switching from stating that the party will *'undoubtedly'* take a CP in the future to stressing that Alliance members may decide it is best not to pick a side. Given most Alliance activists hoped, or predicted, it would be left as a conscience vote, the Leader's new perspective is catching up with the activists' already existing preference. Although Alliance activists very rarely indicated what way they thought the party would go if it had to pick (especially compared to GPNI activists), Alliance has created a sense of uncertainty about which way it would move, if it had to, even among its own activists albeit there are rare exceptions where activists have a stronger view on what the party may do.

Activists appear to believe that Alliance or its supporters would decide on the party's CP, if it had to pick, not on emotional or tribal aspects, but on rational facts and on what is best for NI. It will not be a 'willy-nilly' decision - one activist (22) notes that the party is clear that it will consider all sides, the benefits or not of a UI, the downsides and upsides of the Union, and they say the time will come when that conversation will be had, but they do not think it will be any time soon. By taking a position based on pragmatic, evidence-based assessments (e.g., economic benefits) rather than emotional nationalism or unionism, their belief is that Alliance could

lead the debate in a more moderate direction. That is, the activists have trust in the party to make the right choice.

Alliance seeks to strategically position itself as making a clear-eyed rational decision as it is the ' issue owner' of neutrality and therefore it makes the case it is the 'owner' of decisions grounded in rationality. The reality is messier in that it is likely there are a variety of positions within the party and there is not true 'non-alignment' but 'less alignment' for many activists. In the context of the scrutiny of a CP debate, those influences, backgrounds and positions could also have influence and internally could be conflictual with external consequences for undermining the Alliance image of 'rational neutrality'.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Difference between activists' trust in Alliance to make the right choice and wanting the party to

Even with said trust, some activists did express apprehension around the party taking a CP and this was mainly (but not only) 'loss-based'. Activists were mindful that taking a CP risks the party losing support, or losing its core ethos, or losing the trust afforded to it as not being distracted by the CQ, or really fears for the party's loss of credibility and goodwill that has been built up by the party not taking a stance, even though the decision will be made democratically within the party. For one activist (38) who indicates that the party decision will not be based on feelings, also indicates that if the party took a binary position, that undercuts the reason they initially picked to support it as Alliance would 'lose' its non-sectarian party identity. For another, activist (6) that trust is there, but their apprehension is less 'loss-based'. They would trust the party to make a nuanced choice but are more worried in the context of a referendum about the '*wider response'* for example they would not like to see a repeat of the 2012 flag protests and

the polarisation of politics led by other parties instead. There are clearly a number of different strands within Alliance. There are some activists who fear alienating voters attracted by an absence of identity affiliations and who see that as their own 'identity' and then there are those worried about internal divisions due to the reality that there are different positions and backgrounds in the party. In this case there is severe caution about engaging in these discussions even internally. Then there are those concerned about engaging on the CQ as distracting from daily issues.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Do activists see any gains from taking a CP?

As mentioned, taking a pragmatic decision means Alliance could lead the debate in a more moderate direction, but activists themselves seem to see far fewer 'gains' from taking a CP. Alliance activists potentially may see staying neutral as not a loss per se, but not entirely a gain, because it would be easier in a sense to come out on one side, as it would be less challenging when formulating policy. Illustrating this, one activist (10) said that in the past, *'Alliance would have been criticised, 'You're sitting on the fence' and that is the more difficult place to be, like you are not just wedded to it blindly, you have to try to think about the policy implications...'*

Even with 'conditions' applied, very few activists really considered there to be 'gains' from the party taking a CP. Potentially it would attract more Alliance activists, or it would finally bring an end to the criticism that Alliance is 'sitting on the fence'. Indirectly, one activist (40) recognised the party staying neutral would itself be a 'loss' in terms of its base, as it would put Alliance in a slightly weaker position with voters in nationalist-leaning areas because they would want Alliance to pick a position, but 'directly' the activist's own preference was for the party to remain neutral.

Ultimately, given those interviewed activists who are 'decided' on how they would vote in a referendum, in general also would like their party to leave it as a conscience matter, it appears Alliance is making the right choice to prioritise the preferences of those who actually make up their activist base. This is still likely the right choice even at the expense of losing potential new activists who would be drawn in by more formal engagement with the CQ, and potential new activists who are 'decided' would likely still want the party to stay neutral anyway. Ultimately, this is a zero-sum game as Alliance would lose as many potential activists as they would gain by taking a CP.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Having a 'condition' to take a 'position'

There is a spectrum of activists who range from more apprehensive to more relaxed about the party potentially taking a CP. Even at the end of the spectrum that was more 'apprehensive', some Alliance activists may not be completely closed off to the idea of the party taking a position, but may have strict conditions that they see would need to be met before the party can do so. By having 'conditions' these types of activists showcase they may not feel 'comfortable' being in a party that arbitrarily decides on matters which ultimately could redefine the party's core ethos, that is, they take the constitutional question seriously and it is not something to be knee-jerk about. For example, even for the activist who is fearful for the party's credibility (40), they believe the party should or could decide only when the facts are presented to it. One activist (4) does not have a problem with the idea of Alliance taking a position, and says the party are going to have to at some stage, but this activist does not think that Alliance or anyone is in any kind of a position to take a stand one way or another *'until we know exactly what it means'.* Given it was commonly mentioned by activists that they want to know what a UI 'looks like', the activist likely means they

do not want the party deciding until the shape of a UI is very clear, such as in terms of what way will the economy or healthcare be organised. However, there is a question as to whether requiring conditions that are unrealistic or extending the timeframe out over a very long period of time or indefinitely is ultimately a means of retaining effective neutrality. In essence, this may be a way of protecting Alliance's self-image as 'rationally neutral' by invoking in the name of 'full information' such a set of requirements in terms of conditions and certainties on options and the process involved that it means neutrality extended into the future as no position can be taken in any relevant time frame.

A few more 'relaxed' activists think politicians making big decisions and having a say on big matters, like the party taking a CP, is just part and parcel of being in politics. In this sense, it is just a mundane decision that would have to be made like any other in a political party. These activists conveyed the clearest sense of comfort with the capacity of the party to engage with the issue and take a position. For example, if the question was in front of Alliance, one activist (3) thinks it is about taking part in the democratic process through the party and the party will need to decide how to navigate through that. They say ultimately that is why they joined a party in order to have a say on significant matters and that would be one of the big matters that comes up in front of Alliance. However, this activist seems to assume that the position that the membership can vote for is 'neutral', as they say that Alliance people/members will take different views on it, *'but everyone understands that the party would have to take a position, and that position could be no position'.* Another activist (23) says the prospect of making a decision is just *'part of politics'* where decisions are what *'we have to make most days*'. They do not think that it would be like abortion, where it was a matter of conscience, and Alliance would have to take a position on it but the position itself would be dependent on many factors, like the economics,

health service, etc. This activist was unusual in not considering the CQ to be an issue where a conscience vote was most appropriate. There is notably a difference between an activist not being particularly concerned about their party taking a CP and activists not caring as to what the choice actually is. One activist (27) was slightly flippant about the prospect because they explain how ultimately it is an anonymous choice and secret when each Alliance member actually votes so it doesn't really matter as you can still vote whatever way you want in the booth. This activist does not believe the party will take a position in the future or there will be a whip on it. There is an interesting distinction here between those who are concerned (or not) about the ballot itself (which this activist clearly is not) or about the debate internally leading up to the ballot which seems to be the basis for much of the concern expressed by others given the potential divisiveness this may generate.

While the ballot itself is secret and the party members will have freedom to make their decision as to which direction the party should take, this does not mean the party itself cannot generate influence, even subliminally, over its own members' thinking. For example, activist (24) noted how they cannot remember a time when a UK minister or representative was brought to a party conference as a speaker, while the Tánaiste was the keynote speaker at its 2024 party conference. In this sense, it is possible that there can be a subliminal message and possible influence over members, when they see a standing ovation for an Irish representative and hear criticism for the British government.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Beyond the loss-gain: Some opening up among Alliance activists

Beyond activists recognising the losses and (less so) any gains, activists still do not want their party to 'ignore' the constitutional issue and believe Alliance can play an important role

in the wider debate, despite the challenges and potential risks of taking a firmer position within that debate.

Alliance activists expressed differing views, with some believing that the party should take part in discussions before a referendum is called on the basis that good quality information and debate can held avoid the experience of the Brexit referendum. Some went further and thought that Alliance taking part might help some unionists take part as a form of role model for participation in these discussions. It appears that when it comes to Alliance encouraging unionism to partake, some believe the onus is on unionist parties, and others just think it is up to Alliance to set an example by attending to show it is alright to attend these types of constitutional conversations (e.g. activists 23; 4). For example, activist (23) knows that Alliance has taken part in some of those all-Ireland discussions, and they think that is healthy for people to see that it is not something to be frightened of, and to share those conversations and to encourage people to come forward. They do not think it does any harm to have those conversations before a referendum as this enables Alliance to call for information on what a UI would involve in terms of healthcare, taxes, etc., as a core Alliance condition for a referendum.

While apprehensive about their party taking a position, even some of those at the 'nervier' end of the spectrum can envision Alliance not just ignoring the referendum or the CQ, but being a party that 'has a list of questions that needed to be answered' for the people or gets answers from other parties on their constitutional positions (e.g. activist 17; 40). This ties back to the self-image of Alliance as the 'rational neutral' party that focuses on the acquisition of evidence for effective decision-making discussed above, albeit in this case its role is in seeking out this information from other sources for public use rather than for internal decision-making. For example, one activist (40) does not think Alliance

could say nothing at all, but equally they do not see Alliance (or themselves) wanting to campaign on a particular outcome, but it could take on a role like it did leading up to elections, in that Alliance would be saying to the aligned parties what would they do about that, what would you do about assets, healthcare, etc., under your preferred CP. Although there is a question of how 'truly impartial' this role is, as it may involve accepting information that itself is not impartial, or in the past, as Alliance has given out information, rather than just collecting it, this raises additional questions about impartiality. For example, during the GFA process Alliance opened played a role in providing information for the public to combat all the half-truths being spread by other parties about the agreement (as discussed in the case selection in chapter 2). This may be a role that Alliance would seek to take on once again with likely inevitable contestation over the impartiality of this information from others that disagreed with it.

Basically, harking back to the accommodationist bridge-building role that Alliance played during the GFA, other activists don't think or see that Alliance would take a position and would like the party working as an honest broker in a conversation on the referendum. For example, one activist (10) would see the party helping people to wade through all the emotion and the passion and try to make a mature informed decision on what is best for them. A bridge-building role for the party still might be risky compared to a data collection role, as the party could potentially direct, and bias, the flow of information. It also would mean Alliance would 'revert back' to the accommodationist civic party category that it had moved away from (see conceptualisation chapter).

The idea of the party giving the 'facts' during the period of an actual referendum is something that many activists are also open to, even those who are fairly apprehensive about the party taking a CP. One activist (2) explicitly recognises a contradiction

between wanting Alliance to stay neutral and also to give the facts. The activist outlines that it is important to have a campaign which provides the hard evidence for both sides, *'but if you're doing that, then I am unsure are you taking a position on it'.* In this sense, there is a potential tension activists note between Alliance providing information externally to shape a debate, but seeking not to shape any potential internal debate.

There was a greater hesitancy among activists towards the party developing a policy document on a referendum. However, they may be more open to the party creating an 'internal' – not publishable – policy document. For example, one activist (1), is not against the party creating a policy for itself on the views inside the party, but caution remains about how a policy document with wider circulation may be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as affiliated with a particular position.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - See you on the other side – Alliance role post-referendum

Although many envision Alliance playing a role before a referendum or during a referendum campaign, others' vision of Alliance is cast much further into the unknown in the event of a UI. There were a few 'accommodationist architects' who have a bigger vision for Alliance in ensuring accommodation and fair representation for both communities when building a new state or UI. This is in itself is like Alliance playing an 'honest broker' role, but 'after' the referendum. Most of these 'accommodationist architects' were well-established in the party and saw the party playing an active, state-crafting role which maybe makes it more convincing that this is a role the party could actually play as these higher-level politicians could have more direct insight on how this would work and the commitment to it the party would make. For example, one activist (13) thinks Alliance in its bridging position in

the middle would play an important role in trying to create a new state that to the greatest extent possible can bring in both sides in a relatively amicable way. Another activist (9) thinks Alliance has an important role under a UI to play as a party in ensuring that unionism is not left behind and that it is accommodated with a *'strong voice politically*', even perhaps '*over-accommodated'* in some cases[64]. These 'accommodationist architects' also demonstrate the interconnectedness of different aspects of the party in terms of its constitutional vision (i.e., the party values accommodation and equal treatment of all communities). Many activists will be influenced in a referendum by whether identities are properly accommodated under whichever constitutional outcome (discussed more in the next chapter) and how activists' vision for the party itself is to make sure this accommodation happens.

Conceptual marker – Constitutional Neutrality - Still the big question – when should the debate begin?

Timelines are the trickiest to determine with Alliance in terms of when the debate should begin on the CI, and there are a variety of positions on this. There is a clear sense that Alliance activists believe Alliance should be involved in conversations but to a significant degree, this involvement is contingent on a referendum being close to being set in motion as well as a diverse range of other factors being in place. Activists believe the party should engage in events such as Ireland's Future in the short-term. The timeline question instead primarily seems to arise as to when conversations are taken to mean something more substantive. This type of bigger conversation appears to mean a stage when the 'long campaign' has begun, and Alliance makes the assessment

[64] Many activists in both parties believe that no matter how much you do, there are some who will not accept it (e.g. Alliance activist 7).

that the party should dive into this process. For example, activist (40) lists a number of potential elements required: that nationalists have to reach out to unionists and include them and what they want, signs that there was a shift in the polls and broader conversations beginning to move towards that, then Alliance would start to engage in that conversation. This renders it relatively vague as to what precisely is needed for Alliance to engage despite the widespread belief that Alliance should ultimately be involved.

Other activists are less enthusiastic about the party encouraging unionists' participation now because this type of role is perceived by them as potentially 'selling' the idea of a UI or 'leading the way forward in the debate' which is not the mission of Alliance or its activists. For example, some emphasise the responsibility of nationalists (e.g. activist 28) to make the case for a positive vision for a New Ireland to people. But as activist (28) says '*now that's not our vision, our vision is to make Northern Ireland as good as it can be regardless of where it sits'*. Similarly, one activist (2) recognises that if SF is leading the charge in terms of the conversation/preparations the unionists will shut down, but also notes if it is being led by Alliance, then it *'looks like we're driving the whole argument'*, which is not something they would be particularly content with. Therefore, they think it is something that should be led by the Secretary of State (SoS) and also a relevant Minister from the ROI government rather than Alliance.

However, sometimes it is difficult to determine what exactly Alliance activists mean by a party taking the 'lead' in terms of the referendum debate. Although the previously mentioned activist (28) does not put the onus on Alliance to sell a 'UI' vision, they also see Alliance taking a 'leadership role'. They think Alliance should start pushing at the point where it looks like a referendum is going to happen, *'so we need to be talking about this and we need to understand this'* and that becomes the justification for Alliance to

actually start to play more of a *'lead role in that process'*. But what does the activist mean by 'lead role', in terms of referendum conversations and getting people informed and talking about a referendum? Does it mean the party takes on a more neutral role, like gathering facts/evidence to give to the public, or does it even mean organising its own events around the CQ? It appears that this could be Alliance engaging in discussions on a referendum and informing people and presenting distinct perspectives, but not necessarily leading a campaign for any specific position. In its preferred role as the 'rational neutral' party, it seeks to create the opportunity to hear different perspectives to have that debate.

Conclusion

This chapter has mapped the identity profile of Alliance Party activists across two conceptual markers, non-alignment and constitutional neutrality, drawing on a substantial body of interview material. Several key findings emerge. First, Alliance activists are best characterised as 'less-aligned' rather than non-aligned: they have distanced themselves, to varying degrees, from the communal identities of their background, while retaining residual attachments that surface in discourse, particularly in moments of unreflective self-expression. The transition to less-alignment is an ongoing process and it is shaped by both personal biography and structural context, including the experience of party activism itself. Second, the Alliance cohort exhibits a notable and multi-causal decline in British identification that cannot be straightforwardly attributed to Brexit, though Brexit may be a contributing factor. It also reflects longstanding discomfort with the specifically Ulster unionist inflection of Britishness, an increasing proportion of activists from Catholic and nationalist backgrounds, and a more general tendency to question the coherence of British identity as a meaningful category. A minority retains a Britishness redefined in

civic, non-unionist terms, and the decline of Britishness has not produced a corresponding growth in Irish nationalism. Third, Irish identification among Alliance activists is widespread, but distinctive, civic, geographic, situational, and chosen rather than politically sovereign. Most Irish-identifying activists are comfortable being Irish within the current Northern Irish constitutional framework, and do not understand a UI as a necessary condition of their Irishness. This suggests a decoupling of Irish identity from Irish nationalism.

On the CQ, Alliance activists span a wide range of positions from firm pro-unity to firm pro-union, with a substantial and heterogeneous undecided middle. The expression of constitutional preference is socially constrained within the party context, and most decided activists hold their preferences in a characteristically Alliance way, linked to assessment of evidence and decoupled from their political allegiance to the party or a specific programmatic point of view. Alliance activists see a potential key role for the party in the provision of information to the public although this raises questions about the extent to which the party can take on the role of conveying ‘the facts’ while not undermining its own neutrality. Activists also see Alliance as serving as architects of accommodation, serving first to encourage unionist participation in referendum debates and as a key guarantor of protections for unionists and accommodations of unionism in any potential UI. The party’s institutional neutrality on the constitutional question is, for now, broadly supported by its activist base, not least because that neutrality is itself part of what makes Alliance politically distinctive and potentially understood as the best current strategy given the internal and external risks that both engaging in the debate and seeking to identify a position may present.

Chapter 4: Identity versus pragmatism: Understanding the constitutional deliberations of the practical Alliance activists

Introduction

Given the emphasis that Alliance activists place on the party's self-image as a 'rational neutral' party that considers an issue based on empirical evidence, this chapter seeks to more systematically explore the perspectives and interpretations of activists of deliberations on the constitutional question to discern the extent to which identity, emotion and affect are displaced in favour of a focus on 'the evidence.' In reality, the chapter demonstrates there is a significant role for a wider range of factors than this 'rational neutral' frame would typically acknowledge.

Factor 1: Identity as a factor?

Non-emotional and non-ideological?

Given Alliance's pragmatism, preference for evidence-based decision-making and realism, it seems (undecided) activists are missing the 'human part' of the constitutional question and could be considered 'immune' to the influence of emotion, affect and identity as compared to those active within more traditionally aligned parties. There is, of course, a substantial literature illustrating the role of rationalist decision-making in attitude development and political behaviour such as the Rochester School of vote choice (see Amadae and Bueno de Mesquita, 1999). However, over-emphasising the rational can overlook the role of identity (e.g. Horowitz, 2000) and the emotional and affective (Kecmanovic, 2005) especially when political questions tied to nationalism and national identity arise and the realities of the discourses and perspectives of activists shows that despite this

broader self-image of the party internally there is a wider role for identity than these types of rational models imply. As well as an 'immunity' to the 'irrational', this conception of activists also implies a superiority that is not demonstrated by Alliance activists themselves. Activists are at pains not to suggest that voting based on practical policy aspects is inherently better to voting based on emotive-ideological aspects (e.g. activist 22). Similarly, emotion is not something that activists will entirely distance from. Alliance activists will not feel unemotional about a border poll even if they may not feel particularly emotionally attached to either national identity. Exemplifying this, one activist (10) said '*for me personally, I don't think that...the emotions and the passions would get in the way. But I'm saying that because I don't think I feel emotional about being British or Irish…'*[65].

Certain Alliance activists do at times though suggest that Alliance are rational and nationalists and unionists are 'irrational'. Activist (18), for example, suggests you do not want a citizen assembly where it is all Alliance people who turn up as the Alliance people are already won over to looking at the world in a different, potentially rationalist way, and that it needs to be open enough that you have the *'raging republicans and looney loyalists'* taking part too. This is indicative of something of a partial disregard at least for those deemed to relay 'too much' on strong identity affiliations. It is not however that all aligned individuals are seen as equally and immovably 'irrational.' For those who are aligned, but of a more moderate persuasion, economics and healthcare are seen as two things by activists that could make the 'ideological' nationalists 'rationalists'. It is mostly those with more extreme alignments that are seen as more resistant to movement based on material or policy dimensions.

[65] The activist did say '*but I might feel emotional about things like the welfare state and whether I can get iPlayer. [Laughter]…*'.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the reality of non-alignment is in fact reduced rather than eliminated affiliations. There is not an out-and-out denial from most activists of this, and some indeed acknowledge that the notion that they would vote based purely on rational terms, and without any influence of their background would potentially be untruthful on reflection. One activist (15) also recognises their perception of themselves as predominately rational could be built on them being untruthful. While they feel they are primarily a person who approaches life in a rational way, this does not mean they can say that they always truly do this and at times, this is closer to what they tell themselves than the reality of how they think and behave. It is also the case that what is framed as 'rational', classically for example materialist arguments about differential economic outcomes from a UI or staying in the Union, can itself be shaped by or invoked for identity-based/ideological or 'irrational' dimensions. Activists are not unaware of how economic discussions and models can be manoeuvred in a particular way to support a certain argument around a preferred constitutional outcome. For example, one activist (14) thinks the economy is one of those arguments now for some other people where they will use it if it helps their argument, and it is not actually a top priority. What is intended to be an economic argument is ultimately in these cases a sovereignty argument. That said, the largest proportion of activists were clear in conceding a role for their background and socialisation in shaping their vote even while the self-image of the party as 'rational neutral' is significant.

Of course, some activists were adamant that their background won't impact their constitutional thinking, but potentially these activists are those who come from more 'extreme' versions of their community background (i.e. strict unionists/nationalists) and would be more likely to want to distance themselves completely from these backgrounds. For example, one activist (18) thinks that they will vote for what logically makes

sense, but they appear to have come from a strict DUP/Orange Order background. Potentially, the utter disgust they reveal in their interview for this type of politics and associated values pushes them towards a position they identify specifically as driven by rational logic. Moreover, some openly reflect on their assumptions that it won't have an impact, or they will make a rational choice. Even one activist (3) who does not think their traditional community will impact their vote choice also recognises it is easy to say that, and they can understand how you could subconsciously take things from your background. Some activists answered on whether their background would impact their vote choice with reference to their family unit (e.g. parents, relatives) and that their family was their 'background'. For most, there is the perception that families will not 'directly' influence their vote choice in a referendum (i.e. my parents support a UI, so I do). The word 'directly' is important because those such as activist (3) will be 'indirectly' influenced by their family, but not in the sense that they will be influenced by how their parents vote, or that their familial background will push them to align with one constitutional preference over another. Rather, they will be influenced by how their current family (their family crosses both sides of the main NI traditional communities) would be embraced, and the future for them would be at the forefront of their thoughts, rather than their background and how they grew up.

Of course, the primordialist perspective may suggest that, in the same way that even if a person no longer identifies with their innate identity (e.g. they converted to a different religion in adulthood), but, for example, in times of war will 'revert back' to this innate identity (McKay, 1982), then some might argue that if a referendum is called, these activists might 'revert back' to their traditional ethno-nationality. Essentially, the constitutional threat posed by unification and the referendum would function similarly to a conflict which also presents a potential 'existential threat' or primal threat to the survival of the ethnic group or threat to the

nation. The referendum and potential defeat of the unionist position and unification would similarly be a major threat to the nation and would motivate those who would have potentially otherwise de-emphasised their national identity. However, as in the previous chapter, these centre-ground activists also are almost innately 'resistant' to aligning themselves by orthodox identities, which helps explain why they chose to join a non-binary party in the first place. Therefore this, (combined with how primordialism itself is a weak theory of identity e.g., Fearon and Laitin, 2000), would lean towards an expectation that these activists would not 'revert back' to their traditional identity when choosing how to vote in a united Ireland referendum.

Apathy? Intensity of feelings around a UI or status quo outcome

The lack of intensity of feeling connected to constitutional outcomes may broadly reflect the lack of emotional feeling of many activists about the constitutional question in which they don't imagine a UI is going to suddenly fix or solve the problems currently in NI and instead all it does is change who 'controls the purse strings' (i.e. it shifts from Westminster in the UK to the Dáil in Dublin).

Alternatively, this lack of intense feeling may result from an expectation of remaining in the UK, and that activists have a clear idea of what the 'status quo' looks like, which is to say, it is much of the same. However, for such reflective thinkers, Alliance activists can often (not always) take it for granted that the status quo will just be more of the same, such as when remarking on how it is more of an unknown what a UI looks like. For example, one Alliance activist (9) says *'And obviously… it's very easy to know what we're voting for if we vote for a continuation of the status quo, okay? Like, that's fairly clear, so that doesn't need to be ironed out. What we don't know is if we vote for change, what we're getting'.*

Sometimes it was implied that the status quo is going to be more of the same, as when directly asked how the status quo result will impact them, some activists respond that they would get a sense of *'ease'* from knowing things won't really change that much. Given how often it comes up that Alliance activists assume that a status quo is more of the same, potentially what is needed to better inform this undecided grouping is not just the publication of a plan around what a UI looks like, but also what a status quo result looks like to 'prove' nothing will change. Additionally, a status quo vote is generally considered a neutral or positive outcome. For example, one activist (22) sees a status quo result as more than just 'the same' and asks what would voting to remain in the UK mean, would that involve greater devolution or other changes. This could be perceived as pro-union bias, but this is seen instead as an opportunity for a better version than the 'current union' as in reality there is a hope for more on the other side of a result.

The easy-going attitude to the potential outcomes of a referendum might also somewhat reflect how a significant few see they can or would just acclimatise swiftly into their new life under a UI, or that they are the type of person who when they go to a place they buy into that community (e.g. activist 40). For example, one activist (20) (who would not stay in NI if there was a UI) feels very comfortable in the Republic as a visitor and feels it is almost like coming home, and if they moved to somewhere well away from the border under a UI, they would be very comfortable and would immediately get into the '*groove'* of life there. Not only do some activists think they would assimilate into a UI quickly, one activist (7) thinks NI people in general would quickly become accustomed to their new existence. They believe NI people would have to get used to a new tax/health system, etc., under a UI, but generally people get used to things very quickly.

This attitude might also somewhat reflect how so many Alliance activists envision that in a UI at the 'day-to-day' level life would not change a whole lot at least not in the shorter-term, or unless there are major macro problems. Therefore, they are not so 'scared' about the unknown of a UI, because they sense that daily life will look a lot like it does now. Activist (28) for example thinks there's going to be a very long transition period, and *'we're not going to see any significant change to our day-to-day lives overnight'* even if in the longer-term things would change. However, it is important to note, that some activists (4; 9) see the 'day-to-day' impact as dependent on certain things like the Protocol's implementation, or the extent to which security becomes an issue.

Ranking - much different than moderates?

For the (reflective) rationalist activist cohort they will likely prioritise policy issues in a referendum. However, potentially, the 'ranking' that each activist gives to each policy issue (e.g., healthcare, economy, Brexit, etc.) could change by the time a referendum actually rolls around. Alliance activists often mention how unionists are quite a pragmatic lot who would care about 'normal things' in a referendum (at least independent of political party unionism) and how nationalists who are happy enough in the status quo in practical terms, such as with their job status, might not necessarily make the jump to a UI (e.g. activist 4). Therefore, if those who are 'aligned' can make 'practical or pragmatic' deliberations in a referendum, there is a question of what makes the deliberations of those who are active within the non-aligned Alliance so different from moderate unionism or nationalism. Even one Alliance activist (36), who sees Alliance influenced by the same factors as the moderates in a referendum does not know if there are truly factors that *'uniquely'* would influence Alliance supporters, given Alliance sit in the middle. As they outlined, *'…the factors that would encourage both moderate elements of*

nationalism and unionism, whatever those issues would be, Alliance are going to be comfortable with…'. However, where Alliance activists may differ is their 'ranking' of factors. That is, the ideological/constitutional aspect will rank lower in terms of priorities for them in a referendum and the more practical policy elements will rank higher than for unionists/nationalists. Similarly, in the Tonge et al., 2024 review of policy preferences (in terms of vote choice rather than a referendum) '*where Alliance members differed is in the downgrading of constitutional issues. They ranked third in the electorate's priorities (below only Brexit and the National Health Service (NHS)) in 2019, but for Alliance members they lay far lower*' (pp. 218-219).

<u>Overarching question – information is key no matter where 'issue' is on the priority list</u>

Although the 'ranking' that Alliance activists give to each policy issue in their 'priority list' will be dependent on the individual activist, the most commonly recurring factor likely to influence their decision is that (most) Alliance activists will be influenced by the answer to the 'better off' question (i.e. will I be better off; will my family be better off; will NI be better off in a UI or remaining in the UK). Several mention they want to see or be told the benefits of a UI or see a 'detailed plan' of what a UI looks like before they can decide which constitutional outcome is 'better' as discussed previously. One Alliance activist (11) notes a referendum is something they have thought about in terms of the need for a well thought out plan about how the country would be integrated, and the prospect of a UI needs to provide something that is better than the status quo and if it does, this needs to be clear and specific such as providing better wages or a pathway to a better economy. If those making the argument and campaigning for a United Ireland can provide a detailed plan that would show that, it would be a big factor in which way the activist would personally vote.

Currently, Alliance activists (and GPNI) are still looking for each side to 'present' their visions of each constitutional outcome. As one Alliance activist (36) says *'..nobody is actually coming up and saying, "This is what a [New Ireland] looks like"'.* This is similar to Todd et al.'s focus group finding on undecided people in North and South where focus group participants *'wanted information about economic impacts and about proposals for public service delivery on healthcare, benefits, housing and transport, but they also wanted to discuss those issues as part of a process to develop a vision of what a united Ireland would look like before referendums are called'* (p. 145).

This desire for 'information' might explain why several activists answer that they don't really know how a UI would impact the lives of those in NI or what a UI means to them, precisely as it has not been laid out to them. It does though also reflect how this is not talked about within the party internally at a formal level. This pattern may be more specific to a non-aligned party like Alliance. Again, there is though a question as to how far are the activists going to get the information they require given they are clearly not willing to go so far as to be on board with their party leading the conversation at this point. It may be that there are unreasonable expectations about the amount of information needed for most voters as they will use heuristics to inform their decision, but for Alliance activists or in particular those activists who come closest to the 'rational neutral' paradigm discussed above, they will want as much information as possible. This means the emphasis activists place on the need for detailed discussion and explanation of the options and evidence for what the outcome will look like is quite particular to groups within the party as compared to the wider population or even activists from other more identity-aligned parties.

Factor 2: Back to Alliance's early justification - Better economically and socially

Alliance have traditionally justified their pro-union stance based on how being in the UK was best for NI from an economic and social perspective. This section explores the extent to which activists still hold this view and the role it plays in shaping their attitudes towards the CQ and a potential referendum today.

Economic – UK still has NI's best interests?

Even though there were still some questions around whether the ROI could afford NI, despite new research questioning the size of the subvention[66], a select few activists were already 'sold' on the economic benefits of a UI. For some this is based on 'what you get' in the future under a UI (i.e. better economic benefits). For example, one Alliance activist (9) thinks the *'economic argument is largely won to be honest…if you look at other reunification projects worldwide, like Germany, the economic benefits to the poorer region for lack of a better word, are usually quite great…'*. However, it should be noted that while this individual activist draws a direct comparison between a UI and German reunification, this is not something Alliance at large promotes. Former Deputy leader Stephen Farry did not see it as a like-for-like comparison, as for instance, there was widespread support across both parts of Germany for reunification unlike what will happen in the context of Ireland (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). Others may also base this assertion on a comparison between how the ROI's economy is performing better than NI's economy and so a UI will be better off economically because the ROI already is. For example, one activist, (4) says *'a lot of the questions'* around whether slightly wavering Alliance voters who might be of a slightly

[66] Doyle, J. (2021). 'Why the 'Subvention' does not Matter: Northern Ireland and the All-Ireland Economy.' *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, *32*(2), pp. 314-334.

unionist persuasion would be hit economically by a UI '*will have been answered by the fact that your* [interviewer is from the ROI] *economy is in pretty good shape and has been by comparison to ours'.*

The international survey-based vote choice literature concludes that voters generally are sociotropic, so, caring more about national than personal (pocketbook) economic conditions, backward-looking, and myopic (Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck, 2011). The Alliance activists here typically focus on these broader perceptions of the performance of the national-level economy rather than the personal pocketbook as conditioning their expectations and which they project onto the wider debate and decision to be made on the position of the party and swing voters. More broadly, not everyone was as convinced as the previous activists, as some think the comparative economic benefit depends on what level of the economy you are looking at, or how far into the future you are talking about. For example, one activist (15) suggests that the ROI's economy is not as good as it seems, that is, on the surface it always looks great, but the reality is somewhat different. Another activist (6) thinks it is potentially difficult to answer whether NI people would economically prosper in a UI, as while it might be a negative in the short-term, *'you would also have to look at the long-term'*.

There is a potential differential relevance of economic issues dependent on age. At an individual-level, it may be expected that the economic issue is not going to be as high up on the priority list for some demographics even among Alliance activists. Although one activist (11) guesses their younger age probably prevents them from understanding the economic benefits of a UI, it did not appear that activists of a more mature age were especially informed around the economic benefits of a UI relative to those who were younger. An interesting perspective offered by activist

(3) was their understanding that while the economy would be the key factor for most age groups, for younger people, the activist's sense was that the economy would not be as important as a motivation for a growing number of younger people as compared to issues such as civil rights and the protection of minorities.

Both an economic and social issue – the NHS not viewed through 'rose-tinted glasses'

In post-Brexit politics in Ireland, both north and south, there is a renewed interest in the opportunities and barriers to an all-island healthcare system. For instance, in a plethora of debates and presentations on constitutional futures, healthcare has emerged as a key issue. Access to the UK National Health Service (NHS) could be a key factor preventing voters in NI from supporting a UI. In a 2019 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, respondents were asked whether the two different healthcare systems would influence their vote in a referendum on a UI. Overall, 52% said that it would discourage them from voting for a UI (Heenan, 2021). How then do activists in Alliance consider and approach this issue?

What came through in the interviews is the majority of Alliance activists who did not view the NHS through rose-tinted glasses. Similar to the patterns observed in Todd et al's (2023) focus group research on those in the South and North who are undecided on how they would vote in a referendum, several Alliance activists would move their position on the NHS within their interview, even in the middle of a single contribution. They might start off talking about their concerns around having to pay to visit a GP under a UI as happens in the ROI, to then recognising that the NHS is ultimately becoming more privatised or the HSE more socialised, or asking the interviewer (who was from the ROI) whether you can actually get treatment in the South at least, even if you have to pay for it.

However, while ‘healthcare’ is deemed a ‘pragmatic/practical’ factor shaping attitudes in this project, this is not to suggest that activists were unaware of how emotionally-laden of an issue the ‘NHS’ is for other people besides themselves. Some recognised that there is an ‘emotional attachment’ to the NHS as an institution which they do not necessarily see as a bad thing (activist 22), or that it will be an emotional reaction from people if the NHS is not guaranteed under a UI and the NHS is abolished (in particular as the NHS is embedded in what it means to be British) (activist 4). There is evidence here of how the materialist issue of healthcare provision can again be emotional, affective and ‘irrational’. Again, these activists reinforce the image of activists as ‘reflective rationalists’ (i.e. moving their own position on the NHS), but it would appear they at least see themselves, as more ‘robotic’ when it comes to the NHS as they do not (to their own minds) have this unadulterated ‘emotional bond’ to it that others do.

If age does play into which factors would influence the Alliance activists, potentially the relevance of healthcare as a factor could be age-dependent. Certain activists speculate that younger generations may be less committed to the idea of the NHS as a provider of care than older generations are, although there is little evidence that this pattern is replicated among activists themselves in their own preferences. For example, one activist (21) suggests there will be some younger voters who are less concerned (albeit this does not mean necessarily they will not care at all) about the health service argument in a referendum as they do not rely on it so much - *‘…for example, you'll have 18-year-olds who don't really care about the health argument… because…they're not using the health service…and why should they really care about health… when they can have this new constitutional change?’* Another younger activist (22) is more discerning on age, healthcare and the centre-ground. They note if you look at who thinks about the NHS more, it is probably older people, those who have disabilities,

people who rely on services more, and if you also look at the make-up of the centre-ground it tends to be younger, but obviously there are people with disabilities in the centre-ground, so one cannot make broad generalisations.

Factor 3: Not many unionists or British-only in Alliance – but still care for unionist accommodation in a united Ireland?

Fabricated fears?

While not going as far as wanting the party to be 'accommodationist architects' where the party ensures all identities feel safe and accommodated in any UI model, the place of unionism in a UI is a very big priority for many activists in considering the CQ as is the extent to which they have been 'brought along' in the conversations at the time of a referendum. Although several activists who come from a unionist background have distanced from it, just by having family who are unionists it feeds into their own considerations around a referendum or UI. Several Alliance activists also recognised that the unionist fear around a UI stems from a fear that they will be treated badly in a UI in the same way unionists treated the nationalist community when they held power in the past although several also think that British people/unionists already fear their identity is under threat in the current context in NI.

It seems the presumed apprehension of unionists is grounded mainly in perceptions about what will be taken away from unionists, rather than forced upon them in a UI, for example, not many think unionists fear they will have to learn Irish under a UI. There is an underlying current here that while activists recognise the fears or apprehension of unionists about a UI or referendum, some seem to think that 'in reality' some of these fears would not actually come about. Specifically several reflect on, again

sometimes in a single contribution where concerns are initially highlighted, that in reality the unionist communities' fears around their place in a UI (or the threat to their identity in a UI) is overstated given some activists were not convinced, for example, that unionist politicians are going to be excluded from government, or that their religious freedom is going to be undermined. For instance, one activist (38) declared *'…it's not as if…the Dáil is going to kick out these unionist politicians as then that's exactly what unionism did for nationalism for years'.* Another activist (7) says certain issues, including the extent of religious freedom under a UI are important, but are now quite minor points as they are fairly well-settled, as there is no prospect of losing religious freedom in a UI. Ultimately, a UI is not viewed as much of a threat, as it might have been in the past for Alliance activists. This is in fact a common theme across both parties of the centre-ground. Activists from both parties consider unionist accommodation in a UI to be important and want it to be considered in developing their constitutional perspective. There is though a concern about the retention of signifiers of identity in a UI as for example being required to indicate British identity on state paperwork and applications even with the goal of accommodative representation can lead to the perpetuation of the identity binary even in a UI/New Ireland.

<u>How to accommodate unionists? – cultural celebration?</u>

How far can unionist concerns about cultural difference and political identification in a UI be addressed by institutional or constitutional reform? For a UI to be minimally acceptable, unionists' everyday cultural choices, practices and preferences would have to be respected. They would have to be able to freely pursue their British-oriented interests and British-centred cultural practices.

As mentioned, several activists think that potential ways to accommodate unionist or British identities are things that would be likely to be facilitated, for example one activist (6) imagines that the marches on the 12th July would be able to continue under a UI. What became clear is many activist suggestions of 'how to accommodate' are rarely innovative. That is, the focus is on unionists continuing to be and to identify, do, celebrate and get what already is in place in NI, although maybe these could be codified under a UI. One of the biggest things that activists think could accommodate unionists is to allow them to continue to celebrate their culture in a UI. Alliance activists' suggestion may actually not be too far off, given one Alliance activist (11) who is from a unionist background themselves, sees cultural celebration as a key means of accommodation, as they know how these cultural and symbolic elements matter to those in the community they come from. They say *'I think a big thing will be ensuring that their traditions aren't taken away from them. Because I know coming from the community that things like the 12th of July and being able to fly the British flag is a big thing for them. Being able to like celebrate things like the monarchy is something that they hold like quite dearly'*. Given this, while some activists think that most unionists can be accommodated through an approach that respects dimensions of their culture, others suggest political unionism or hard-line unionism would be more entrenched, require more than symbolic gestures and instead need active unionist representation. For example, one activist (9) outlines *'…in terms of bringing political unionism along, you know, it's not just about that symbolism [of Stormont as an institution], it's also about, you know, jobs and…making sure that they…are given that funding and financial clout to continue…to have a say and act as spokespeople…for the unionist people'.* For those on the harder-line end of the unionist spectrum, one element another activist (13) mentions is ensuring they have *'meaningful political representation*'. Options pitched in research on this issue include

suggestions of guaranteed seats in the Irish Cabinet or over-representation in the Seanad. There is still though some scepticism about affording disproportionate power to unionists in a UI. One activist (14) shares that in Westminster NI have 18 seats out of 650 which is very little power, so in a new Ireland NI would have considerable political power. This is to the advantage of NI, but power is still not going to be overly weighted towards NI and an advantage of this is this also guarantees unionists cannot set the tone of everything in that context.

Despite this, oftentimes non-aligned Alliance activists were not totally comfortable sharing what they believe could accommodate unionists or British people under a UI, because they do not come from that background or have distanced from it. However, potentially the activists would have been more comfortable answering on what they thought would not be an acceptable or legitimate means of accommodation. They can see there are legitimate and illegitimate 'forms of celebration', for example, they would not support paramilitary flags or activities in any setting. One activist (9) said there are places where '*we need to draw the line'* in terms of ensuring that unionism's symbols are celebrated and included, that is, the '*same rules apply that we would apply currently*', such as Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) flags and Soldier F banners are not appropriate in any context.

For some, accommodation and consideration of unionist perspectives while valuable is only an interim stage and can distract from more inclusive progress that moves beyond community representation in general in the longer-term. There was a desire among some activists to get NI to a point beyond there being 'cross-community' interactions and conversations in which there is a transition away from having people or their conversations defined by what community they come from at all. Speaking on their involvement in a community project with persons from

different backgrounds, one Alliance activist (7) was deliberately trying to avoid the term 'cross-community' when explaining that accommodating identities in NI (or a potential UI) may involve including people in general, not explicitly attempting to include people from both communities. Also, another activist (4) of course coming from a cross-community party, says people on the ground are very able to work together, although they are not encouraged to do so by politicians. That is, NI '*should be a community that has a conversation, not cross-community conversations*'.

Cultural celebrations are still not the biggest concern?

Many Alliance activists suggest a way to accommodate unionism (at least less hardline or political forms) under a UI is to allow for them to continue their forms of cultural expression. However, it appears that what the vision for flags or symbols under a UI are, is still considered of secondary importance for several Alliance activists. The more practical questions are the ones that need to be answered and not avoided for Alliance activists, as one Alliance activist (17) said, those who talk about flags and national anthems, are really avoiding answering the more practical questions, such as what salary will public servants be paid. In this view, for these types of activists this is why Alliance needs to be involved in the current constitutional conversations to ensure that the focus is more on practical over symbolic issues. However on the flipside, for the cohorts within Alliance that emphasise the need to accommodate unionists, then Alliance must also ensure that the maintenance of culture and symbols is part of these conversations. Although there would be sympathy from Alliance activists for those unionist or British identifiers who do not see themselves as represented by the tricolour under a UI, a few also do not think others will worry too much about symbols under a UI. This somewhat clashes with the activists who think allowing unionists to continue their cultural expression is important for their

accommodation. One Alliance activist (17) would be open for anything in terms of a flag under a UI, like a tricolour with an NI flag in the corner, *'it would not worry me much, and I don't think it would worry most people much, to be honest'*.

Also, despite downplaying their own attachment to symbols in the same way that Alliance activists think there are 'illegitimate forms of cultural expression' (e.g. paramilitary flags), Alliance activists do display some respect for symbols, but not commonly based on nationalism. They support symbols as representations of distinct identities and cultures, but they are opposed to their use in certain ways such as when they are stuck on lampposts to mark territory. Also, maybe it would be expected that Alliance activists would be happy to associate themselves with the European flag, for example at one point Alliance as a party was on board with the Assembly putting its focus on developing shared symbols, including a flag for NI and supported the greater use of the European Flag (in terms of public use). However, flying the European flag was not really brought up by this sample, although one activist (14) still agrees that *'those kind of issues like what flag we wave, maybe matter less to Alliance because we have chosen a party that is purposely not a flag-waving party',* but also says '*Although you could argue in 2016, we were waving the EU flag'.* However, this likely was more of a 'metaphorical flag' to represent Alliance's pro-remain position for the EU, rather than a real 'European flag'.

Keeping the tricolour?

While it is the centre-ground that needs to be persuaded to vote one way or another in a referendum, there is also a recognition by activists that the unionists have to be 'persuaded' not to necessarily vote for a UI, but convinced by SF and ROI that a UI would be a warm and welcoming place for them. As one activist

(22) notes the aim would not be to get people from the pro-British community to be voting for a UI, it is to make them feel at least comfortable and safe, at home in a UI. However, there was not much consensus from activists around whether two flags can or should co-exist in a UI, even on public buildings – although it was rarer that activists just say you only need the tricolour under a UI.

In 2003, Alliance proposed that a new flag should be adopted to represent all communities in NI. However, two activists saw how previous attempts to combine symbols were a somewhat messy process. This partly explains why one of these would not want to get rid of the tricolour under a UI, but both also recognise how the tricolour has in a way (historically) represented peace between unionists and nationalists. One of the activists (18) thinks it would be a nonsense to get rid of the Irish flag, the Irish flag was meant to represent the orange, green and middle, although they could see the regional flags being used again. However, this activist does not think there needs to be a new flag and told a story of how they were involved in a Belfast city council event to create a flag and the resulting tie-dye flag was not well accepted. Another Alliance activist (21) also understood how the tricolour was meant to represent peace between the two sides. They also considered the messiness of the crest for the police service which combines British and Irish symbols, but this activist instead thinks that maybe the easiest way to is by allowing British and Irish symbols to sit alongside each other and coexist in a UI. This same activist thinks there is people who would never accept governance under the tricolour, so there does need to be a change within how the state would present itself. There was ultimately little consensus from activists regarding wither two flags can or should co-exist in a UI, although it was rare that activists would say that only the tricolour is needed under a UI.

There was also a recognition of the hesitancy or potential hesitancy from the ROI towards changing things under a UI. Alliance activists can see a lot of these things being too much compromise for the ROI, or express scepticism about the openness of people in the ROI to symbolic changes, such as the idea of changing the national anthem or flag (e.g. 14; 4). However, there was also a worry from Alliance (and GPNI) activists about what happens if the ROI public does not want a UI. Several wonder what would happen after a result in a referendum where NI votes for UI, but the ROI does not – a scenario, one activist (20) describes as NI having “cheated on your partner” in Scotland, Wales and in England. While this is a legal possibility, it is thought highly unlikely based on existing polling. As discussed in Todd (2021), in a ‘Two Traditions Paradigm’ the existing institutions would continue in a UI with continued funding, either proportional to use or with parity between the traditions or an agreed mix. Instead in a ‘New Ireland Paradigm’, the aims of diversification, choice and mutual enrichment of traditions would govern organisation throughout the island. However, the broader idea of a UI as an opportunity for the construction of a holistic reimagined almost utopian ‘New Ireland' is an idea much more commonly referenced by the Greens even though there are elements of the discussion here of a new flag and traditionally from Alliance that touches on this paradigm. In Alliance, for those favouring a ‘New Ireland’ there is limited consistency in terms of how much of this society and its symbols should be entirely crafted as ‘new’ from the ground up versus adaptations from what is currently in place in NI and the ROI. Generally Alliance though seem to be much more focused on the 'efficiency' arguments for a UI and related material issues than 'reimagining a New Ireland' like the radical Greens (as discussed in later chapters).

Factor 4: Brexit – not such a game changer?

For many, Brexit is considered the key inflection point and defining issue that has shaped the salience of and engagement with the CQ. For voters, in an October 2017 LucidTalk poll the most dramatic score comparison was that for Alliance/Greens/Others the likelihood of voting for a UI comparing the impact of Brexit leading to NI being better-off versus Brexit leading to NI being worse-off was a 10% greater likelihood of voting in the first case for a UI compared to a likelihood of voting for a UI of 57% if Brexit led to NI being worse off (LucidTalk, 2017). This was seen as a big danger signal for the pro-union campaign (i.e. NI in UK) i.e. if Brexit goes badly for NI (i.e. in this group of voters' opinion) then this could aid the pro-UI campaign. The broader expectation for centre-ground parties is that Brexit acted as a shock that shifted opinions on and engagement with the issue. Counter to other work on the influence of Brexit on thinking on the CQ, activists interviewed from Alliance did not strongly emphasise the role of Brexit as explored below.

Sticky issue

While Alliance activists' issue rankings will be responsive to changes in the socio-political or economic context, a select few activists illustrate that potentially some factors (specifically Brexit) may be 'stickier' than others – that is, some factors will be more difficult to make better or fix, and so are more likely to get stuck at the current rank that the activists assign it to. While some activists do speculate that the UK could be back in the EU by the time of a referendum (e.g. activist 21), others see Brexit as an issue likely to have to be considered as part of the referendum debate for some time. For example, two activists (9; 6) showcase that while social issues have or could be dealt with, Brexit is – in comparison – not something that is solved or even solvable. Specifically, the activist

(9) thinks the Brexit issue has *'not lessened',* but in terms of those social issues, that is *'a little bit more off the agenda* now' due to the Westminster legislation brought into NI that decriminalises same-sex marriage and abortion. Also, activist (6) thinks the threats to, or actions against social progress and rights from the particularly hard-right Conservative government that was in power when interviewed could be protected against and reversed, if maybe a Labour or Labour-Lib Dem coalition came in in England. However, again they see the Brexit issue as 'stickier' stating that *'...but a lot of things like Brexit you simply cannot reverse and it has set things in motion for decades that will probably have negative consequences'.*

Sticky issues, but not the decider

Even if Brexit is a stickier issue for activists than social issues, this does not mean that Brexit currently sits (or is stuck) high up on the priority rankings of Alliance activists. Many Alliance activists recognised that rejoining the EU would be a perk of a UI, or it makes the idea of a UI more appealing, but many also suggest that Brexit's impact on NI should not be overhyped, particularly given NI remains partly in the EU and NI people still can hold Irish passports which award them rights similar to an EU citizen. For example, activist (2) says Brexit does make a UI more appealing but this is not the determining factor in generating support for a UI as a number of benefits are already in place as NI people uniquely can choose to designate as Irish and can have an Irish passport, which allows them all those conditions like to travel around Europe and to skip the lines at the airport. While these material benefits may still be protected outside the EU, there are less concrete but still meaningful feelings of loss that inform activists' thinking. Even though some recognise that NI still has access to the EU, it still induces the activists' feeling of being detached from a progressive entity like the EU. For example, one activist (9) knows NI has '*not*

lost' access to the single market, but recognises '*the loss*' of feeling part of a multilateral setup which those like themselves who have a global and outward-looking view on life would crave. Immediately after the Brexit vote, some activists were more actively considering a UI. In the initial days subsequent to the vote they were tempted to campaign to go back in the EU, or they reflected more about how if NI just became part of UI, it would be back in the EU. Activist (1) shared in the initial days after Brexit, they considered *'what if we just became a united Ireland, we would be back in the EU…because ultimately there is a lot of flaws over at the EU, but there has been good things that have come from the EU…'.* However, that was a 'gut-reaction', and since then they have not really considered cheerleading for constitutional change in the same way they might have wanted to immediately after the Brexit vote. Mainly some see the Brexit question as an opportunity to vent their frustrations at the British government. As one Alliance activist (23) says, probably Brexit has made them think about [UI] again just in terms of the losses, probably more in *'their distaste and disgust for how this part of the world has been treated by the UK Government, as opposed to 'I am definitely now going to go towards a united Ireland'.* As well as affecting attitudes to the UK, there have also been effects on how some activists think about Irishness in a post-Brexit context, even if this is not the sole influence. For example, activist (10) explains that Brexit has been a part of what has made them think directly about being part of Ireland, but so has other aspects such as how their job brought them to the ROI and they had family that previously lived in Dublin, etc. In this way, Brexit is a secondary influence rather than a changepoint. However, in terms of attitude change, Brexit appears to have moved Alliance activists towards further engagement with the issue, but without them cheerleading for a particular result.

There are alternative avenues through which Brexit can be interpreted which can weigh on constitutional preferences too. For

some, Brexit is an economic issue, but it can also be seen as a cultural issue for others or speak more broadly to a wider sense of progressiveness or regression. One Alliance activist (22) considers Brexit an economic factor, unless you are a young person, for example, where you have experience of Erasmus and it is probably more of a cultural thing. Others make a connection between progressiveness of the two states and Brexit as illustrative of a sense of regression while the ROI has been liberalising, '*I suppose socially, I'd say the Republic has been sort of…more progressive…than the direction of travel in the UK, if you know what I mean, with Brexit…*' (activist 28).

Stickier, but still

Even if Alliance activists were to more broadly recognise that social issues are less sticky (i.e. easier to solve than issues such as Brexit) this is not to suggest that activists are currently convinced that social issues are 'fixed' within either the NI or ROI context. Not everyone was strongly convinced of this, despite the introduction of the Westminster legislation to make access to abortion available in Northern Ireland, or despite their own recognition that the ROI has become progressive since its distancing from the Catholic Church or since the Repeal the 8th and the same-sex marriage referendums. Some recognise that 'in reality' despite the Westminster legislation, abortion rights and services are not being supported in NI. For example, one Alliance activist (23) claims that despite abortion being legislated for people cannot access reproductive healthcare and other civil liberties in NI. Additionally, the ROI's reputation of being a more progressive state is not without some – albeit very little – scepticism from a select few activists. A small few (e.g. 20; 14) still see the ROI as conservative-coded, even if they also mentioned more generally that the South has taken progressive steps or is generally more modern than NI. For example, one Alliance activist (20) says rural

Ireland is '*probably as Catholic and socially non-liberal as it ever was*', but the ROI is in parts a European state in a way that '*Northern Ireland is a vestige of something from the 1960s'*. Overall, this is suggestive that there are internal differences of opinion on whether old understandings of what the ROI is like and concerns about that still apply or not and this may also be important and not necessarily 'changed by Brexit.'

Protocol – party line, and a line to a UI?

Activists had expressive perspectives on Brexit, but when asked about the impact of the Protocol on their thinking around a UI, they often talked more broadly on the Protocol, that is, how it is not new that NI is treated differently to GB, or not new that it is difficult to trade into NI (e.g. 18; 7); or how some see the Protocol's varying impacts on businesses. As an explicit example, one younger activist (3) says the part they would '*focus on'* would be the decision to leave the EU and the '*future direction'*, rather than the Protocol which is just something that has happened as a necessity out of the decision to leave the EU. Moreover, potentially the way some see the Protocol could be indicative of their UI preferences. On one side those who are undecided suppose the more issues that the Protocol creates or if politics gets bogged down over Protocol negotiations or a hard border is introduced, the more appealing it becomes to be one Ireland. However, on the other side, a pro-UI activist (36) says a working Protocol would also make a UI more straightforward '*And of course, this is where unionists are so worried because a successful implementation makes the transition to a united Ireland easier…'* which is more about the demonstrative logistical effects from an efficiency point of view rather than about the attractiveness of the option.

While there was some discussion as to how the Protocol has given advantages to those in NI, activists often in the same answer

would talk about how NI ‘could have’ the status of somewhere like Monaco, Switzerland or Singapore if a different direction was taken in terms of Brexit. For example – ‘*To me Northern Ireland could have been, could still be, uh, a, like a Singapore. We, we, we could be this wonderful, successful, almost a, a countrywide Freeport, we have the chance for the best of both worlds. We really do’* (activist 7). While some describe the protocol as the best of both worlds for NI, this is not the perspective of these activists, and the reality of the protocol falls well short of these ideals. This also suggests that there is still potentially ‘more to gain’ from a UI beyond the realities of the protocol so the protocol does not ‘deactivate’ the case for a UI as discussed by some above.

The Protocol also functions as something of a boundary maker as the Protocol operated as the breaking point for the emergence of polarisation as attested to by certain activists. In this way, as the Protocol served to reinforce and reactivate traditional boundary lines, a referendum and central focus on the CQ could well serve as a very heightened version of what was observed with the Protocol. Activist (4) says ‘*if the economy was shown that it would be stronger in an all-Ireland, then possibly, they would be a bit more open to engagement because their constituents would be telling them that they should be getting involved. But the other side of that… and the very, the very obvious and immediate outworking of the protocol is that the unionist, uh, electorate are saying to their representatives, "You are absolutely right to, to take the stand you're taking against the Protocol".’* Activist (7) similarly argues the Protocol is an example of polarisation that becomes potent ‘*only when it is whipped up by our political class’*. There is a clear concern that these dynamics and mechanics around the Protocol may foreshadow similar developments in the run-up to a referendum and harden and polarise identity boundaries.

Factor 5: The logistics: What Alliance activists want in terms of a border poll – when, how and who?

Alliance does not favour extensive speculation on when a referendum may occur, and instead Alliance's Stephen Farry has outlined that it is a 'condition-led' rather than 'date-led' process as set out in the GFA (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). Alliance contends that NI people are more interested in the 'what', that is what a potential UI would look like, rather than the 'how', that is, the mechanics around having a border poll (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021, b). However, despite the focus on the actual substance of what a UI would look like, Alliance actors do still have views on how the process should operate. As Farry outlined, '*I understand the need for a citizens' assembly as part of that process, although we are not at that stage just yet…I would suggest…that the best people to do that are in universities, colleges and civil society organisations for now*' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021, c). This contrasts with the GPNI who, as discussed in later chapters, emphasise the primacy of citizens' assemblies and advocate moving up the timeframe to prioritise having such an assembly sooner rather than later. Although Alliance does recognise there are only two options in a referendum, Farry at the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (JIGFA) has shown a willingness to talk about other models within a single Irish state or some form of shared sovereignty from a theoretical/academic perspective, with recognition that these models may get more consensus. In light of this and given that Alliance emphasise the specific conditions and processes that are critical to their support for a border poll, this section examines activists' perspectives on the particular logistical details they would like to see to encourage engagement with it. This includes the options on the table as well as the mechanics of the process (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021, d).

Putting a frame around their border poll thinking – take your time?

Todd et al.'s (2024) focus group research on those who are undecided on their vote choice in NI and ROI found *'that most* [NI] *participants who raised the issue of timing argued that referendums should not be held in the 'short term', but they went on to propose a relatively short timeframe'* (e.g. 4 or 5 years, or 2 to 5, or 5 to 10) (pp. 140-141). Most Alliance activists not only did not envision a referendum for 'at least' a decade, but a referendum in five years seemed like far too soon for many[67]. Additionally, many were not opposed to a referendum 'in principle' (that is, they do not fear one because it risks a UI) with many seeing it as an inevitability (even if 10-15 years away), but that is not the same as the activists thinking that NI is in the best position for a referendum to be held. When it comes to NI being 'ready' for a referendum, the vast majority do not think it is ready now, or it is not quite ready, or it is not ready, but getting closer, or it could be ready, but they don't know when that is. For example, Alliance activist (38) thinks it would be ready in *'another 10, 15 years',* or activist (18) says it will be, but not now and they don't think it will be in five years, they think it could be *'10 or 15 years away*'. Ultimately very few saw NI as ready for a referendum now. One Alliance activist (2) recognised that maybe NI is being 'prepared' for a referendum now, but ultimately, this is not the same as them saying that NI is currently prepared for it. Activist (2) asks *'are we being prepared now',* saying the question is asked all the time, coming up more and more, and it is discussed extensively in the media and publicly. Also, there was the recognition that the discussion around a referendum is 'already taking place' – as one Alliance activist (4) says *'quite frankly it is already taking place in the nationalist community anyway, so we need to be in there and part of that'* –

[67] Very few activists from the GPNI or Alliance expressed a view that a BP could or should happen within five years. A rare exception was GPNI activist (14) who did think it was likely there would be a BP within 5 years.

but again, this is not the same as an activist saying that NI as a whole is ready to engage with the idea of calling a referendum and even the activist does not think Alliance should just yet be outlining a constitutional position. However, other activists create a sense that debating the timeframe does not matter, as a referendum is essentially an inevitability at this point (although it would be doubtful that they want Sinn Féin pushing this message and therefore making a border poll an imminent and central issue). For example, one Alliance activist (11) does not think the country will ever be ready for a referendum, but it is going to happen either way, it might be five or 25 years, but they think in their lifetime it will happen. Whether activists considered a UI as an inevitability or not, some expressed that they do not see the point in fighting against the inevitability of having to live with either referendum result, including living in a UI, if that was the result (and partake in conversations around it). For example, one Alliance activist (26) says people will have to, whether they like it or not, learn to live with what referendum decision is made. These discussions are not confined to Alliance as the GPNI similarly believe the starting gun has been fired on the debate, and that the likelihood of a referendum in the short-to-medium-term has significantly increased while most Green activists would similarly define NI as not being 'ready' for a referendum now given the debate is only beginning. The GPNI, like Alliance, believe preparations and conversations must occur in order for NI to be 'ready' for a referendum.

Ultimately, Alliance activists emphasise 'taking our time' when it comes to the lead-up to any referendum (and also a transitionary period if the vote was for a UI) to allow for space for the necessary conversations and preparations to take place. For example, one Alliance activist (1) does think a referendum will happen, but they don't know whether it will or should as soon as some of the nationalist politicians are pushing for, i.e. five to 15

years as they worry that would be *'rushing it'* because you need to *'work through'* some of the issues. However, in the same vein, some might ask when is the 'cut-off point' for Alliance activists, that is, when will they feel that NI is sufficiently prepared enough to take that vote – not all believe this can be delayed indefinitely (e.g. activist 13).

Trigger for a referendum – what you cannot use and a legitimate outcome

Alliance activists have strong opinions on what you 'cannot use' to trigger a referendum. Some like activist (2) said you can't just look at the census figures and say a referendum is needed now as there are more Catholics *'because equally I have friends who are Catholics who are happy with the status quo'.* Other activists also said who is elected to the Assembly cannot be used as a trigger to call for a referendum because parties who designate as Other do not take a CP (e.g. activist 14). Also, while there is an acceptance from activists that it is up to the Secretary of State ('SoS') to call the referendum there is sympathy with those who think this is an unfair process. For example, one activist (1) thinks it is '*hard to swallow'* for people with an Irish identity that this is the SoS's call. However, there is also a 'democratic line' that even if the majority want a UI, and the rest don't, several note the majority should win the day. As one activist (9) notes, '*that's just the nature of democracy'.* However, while this is democratically legitimate, it constitutes a bare majority. It seems to clash with Alliance's ethos to be satisfied with the bare majority supporting a UI in this way as Alliance strongly emphasises the need to maximise cross-community support wherever possible. It similarly appears to clash with this ethos to define the threshold of being 'ready' for a referendum as simply that there are more nationalists than unionists in NI, which is how a surprisingly significant number of activists describe 'readiness'. Although even the activist (9) who

said that a UI can be won on 50% plus one vote still appears to tie a legitimate outcome to having a worked-out plan for a UI as well as achieving this simple majority threshold. They said, *'we need to know what sort of health service we are going to work within, how Stormont is going to function…so all of that sort of stuff needs to be worked out before we go to a border poll and then we go for 50 plus 1, it is a legitimate outcome'.* Another activist (4) is more explicit in critiquing the 50% plus one even if they see it as democratically legitimate. However, they again want clarity and preparation beforehand to allow for a legitimate outcome, and they think more broadly people need to be brought along (again this a somewhat vague Alliance term): *'We need to have brought everybody along with us to a position, not that we should say yes to a UI but, we're agreeing on what Northern Ireland should be like in the future and once we have that, then we can have the border poll as then the answer will actually be legitimate whether its remaining in status quo or united Ireland'.* While accepting a bare majority voting mechanism, activists seek to reconcile this with the Alliance ethos by also building a clear framework for a UI in combination with this.

There seems to be a common assumption among activists that nationalists themselves are being told by nationalist parties, or they commonly believe that if a referendum is called then automatically, they will get a UI because they are being told repeatedly that they would get their prize (activists 7; 15). Activists are though sceptical of this and worry about this as the basis for a strong push to trigger a referendum now as in reality, this level of support is not in place as not all of those from a CNR background alone, never mind the centre-ground, support a UI. As activist 7 says *'the nationalist community, because they are being told, repeatedly told that if we had a border poll, which is theirs by right…they would get their…United Ireland…I don't think it's true yet…I do think it would result in a staying within the UK for the next*

period, because I don't think that all Catholics want to leave the United Kingdom'.

Need everyone at the table

Several activists think even unionists see a referendum is on the horizon, *'…even for …unionists there's an understanding that since Brexit that there is a border poll on the way at some point…and there's more people preparing for that…'* (activist 3). However, while certain activists think unionists see a referendum as on its way, they also recognise how unionists are still excluded from the constitutional conversations happening, or emphasise their inclusion in future referendum talks is paramount. However, arguably, certain Alliance activists are (unintentionally) awarding unbalanced power to unionists to sway the direction of the constitutional debate by only seeing conversations around a referendum as having value if unionists or their representatives are engaged with. As activist (2) outlines, '*So I think they need to involve, you know, you need to have everyone in the room. There's no point a nationalist party going off, having these conversations, deciding what the rules are. It needs to be done in consultation with all of the key parties*'. Also, activists' understanding of why unionists are not partaking in the current constitutional conversations (e.g. Ireland's Future) are not consistent. Some seem to put more blame on the unionists/leaders themselves for not participating, while others explain that the constitutional conversations are not welcoming environments, as they are sometimes framed by a narrative that a UI is the only outcome that could come from a referendum[68]. For one activist (24) this does not take away the responsibility of the pro-UI side to accommodate unionism. They would not expect unionists to partake in these

[68] As mentioned in the case selection of the methodology chapter, this was a reason that Alliance refused an invitation to the New Ireland Forum in 1984.

constitutional conversations, for those who want a New Ireland, it is their argument to make *'…It is for them to make the sacrifices that they think are suitable and reach out, like to say "Even though we know you are not taking part in our discussions, we know this is the point of most concern"'.*

However, there is a difference between wanting unionists to partake in the conversation, and expecting them or forcing them to. Very few activists even acknowledge that unionists are 'slowly beginning' to engage in the constitutional conversations, that is, it seems a long way off for many – aside from one activist (28) who is a rarity in suggesting that the unionists are starting to engage: *'the groundwork of that has started, like you see people that are Ulster unionists maybe going to the Feile or they would be get involved in panel discussions around this'.* There may be alternative avenues outside of the traditional nationalist parties and classic arguments that could facilitate engagement with the CQ and a referendum by unionists. For example, Alliance member (6) thinks that Ireland's Future / United UK (civic groups) are generally good at presenting a case for the UK or a UI, but in a way that is not party political or reliant on the old flag-waving arguments: '*Like, there's a lot of talk about, for example, the fact that a united Ireland, maybe we get back into the EU, so here's all the economic benefits. Whereas, the UK ones generally say, "Well, the UK is the fifth or sixth-largest economy. It's a member of NATO, the UN Security Council, a lot of these are really able to put aside the old debate"'.* In addition, potentially, some activists might think reframing the conversation to not only focus on a UI and Union option, but also to focus on rejoining the EU, rather than rejoining the ROI (via a UI) may be effective in enticing more diverse communities to engage with the issue. However, one activist (20) recognised that theme would not be considered so neutral by loyalism. They explain that Alliance did not want to partake in the 'Ireland's Future' conference on the basis that there is a preconceived outcome, but

recognises if you were to say, let's have a conference about how NI could come back into Europe, that would please those in Alliance, but ultimately 'scare' committed loyalists.

Some Alliance activists were asked how they believe the conversations around a referendum can be made a comfortable space for unionism but there was little in the way of a systematic reply. It is clear that they want this but don't know how to actually do it – apart from avoiding conversations like Ireland's Future that assumes a UI is the only potential outcome. Stephen Farry has separately focused on the 'facilitators' and as above, there is a focus here on civil actors – 'the more it can be established that discussions are being facilitated by independent or impartial facilitators, particularly in civic society and academia, the more chance there is in the short run to get civic unionist actors at least to engage' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021, e). Most say it is possible and preferable to seek to engage unionist civil society activists to take part in discussions and in research if it is not a campaigning group, but neutral or academic.

Who has Responsibility? Governments, the UI campaign, or Alliance?

There is significant debate as to where responsibility lies in determining who should develop the proposal for a referendum, the options on the table, timeline, and proposed transition process afterwards if there is a pro-UI outcome. This could be understood as a 'process model' where the Irish state is afforded substantial responsibility in the preparation, implementation, and potential transition from a referendum. This would mean the Irish government would have responsibility more broadly in leading the conversation and process. However, there are also alternatives which variously emphasise Irish and British government engagement before a potential referendum with a stronger role for

the British government as the SoS is responsible under the GFA for calling a referendum, or shifting responsibility to the wider pro-UI campaign to specify a process, set out the terms of any options and outline a transition model. There are also proposals for civil society and academic institutions to play a major role in the development of options and specification of potential processes to hold and transition from a referendum. In light of this, Alliance activists were asked to consider how they assess who is afforded responsibility and any potential consequences for Alliance's role in the process.

For Alliance activists when it comes to the responsibility around preparing for a referendum, the weight seems to go towards the Irish government or the pro-UI side (or both). However, Alliance activists were not arguing that the British government has no role in preparation, but broadly some potentially think the Irish and British government could have different roles which could in turn be differently weighted, for instance, the Irish government could have more of a 'framing role' for what a UI would look like while GB would have greater responsibility for handling the financial side. One activist (23) notes it is important to ensure that the British government is there to support the people who have made that decision that this is going to be an all-Ireland decision and that they really need to be behind that and ensuring that there is nothing that they are doing that would be potentially aiding that small cohort of people who would not want that for ideological, rather than pragmatic reasons. This is also a common theme among GPNI activists. For example, Green activist (23) also noted that *'the British government would be less happy to have that conversation about a border poll than the Irish government hopefully would be*'.

However, others are clear that – even though the Irish government might be more open to a referendum – the British government still has an important role in facilitating the change if

the result was a UI and as such responsibility cannot solely fall on the ROI government. In particular, there should be intergovernmental engagement in this process. British and Irish government engagement would though be particularly difficult if the British government is particularly unionist-leaning or the Irish government is 'very' nationalist. There is then an assumption and necessity that the two governments engage in good faith not dissimilar to the need for such good faith in the collaboration on the Protocol. This likely requires a considered, slower and thoughtful process to be effective and not to generate destabilising effects. This need to 'tip-toe' puts off another activist from the idea of both governments (and even Alliance) publicly talking about and prepping for a UI. Activist (28) thinks discussions are probably going on behind closed doors about how this assumed UI might look, but for anything to happen in the public sphere, it is too soon: *'sort of the British government are found to be in discussions around this, you know, they're, "Oh, you're looking to get rid of us?".'* They also think the Irish government need to be careful too: *'if they push too hard too soon they're in the same position as us [Alliance], they're going to be accused by the unionists of, "This is what you want. This is what you've been after all along".'*

However, as two activists illustrate, the approach of the governments to a referendum speaks to how certain party activists understand the appropriateness of Alliance starting to develop its own policy on a referendum (although as mentioned in the previous chapter, most would not be on board with the party at least publicising a policy). Alliance activist (14) suggests that the idea of the party developing a general policy around a referendum would be meaningful only once the state has afforded a referendum to Ireland because otherwise none of the policy discussions could actually be brought about in reality: '*this question is more…for the…Irish government… you know, rather than Alliance. I think…the Irish government really has to be the ones that are, like,*

organising this to a certain degree because…Alliance could have policies on this. But unless….it's actually going to be the state affording it in Ireland…It would be essentially just like a think tank'. Alternatively, it may be appropriate for Alliance to develop a policy once the governments have decided on the broader post-referendum settlement. For example, one activist (13) thinks when it is not even known what the financial settlement with the UK and system of governmental/political structures would look like, they are unsure how you can begin to frame meaningful policy. This could be understood potentially as two stages to the process with differential responsibility in each stage. The Irish government is expected to play the lead role in Stage 1 in the run-up to a potential referendum with a more equal share of responsibility in Stage 2 following a potential referendum with a UI outcome where the two governments must then work to manage the transition politically, socially and economically. However, this point about the need for a sense of the settlement afterwards means that while the Irish government is afforded primary responsibility to play the lead in Stage 1 this does not mean everyone agrees that the British government is 'off the hook' until Stage 2 even if it is 'less responsible' in Stage 1 than the Irish government.

Some think that not only do the Irish and British governments need to be open and ready for a UI if that was the result, but believe the Irish parties need to be ready for a UI too where all the different ROI parties need to be in agreement around what a UI looks like, or ready to start the work should that be the result. This is of course particularly relevant to Stage 1 where the Irish state has to play the lead role, and Alliance activists see the challenges in this. For example, activist (9) thinks it probably needs to be an agreement from FF/FG/SF on this before a referendum, so that regardless of what happens in terms of national elections in the ROI *'we have a pretty good idea of what the policy space is going to look like'.* Another activist (21) questions if the different

pro-UI political parties even in the ROI (e.g. SF, FF, FG, etc.) cannot even agree on a single vision of a UI, how is everyone across the divide going to agree. The activist says if the pro-UI parties with their own views/recommendations on a UI across the island are not even ready to sit down and agree on one single vision and be ready for that then they *'don't know how they're going to sit everyone down right across the political divide'*. This ties back to the wider pattern in which Alliance activists see many conditions as needed for a referendum process that they are comfortable with and some of these conditions are not just in NI, but in ROI politics too especially given the significant responsibility that activists afford to the Irish government in leading this process as above. The Shared Island unit is a potential example of this, but much of the work as above may be better afforded to civic society in the ROI given the preference for and evidence of the greater effectiveness of civic-led processes discussed previously.

Factor 6: Stability and reconciliation – fitting these within activists' constitutional perspectives

Institutional stability

A non-functioning Stormont, or one resistant to reform, is often perceived as something that would make a UI more appealing. However, ultimately, the Alliance activist who was interviewed after Stormont returned after collapsing did not think it impacted their vote, but it proved a referendum's inevitability to them. This activist (24) did not think it changed their view of whether they would vote or not vote for a UI, but it has changed their view that at some point it is inevitable that there will be a referendum and perhaps a UI at some point and if anything, it has made them more aware of how strategic some of the parties like SF are. A reformed Stormont might be considered one that allows for stability to prevent a scenario where there is not enough trust

between parties to keep to their word in terms of a post-referendum result. Activist (6) thinks a stable and consistent government and political system is key so that whenever the result comes in there is the respect from politicians to implement the result, as *'you wouldn't want [an] American scenario where one side refuses to accept and it all falls apart'.* However, it appears that activists do not have much faith in other parties to be able to tackle the complexities of a UI. Some in particular express this as 'NI can't even do X (e.g. agree on education, get government working on something resolvable) so how could we NI or NI and ROI, ever do Y (e.g. agree on education for the whole-island, have a mature conversation on bigger issues). One activist (18) says '*so if we cannot come to a decision about an 11-plus, how in the hell on the whole island are we ever going to come to a decision about what our education system looks like, and that is just one aspect'.* Similarly, it does feel to one activist (13) that in NI as it is difficult to get the government up and running now over issues that to them seem easily resolvable, the idea that there can be a move beyond to deal with bigger questions feels a long way off. Activists (40; 28) also contend that not only would a functioning executive demonstrate that NI can work but allowing SF and nationalists to take the First Minister role and pass legislation like the Irish Language Act would allow Irish identifiers to feel more effectively accommodated in NI potentially reducing support for the need for a UI[69]. There is then a sense that institutional (in)stability is both potentially driving support for a referendum/UI, but also could be illustrative of the problems of seeking to engage with debate on the CI in the context of a referendum. In turn, one activist (21) explains that in NI, there is division between and within parties on all sides of the divide, so it is difficult to see how the nationalists, unionists, or Alliance themselves could be ready for a referendum and *'coalesce around one single idea'* externally or indeed internally.

[69]The Executive has since been restored with SF's Michelle O'Neill as First Minister.

This may mean that beyond the stability of governmental institutions in NI, the parties as institutions themselves may struggle to hold together if they face a shock like having to prepare for and deal with referendum given, they are already divided. It is particularly striking that this activist at least sees this as a potential issue within Alliance. One potential reason for this is that the discussions of a referendum are currently happening in the abstract and the responses of activists are themselves often to hypothetical scenarios. There are in essence a variety of competing abstract visions of what a referendum/UI would involve. If instead the party was involved in a set of meetings on for example the 11+ or GP services, or LGBT+ rights and was presented with a formal proposal from the Irish government as to how these would be dealt with, then they would have something specific to say yes or no to, or to propose an alternative to and this may itself mean that the party's decision-making processes can be followed in responding which may itself be the key to maintaining cohesion.

Societal stability

As mentioned, Alliance would rather focus on making NI as good as it can be regardless of the constitutional status. For Alliance, they ask how NI can focus on moving forward towards constitutional change before it itself as a society is reconciled. It appears for certain activists that a reconciled NI is one which is more appealing for the ROI or UK. For instance, one Alliance activist (20) says until NI can sort out its issues internally as a segregated society, put an end to the legacies of the past, and create an integrated society between all communities, then NI is an '*unappetising*' partner for anybody else. A reconciled NI is also for some activists an NI ready to talk about a referendum. For example, one activist (12) implies that NI as a place still defined by deprivation and social isolation cannot have '*a peaceful or sensible discussion about a border poll*'. However, it also appears that a

referendum ‘followed by’ a status quo result - not necessarily the status quo constitutional status on its own - can in a way provide Alliance activists with what they want in terms of a more stabilised society. This is because some see that for a window at least, the constitutional issue does not dominate or distract NI. For example, one activist (14) thinks if it was a big victory for the union, like 40/60, it would shut down the conversation and there is potential there for more stability for a condensed period. Another activist (13) similarly revealed that a clear status quo verdict in a referendum would allow for these major questions to be put to bed in such a manner as to allow for a focus on making NI work. Of course, in reality, it is not necessarily the case that a referendum with a 60/40 or similar margin would actually generate long-term ‘closure’. However, many activists would not see this condensed period of ‘stability’ as long-lasting and some also could see a scenario after a status quo result like the Scottish independence referendum where it will create continuous cycles of referendums, which itself is destabilising (e.g. activist 13). On balance, this instability may not persist necessarily to quite the same degree. There is likely a key role here for how close the result ultimately is of any (initial) referendum in shaping the scope and schedule for future referendums subsequently. For example, Alliance activist (14) says if there is a vote 45/55 or closer (in favour of the status quo), subsequent polls would be every seven years, which may play a role in making a UI a reality and actually be more beneficial in terms of planning for this in the longer-term.

For a small number of activists, there is a view that at some point in the future, it will become natural that people would want a UI or naturally obvious when people would want a UI without even the need for a referendum. For example, Alliance activist (4) says ‘*In fact, we should get to the stage where a border poll actually is not necessary, that it's just obvious that's what everybody wants or doesn't want’*. In this scenario, the ideal situation is NI gets to a

point where it does not even need a referendum because it will be obvious after people are brought together in a more integrated NI whether a UI is the right option or not, and so in this scenario where all questions are answered than there should be very little violence after a referendum. Similarly, activist (27) feels that if there is an evolution towards '*more common sense…all living properly side by side'*, a focus on jobs, housing and education then a referendum can happen without any major issues as it will follow from a natural consensus. While this is not a common view and is necessarily somewhat idealistic, it may explain why some in Alliance set many conditions for a referendum as they believe 'ideally' a UI would just emerge as a 'natural view' rather than it being a competitive clash of positions through an intense and potentially divisive debate and referendum process. In turn, this may partially be a means of explaining the understanding of neutrality for some in Alliance as there is, in this view, no need to take a position and compromise neutrality for a referendum when a preferable 'natural' transition to a UI could take place later. An alternative way to interpret similar comments from activists is that Alliance believe the referendum debate distracts from work on societal reconciliation and stability and functioning institutions which if all in place would produce 'natural' transition to UI later. Specifically, if there is school integration and all-island cooperation then the conditions emerge for this type of more 'straightforward' transition. For example, an Alliance activist (5) who is pro-UI and Irish even thinks bigger conditions like all-island development and cross-border integration needs to occur before it is a good move for Alliance to take a CP (which by this logic would be a pro-UI position) and would occur in the context of a wider 'natural' transition rather than a majoritarian referendum.

Political versus people

Todd et al's (2022) study on 'moderates' found how they

tended to be distant from 'politicians': *'politicians as a group were almost universally referred to using "they" and sentiment toward politicians was generally quite negative'* (p. 892). However – apart from one activist (7) who interrupts their thought process to remember that they are actually part of the political classes – *'…and therefore our political class, of which I'm one I shouldn't forget'* despite being 'politicians' themselves, they generally speak about politicians (or political leaders) as a separate group from themselves. Several activists in particular separate politicians and 'the people' of Northern Ireland by maturity, as most of the time they see Northern Irish society as more mature than the politicians they vote for. Another activist (22), suggests most of the progress in Northern Ireland (e.g., it is more openly LGBTQ+-friendly than before and it is more of a metropolitan society) has been in spite of the politicians and the government because Northern Ireland is a very resilient, resourceful, and adaptable population. However, this is not to say that Alliance activists do not see constitutional issues as still a major driver for voters and 'the people', but many instead see these issues as becoming less salient in NI. Although it does appear that certain activists see the Protocol and also the collapse of Stormont as something that is making 'the people', or at least unionists, less reconciled to current conditions. The Protocol is not really impacting the activists' own views of their identity but they still see how it is a source of tension. Even though they think that the people of NI are quite resilient and get on, the previous activist (22) thinks that people currently are very polarised because of the Protocol and as Stormont was collapsed[70], and to then engage in what will ultimately be a polarising referendum is a bad idea. Another Alliance activist, activist (4) thinks unionists ultimately are generally a pragmatic lot, but with the Protocol the unionist electorate are saying to their representatives, 'you are right to take your stand against the Protocol', so it just shows that *'we have a*

[70] At the time the interview was conducted.

long way to go to bring them into the conversation' around a referendum.

Structural stability

In line with the findings of Todd et al (2022, p.892) on moderates, this thesis finds that on average, there is a greater degree of criticism currently levelled at the DUP than SF by Alliance activists. However, this is not to suggest that Alliance activists are not critical of SF particularly in the context of their rhetoric around a referendum and potential UI, but SF and nationalism is currently seen as more progressive and in line with Alliance positions than conservative Unionism. At a more personal-level, some say that they, or others, don't identify with 'either' side because one is associated with IRA violence and the other with stubbornness or conservativeness. For example, one activist (1) said*, 'Because at this moment in time, especially for people I'm seeing, it's like, 'Oh God, don't say…I'm a unionist because, you know…that associates me with…Ian Paisley and the DUP. And don't say I'm a nationalist because…that's the IRA and Sinn Féin'.* Another Alliance activist (24) said if someone asked them are they British or Irish, they would say Northern Irish because they do not define themselves with either of the others, for them, one side is conservatively Christian and the other side has violence associated with it. However, in both these examples (1; 24) the 'Irish/nationalist' side is described as associated more with paramilitaries and violence, even if the activists see both sides as having 'bad' connotations. However, when it comes to a referendum, activists' collective assessment is that extreme Loyalism would be more likely to cause havoc than the nationalist-side (CNR) or if the result did not go their way, although many viewed civil unrest as likely to happen 'regardless' of the vote outcome. This evaluation is partly based on how some think those from more extreme wings of Loyalism would be more likely to take

up arms. Activist (23) guesses, those who aspired to have a UI would be disheartened if there is a status quo result, but they do not know that they would be taking to arms, unlike potentially those from a PUL background. Given this, it should be noted that even if Alliance activists are not as 'balanced' in their evaluations of the unionist-side versus the nationalist-side when it comes to civil unrest, there is also a perception that loyalist paramilitarism is not 'organised enough' potentially to cause major security breaches or chaos. That is, they may think that the loyalist-side would be more likely to cause unrest, but in reality, they won't be able to do so to any great extent. For example, one Alliance activist (4) says *'quite frankly loyalists are not particularly well-organised…they don't have the same idealism as the Provisional IRA…they are simply reactionary'*. Another activist (9) thinks the security situation, which would primarily be reactionary violence from loyalist paramilitary groups, is a major concern, but they don't think these groups would be able to *'organise in a significant way that would cause upset to the security services but they'd cause a lot of harm and damage as well'*. The overall evaluation that any major challenges to stability, if they do arise, would primarily come from Loyalism is also based on how some mention that nationalists would largely go down a constitutional avenue rather than a dissident republican route should the result be the status quo, and/or dissident mobilisation would not get support (e.g. activists 15; 9).

Factor 7: Wooing or winning over Alliance?

Who is 'wooing' the centre-ground?

O'Malley (2023) identified that *'Professor Duncan Morrow, former Alliance Party chair, cautions that the increase in support for a border poll among some Alliance voters signified a comfort level with an Ireland led by moderate leaders such as Leo Varadkar*

and Simon Coveney, but an Ireland led by Sinn Féin would be another matter' (p. 8). However, while the activists in this sample might be more comfortable with these 'moderate leaders' under a UI, it is not that they would necessarily be satisfied with these centre-right parties in power under a unified model. For example, one Alliance activist (15) would be put off from a UI led by a SF government and is reticent towards SF both because of their history and their position on the Troubles, but also, they practically find SF difficult to work with. However, this activist (15) and another activist (20) who also seemed very apprehensive regarding a SF-led UI, do not want to create a perception that by being reticent towards SF, that they are pro-FF and pro-FG. The activist (20) notes it is not that they are an FF *'fan'* in the sense that *'Micheál Martin is a nice person, but that's just the perspective of this side of the border'.* The other activist (15) is no big fan of FF and FG either and sees them as somewhat conservative in many ways, although they are not as bad as the UK Conservative Party. Interestingly this activist self-defines as more left, but appears to prefer the centre-right parties to SF, if they had to pick.

While a UI led by a SF government could be a 'deterrent' for Alliance activists to support a UI, there may be a slight perception that, at least currently, SF are doing a better job at 'attracting the vote' of those undecided in Alliance (and the undecided more generally). For example, one Alliance activist, (36) said that *'Sinn Féin in particular are wooing that middle ground and the unionist side are attacking me as [part of] the pan-nationalist front'.* Nonetheless the activist (24) knows since Stormont has been back both SF and the DUP leader are acting more strategically as they know the last place to get votes is from the centre and the actions of both parties can push and pull them through their tone and actions on distinct issues. However, the activist also seemed particularly convinced that SF is taking on characteristics of Alliance and SF is seeking to align with Alliance positions not the

other way around, and unionists are only beginning to respond. However, it is possible that what could 'turn off' Alliance from Sinn Féin is its use of language and tone, as for example John Blair MLA's criticism in the media of SF for the 'tiocfaidh ár lá' speech[71]: *'for anyone in our society who identifies as British and who is told by Sinn Féin they will be welcome in a united Ireland, this speech will be seen as nothing but offensive and hyperbolic rhetoric'* (Irish News, 2019, b). Alliance see the need for Irish nationalism to tone down the discussion of the IRA and the inevitability of a UI (e.g. activist 36) or the aggressive pushing of a UI (e.g. activist 15). It will be key to SF's strategic engagement with the centre-ground as to whether they can adopt a discourse that does not engender opposition or critical reaction like this while still mobilising its base with rhetoric activating identity.

Although potentially since these interviews, contemporary political unionism is doing a better job at representing a form of unionism that would be attractive to Alliance activists. According to a February 2025 LucidTalk poll (Belfast Telegraph, 2025), the DUP Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly had a 47% approval rating with Alliance Party voters, making her the most popular DUP minister among Alliance supporters at that time [although in March 2025 Alliance deputy leader Eoin Tennyson blamed the DUP for the slow pace of delivery from the Executive]. One Alliance activist (6) suggests the civic groups on the 'unionist side' rather than the unionist parties are putting effort into 'wooing' them. The activist senses many pro-union civic groups probably are not as connected to unionist parties as they are keener to reach out and say *'we want to persuade you to stay in the UK', whereas maybe unionist politicians feel they do not see the need to debate as, "we are safe""* as these parties instead feel that the result will be remain in

[71] This was in response to the use of the phrase by Sinn Féin's Martina Anderson in the context of potential border checks at a hunger strike memorial rally in 2019.

the UK and this lack of engagement from the parties is also potentially cited by others (e.g. activist 36). Potentially Alliance questions whether the DUP realise their mistakes and harm induced for themselves following from Brexit, which could lead to strategic learning ahead of a referendum and alterations to strategy if this self-reflection had occurred or if these patterns are more ingrained, the self-harm of the Brexit approach for the DUP may be re-enacted.

The extent to which some Alliance activists are being 'wooed' by the pro-union perspective is conditioned by how they interpret the meaning of Britishness as connected to support for the union in a referendum. The activist (23) says probably most people tend to go with the status quo (i.e. would support it in a referendum) as it is what they know, it is not necessarily a *'preference or a love for king and country and flag...'.* One Alliance activist (14) believes there may be some role of symbols of Britishness in underpinning their attachment to the union but is likely only to exert a partial role. They say that the very fact they are used to seeing the Union Jack in the unionist area that they currently live in means they, at least, will be more aware of any changes to symbols under a UI than someone who grew up in a nationalist area, even if said symbols do not mean too much to them anyway, as they *'don't particularly care for flying of either flag on public property'.* This means while there may be some attachment to these visible illustrations of British identity this is not necessarily a determinant of how they will approach a choice between the union and UI. Also, even if an activist feels more comfortable with one symbol over another, this does not mean they are not open to change should the constitutional settlement change. One strategy to enhance the capacity to 'sell' the union argument is to position advocates of this position as 'pro-union' rather than as unionist given the potential political connotations (e.g. activist 22). Even if the pro-union side, or unionist NI

politicians are not particularly ‘off-putting’, if the activists have a negative view of the ‘union’ defined by British politicians that also might influence whether they are being ‘wooed’ to the union over a UI. More generally, while many activists did not like ROI politicians, there seems to be a particular distrust for, or lack of belief in, UK politicians. For example, one activist (7) seems to suggest they can believe in the Irish electoral system and government, but less so the Westminster system and avoids Westminster politicians in general. Another activist (36) said they *‘have had their fill of English politicians’.*

Wooing is not winning!

Again, it is important to reiterate it is not necessarily that nationalists and the pro-UI side have ‘won’ Alliance activists over and there is no clear overall majority, but there is some partial evidence for movement in this direction as recent survey research found Alliance members are more pro-united Ireland compared to previous survey research (Tonge et al., 2024, p. 167). There is not even a consensus around which option (i.e., remaining in the UK union or a UI), is more ‘sellable’. For example, some think a UI or New Ireland is easier to sell as this is a new option, while others think it is at least easier to sell the status quo because it is less of an unknown, as previously discussed. Specifically, one activist (24) said the status quo is always more difficult to defend as being able to discuss a new alternative is always more straightforward as nobody actually knows what it is. Alternatively, though, one activist (6) says ‘*when you're defending the status quo, it would probably be easier because you know what it's going to be like’.* It appears most Alliance activists would follow the line of making NI work first which could in turn imply support for the status quo at least in the medium-term and ties back to the pattern of Alliance emphasising both the need for the right conditions for a referendum/UI, but also on making NI work as the priority. For activist (15) for example,

there are a range of policy issues in the short-to-medium term that can be addressed in NI under the current arrangement as well as wider governance issues that would have a more significant impact on people's lives than making a constitutional change to a UI and these issues in NI in the near-term should then be the priority. Again, a key element here is how a 'United Ireland' or 'New Ireland' is defined and interpreted as the understanding and framing of these options generates differential responses. For example, activist 23 was extremely on board with the idea of a New Ireland. The interpretations of these options and the how they are understood is likely to influence what is more sellable to Alliance and the centre-ground.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored key factors through which Alliance Party activists expect to deliberate when confronted with a referendum on a UI. The evidence does not support a simple or uniform picture, but several significant conclusions emerge. First, while Alliance activists genuinely see themselves as pragmatic, evidence-based deliberators, this self-image requires qualification. They are candid about how background and socialisation impacts their constitutional thinking, and their neutrality reflects a specific configuration of values rather than indifference. Second, economic performance and healthcare arrangements are widely seen as central to deliberation, but activists lack the credible, detailed information needed to reach confident assessments. Many feel this informational deficit extends to the wider public debate, and see Alliance's perceived neutrality as placing it in a key role in relaying such information.

Third, accommodating the unionist community is a genuine and non-negotiable priority for most activists, even those

personally distanced from unionist identity. This reflects both party values and personal backgrounds, though some underlying assumptions about unionist concerns may warrant more critical examination. Fourth, Brexit is a significant yet not decisive factor, whose weight will depend on the political context at the time of any poll. The evidence substantially qualifies the view that Brexit has been or will be a straightforward driver of constitutional reconsideration among the centre-ground.

Fifth, activists hold demanding views about the process, timing, and conditions for a legitimate border poll, rooted in commitments to inclusion of unionism. In more extreme forms, however, these conditions risk indefinitely deferring serious engagement with the question. Sixth, institutional and societal stability are seen as prerequisites for a referendum, with activists emphasising the need for solid foundations in Northern Ireland's political culture before any transition is attempted. Finally, Alliance activists constitute a heterogeneous and genuinely persuadable constituency, one not easily directed by party leadership and therefore a challenge for any actor hoping to move them decisively in either direction. Winning them over will require not tribal appeals, but patient, credible, and detailed articulation of what each constitutional outcome would mean for everyday life in NI.

Chapter 5: GPNI activists' conceptual markers: Just a Bunch of Civic Environmentalists?

Introduction

This chapter examines how the non-ethnic, constitutionally neutral orientation, but fundamental focus on issues and taking clear issue positions together manifest among the activists of the GPNI. While constitutional neutrality and non-ethnic alignment are conceptual markers shared between both parties of the centre-ground, for the GPNI there is also a key role for the party's strong issue orientations. As an issue-based party, the working-class focus of the party intersects with this issue orientation. In particular, it explores how GPNI activists navigate internal class cleavages, distinct ideological commitments, issue ownership and party brand identity, constitutional issue engagement, and the relative position of the Greens versus Alliance as the proverbial 'middleman' in the changing constitutional climate.

Manifestation 1: The intersection of class and ethno-nationalism in the GPNI

A. Conceptual Markers – Working-class Focus and Non-alignment

Working-class Brand and the De-alignment from Sect

The issue-based GPNI faces specific electoral challenges in NI where ethno-nationalism is prioritised over class issues. Working classes in NI tend to not act on their *'critical understanding of the interests and grievances that they share'* given the focus on the well-established *'imagined communities'* (Coulter, 1999, p. 93). However, there are certain class dimensions to wider NI politics in which more middle-class and working-class voters vote for the

SDLP and UUP and SF and DUP respectively. In this sense, there is a version of classic class consciousness present in NI, which largely operates within the national identity blocs whereas the GPNI places a more independent emphasis on class issues. However, this reflection assumes that the GPNI is an 'outlet' for working-class politics, but not all activists were at least initially convinced by the party's working-class credentials. For example, one GPNI activist (11) was turned off from joining the party when they were younger because those they met who were the same age were middle-class. It was only when they went to university and met with party reps who really cared about working class concerns that they were able to see the interconnection between class and environmental issues more clearly and they think the GP itself does a lot of good grassroots work in working class areas. Therefore, while this thesis 'places' the GPNI into a conception of an issue-based working class-oriented party, active membership may be needed for activists themselves to fully appreciate how the party genuinely reflects this orientation.

Broadly, party members contribute to building the party 'brand', playing a '*symbolic role in the chain of representation',* often showing how the party is not just a party of elites, but adds to the party's perceived authenticity by being a visual symbol of its support in communities (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010, p. 827). Applying this logic, the GPNI activists are 'advertisements' for the working-class nature of the party and so felt the need to reiterate the authenticity of the working-class 'brand'. Implicitly, some activists raised their 'middle-class' background or how they represent a 'non-working-class' area in NI, but to emphasise that their class or elected area does not 'truly' represent the core GPNI working-class image. Sayer (2002) explains how people shy from talking about their social class, as it is itself a moral signifier and subject that can cause embarrassment, particularly among working-classes who can feel a social shame engaging with the

topic. However, these activists appeared more 'embarrassed' by their 'middle-class-ness' that is 'off brand'. For example, one GPNI activist (2) is *'slightly different*' from a lot of their Green colleagues in that they run a business and have respect for market forces, they are also a landlord but believe in regulation, albeit ultimately, they care for people and have concerns about the Tory government. Interestingly, in contrast to certain Green activists admitting they are middle-class, Alliance activists would sometimes admit they are more socialist which again does not fit with the Alliance 'brand'. One such activist (1), noted they were a little more socialist than some of the Alliance policies, while stating that Alliance is centre-left, not left and socialist. For both Greens and Alliance then, there are activists whose class and/or ideological background does not neatly match with the party brand, but these activists still feel a need to represent the groups and beliefs the party stands for.

Reality of (non-) alignment

Theoretically, strong primordialists (e.g. Geertz, 1963) would see ethnic identity as from the 'givens' of existence and stable, while class is a more 'constructed' and permeable identity. However, for GPNI activists, ethno-nationality is treated as the more 'constructed' option: you can pick and choose your ethno-national identity, but not your class. In reality, this was not such a clear-cut process as assumed given the instances of 're-attachment' to ethno-nationalism. Certain GPNI activists 're-attached' themselves to their unionist background such as when (partly) sympathising with unionists' fears of a UI, or frustrations with the NI Protocol in identity terms. As one GPNI activist (1) relays *'Coming from my background…I feel like I can criticise the unionists a bit more than somebody from the outside can. I get very annoyed at their rhetoric sometimes, but I genuinely do appreciate the very genuine fears they have about the place of unionists being subsumed within a united Ireland.'* This GPNI activist not being in

a ‘unionist’ party and not seeing themselves as ‘unionist’ may elicit less defensiveness against their criticism from ‘true’ unionists then another GPNI activist not from that background. As Hornsey and Imani (2004) explain outgroup criticism may be seen as motivated differently, and so, less tolerated than that by ingroup members, whose criticism might be perceived to be about bettering the in-group (p. 366). GPNI activists (sometimes unintentionally) can simultaneously criticise the background they come from and no longer identify with that background but also sympathise with it or recognise how it still biases them, even if they try not to let it. For example, one activist (6) discussed the ridiculousness of some of the stuff the unionists get annoyed at such as dual language signage, but they feel especially for older generations of British people who fear a UI and while being pro-UI themselves. They also have concerns about ROI historical commemorations as they are from this original unionist background. In this sense, the push-pull of identity that Green activists experience explains their membership and engagement in the party; the non-sectarian, de-aligned nature of the party allows for the experience of ‘flux’ in one’s own identity that membership of parties beyond the centre-ground does not.

Additionally, some GPNI activists ‘re-attach’ to their traditional background as a blocker to comment on identity or constitutional issues. Even if some GPNI activists do not identify strongly with their community anymore, they still feel that coming from a traditional bloc (e.g. unionism) means they do not want to speak for anyone from the community that they do not come from (e.g. nationalism). Or, at least, being from one community, even if they no longer identify with it, means they desire to be able to draw on the opposite bloc’s perspective to offer better insights on said community. For example, activist (3) from a unionist background felt uncomfortable commenting on accommodating the Irish identity in NI without having a nationalist individual to draw on for

perspective. Similarly, there was an awareness of how coming from a particular bloc (i.e. unionism) means it is easier for them to feel more comfortable than other GPNI supporters in the current constitutional status quo. Here, non-alignment is not the full reality as activists – subtly – acknowledge how they still view the world, at least partially, through their ethno-national identity despite the class lens and non-aligned position that the party emphasises.

Admitting Identity

As a non-sectarian party in a divided society and institutional configuration that encourages traditional affiliations, the GPNI faces a distinct challenge wherein the non-aligned nature of the party can constitute a basis for embarrassment about 'conceding' identity background influences. Unlike the traditional parties, activists are hesitant about what they consider 'admitting' their identity. For example, activist (16) articulates that there is some '*shame or embarrassment about admitting people's motivations'.* Another activist (10) sought to make sense of this by outlining how NI citizens and activists themselves can experience one or even both identities: *'I would say I, at times, have felt British and, at times, have felt Irish…and I think that's true for a lot of people in Northern Ireland, and I know that a lot of people, if they're strongly unionist or strongly republican, maybe won't admit that, but I think even for them that's true because we do have such strong influences of both'.* This may be best understood as being able to cohere with one's 'true' self in the Greens in which any identity background or indeed any combination of backgrounds or views can be facilitated and engaged. This is the reality of a more flexible and lesser alignment: distinct identities are below the surface, but individuals may come to articulate the version they feel most comfortable with and consider the complexities of the identity perspectives of others without 'reducing' people or communities to one perspective or set of interests.

Primarily class over sect?

As the above showcases, several GPNI activists admit their class background, and distance at times from their ethno-nationality, but some also make a case whereby class is pre-eminent for opponents, particularly the centre-ground's Alliance. GPNI activists see Alliance as class-coded in that they are considered by the Greens to be a middle-class party perceived to represent middle-class interests. Alliance is not *just* 'unionist' for the Greens but 'middle-class unionist' and for some they are alternative middle-class unionist representatives (e.g. activists 7; 2; 11).

Although Rønn (2025) does not directly explore the relationship between sect-class at the micro-level, certain dynamics are applicable to GPNI activists. Rønn (2025) recognises instances where class grievances or identities compete or outweigh sect's significance (e.g. social movements that transcend sectarian divides). Here, class is treated as at least equally relevant in how activists think of what they represent and what their challengers represent including in the non-aligned space. For example, a GPNI activist (11) who is pro-UI (in the long-run) is also extremely connected to their working-class identity and had to navigate wanting a UI; while feeling like they were losing things that are important to them and others from working-class communities, like UK funded charities. For them, there were clear instances where the class lens has to be considered, as the wider party would espouse too. In another specific example, the same activist (11) was able to get their Level 3 NVQ in First Aid through the cadet force as an opportunity made available to someone from a working-class background, but they do not know what the cadet force is like in the ROI and as such whether such opportunities would be available even in their preferred UI. Certain activists showcased how their own middle-class background does not direct their

political or constitutional focus, but class itself does. For instance, one GPNI activist (4) does not expect much of an impact of a united Ireland on them personally as they are middle-class but part of them would be more interested in effects on working-class Protestants.

Furthermore, there are additional influences on position beyond class and ethno-national identity. In some cases, there may be a 'split the difference' type of de-alignment where it is it difficult to analyse the 'source' of their preferences i.e. ethno-nationality or Green principles. Specifically, one GPNI activist (8) favourably assesses having regional governance under a UI, partly due to their re-attachment to their traditional background, but also it simply aligns with green thinking. The activist who came from a Protestant background, but very much no longer sees themselves as such, says *'…even as someone who… doesn't really associate myself with unionism… I suppose we still want to have that sense of identity* and *as someone who's really passionate about grassroots democracy, I think that is really important because the people in the local area know what is needed…'*

However, as a caveat, posited class interests can sometimes also be 'used' to justify a constitutional position (e.g., working-class interests will be argued to benefit the constitutional position that is already preferred by the activist). Although not the dynamic described by Rønn (2025) of class-identities as subordinate to sect whereby communities defined by class are grouped by sect and pushed into the sectarian politics framework (p. 7) here would be another form of subordination whereby class is used as justification.

Manifestation 2: Interactions between the overlapping elements of the GPNI's 'issue-based' orientation

B. Conceptual Marker - Issue-based: Join for the leftism, but stay for the environment, or vice versa?

It would be a mistake to determine that GPNI activists always support, and continue to support, the GPNI primarily because of their leftist ideology. Firstly, this would not directly explain why they chose to support the GPNI over another leftist/socialist party in the first place, specifically People Before Profit (i.e., another non-ethnic, integrationist party). For example, some activists' (5; 6) admit that their own political leanings would also encompass a lot of PBP's political foundations or ideologically the activists sway between both GPNI and PBP, but ultimately the GPNI wins the day for them because *'I don't think their [PBP]'s green platform is as well-formed and as well-integrated…as the Green Party* (activist, 5) and *'just as a party and as a community of people and as a praxis…I feel like the Greens have more potential'* (activist, 6). Petitpas and Sciarini (2022) show how left-wing voters' decisions between two very similar leftist parties in Switzerland (Greens and Social Democrats) is based not only on issue position, but also on how they keep or change their assessment on the most competent party on a given issue ('issue competence'). These GPNI activists potentially made (and importantly, maintain) an assessment that despite the ideological similarities between PBP and GPNI, the GPNI is more 'competent' in terms of dealing with the green issue pragmatically and in mobilising towards policy change and implementation, and so this helps to swing their choice.

Looking back from a post-Brexit vantage point, certain GPNI activists supported the leftist dimension of PBP's Brexit campaign, but their association with the Leave side was unappreciated due

primarily to its anti-immigration rhetoric. For example, one GPNI activist (1) liked the Lexit campaign and again thought PBP was quite strong on environmental issues too, but they could not understand how PBP could then stand with parties such as the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) with racism on the rise caused by Brexit's implications for negative attitudes towards immigrants. Unsurprisingly, few GPNI activists presented reasons to switch support to PBP. Activists mentioned PBP's support for a United Ireland and PBP's willingness to take a clear position on this. While activists admire many of PBP's positions and some share this support for a UI, they also see potential issues with the GPNI adopting a similar approach on non-leftist and more identity-based constitutional issues. Activist (10) for example admires many of PBP's policy positions but sees their support for a United Ireland as potentially undermining the extent to which PBP can grow support among working-class Loyalists. This is seen as an exemplar of the potential risks of the GPNI taking similar positions on constitutional issues and inhibiting their opportunities for growth across the communities in similar ways. However, PBP are typically less willing to compromise on left issues, so if the GPNI becomes too pragmatic and downplays its niche positioning to be electorally competitive (like the GP in ROI arguably did to enter the 2020 coalition), some with stronger socialist views may prefer PBP. Reflecting Bergman and Flatt (2020) by moving away from its 'owned' issues like environmentalism or leftism, the niche GPNI could ultimately hurt its vote share through moderating on issues and prioritising electoral performance.

Secondly, to determine that GPNI activists 'continue' to support the GPNI primarily because of their leftist ideology treats party attraction or support as stable. Existing studies recognise how party members' ideological preferences can weaken over time, which could contribute to the likelihood they will leave the party (Wagner, 2017, p. 347). However, for some activists it is not

a matter of their ideological preferences weakening, but the 'intensity' of it moves between issues; they become more committed to issues they were less focused on when they initially joined. They might have joined for primarily leftist or environmental reasons, but since being in the party they have come to learn and develop a niche concern for both left and eco issues together. Therefore, the reasons that they 'stay' in the party might not be the same reasons that drew them to it initially. For instance, one GPNI activist (1) explains they initially were drawn to join the GPNI for recycling/animal welfare reasons (and those issues are still important to them), but *'after I joined'* they came to realise that the party was more than this type of party and is more politically rounded across the board with fully fleshed out policies on a very wide variety of social issues. Another activist (6) was drawn to the party due to its leftist orientation whereby the activist *'also had an interest in environmental issues, but honestly that was secondary…And I learned more about that, the longer I was in the Greens, and that became more of a passion for me and now I can see that the two are so intricately connected.'*

Collignon et al (2023) find left-wing GP members in England who mainly joined to campaign on social justice over eco-issues were much more vulnerable to exiting the party when the mainstream party shifts position (such as leaving to join Labour after Corbyn's election as leader, p. 849). This could have major implications for the GPNI in the current post-Brexit context where unification is more likely. Specifically, activists like (6) who 'initially' joined for more leftist reasons could be at least 'more vulnerable' than those who joined due to environmentalism to leaving the GPNI in a UI, which will offer more left-leaning parties than currently competing in NI (e.g. Social democrats, Labour, PBP), particularly given the activist (6) recognises there are more left party options in the ROI. One alternative of course could be that we will see a diversification of issue emphases in the Green Party's programme

in a united Ireland that will allow them to better compete with the wider range of socialist parties that will be available in a UI as occurred when the GP in England and Wales lost its anti-austerity, far left niche to Labour (Dennison, 2020)

Identity versus ideology

The GPNI is seen by activists as home to the 'rebels' in NI as they have a post-ethnic outlook. Activists reinforce this as some see their own identity configurations as *'confounding'* (activist 13) or *'contrarian' (*activist 12*).* The latter is from an extended working-class Catholic background, and although they are genuinely agnostic their perceived community background would say they are probably going to be a soft nationalist. However, they consider themselves a *'contrarian'* in that they are an Anglophile after living in England for seven years and while there might be those pressures of family on them to vote for reunification almost as a reflex, they care more about who (i.e. pro-UI or pro-UK side) is selling it best to them. However, there is an element of pragmatism too in their thinking, as the activist (12) identifies as Irish, they are born on the island of Ireland, but they are a pragmatist and are a UK citizen and they feel some within republicanism would say they are not a UK citizen and refuse to recognise partition and, that is not a practical reality in their view.

The GPNI also has to manage another, much smaller cohort, those activists socialised outside NI who are drawn to the GPNI solely by ideology and feel very confounded by the import of these ethno-national identities. A GPNI activist (13) considers traditional allegiances 'confounding' in this part of the world given they come from a family of English Catholics, which does make them feel they are from 'beyond the binary' and quite disconnected from either tradition sometimes. Another non-NI-born GPNI activist (4) feels a 'place apart' in how they still view politics through the left

and right lens (rather than unionist-nationalist), despite being in NI for years. Although potentially, this is not 'unique' to those from a non-NI background, but activists who support non-aligned parties like the GPNI or Alliance, already are won over to viewing politics through a more 'normal' political lens. However, these GPNI activists socialised outside NI could be 'more' against the party engaging with identity or constitutional issues as it is not been a part of their own experience to the same degree (of course some were from UK or ROI and as such partially socialised by these identities, but not NI specifically) and engagement with these issues would instead be pushed on them by their party support. Alternatively, they could be 'less' deterred from engaging on these issues and taking a CP because they did not experience the negative implications of being in a divided society. These activists epitomise how the GPNI is a natural home for activists with these complicated and in some cases very different identity affiliations and more pragmatic perspectives, but in reality, they must operate alongside those who have a firmer CP and those who have distanced themselves from, but retain, an identity affiliation as above.

Issue ownership – choosing between the 'centre-ground' options

Issue ownership – and more specifically what issue the GP 'owns' – is particularly relevant when understanding activists support of the GPNI over Alliance, if they are drawn to the 'conceptual marker' shared by these parties – their constitutional neutrality. Of course, some (including Alliance activists themselves) suggest Alliance is on par with the GPNI in terms of tackling environmental concerns (e.g. Alliance has its own Green New Deal) which would not then explain why they would switch from Alliance to GPNI if they care mainly about the environment side of things. However, it appears that activists value their party as the 'truest' to its issue-based agenda (i.e. the GPNI 'owns' the

ecosocialist, environmental issue). For example, one activist (7) says '*I would say we're the only party that has an ecosocialist ideological perspective… we're the only party that has the environment and climate at its heart'* or another activist (3) would like to think the GPNI is most *'authentic'* in terms of the environment (and social issues). However, it may be the case that environmentalism rather than a sudden affiliation to leftism could explain the switch from Alliance to GPNI, despite them both being 'constitutionally-neutral centrist parties. Even one GPNI activist (17) was previously fairly high up in Alliance, came to feel Alliance were not doing enough in terms of environmentalism, which was their key issue, so they later moved to the GPNI.

While the GPNI activists know they 'own' environmentalism, they also recognise that for those who care about leftist issues there is a challenge from Alliance. GPNI activists recognise and commend the success and contribution of Alliance on a number of shared priorities. Certain activists appear deflated that although they are aware of Alliance lacking 'leftism', those outside the GPNI 'bubble' might not know the truth (or even care) about Alliance not really being so left. For example, one GPNI activist (10) does not think that people in NI necessarily are aware that Alliance is not a left-wing party (or that being left matters to many). Some GPNI activists viewed Alliance as representing a 'surface-level leftism'; that is, when you look at the details particularly economically, they are not in reality a left party. For example, one GPNI activist (3) states *'…sometimes, because of some of the stuff that they talk about, whether it's social or environmental things, it could maybe give the impression that they're a wee bit more left-leaning than they really are. But when you drill down…'* Again, reflecting this 'surface-level leftism' another activist (6) shares Alliance *'speak the language of some of those parties probably coming from a, like, social democratic approach…But…when push comes to shove, they're not driven by an anti-capitalist ideology at their heart'.*

However, this is potentially strategic by GPNI activists who separate themselves from the wider set of left of centre voters, whereby they are and seek to represent themselves as more 'engaged or hyper-aware' leftists who can recognise that Alliance is not sufficiently left.

Issue ownership – Meaning neutral by 'default'

While Alliance positions itself as not truly aligned, there is a perception among Green activists that this is a non-alignment or neutrality that is a product of Alliance being defined by its 'reaction' to the traditional blocs. In this way, for GPNI activists Alliance is a product of traditional NI ethno-national politics and positions itself as the middleman between the ethnic parties tactically and ideologically and as such, Alliance still operates within and not independent of this 'ethnic spectrum'. For some GPNI activists then, their party might be seen as the 'true' neutral party because it exists beyond the divide and is focused on NI's future. However, even if GPNI activists do see Alliance as 'less deserving' of its position in or as the 'neutral' centre-ground, several still recognise the growth of Alliance as a positive thing as it shows the middle is growing, even though it has ended up costing the GPNI electoral support. GPNI activist (2) says *'The middle ground of the north is still finding its feet. Certainly, as a part of the Green Party, I had hoped that we would capture that more…I think the last assembly elections showed that the Alliance were capturing it more…I have no issue with that, my personal view is, the stronger the middle ground is, the more the extremes are pushed aside and minimalised and their influence diluted.'*

Several activists across both parties would agree that a strength of their own party is it is not focused on identity or sectarianism. However, some in Alliance called out the GPNI for ignoring these types of issues completely, while Alliance

recognises they need to be dealt with even if the party disagrees with them. For example, Alliance activists (3; 15) think that quite often the Greens tend to shy away from sectarian politics, as they say it has nothing to do with them and that they are focused on other/green issues but while Alliance activists commend Green action on these issues, for the Alliance activists, these identity issues still need to be dealt with. However, on the flipside, some GPNI activists actually assess Alliance as 'shying away' from the constitutional question, with their perception heavily informed by Alliance's decision to not attend a particular 'Ireland's Future' conference. At the same time, the GPNI also thinks Alliance is directly connected to the constitutional issue, as some activists see that Alliance's existence is still dependent on the binary divide. For example, one activist, (10), suggests Alliance have a *'strange symbiotic relationship to the constitutional issue'* whereby they would say that the GP are more truly embedded in a commitment to social justice and therefore the CI is pushed down its priority list, but for Alliance the constitutional issue is important as it is fundamental to their identity that they are the 'Not unionist Or nationalist' party. Although the GPNI sees the aligned parties as 'outdated' some in the GPNI view Alliance as also still stuck in the 'past' in this way. For example, whilst for years one GPNI activist (2) was an Alliance member, and they saw Alliance as '*still caught up in the conflict of the past and they just wanted to get to the point whereby Northern Ireland is beyond that'*. Alliance, for their part, do not deny this and in many ways take ownership of this status and role.

Overall, regardless of how GPNI or Alliance interprets the extent to, which they themselves, or each other, are engaging with the constitutional issue, it appears that the GPNI's own neutrality is more 'moveable' compared to Alliance. For Alliance, being neutral is a defining identity of the party. However, being an 'issue-based' party, i.e., a party that takes positions on salient issues of

the day, is core to the identity of the GPNI. In this way, the GPNI is 'neutral by default' until it makes the evaluation that it should take a position on an issue. Therefore, it can 'move away' from being neutral on the CI, if the CI becomes an issue of greater salience, which it now assesses to be the case in the post-Brexit era. For Alliance, being neutral is more fundamental to the party's self-identity.

Issue-based - Any Green Party will do?

Albeit on environmental (not party) activism, Botetzagias and van Schuur (2012, p. 517) illustrate how past activism in environmental movements predicts green party members' activism in current movements as they have been familiarised with the ideology and the goals of the movement. Similarly, as a baseline, there was an expectation that GPNI activists would join any green party if they had prior exposure to, interest in and had participated in one in another region. Being a GPNI activist potentially meant supporting 'a' GP regardless of what country you are in, given select activists (activist 15, 8) switched their involvement/support from the GP in England and Wales to the GPNI when they returned to NI. However, it was unclear whether these activists switched to the GPNI only because they wanted to support 'a' GP or because they wanted to keep supporting a more eco-socialist party 'regardless' of whether it was a green party or not. For instance, illustrating this confusion, one GPNI activist (8) implies it was an organic switch to the GPNI for them based on the identity of the party: *'I was part of the Green Party in England and Wales as well, so I was going to then, transfer over that way.'* But also their initial motivation appears 'issue-based': *'I guess I didn't know anything about People Before Profit when I moved back here, like I said, I was part of the Green Party in England and Wales, mostly because of the environmental side of things and social justice, those are the*

two key things for me and so I was always just going to get involved in [the GPNI]'.

There is an association and partial issue ownership of leftism and environmentalism together for GPNI activists, so potentially it is not enough for it to be 'a' GP as it must have these issue positions given it is that combination that the activists are attracted by. Reflecting this, the GPNI activists were critical of the GPROI. GPNI activists often did not see the GPROI as really that 'left' and/or generally it was recognised that the GPROI's decision to enter into the 2020 coalition was not wholly supported by the GPNI. For example, one GPNI activist (6) struggled to picture themselves in the GPROI, due to the GPROI's lacking left credentials and the unrepresentative nature of their politics: *And I've sometimes gone, "if I lived in the south, I'm not sure I would be in the Greens." I think the left-wing part of me would win out and I'd have to join a different party…And it's not to do with the activists on the ground... it's just the leadership… But also…in the north… [I] think we overwhelmingly voted against some of the stuff that has subsequently happened*[72]*,* [whereas in the South] …*this is what people want in the Greens, so then I feel a bit like...it doesn't represent me and my politics.'* Again, these insights are particularly relevant to the post-Brexit era where a UI is more likely. Referring back to Collignon et al (2022), if the GPNI is no longer a distinct entity under a UI and the GPROI remains the only 'GP option' if these activists who want to support an eco-socialist party and not just 'a' GP then the weak 'left credentials' of the GPROI could mean these current activists would be more vulnerable to moving their support to a left party that is operating in the ROI. However, if they support any party that is 'a' GP they might be more likely to support

[72] This appears to be a reference to the socio-economic policies of the GPROI in government.

the GPROI under a UI, especially if their support is primarily based on environmentalism.

Even beyond whether the GPROI issue 'salience' on leftism is too weak for GPNI activists, the context itself is just too different. Again being 'a' GP is not enough. As one GPNI activist (1) details *'And this is not a criticism to the Green Party in the south…But I think even whenever we've had things that they want to, like, maybe release statements or something up here and we've had to be like, "You can't say that, while that might not sound offensive to you, we know how this is going to be taken."…And these are just things that have never crossed their mind before…Not everyone…but it has arisen'.* However, the context itself may not be enough to push GPNI activists to assess another GP as 'too different' given some recognise an 'ideological closeness' between the GPs in Scotland and NI, especially as they are both more left-leaning. Here, the Scottish Greens satisfy the GPNI's desire for dual-issue ownership. While aware of the party's good network with GPs across Europe (and the Greens in England and Wales like the ROI are less left wing), one GPNI activist (16) notes *'…but there is certainly, like, a strong fraternal relationship between the Greens in Northern Ireland and in Scotland...I think most of us would see them as quite left-wing.'* Given a number were or said they would have been Labour supporters when in England, it reinforces that activists would not be hopping their support between regional GPs, as leftism is the key draw. Fundamentally, it is clear that issue ownership over a leftist agenda is key to the distinctive appeal of the GPNI as evidenced by the attraction the party presents to those including from Labour and especially more socialist Labour backgrounds in the UK. While other party options may be available, this distinct issue ownership profile and ideology is a key distinct draw marking the party apart.

Manifestation 3: Time to move away from constitutional neutrality?

C. Conceptual Marker – Constitutional neutrality

1. Sense-making of the 'new' engagement with the constitutional issue

Currently, the GPNI espouses a neutral position on the constitutional question but in recent times, the party has begun to engage further with the issue, how to frame it, what the necessary conditions and most effective designs are for a potential referendum, and what potential position to take. This change of approach may have been noticed by voters. Although the majority of voters in a Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC poll (2021) revealed that they thought the Greens took a neutral position (51%), this is only a slight majority, and a relevant amount (37%) think they take a nationalist/Republican position.

Compared to Alliance, GPNI activists were generally more open to engaging with the constitutional question. There is a question of why activists, especially at lower levels (i.e. non- MLAs or councillors) appear open to their party actively engaging with the CI. The broad conclusion here is that the party is now considering whether to move towards engaging on the CQ and referendum as it is an issues-based party. This is likely to produce challenges for the Green Party as engagement along these lines clashes (or is perceived to clash) with the constitutional neutrality that marks the party out but the party activists feel it may be worth engaging in this way irrespective of the challenges it presents as functioning as an issues-based party that responds to salient issues and policy questions is the core party identity. However, this decision to move to engage with the issue and take this calculated risk is a relatively recent phenomenon raising questions about why the decision has

been taken to move on this now. There are a variety of potential reasons that emerged and were explored with activists and are now considered in turn.

Reason 1: Easier to communicate about 'the future'?

One potential reason could be down to how the GPNI as a party is more of a comfortable space to engage with the CI without the baggage of sectarianism. For example, strikingly, one GPNI activist (13) noted in an unprompted fashion, that they know that constitutional conversations are something that the GP in NI is planning on having in the near future, and continued that this is one of the differences between Greens and Alliance, that it is fine to have these conversations and *'it is not inherently sectarian to do so'*. Another activist (12) recognises how the GPNI can talk about this issue without some of the ideological or aspirational phrasing used by traditional identities in particular Republicanism: *'So, I think that's an important distinction about how we can present a uniquely Green alternative on these issues or these conversations*.' 'Communicating like a Green' is a way of talking about the future in a way that can consider constitutional issues without leaning on traditional identities as part of this wider canvas of what 'the future' looks like. Todd and McEvoy (2024) observe that language is a big barrier to participation in constitutional conversations, as terms like 'Irish unity' are triggering of traditional ideo-identities that many have distanced from, or are disheartened about (p. 177). Participants in their study recommend that more engagement with these conversations likely requires moving away from binary, ideological discourses towards more normal issue agendas. However, GPNI activists recognise their party is in a way already doing this more broadly – it can have wider discussions of 'the future' because their approach to communicating is about planning and building a future and so that involves dimensions like climate but also constitutional issues and institutions if this fits into their

discussion on non-ethnic themes like climate change. Also, the activists themselves are not 'fearful' of language associated with constitutional issues. For example, they were more likely than Alliance to both use the phrasing and support 'Joint Authority' while Alliance tended to just talk about British and Irish governments working closer together. This is quite striking in itself. For example, Alliance activist (23) refers to the idea of NI as a sub-region governed with '*input from the southern government…and maybe a bit less from Westminster, a kind of…dual responsibility*', but there is a noted reluctance to use the comparable (and familiar) term of joint authority.

Reason 2: Issue party means applying an issue lens?

Another logic linked to the above for why GPNI activists appear more open to engaging with the CI is while the GPNI conceptually is post-ethnic, activists do not see this post-ethnic approach as being a substantive way of breaking away from those blocs. The party is instead seeking not to apply the identity lens and applying an 'issue' lens. Fundamentally, the party is driven by its issue-based party status in which the party at its core engages with and takes positions on major salient issues. It tackles these issues head on. This includes the CI which has now become more salient since Brexit and given discussion of a potential border poll. In this way, the GPNI does not shy away from identity issues and/or the constitutional question (as it would accuse others of doing) but instead seeks to consider these through this distinct issue-based prism. Specifically, select GPNI activists imply the GPNI is not as snobbish about sectarian issues as other parties. GPNI activist (10) explains: '*So, I think the Alliance sits somewhere oddly in that sort of triumvirate as, "Look at us, we're not sectarian." And it gets people's backs up. And, I mean, I'm very careful…I appreciate why people have the constitutional issue as their biggest issue.'* Other activists call out as elitist Alliance arguments that it will consider the

CQ and a potential UI based on rational evaluation rather than ideology. Of course, from an Alliance perspective this thesis finds that Alliance activists do not deny their party is built from the two blocs but instead offers a way out of these camps but there is evidence here of a clear alternate prism attached to each party when thinking about how and to what extent to engage with these constitutional questions.

There is also an openness to the GPNI taking a CP because activists believe outsiders will perceive it differently. Activist (16) illustrates the particularly 'strong' position of influence the 'centre-ground' generally would have if its politicians came down in support of a side. They contend it would potentially make the UI concept more palatable to a wider audience and would change what the entire campaign looked like rather than it just being seen as a SF campaign otherwise. The core lesson follows, all these activists would see any position/policy from the GPNI – whether it was pro-UI or not – as being moulded differently, and 'perceived' differently than nationalist positions or campaigns as this would be a different type of campaign and different framing of the question focused on distinct issues and built around the Green lens of a new vision for the future. Of course, this may not be the case in reality, but it shows how activists could ultimately push their party to move on this as a party with an issue focus and a desire to remake a more radical departure for the future, whatever the risks and potential contentiousness of further engagement or position-taking.

Reason 3: Issue party means image is secondary?

Another reason GPNI activists may care less about the risks of engaging with the CQ is if it believes otherwise critical issues would be neglected by a party that prides itself on engaging with the key issues of the day. The GPNI does not fear damaging its 'neutral party' image if it means tackling salient issues. Activists

mentioned their party's courage in dealing with more divisive issues, or pioneering efforts in policies such as on the decriminalisation of drugs. GPNI activists view their party as an 'issues party' defined by taking positions on bigger questions and are expected to do so whether that is climate, drug decriminalisation or the CQ. Activists recognise their party cannot avoid the discussion, and that is part of being an issue-based party even if sometimes that means taking positions that will be unpopular generally or in one community versus the other. One GPNI activist (7) talks about weathering the storm when it comes to encouraging unionists partaking in the debate, and the same grin it and bear it attitude could contribute to the openness. This activist (7) explains, *'the Greens are often seen as the kind of eco wing of the Shinners…so there's a danger that we are seen as promoting inclusion of unionists in this debate, that we could be accused of that…well, there's nothing we can do about people's perceptions. Let's just take it on the chin and be open and honest with people about, this is a train that's now leaving, it's not that getting on board and the next stop is Dublin, it's that you've got to make your case* [*for maintaining the Union*]'. Of course, Alliance also has to take the accusations of being on the fence if it stays neutral (e.g. activist 6). The GPNI's party identity as seen internally is that the party has to take positions whereas the Alliance party identity is that it must be neutral on the CQ and identity issues such as a referendum.

Reason 4: Activity dependent?

Another explanation for why GPNI activists appear more open to engaging with the CI could be down to what kind of 'activity' this is interpreted as. For certain GPNI activists, policy development on a border poll was viewed more as a positive move towards thinking about the 'right way' to hold a referendum or the future direction of NI. Alliance activists appeared more hesitant towards developing policy along these lines because they did not

see it in this way as being about how to carry out a referendum rather than the party recommending how to actually vote in one (e.g. activist 10). For example, GPNI activist (5) also seems on board with the party starting to develop a vision about how to have these conversations even if they are hesitant about the party taking a CP: *'I think you could probably hear my hesitancy as well around, should it have a constitutional position or not? We're in a particular moment, I think, right now where these conversations are important. So I think the Green Party Northern Ireland should absolutely start taking positions on making conversations happen or making that space or starting'.* Again, the GPNI as an issues party is not 'afraid' to take a position, especially when developing the right approach to productively considering the issue and creating the context for a meaningful and respectful debate itself necessitates substantive engagement.

Reason 5: Going the direction they want anyway?

Given most of those who predicted the party would come out as UI if it had to pick between the options also personally supported unification, an argument could be made they know they can talk about the CI without a strict fear that the party would move away from their own personally preferred position. This does not mean however they want the party to lose its cross-community appeal. For example, the prospect of the party taking a CP does not make one activist (6) nervous personally as they feel it would probably be the position they agree with (i.e. pro-UI), but they feel if the Greens were to take a CP, that would be the end of any hope of being a cross-community party (at the 'party-level'), and so that makes them nervous. This illustrates the difference between party risks and personal preference. Again though, this is not however seen as a 'red line' that should inhibit engaging with the issue.

Reason 6: Top-down?

The issue with the previous reasons (1-5) is it is doubtful that activists only recently have come to realise that their party is not comfortable engaging with constitutional issues. One argument that could be made is that it is a 'top-down' decision, that is, leadership or prominent GPNI reps want to move the party towards active engagement, and this has trickled down to the wider membership. However, this argument ultimately assumes that lower-level activists take their cue from higher up levels, which may or may not be the case especially as the GPNI takes a grassroots approach with respect to the influence of membership over party policy and positions. Overall, while GPNI activists do refer to what leadership say and may partially take their cues from them, they also have their own strong principles, positions, and perspectives. Also, one of the GPNI activists (1) who was interviewed earlier on in this project before the announcement at the AGM where the leadership declared the party would be moving towards an active role, got the sense that GP members are seeing the CI as an issue that needs to be addressed in the party more than it was previously, particularly since Brexit and the dealings around the Protocol. This suggests that at both leadership and lower activist levels there is a growing consensus across the board that this issues-based party must now engage the issue.

2. Sense-making of the GPNI's 'ability' to engage more with constitutionalism

While the previous section cared more about why/if there is an openness to engaging with the CQ, GPNI activists also view their party as 'able to engage' with this issue – specifically in engaging with discussions with unionism on the CQ or participating in constitutional conversations itself like Ireland's Future.

Party specific infrastructure to (not) allow for the engagement

Todd and McEvoy (2024) explain that there are particular situational impediments to engagement where there are limits to resources, access to information, education and avenues to and capacity for communication (p. 176). Given the GPNI's small size without MLA representation in the Assembly, GPNI activists might consider a situational obstacle for the party to be is its lack of major infrastructure. As one GPNI activist (3) said, *'And I think especially in a party that's got very little resources and…it's all volunteer-led, we don't have any staff…it's quite difficult to even do the things that we need to do just operationally… and that the constitutional question, it'd be great to have time to discuss it, but we probably don't'.* Here, the barrier is not an avoidance of engagement with the constitutional issue in the sense that is too sensitive a topic for a 'non-aligned' party, but the obstacle is infrastructure; there is not the time nor resources to engage.

Taking the honest broker role from Alliance?

Within Todd and McEvoy (2024) many participants focused on two resources needed for participation: time and skills. Having the ability to be able to talk about the CQ is implied to have been developed over time, but really it is something built into the GPNI based on how it is perceived (or thinks it is perceived) in terms of not being a threat to unionism. For example, the activist (10) shares, 'this is *partly because we are small and partly because people don't really get us'* that the GP have a way in to unionism because the GP have not been in direct opposition to unionist parties. In addition, the activist outlined how the GP have worked directly with loyalist communities and loyalist groups on smaller community and charity projects.

Beyond whether GPNI activists perceive that their party is more non-threatening to unionism or an honest broker, another activist (11) explains by virtue of its lobbying group status, on the ground, there is definitely much that the GP can do so it '*should use itself as a pressure group'* for those in government and unionist parties to partake in a pre-border poll framework that is developed and the opinions that come from that.

In addition to its experience as a lobby group and the relationship to unionism, another activist (15) suggests that GPNI's willingness to work with both communities potentially is bred into the broader consensual culture of the green movement. They explain how the non-hierarchal structure and pattern of consensual agreement within the party could provide it the means to bring the unionist community into the conversation around the constitutional question.

While there might be a recognition that in reality externally, the GPNI may not be seen in the same light as it frames itself internally, most activists did see the party, at least, as more 'not unionist' than Alliance, and thought unionists would think the same. For example, the activist above says, unlike Alliance which has more unionist baggage and their heartlands are in traditional unionist areas, the Greens get support from a less clearly defined unionist identity cohort and is genuinely seen as being more neutral than Alliance and perhaps would be seen as more honest brokers. This is important in engaging nationalists but also critical given more fraught relations at times between unionists and Alliance specifically. This could limit Alliance's ability to play the classic honest broker role when it comes to bringing in and engaging unionists around constitutional debates and pre-border poll frameworks.

For Alliance there is a fear of being seen as ‘soft unionist’ if seen to be running away from this debate whereas the Greens are willing to engage with all sides, as they engage with any side regardless because it is about the need to engage on ‘the major issues’ for a party defined by this as a core ethos. There is a sense that activists could potentially be okay with the idea the GPNI would be willing to go as far as representing unionism in constitutional discussions, but this is not something that would work for Alliance. For example, one GPNI activist (12) keeps saying to their unionist friends, if you do not engage with this conversation, then there is nobody *‘fighting your corner except us’,* so as the discourse evolves, unionism could cut its nose off to spite its face by not participating. One Alliance activist (9) however, says they do not think Alliance would be comfortable sitting in representing unionism on a panel but they do see how it could – *‘There's no reason why we couldn't facilitate that sort of discussion, but I think the nature of our party, the ethos of our party would facilitate a less-confrontational…conversation’*.

Overall, the argument above still stands regarding the Greens relationship to unionism and the opportunity this provides for them to use this relationship to better shape the broader constitutional debate, but of course it is not the ‘ideal’ actor necessarily to play this role as articulated by activists. For example, while comparing the GP may be better positioned to have conversations with people such as those in the loyalist community than Alliance and a section of unionists that Alliance have alienated, activist (3) also feels it is probably going to be the same sort of civic organisations that were responsible for starting talks running up to the GFA that are likely to be the only people who are likely to make headway in terms of trying to convince people to get involved in discussions. This likely means a role but only a partial one for the GPNI in facilitating this engagement.

3. Not the ‘normal’ neutral

The debate on how the party should address the constitutional question does seem to be developing within the party. There is however uncertainty about how to do this, without being seen to de-prioritise eco-socialist issues, either in terms of party image or just practically as they are a small party with very limited resources. Of course, for some outsiders the big issue will be not which position should they take, but ‘if’ they take a position, as the GPNI is likely in 10 years to have voters from a unionist background. However, several GPNI activists suggested ways the party could take a position that were imaginative in nature, and very unique to the GPNI, but ultimately were not pro-UI or pro-Union. For example, one activist (15) who is unsure about their feelings around the GPNI taking a CP explains their view around the party expressing a two-futures idea where the party needs to articulate an idea of what the GP would be like and what it would like a single Irish jurisdiction to look like, and, they think the GP can express that without necessarily saying that it advocates for unification. Here, the GPNI activist continues to navigate the CI in a way that engages with the issue from the lens of ‘the future’. However, some of those who suggest these more ‘imaginative positions’ likely would take issue with saying their position is basically neutral by another name because it almost minimises the legitimacy of such a multi-faceted position which is not just the party keeping its mouth shut on being UI or pro-Union, which ‘neutral’ could be defined as. For example, ultimately activist (15) thinks that the ‘two-futures’ idea *‘distinguishes’* the GPNI from the Alliance view, which is *‘either to avoid the question or to say that they will remain explicitly neutral or to be... very softly pro-status quo which Alliance often fall into’.* However, this thesis still would define these imaginative positions as neutral but recognises them as different from the formulaic or typical conception of neutrality. Another activist (14) explicitly comments on how they would not describe their ‘creative

idea' for a potential constitutional position as *'neutral*' per say, it is just *'something different'* and more about actively '*positively creating new ways of thinking about democracy and borders…creating new and fresh thinking…as distinct from solving a nineteenth century problem'.* Here the activist is trying to square this with a wider Green vision and party brand that is not neutral in the classic sense, but still non-ethnic and above all focused on 'the future'.

The GPNI and its activists also pride themselves on being 'rebels' or radical in NI and from this there is a sense of 'guilt' that being neutral on the CQ is not something that is seen as fair from the perspective of others. For example, one GPNI activist (6) knows the party staying neutral may not be '*good enough'* for some because it is more important to them and they maybe lived with the constitutional status impact such as the conflict and the associated violence. For another GPNI activist (3) *'I suppose I really kind of hope we're never going to be in the position that we need to take a defined position on it and…I think to some people, that might seem a bit lacking in conviction or being bold enough…'.* This is best understood again through the lens of the Greens as an issues-based party. The party and its activists seek to apply the lens of being focused on the future in a holistic sense which generates a sense of responsibility to take a position on these issues given how much of an impact on what the future will look like they will have.

Even though they are open about the party starting to engage more with the CI, or see other Greens wanting to, certain activists (12; 1) do not want to present the party, or themselves, as suddenly prioritising the CQ. Instead, they recognise the need for the party to engage with the CI is becoming increasingly apparent, or they accept that the party will have to decide on a CQ at some point as it is a party operating in a context where this is a critical and increasingly salient issue. Activist (12) thinks it is still right that

now is not the time for the GP to deal with the CQ, but they do believe this window is getting shorter. There is a clear sense here that the issue is pushing its way to the forefront and while the party is starting to realise this, the activists are still trying to get back to their focus on wider issues as a caveat to their movement towards engaging the CQ. The other activist (1) shares that they still believe there are much bigger things in NI that affect ordinary people such as climate change (again referring back to the core issue priority), but they also appreciate that as a local party in this context the GP has to deal with the local issues that are important to people, and there will come a time that the party does have to decide. Perhaps the GPNI can take a position, but in a 'neutral way' that is still aligned to green thinking, that is it does not have to 'give up' its nicheness to take a position. Others like activists 7 and 5, despite believing the party should remain neutral, currently still think it would be slightly easier for the GP to take a position than it would be for Alliance: *I think it would be slightly easier for the Green Party to take a position than it would be for Alliance, actually… the Green Party could make…an easier argument in a certain sense or one that allied more clearly with their values as a party*' (activist 5).

Returning to the principles and ideology of the party, it still appears that taking a position that 'aligns' to green principles means taking a 'nationalist, or united Ireland' position. There is a question whether these activists or others, would think it would be straightforward to use and, if so, how any of the founding principles (e.g. ecological wisdom, social justice, nonviolence and, in particular, subsidiarity) to rationalise the party coming out in support of remaining in the Union. Even broadly it appears that the UI argument is easier to make and for this to 'resonate' based on green principles. One activist's (12) assessment is that it is an easier sell from those on the centre-left or progressive politics who could probably sell it to GP members better, a different vision of a new state, rather than what the UK is, and particularly through the

last years of Tory governments and austerity. A useful example is the Scottish Greens who came out as pro-independence and interviewees were asked about this.

Many of the same arguments around grassroots democracy and getting away from Britain are seen as rationalising a UI tied to subsidiarity and were articulated as such, yet most activists wanted their party to remain neutral currently. However, a certain activist, who saw how it was beneficial for the Scottish GP, was one of the few who wanted the GPNI to take a position. GPNI activist (13) said it is not as easy to justify a UI as an independent Scotland: *'I have deep misgivings about the British state…Scotland is clearly voting to the left of the rest of the UK and is distinct culturally, if nothing else…'.* There is likely cross-pollination of observing another GP taking a stance and affiliated with a CP in Scotland which leads some GPNI activists to believe this is necessary for the GPNI to do. However, the activists illustrate that maybe it is not so 'straightforward' to compare the GPNI and Scottish GP taking a CP because NI and Scotland are two different contexts, or alternatively, unification and independence are not directly comparable forms of constitutional change. Green support for a UI therefore could be understood as a similar path to Green support for an independent Scotland as access to a more progressive and liberalising society and so in line with Green priorities and issue interests. However, an occasional activist was more sceptical about the ROI as representing the progressive alternative avenue that a more progressive potential independent Scotland does within the UK (activist 5).

Conclusion

This chapter has traced three key manifestations of the GPNI's conceptual markers (non-alignment/civicness,

constitutional neutrality and for the GPNI, issue orientation); working-class focus, issue-based identity, and constitutional neutrality as they appear in the accounts of party activists. In each case, the picture that emerges is more complex and more contested than the markers themselves might suggest. Working-class focus is sustained through party branding even where individual activists' own class backgrounds are ambiguous or middle-class. It generates genuine material trade-offs for activists from working-class communities, and it intersects with ethno-national identity in ways that vary considerably across the activist base. Issue-based party identity and the commitment to eco-socialism as the organising principle of political action is deeply held. Activists join and stay for reasons not only tied to leftism and the intensity of their commitment shifts across issues over time, and the party's claim to 'own' the eco-socialist issue structures its competition with both PBP and Alliance in politically significant ways. Constitutional neutrality, finally, is not a static posture, but a dynamic and internally contested orientation. In a time of an altered political context, activists are increasingly aware that the party's neutrality is under pressure and many are open to or actively supportive of a more engaged role for the GPNI in constitutional deliberations, though the form and content of that engagement remain subjects of debate. There is diversity to the drivers of this engagement ranging from the party’s wider ethos, the role of Brexit, the party’s scope to reach out to unionists, and differential top-down and bottom-up processes.

Taken together, these three manifestations illuminate the GPNI as a party whose conceptual identity is not simply imposed from above through leadership, but is actively negotiated, sustained, and complicated by the activists who constitute its membership and day-to-day engine. The working-class ethos, the eco-socialist commitment, and the principle of constitutional

neutrality each are performed in different ways and with different degrees of self-awareness by the GPNI's activist base.

Chapter 6: Constitutional mind-set of the constitutionally neutral activists

Introduction

This chapter explores the factors and prisms through which activists as the core of a party with a position of constitutional neutrality navigate the constitutional question. It engages with core Green Party commitments on issues such as the environment and eco-socialism and how these influence support for a referendum or CP, the utopian versus rationalist assessments of a potential UI and what it offers, the design of an effective process for debate and transition, but also the interaction of residual identities and preferences rooted in affiliations as well as commitments to the Green agenda and issues.

Factor 1: The environment under each constitutional set-up: Do you need a UI to achieve all-island policy and climate transformation?

Unsurprisingly, the environmental impact will influence the constitutional decisions of many GPNI activists. However, even for several pro-UI activists, this does not mean they enthusiastically recognise that the ROI or its governmental approach to the environment is clearly better. For example, one activist who is pro-UI in the longer-term (11) says compared to the British government, Ireland is *'slightly, just slightly slightly better'* in terms of fracking licenses and pesticides due to being in the EU, and other internal reasons. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the conceptualisation of a UI is envisioned as a future that is more than simply changing the constitutional status to flip what is currently in place. A UI is attractive in the main only if it generates a more holistic set of changes in what is the 'New Ireland' than just joining the current ROI.

There are three potential avenues for environmental progress on an island-wide basis There are certain distinct logics through which it may be more 'convincing' that a full-blown united Ireland is necessary to achieve what an activist hopes to achieve in terms of the environment but that is not the only option. In the first 'implementation argument' a GPNI activist thinks that NI's environment would be better in a UI as they think an all-island approach would be a more efficient means of addressing eco-issues. However, given the scope for all-island cooperation without a constitutional change it is difficult to understand under this logic why they think a UI is necessary. For some Greens and in particular nationalist-inclined Greens, a UI is favoured as a means of diluting unionist or Westminster control, and this is what will allow for better eco-action. In this way, all-island decisions become achievable which in practice they are not currently, given the attitude of unionism and the British Government. As indicated in the assessment of the First Environment Minister of the devolved assembly currently mutually beneficial all-island engagement on the environment is not free of ideological resistance from those of a broadly unionist perspective who are wary of any 'all island' or 'cross-border' environmental/ sustainable development agenda (Barry, 2009). A UI would clearly overcome these roadblocks for many Greens.

If instead they think that NI's environment would be better because in a UI NI would be back under EU legislation, than it makes more sense why they see a UI as an environmentally beneficial outcome. This is the second potential avenue. Otherwise, if the activist views a UI as better for the climate/environment from a stand-point of 'nation-building' this is the 'radical argument' and provides a very clear reason why it is possible to understand why a UI would receive Green support for environmentalist reasons. Academic Seán Fearon recognises the

'implementation and radical argument' in justifying the positives of a UI. Commenting on this idea in terms of electricity trading across the island, Fearon (2021) explained '*A unitary all-Ireland state can and should make implementing climate policy, and the infrastructural commitments underpinning it, more effective and responsive.'* But, again, this appears in theory to be possible without a UI specifically if alternative cooperative mechanisms were in place on the island. However, Fearon ultimately goes further to develop a justification closer to the radical position explaining that '*Unity is in essence a process of nation-building…More specifically, this new dispensation can create political space to make the required structural changes and secure a safe climate future.'*

Given this, some activists (5; 8) themselves are convinced that partition in certain ways works against achieving an all-island environmental policy, as there are barriers created by the bureaucracy of having a border, or even more specifically the uncertainty created by the border about which side of the border has responsibility for dealing with the environment. Activist (5) said *'...in theory, you could…but of course, the red tape, the political symbolism...all of the things that go along with that when you have a border and you have the divisive nature of that border, I think, make it very difficult.'* For this reason, an implementation argument for a UI follows, as an all-island approach to the environment short of unification would not ultimately have meaningful success. However, in turn, a United Ireland without nation-building and transformational change more broadly is considered by some to have limited benefits or even detrimental consequences. 'Degrowth' or 'Post growth' perspectives argue that living standards are not solely determined by economic growth, but that instead redistribution and a circular approach to production can achieve the same goals but an 'implementation argument'

deemphasises these strategies as compared to more radical reimagination approaches (Fearon and Barry, 2022).

Fearon and Barry (2022) outline how an economic transition underpinning Irish reunification that intensifies and geographically extends the neoliberal growth models would see a New Ireland accelerate, rather than reverse, patterns of unsustainability we currently observe in both jurisdictions. Further to this, Fearon and Barry are critical of those arguing that a New Ireland would need a smaller public service than the two separate administrations currently operating and see this as a potential neoliberal scaling back of the state, which if replicated across the board in the approach to a UI would leave the new state no better off and potentially worse off than the two states it has replaced on issues of sustainability and distributive justice.

For many there are limits to the synergistic and implementation argument here and instead the idea of a broader 'reimagined future' is at the core of it. While a GPNI activist might say they are primarily motivated by, for example, the ‘environment factor’ in a referendum, to that activist they see the ‘environment factor’ as not just ‘will a UI be better for the environment’ but a much broader factor linked to ‘social issues’ like economic transformation. For example, one GPNI activist (16) – who is pro-UI anyway - reiterates this is not a cop-out, but for them, the issues (environmentalism and socialism), are so interlinked they cannot differentiate them so a whole economic transformation and revolution is necessary to address climate change and vice versa. In seeking to make progress on all of these things, this is understood as being easier to achieve in a UI as the idea of starting a new state and having constitutional change creates the opportunity for more substantive and radical changes of various forms deemed necessary. These arguments are perhaps most common among those already committed to the idea of a UI and could be read as retrospective

justification of that position, although there is a clear link to the core issue agendas of the Greens.

Being a Green supporter does influence what issues voters care about as these are policy-oriented voters of a niche party (Siers, 2025) but also how they weigh and interpret issues even where other voters care about them nominally to some degree. While it was difficult to figure out which factors would 'uniquely' influence Alliance activists in a referendum over the more moderate elements of unionism or nationalism, select GPNI activists are able to see how 'shared factors' (i.e. factors that will come into the deliberations of everyone) will influence GP supporters in a 'uniquely green way'. Therefore, this is a different interpretive framework for Green supporters. Being Green in this sense provides a lens around constitutionality that others do not have access to. For example, one activist (6) demonstrates that maybe being green offers you a 'lens' to recognise the immediate impacts of environmental and energy regression and even though they think those external to the party would be partially influenced in a referendum by some perception of the ROI doing better in terms of energy, ultimately it would take longer for outsiders to understand the impact of this and it would need to be explained in economic terms. In this way, GPNI activists have a sense that GPNI members and voters have a much stronger engagement with the environment and longer-term consequences than they believe many other voters have. This can also connect to the advantages of ROI EU membership in terms of renewables and lower energy prices, and this is seen as potentially an influence over people in NI's support for a UI in a referendum, but this will likely be much more readily apparent and important for GPNI voters and members. For example, even though the previously mentioned activist (6) thinks people will be influenced by Brexit in a referendum again they think 'being green' impacts what aspect of Brexit will be influential. They shared that *'everybody will be*

influenced by Brexit in different ways, but probably for different reasons than a Green party person would be'. This is because others will not be looking at environmental policies coming from the EU, they will instead be thinking more about issues such as their kids' ability to go to university in the EU. While in the end very few non-GPNI members or voters are likely to have the environment as their number one issue in a poll, while a plan is being developed GP activists can argue then as it will be very close even if just 1% of people are swayed by a strong green agenda, it could make the difference and therefore a plan for a New Ireland should appeal to this 1%.

How does a UI and the ROI stack up as an economic alternative? For some, the ROI does not offer a particularly distinct alternative given its export-oriented growth model and comparable neoliberal capitalist ethos. These anti-capitalist attitudes are again demonstrative of the pre-eminence of ideological commitments in the Greens which can sometimes 'override' their ethno-national preferences/identity. As GPNI activist (1) outlines *'... I don't identify as British because I hate all the kind of, like, colonial imperial history to do with it…But also...if there was a referendum tomorrow, I don't think I would vote to be part of a united Ireland as Ireland is now, because to me, it's a bit of a parasitic capitalist hell.'* In reality, given so many activists see Dublin and Belfast, London and Dublin, NI and the ROI, etc., as very much the same (as many Alliance activists do also) the common evaluation of the ROI as 'capitalist' is still not necessarily the biggest turn off because they do not think NI is much less 'capitalist' in comparison to ROI, or Belfast is much less 'capitalist' to Dublin. Ultimately for leftist Greens, these states are all capitalist. This assessment is backed up by one activist (4) who 'backtracked' on their initial assumption in the interview that the ROI is more 'big-business-focused' given NI has also been attracting big tech companies into the region. Notably, while the

ROI is attacked as being neo-liberalist capitalist, there was no major discussion about the UK in this regard.

Factor 2: Dealing with the 'shock' of leaving the EU: How Brexit impacts GPNI's activists' constitutional thinking at different ends

In Northern Ireland, political elites have drawn on Brexit as an opportunity: to achieve a united Ireland in the case of Nationalist leaders, or to strengthen the union for Unionist elites (Evershed and Murphy, 2021; Gormley-Heenan and Aughey, 2017). By sculpting Brexit in this way, leaders have prioritised their own groups' political agenda over intergroup harmony. However, the 'vision for opportunity' is not the same for GPNI activists. In their case, there is instead the core idea of different versions of these visions of opportunities like the reimagined eco-socialist future in a UI discussed above. Brexit generated this shock in thinking about how NI fits within the UK and ignorance of England towards NI. Realistically it was a shock for wider society in NI among the Remain voting population that were confronted with this ignorance and served either to harden pro-UI attitudes among Green nationalists or lead to questions for pro-Union or neutral Green activists. By threatening the GFA and raising the spectre of a return to a border on the island, Brexit has triggered a 'constitutional moment' generating a shift in thinking about island-wide relations and accelerated reunification debates (Todd, 2017). Stephen Farry recognised that technically the structures of the GFA were not challenged by Brexit in itself, but it potentially hurt the spirit of the agreement, impacting people's scope to hold many diverse identities, and causing people to revert back to their single identities (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2017, a).

GPNI's own Euroscepticism as regards the EU neoliberalist agenda explains why at least compared to Alliance more GPNI

activists exist at the ‘extreme’ ends in terms of Brexit’s impact on their constitutional mindset. Certain GPNI activists expressed that, to some degree, their personal Euroscepticism or cynicism about the EU was perhaps not reflective of the wider GP population. For example, one activist (3) knows there are many Green Party people who would potentially be less cynical about the EU than them, but they still feel the institution is somewhat ‘unreformable’. In fact, several activists expressed this sense that their Euroscepticism does not reflect strands within the GP more broadly. Returning to the EU is not something they are thirsting for albeit on balance, apart from one activist (7) who is radically Eurosceptic to the point they would not vote remain if they had their time all over again, Brexit is still viewed as a ‘bad thing’ to have happened. This is likely the difference between hard (i.e., fundamental anti-EU project) and soft (i.e., conditional opposition) (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002). As there is a greater Euroscepticism but ultimate pro-Remain preference among several GPNI activists, this means there are some who are indifferent about a United Ireland within the EU. As discussed later, at the other extreme, some other activists’ constitutional deliberations are instead strongly shaped by returning to the EU via reunification.

Brexit increased feelings of Europeanness among those in remaining states *‘because the constructed identity of a united Europe strengthens in such a crucial situation of endogenous crisis...’* (Breitmoser, 2021, p. 74). Within this context, it makes sense why one very soft unionist activist (4) credits EU membership as the driving force behind why they now support a UI. However, endogenous shocks assume a ‘sudden’ effect on identity but, in reality, the impact appears to come from how Brexit showed to activists that the English do not care about NI, but they also reveal that they already knew this before Brexit even came about. In this way, this process shows that Brexit just ‘reinforced’

their pre-existing perception rather than formulating it and, potentially other longer-standing factors (e.g. they (4) considered themselves part Irish) could also have contributed to this change. More broadly, with respect to the idea of Brexit 'reinforcing' pre-existing perceptions rather than generating new views, some activists like 16 and 17 outline how their resentment for how NI was treated by the UK in terms of Brexit was tied to a form of grievance that had already largely solidified prior to Brexit, such as when they went to university in England. However, the frustrations and resentment they had from university seems to overlap with the inferiority that Brexit conferred, similar to how the young people in Todd and McEvoy (2023) *'who had gone to college in the other jurisdiction noted the ways they were misunderstood or stigmatised in that jurisdiction'* (p. 8). Activist (16) similarly outlined '*…sort of the lack of knowledge…really cemented that…you do feel like a second-class citizen, to some extent…as a UK citizen, but not part of mainland Britain'.*

Sometimes it is indeed hard to see how Brexit has impacted the activists' view of their 'Britishness' as some seem to talk about their view of the EU as having already changed before Brexit. GPNI activist (1) said they got a view of the EU after working and living around Europe after leaving school, but also after Brexit they 'realised' that they do not resonate with this form of Britishness as their identity, having seen Brexit fought on issues like immigration. Another activist (10) explains *'on balance, I feel more Irish than British and particularly now...the version of being British that I would have felt isn't the Britain I recognise anymore'.* There is a shock to their self-understanding of their own Britishness but also to what Britishness meant generally as Brexit offered a very specific view of it that Green activists and supporters were especially uncomfortable with. Rather than Brexit generating this from whole cloth though, this likely had some deeper roots. Changes in attitudes to Britishness and the EU were already in

motion for some but Brexit constituted the strongest of exogenous shocks on top of this that ultimately leads to confrontation with identity and attitudes.

This shock to their understanding of Britishness now enables a potential vision of how the Britishness of Green supporters (different from the vision of Britishness Brexit brought into focus) could actually be accommodated with adjustments in a UI that facilitated that 'progressive Britishness' and a form of Europeanness that 'Brexit Britishness' has dispensed with. Brexit led to a realisation that Britishness does not have to be a connection to the UK in the traditional way as that is no longer a Britishness that Green supporters feel affiliated to. One GPNI activist (7) thinks reunification would have to lead in some way to a rethinking and reimagining of Ireland and Irishness and it would require a reimagining of Britishness in Ireland, and by 'rethinking' flags, anthems and symbols under a UI. Another activist, (15), who liked the idea of the GPNI articulating a 'two-futures' idea' also can see a future in NI where Irishness is embraced the same way as in the South. The activist explains *'you can imagine a future in Northern Ireland where Irishness is more central or treated equally to Irishness from Cork or Irishness from Kerry'.*

As mentioned previously in a distinct fashion, Brexit has impacted at the 'extremes.' For some, it completely changed views. For example, it made some activists pro-UI, or another activist (5), who is not from NI or Europe, went from feeling not much at all about a united Ireland or thinking about constitutionality – as that was not even remotely part of their upbringing to feeling something. Brexit '*shifted the balance a little bit'* in terms of making them see the positives of returning to the EU and for them this shift 'from nothing to something' about a UI is significant. However, the most radical of the activist cohort would be closer to a pro-Lexit position. One very Lexit activist would vote leave in a Brexit referendum if

they had their time all over again and they also see a positive in Brexit in terms of a UI. This GPNI activist (7) shares Brexit and how its consequences have fast-forwarded the reunification debate, which in some respects '*you could say it is good, as now we are dealing with an issue that we were kicking down the road for maybe a decade or so'.*

Although, as among Alliance, many GPNI activists also were 'in the middle' whereby Brexit made them think more generally about the state of the Union or showed them just how badly NI is treated by the UK government, but it has not dramatically altered constitutional thinking. This is still evidence of a 'shock', though one which is unlikely to be a radical transformation of views, but forces supporters and activists to begin that reckoning as it has for many in NI. This is, however, especially true for the Greens given their focus on wider values and issues which now require redress and imagination about what the future may involve.

Factor 3: Who should run the UI? The GPNI don't just want Irish Tories

For GPNI activists when considering the CQ and a potential UI, there are three distinct dimensions for the potential transformation in governance to be considered. Each of these dimensions must be assessed in terms of the scope to make substantive improvements (or avoid something worse) for someone who is a GPNI activist.

A. Tier 1: FF/FG/Tories in the Union

The first dimension Green activists must consider is the nature of the government that the ROI would have if and when unification were to occur and the implications for GPNI issue preferences. In

this respect, the changing face of ROI politics is critical to consider. Combining survey data since 1973 and all Irish election studies between 2002 and 2020, Müller and Regan (2021) show that the average Irish voter now leans to the centre-left. This move of ROI politics to the left could in principle be a pull factor for Green activists for whom the ROI may increasingly look like the progressive constitutional option. GPNI activists are particularly concerned with who would be 'governing' this unified Ireland. The conservative nature of ROI politics turns off several GPNI activists as in reality not everyone is convinced currently that the ROI or its government is moving more to the left at least compared to the UK. This suggests that the patterns Müller and Regan identify have not convinced GPNI supporters/activists yet and this is likely connected to the growth model in the South, housing problems, and the issues with public services in particular the health service. For example, one activist (3) notes that if there truly is a left government in the Republic which ends up doing good for the planet and people, it might sway people to a UI in the GP that may have been on the fence or would have not originally supported a UI. They say if it ends up with '*Irish Tories rather than British Tories… does that really…benefit anybody? I'm not banking on a left-leaning utopian government coming in the Republic anytime soon, sadly…*'

There is a question here as to whether GPNI activists who are pro-UI due to a desire to 'decolonise' NI (these activists are discussed more later) would reject a UI even if they still assessed the ROI as conservative by the time a referendum is called. Activist (6) would be willing to 'trade-off' having a practically Tory ROI government for a bigger voice for NI in politics and they justify their support based on NI getting a stronger voice, rather than outright decolonisation in the first instance *'… know that the government in the south right now are very neoliberal and practically Tories themselves but I just feel like in the longer term... It's better to have*

a say on this island than be screaming into the void of UK politics or British politics…'.

In turn, there is the question of who would govern Britain if rejecting a referendum and remaining in the UK. Would this be the Tories again? Labour? Reform? The challenge for those within the Greens who favour retaining the union is to frame this as the more leftist and/or progressive choice. This will clearly be partially dependent on the governing parties and coalition in the UK, but also on how those with unionist-coded backgrounds engage with and seek to frame the choice for the wider party to make.

An activist (15) can see the potential of someone's leftism to 'override' their unionist ideology in their evaluations and result in the somewhat counterintuitive outcome of a unionist-coded individual believing an SF government[73] would be attractive. Also, in a way one activist (12) sees how it can work in the reverse, in which the more left-leaning the politics of the UK goes the more likely it is to pull unionists who are on the left back: '*And I think that people...in the unionist camp are missing a trick of appealing to people on the left or centre-left by talking about the UK's radical history…the suffragettes, the Chartists, the trade union movement, abolition of slavery...things that I like about the UK in politics, there's nobody selling that version of the UK to me*.'

There is of course scope for the conditions to change by the time a referendum is called. For example, support for a UI by Green activists is likely conditional on the identity of the British governing parties. Years of Tory government for ideological reasons is especially distasteful to the Greens and is likely to generate rejectionist impulses towards the constitutional status quo.

[73] SF in the ROI is very clearly identified as left-wing and distinct from NI SF as below.

However, the Tories may not be in power and/or Brexit consequences and the relationship to the EU may be addressed. If these issues are addressed, this likely changes the calculus. Activist (12) for example said when answering on the impact of Brexit on their constitutional thinking, *'a little, but not hugely, I don't know, part of me thinks that the UK will return to the European Union within the next fifteen years… [What] made me question the constitutional question a bit more, is these successive Tory governments over the last number of years…So, I think that's an unanalysed element, people just go with Brexit, but I think there's really something in these Tory governments' austerity, populism…I think that's maybe caused people to question it in addition to potential loss of EU citizenship'.*

B. Tier 2: Sinn Féin, but ROI Sinn Féin not NI

The second dimension to consider in terms of governance transformation in the run-up to a referendum and the nature of the potential alternatives on offer to the Greens that they must consider in choosing whether to support constitutional change is the scope for major change in electoral politics in the South, Of course, as above this could mean a general move to the left and/or a UI itself leading to a renewal of what the New Ireland will look like to fit an eco-socialist Green agenda. If instead there is not that major radical change, then who will govern a UI is likely to be quite similar to the current ROI. This could however be a change from FF/FG and if a potential left government was likely to be elected (even without encompassing radical institutional change) likely led by SF and potentially involving the Social Democrats, PBP or the GPROI themselves, then this may be more attractive to Green activists in a way that traditional ROI politics would not be. There are however specific issues with this as a change of direction that could entice GPNI support especially given the key role likely to be played in any such left government in the South by SF.

There is a lack of knowledge between North and South in terms of things like public services and the broader political environment. Todd et al., (2023) outlined how '*In each of the four focus groups, low levels of awareness about life and policy on the 'other' side of the border, and how public services such as health and education were currently provided, were openly acknowledged by the vast majority of those taking part*' (p. 130). In this project, a similar pattern emerged in terms of familiarity with SF in the South. There was a mixed perception of SF that seemed to be reflective overall in a desire to know more about how politics works in the ROI. One activist (5) frames this as a lack of knowledge, saying *'…again, this is where…I don't feel like I know enough about the day-to-day, like, politics of it. So, like, is Sinn Féin in the south like Sinn Féin in the north?'* Activist (15) felt it was not necessarily a bad thing that SF was doing well because that success may show that voters in the Republic would be on a similar wavelength to the kind of people in the GPNI given SF's appeal in the South primarily connected to its centre-left politics. Also, Green activists identify different types of supporters of SF in NI to ROI. Activist (15) explains that SF would want some of the same centre-left things as the Greens do, like dealing with the housing crisis, and their success is rooted in leftism, not because it has been shouting about a UI or defending the IRA constantly as would be the case (from the activist's perspective) in NI. One example of more effective tone-conscious communication instead from SF which if repeated systematically may court the centre-ground also came up among GPNI activists when, at the time of some interviews, Queen Elizabeth died, and some activists brought up the public message from the SF leader. For some GPNI activists (4; 10), the type of message and language used by SF in this case showcased what would 'win over' those who might feel like they will be excluded in a UI, that they will not be alienated or make some strands of unionism feel genuinely understood and engaged with. At the same

time, SF even in the ROI are not seen as having the same type of left-wing politics so the GP could still differentiate itself or the leftist credentials of SF may still be questioned by some. In the case of activist (3) they questioned the leftist credentials of SF *'…I suppose that's taking into account that, if Sinn Féin really are a left party, which is up for debate because they certainly aren't up here [laughter]…'.* GPNI activists do have particular admiration for Sinn Féin's efforts to build a socialised healthcare model in the ROI. For example, while private payment for healthcare and the influence of the Roman Catholic Church are a UI turn-off, one activist (6) also recognises there is much work going on in the south with parties like SF leading on attempts to improve healthcare provision.

SF for others is seen as part of the picture of a 'reimagined future' provided for by a potential UI. Some activists seek a UI as a form of socialist utopia, but both this cohort and even among those who also hold more pragmatic views and are more focused on weighing up the evidence, what an SF UI government would mean in terms of the scope for major change is a key consideration. Even if SF are considered left, they are not considered the same type of left as the GPNI, in the same way the Greens taking a UI position would not be the same thing as the nationalist parties being pro-UI. For example, activist (15) views SF in the ROI as left, but see their leftism as different to GPNI left-libertarianism, and connects it to potential authoritarian tendencies within SF.

C. <u>Tier 3: GP in government, but a version of the GP which is more like GPNI versus GPROI</u>

The consideration of whether to support a UI for the GPNI is also dependent on an additional internal dimension, in terms of what the future is likely to be for the party itself if a UI were to come to pass both strategically and then as an issues-based party in a New Ireland.

First, there are practical considerations in terms of voting and strategy. Activists consider whether a UI could offer a better chance for representation due to PR-STV and prospects for government. This means the practical considerations of electoral system currently and in a possible UI are being considered as this will affect the prospects for the party and its influence on issues in parliament and in government. There is also the perspective that a change in constitutional status would enable the Greens to have a say as NI does not get that with Westminster and the Greens and other micro parties could have more of a say in a UI. For example, when answering could a UI offer anything to NI that it does not already have, one activist (9) shares 'A *Green Party in government would be something. So there's a different electoral system, which probably could be for the benefit of Green Party and smaller minority parties to get a foothold…'*

Next, there are strategic considerations for the GPNI activists in terms of potential competition with the current GPROI especially as the GPNI is much smaller. This raises a number of questions. How do they look at the current Greens in the South? Would they have sway over GPNI in the event of a UI? What does the Green record in ROI say to GPNI supporters about what the future might hold? It may be that a Green party in government is more likely to be offered by a UI given the ROI has shown how the Greens can go into coalition, but it may be more preferable again that a Green party under a UI can become a challenger to SF from the left and generate a politics with a left-oriented centre of gravity. Of course this would still require the Greens to significantly grow.

Alliance activists have a greater dilemma than the GPNI activists about the survival of their party after a UI result. Even if the GPNI is forced to merge with the GPROI, at least there will still be a place for green politics, while Alliance risks losing relevancy. However, this pessimistic angle was not the majority view from

activists. Although some activists question the relevancy or fit of Alliance in a UI – one Alliance activist, (4), recognises the possibility that Alliance becomes '*niche'*, and possibly even '*irrelevant'* in a UI - on balance though, more Alliance activists still envisage an existence for Alliance beyond a unity vote (this matches the findings from the focus group research from Tonge et al., 2024, p. 184). For example, one activist (18) thinks Alliance would also have great opportunities to expand under a UI even though it would become a minority party. However, even though some recognise that Alliance would still be needed given its mission to unite all communities would not suddenly be achieved under a UI (e.g. activist 20), the party could still change with this new constitutional arrangement. As one activist (24) explains, there will still need to be a cross-community uniting party in a UI, but that does not necessarily need to be Alliance, it could be '*Alliance reincarnated*' with members from unionism and nationalism integrated into a new party. Some might have to reconsider whether they would be in Alliance, or maybe those who Alliance appeals to might change in a UI context, which would in turn affect the 'type of activist' within Alliance.

The other idea is not that the success of any post-UI Green Party is the influential factor, but the success of the current Green Party in ROI. The GPROI itself could influence the voting decisions of those in the GPNI, particularly how its success in government would be illustrative of the potential success of green politics. Exemplifying this, when commenting on what they speculate could sway those undecided GP voters towards voting for a UI, one GPNI activist (2) says *'Essentially, has the Green Party in Ireland had any success? Has it influenced policy?...Because that will be critical evidence that being a Green Party member can influence the future.'* A major question for activists to consider is to what extent the GPNI assesses that the GPNI will no longer exist as a separate entity to the GPROI under any UI model. Some activists suggested

explicitly and others implicitly that there would be an amalgamation of the two parties. For example, activist (9) seemed to suggest it is obvious the GPNI would not exist while others seemed to consider the potential for two parties to persist in a UI. Given this, potentially the idea of the GPNI 'officially' joining up with the GPROI under a UI jurisdiction might not be a completely uncomfortable prospect for GPNI activists given even at this stage most activists were indifferent to, or unconcerned by, the party's all-island status (it was not even clear to select activists whether the official label was 'all-island' or 'all-Ireland'). Even the most 'British-identifying' activist (9) concedes (after stating that being an all-Ireland party turns off some voters) that it makes sense that the party is all-Ireland, as opposed to all-UK, for environmental purposes as they share the same eco-landmass. Activists present the 'all-island status' as something that does not really bother them, or it is at least not an issue in general apart from specific times such as the 2020 ROI coalition-building period and when the motion for this status was first passed. Alternatively, they view the status as not really an issue because as much as the GPNI have links with the GPROI, it has great relationships with the GPs in the UK too. While the GPNI supporters may not be 'ideologically resistant' to the all-island status, they are resistant towards being considered the same as the GPROI. Bolleyer (2010) accounts for the evolution of the GPROI away from its more radical and bottom-up, grassroots-led roots towards a more elite-led, moderate organisation. The GPNI has a greater persistence of radicalism and member-led policy positioning, which likely underpins this distinct self-image and distance from the GPROI observed among the GPNI activists.

Ultimately for many Greens especially those who see a UI as the radical socialist destination, the identity of the governance of the New Ireland is less important than the creation of this New Ireland itself. As an issues-based niche party the focus is on the issues. For this reason, there will always be an attitude alongside

'who would govern a UI' and/or 'what would be the institutional advantages for Greens in a UI' that is focused instead on the party making progress on issues as this is the core mission for a party not defined by its constitutional position and ethno-national identity.

Factor 4: Not everyone is 'undecided' – being not so neutral in a constitutionally neutral party

The GPNI as a constitutionally neutral party has activists and members who are not neutral and not driven by evaluations of wider policy positions and the Green interpretative framework. This section provides an investigation of the extent to which core identities do actually still shape their views instead in a post-conflict divided society where such identities are difficult to escape.

'Nationalist-coded greens'

Firstly, there are 'nationalist-coded greens' (e.g. activist 7) who do not deny that their nationalist upbringing could influence them, but they are not ideologically nationalist. Instead they may hold a 'superordinate, cosmopolitan' identity, but they do think the evidence is weighted towards reunification being the better outcome in a referendum. This cosmopolitan identity acts as a barrier against becoming pulled too much towards the ideology of nationalism, that is, *'a cosmopolitan identity is seen as an expression of selfhood that transcends cultural identity and collective belonging'* (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018, p. 130). Clearly their reasoning is inflected, often self-consciously, by the conditions of their upbringing and socialisation. The cosmopolitan identity functions as a kind of ideological insulation and barrier against the pull of ethno-nationalism, but it does not and cannot wholly neutralise formative influences of background. This is important to acknowledge in a post-conflict divided society and not unexpected, but still critical for this internal debate in the party.

It would be difficult to categorically argue that 'nationalist-coded greens' motivations for a UI result are 'purely' evidence-based. GPNI activist (7) notes *'I mean, only a fool would deny that one's upbringing and even subconscious socialisation and so on will have no bearing. I mean, even though I'd self-describe myself as a Marxist and an internationalist rather than a nationalist… I would have to admit that…you're brought up in an anti-British context'*[74]. However, it appears that the activist has been 'more' convinced by a united Ireland for a long time but previously they were convinced more from an ideological angle (republicanism) now they state they are convinced by the evidence albeit the activist (7) considered the NI statelet as never sustainable anyway. However, the biggest indicator of the extent to which identity or evidence is the driver of views will be if there is a change in preference to match the evidence, such as if new evidence for more effective environmental protection goes towards the UK. Gesiarz et al. (2019) find people are influenced to stop gathering data earlier when they have reached a desired conclusion. However, this activist (7) does not appear to have a 'cut-off point' for gathering data as being in the Union is seen as at least not preventing (even if not quite advancing) constructive eco-cooperation and this can be acknowledged where the evidence appears to counter their own position: *'You know, for example, we already have hydrogen buses that are made in Ballymena being used in Dublin. Now, but there, that's an example against what I've just said because there we have partition does not stop positive moves in the decarbonising renewable energy direction'.*

Additionally, activist (7) also does not think all 'prejudices' are unjustified, as sometimes a prejudice that has some evidence behind it is actually a warranted and reasonable belief and they think there is also a legitimacy behind forms of instinctive

[74] The activist (7) is not necessarily talking directly about their own family unit here.

nationalism even if they are critical of this position themselves. In this sense it is of course reasonable to expect that one's cultural background and wider ideological view has an influence, which is separate and for some may be stronger than policy positions on the environment. Even for a constitutionally neutral party's activists this cannot be unexpected in a society where identities have been such strong socialising forces. Are GPNI activists actually convinced by the 'evidence' that a united Ireland is the better choice for the environment, or are those pro-UI activists who already want a UI using the eco-evidence to reinforce their pre-existing bias? GPNI activist (1) still thinks that your identity is not trumping your environmental concerns as you specifically joined a party that works against that, but on reflection says *'Like, sometimes it's even hard to recognise in yourself if you're, almost not like stretching the facts to fit your case…Like, "Oh, I think being part of a united Ireland would be better for the environment, because I really want to join a united Ireland"… Or like the, the other way'*. It is clear that there is an element of both dynamics at work and in different proportions for different individuals but it is very challenging to ultimately assess in each case which influence predominates.

'Green-coded Nationalists'

Secondly, there are 'Green-coded nationalists' who are eco-socialists that support the GPNI's primary focus on issues, but hold a deeper connection to the nationalist aspect of their identity. For example, while one GPNI activist (16) recognises the strength of the environmental argument and policy logic around a UI, ultimately their pro-UI stance comes from their identity and long-standing aspiration as a nationalist. Activist (16) calls themselves a soft nationalist. Although cosmopolitan identity might act as a barrier, cosmopolitan identities have often been tied into and organised along traditionally dominant ethno-divisions, meaning

for example that republican and state-centred feminists, or green and orange socialists have existed in Northern Ireland history (see Todd, 2016, p. 10). These ‘green-coded nationalists’ are not ‘Sinn Féin supporters’ in a GPNI body as even if ideologically nationalist or more pro-UI, they decided to express their politics through a party which is not focused on unification. However, while activist (16)’s drive towards the GPNI somewhat comes from their ‘socialist’ identity, they admitted they initially joined the GPNI because they got a job with the party, and so would they have joined a nationalist party if they had worked for it? It seems they would still have supported the Greens as they have had a long-term affinity with the GPNI, and they would have always been a supporter and their first vote was for the former GPNI leader, Clare Bailey.

Activist (16) explains their sense of Irishness and nationalism and support for a pro-UI is not built on symbols like flags and they would be happy for all of those to be brand new but they acknowledge there will always be people on the island who will need these traditional symbols from one or both communities. Activist (15) who is not explicitly pro-UI but is an Irish nationalist, also does not put much weight on symbolic representations of their identity, a theme also in Alliance. The activist (15) would like to a see a state where the cultural identities of all the peoples of Ireland are represented in some way in the state. They explain that might well be through symbols or tokenistic displays but that is probably fine because much of cultural identity comes down to symbols and does not necessarily go much further than that. In this sense, independent of the degree or explicitness of support among very strong Irish identifiers, there is still a rejection of the idea of a ‘United Ireland for the Irish.’

The above are exemplars of those for whom the GPNI's issue-based identity is genuinely and deeply held, but who

simultaneously maintain a substantive, rather than incidental, connection to Irish nationalist identity and a long-standing aspiration towards unification. They acknowledge and engage this more directly. The challenge here for the Greens as a constitutionally neutral party is whether such individuals could, given alternative evidence, support an alternative to a UI (e.g. status quo in referendum) or if identity affiliations and aspirations make this too challenging despite their commitment to Green issues. This will be an important internal challenge for the party to navigate as it engages more with this debate and a potential referendum.

Overtime - Gradual change via interactions

Although exogenous shocks like Brexit are often assumed to generate attitudinal change that can happen 'in a moment' this perspective does not easily explain how other activists' movement to a pro-UI position operated as 'gradual change', that is how the narrative moved as they moved through life and encountered experiences which prompted periods of re-evaluation. As one activist (10) explained, '*prior to Brexit, I would say that I would always have been more pro-unity than anti-unity anyway, all right'*. These processes of change over time are relatively common if sometimes overlooked in accounts of political attitudinal change as Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001, p. 359) explain: *'The identity construction of the individual can be perceived as a process of self-reflexion that arises as a person moves through time and space, and through different organisational and institutional environments.'* Of course, it is important to recognise here that this may not be full-blown identity change and it is difficult to determine whether this is a preferential change or a fundamental change in identity. It should be therefore understood that identity change need not be so drastic, for example entirely from British to Irish. For one former Protestant GPNI activist (10) having lived in

two communities and being an academic 'opened their eyes' to seeing a united Ireland as a more positive option. They grew up in the unionist community and then moved to the nationalist community, which *'gives you a totally different perspective on everything'* and being an academic *'gives another layer of nuance in there because you have studied and been exposed to different theories and had an opportunity to develop more nuanced thinking'*. They aptly conclude *'So, all of that, I think, breaks down any of that, traditional background.'* This is an illustrative case of the dynamics through which the flexibility and movement of identities and preferences are difficult to box in as the activist is pro-union not Protestant or Catholic, identifies as neither, but more Irish on balance. This is evidence of the multiplicity and of identities that form the membership of this type of party and the reality of what the 'centre-ground' allows.

Of course, the impact of living in both communities likely depends on how superficial the interactions were to change potential stereotypical views held, but it appears that cross-group friendships associated with greater perspective taking and reduced intergroup anxiety and prejudice play a key role here (see Hewstone et al., 2006). For example, GPNI activist (3) grew up in a house where religion and politics were not talked about, but for them the key change was their attendance at a Catholic secondary despite being from a middle-class soft unionist background. This was an experience they were positive about as they learned about a '*different side'* of NI they would not have experienced if they had gone to a different secondary school in their area, which has a very unionist-leaning demographic. They are now more pro-UI albeit they are very against calling a referendum imminently. In other cases, it is difficult to pinpoint when attitudinal change occurs. For example, activist (17) came from a soft unionist background and practising Presbyterian family but came over time to lean towards

a pro-UI position even if it is unclear precisely when this happened and this appears to be a multi-stage, evolving process.

Overtime – Pragmatism and experiences of academia

Activist (10) also said that while part of the reason they are from a unionist background but would be much more likely to vote for a UI is how they have lived in both communities, part of it is also due to *'pragmatism'.* Activist (4) also thinks a UI is a 'pragmatic choice' because they think being back in the EU makes sense, but it is less clear whether activist (10)'s pragmatic reasoning for a UI is due to their academic experience and evaluation of a potential UI through this prism. There appeared to be a role for this academic perspective in how they expressed themselves on the issue. In this way, considering a UI the pragmatic choice is not an abstracted concept, and academia has instead allowed them to understand the feasibility of a UI, relative to the ideological ideals of it. However, this itself assumes that academia is the space for pragmatic thinking. Activist (10), and another activist (7) (a nationalist-coded green previously discussed) tended to imply that being an academic means you are an 'empiricist' weighing up the evidence on which constitutional outcome is best (from a non-ideological perspective), but both these activists themselves already appear swayed towards a UI being the better option. Therefore, it remains difficult to conclude that being an academic is engendering a more rational evaluation of the evidence or whether these activists already held these views. It may be that those who tend to be activists, and perhaps Green activists in particular, go into academia already convinced that a UI is the best option from an ideological perspective. At the same time it is interesting to note that activist (10) in particular came from a PUL background, but still opened themselves up to alterative perspectives that may not have been available to them in earlier years of socialisation. This is suggestive that, at least from a

socialisation point of view, academia may have a distinct influence even if the notion of academics simply weighing the empirical evidence up to decide upon their support for the available options is less well-supported.

Definitional (or still gradual?)

Of course, the previous discussions of 'gradual change' dynamics assume that there was indeed a 'movement' towards a pro-UI position from a pro-union position, but it might be the case that a pro-UI Protestant was 'always' pro-UI and this is not necessarily the same as a route to 'conversion'. For instance, one GPNI activist (6) explains that they have always felt there are many ways to be a Protestant in NI and they were brought up as a *'lefty Prod'* as their family was active in socialist/communist circles. Potentially it was not a 'gradual change' as it was for the previous activist (10) that made them pro-UI, but being pro-UI is to them a representation of their own *'lefty Prod'* upbringing. Notably, this activist was the only interviewee to mention Marxist or Communist interactions. It has been their belief that in order to facilitate a united Ireland, the community must be united towards this common goal and they are strong believers in the power of socialism as a means to unite the opposing communities who will then be more amenable towards republican aspirations. As they explain, '*there are different ways to be a prod in this place and that's…the version that I was exposed to, coupled with the fact that…our family holidays, through my whole childhood and teenage years were just traveling around Ireland…'. However, again, an element on learning '…I was just learning about the history of British colonialism and imperialism'.* There is then potential evidence that certain activists consider support for a UI as a natural companion to leftist beliefs in a ''definitional' sense. However, there is also a role for additional gradual dynamics as the activist refers to socialisation over time

too in their experiences of travelling in Ireland and learning about Irish and British colonial history incrementally.

Decolonisation – 'sub-source'

If it can be said that a left ideology aligns with principles of unity, it adds complexity to the understanding of another 'sub-source' of certain former PUL activists' greater pro-UI preference, specifically decolonisation frameworks. For Green social movements, sustainable development is strongly tied to post-colonisation and decolonisation frameworks of understanding (Doran 1994; Barry 2004 in Barry and Doran, 2016. p. 329). It appears that the same activists (10; 6) (who also experienced a gradual shift in views) revealed what may be assumed to be more 'republican' reasons for why they want unification around decolonisation and settlement as the interviews progressed. However, of course, these decolonisation-based arguments for unification could be rooted in the Green decolonisation and post-colonisation narratives outlined above. Another activist (11) who is from the Shankill Road with a Protestant background, but is pro-UI in the long-run explains *'…for me, there isn't too much you could do on this side of things, in terms of adding to what already is in Northern Ireland to make me want to stay in the union, because despite the fact that I could potentially use [?] the NHS, I'm still for a united Ireland because, for me anyway, I like the idea of un-colonising the country, almost'*. They share this revelation after listing their pros and cons for and against a UI albeit the timing of the border poll is critical to this activist. In turn, activist (10) thinks they would feel more settled in a UI and out of *'this contested state'* and activist (6) would just like it to be *'done and settled'* through a UI, so an *'awful limbo'* will not be passed on to the next generation.

Unionist-coded greens / Green-coded unionists

Unionist-coded Greens are the clear inverse of the nationalist-coded Greens above. To understand the preferences for all of these cohorts of activists, the key is the differential weighting they afford to evidence and the impact that constitutional options play in support for policy and issue preferences versus the role of identity. For unionist-coded Greens as for nationalist-coded Greens it is the evidence that takes precedence whereas for Green-coded unionists and nationalists it is identity that is fundamentally more salient. Unionist-coded greens are a relatively small cohort and of course, this may potentially inhibit the maintenance of the party's neutrality. As discussed previously, this may potentially explain the tendency of the Greens to be seen as one activist described as the '*eco wing of the Shinners'*.

A former pro-union activist (8) from a unionist background is evidence-based in their analysis of a UI. They see themselves as a rebellious person and they reflected on whether their rebellious nature could push them away from their traditional upbringing as a unionist. However, what separates this activist (8) from those more pro-UI (former) PUL activists above is they would not necessarily be inclined to vote for a UI, and instead they would need enough information to know what they are voting for and what is going to happen. In this way, they are somewhat akin to the 'nationalist-coded greens', in that if they were to support a UI, it still would be based more on 'evidence' rather than just a desire to 'rebel.' To support a UI though, there would have to be a shift in the evidence base to alter their views.

One activist (9) interviewed was clearly a Green-coded unionist. As expected in the GPNI, it appears their 'cosmopolitan identity' superseded their ethno-nationality when deciding which party to support, specifically activist (9) has been invited to join

unionist parties in the past and it was not for them because of their '*socialist outlook'*. However, when it comes to voting in a border poll, their 'tribal' identity will be salient, as their vote ultimately comes down to their Britishness more than their Green Party membership and this will therefore likely be a pro-union vote, albeit factors like Brexit and the environment could sway them and there is a degree of hesitancy to this view.

Interestingly, given the common argument that a more federal governing system would be more attractive to unionists in the event of a United Ireland, there was an expectation that this Green-coded unionist activist would want a 'federal United Ireland'. However, this activist (9) was not actually on board with this long-term. Ultimately, what is observed from activists reflects most research to date on the general NI population (i.e., an initial assumption that Stormont would continue under a UI, followed quickly by reasons why it might not or should not or cannot) creating uncertainty around the activists' overall perspectives. Other activists including former Protestant activists such as (11) don't want Stormont to become a permanent fixture in a UI.

Factor 5: Non-violence – Legitimacy of the party taking a stance, and the non-legitimacy of violence

Interview discussions also explored the depth of commitment to the value of nonviolence in the Greens as this pertains to potential violence that may emerge in the context of a referendum. Perhaps surprisingly in a 2021 poll, a very large proportion of GPNI (95%) and Alliance (86%) voters agree the dispute over NI's status remains unresolved and there is still a potential for violence in the future, In particular, this section considers attitudes a) as to whether it is legitimate for the GPNI to believe violence is a reason not to have a referendum but also b) discussing legitimacy of violence itself according to GPNI activists.

There are in essence three distinct strands of thought that emerged among GPNI activists on these issues:

1. The risk of violence is of such significance and scale; there is a need to be careful about considering having a referendum at all;
2. A certain degree of violence may occur and while that violence is illegitimate, it will be a representation of marginalisation and therefore there is a need to design the best possible process to minimise it;
3. There is inevitability to violence occurring, but it will just have to be dealt with effectively.

Non-violence being an explicit goal of GPNI ultimately probably persuaded one activist (14) to join the party and if a referendum is called in the next five years '…*the factors I'll be looking at are not so much the "oh who's putting up a good case for a united Ireland or who's putting up a good case for a Union", it's who's putting up a good case for a non-violent transition…and whether that's to a transition towards, some form of united Ireland or it's a transition towards a reinvented Northern Ireland, it needs to be about, how do we do this without inflaming the tensions and setting the scene for more violence*...'. Opposition to violence follows as a deep-seated principle and as such deters some from support for a referendum. Notably, activist (10) felt, while supportive of a UI in the general sense, that in the current environment having a referendum is '*like throwing an incendiary device in. And I just do not see that it would be, in any way, healthy…*'. Of course, this is a contentious debate. The opposing perspective is exemplified by a leading Belfast academic who has said the threat of violence must not be an argument against any future referendum on a united Ireland being decided by a simple majority vote, even if it is 50 per cent plus one (Irish Times, 2019). However, for the GPNI this is a more essential and meaningful consideration as it is at the core of

the party as non-violence is one of the four principles that all Green Parties operate by. In this sense, the concern regarding violence following from a referendum that the Greens may choose to support constitutes a key challenge to alignment of potential policy and principle.

The issues around the Protocol were considered a 'taster' of how the UI debate will or how a UI result would be responded to. Sometimes, unintentionally talking about the reaction to the Protocol, or how the debate was carried out around it, also pushed some GPNI activists to revisit their understanding of 'democracy'. For example, one activist (7) viewed the Protocol as an indication of how a debate around a UI will have to deal with all sorts of interpretations, misinterpretations, what counts as evidence, and at its core the *essence of democracy,* that is, non-violent disagreement, with violence as an illegitimate response. Another activist (11) notes how the Protocol was responded to by political unionism illustrated to them what an unhealthy way to cope with not getting your way looks like and, while this is democratic in a sense, it is not seen as aiding democracy in Northern Ireland generally and in the case of a UI similar dynamics would occur. This activist feels though that delaying a referendum is preferable as the conditions within the community currently risk serious unrest if there was to be a UI in the short-term. GPNI activist (1) similarly said *'...if the whole situation wasn't managed correctly…And I hate saying this because almost by saying it, you're almost giving, like, a legitimacy to it. But I really do fear that it would descend into, like, violent conflict again…And maybe that is just because of the way we grew up, that you always think it's around the corner… but…and the genuine anger…that people feel it's not a huge leap to see how it could go back to there… And like, again like, I don't want to exaggerate it because maybe it won't*'.

For some it may be that the risk of violence leads to opposition to a border poll due to the commitment to nonviolence in which the response to the Protocol functions as a taster. However, for others this Protocol violence and the threat or possibility of violence around a referendum would, in certain cases, be understood as the product of resentment and a sense of marginalisation that needs to be proactively addressed. As Schwartzmantel (2010) outlines, the mobilisation of violence is '*an expression of anger, directed against institutions, symbols, and processes which proclaim…inclusion yet do not live up to the aspiration to provide…adequate recognition of particular identities of…sections of the citizen body. It may not be only those who are marginalised who resort to violence… this is a powerful cause of the resort to violence and… presents a challenge to liberal democracy…'* (p. 228). Some in the GPNI see majoritarianism as the cause of potential marginalisation and thus of violence. For example, one GPNI activist (7) suggests the GPNI could adopt a position to advocate to change the current threshold needed to pass a referendum such as saying it should be a two-thirds majority as opposed to 50% +1 although ultimately the activist did not agree with this higher threshold. This would in reality involve changing the terms of the GFA and would require a particular '*generosity of spirit'* as the same activist put it. However, ultimately the activist also said concerns around violence cannot prevent unification if the majority want it. The risk of longer-term violence is seen as a reason to ensure to effectively design the process of debate, organisation of a referendum and potential transition but if this process is unmanageable based on evidence, then for some this may be a reason not to hold a referendum. A more poorly designed process would likely generate greater marginalisation and resentment and render potential violence more legitimate. If instead, a fair, transparent and equitable process is designed, and violence was still to follow then in this case the legitimacy of the process further underlines the illegitimacy of a violent response as the most

reasonable measures possible have been enacted to seek to address potential marginalisation from the outcome. This is tied closely to Green support for citizens' assemblies as part of this process.

A third view emerged that violence cannot, irrespective of scale be enough to block a referendum/UI as not only is any violence illegitimate, but some degree of unrest is also inevitable and as such can only be deterred and controlled. In some cases, this view was expressed based on the belief that potential violence will in reality be relatively marginal while in other cases, it appears activists operated on the basis that the threat of violence is always to some degree around the corner for NI and as such cannot determine strategy or policy. For GPNI activist (4), they would still vote for a UI anyway, as they assessed that even violence during the Troubles was localised, but also expressed a sense that NI is used to the threat of civil unrest. As GPNI activist (11) similarly explains, *'And that slightly, only slightly, puts me off because I do think that a united Ireland is something inevitable. And so, whether the community I'm part of, there is civil unrest or not, I think it's going to happen…I try not to let it affect my opinion too much because, in my opinion, it is inevitable, but it's just how much…'.* This further underlines the need to develop a process that is as inclusive as possible and minimises the risk of civil rest or even violence.

Factor 6: Hyper-support for citizen assemblies?

Activists express support for civic-led approaches, but there is a question here as to whether this is a preference for citizens' assemblies specifically or 'participative' democratic mechanisms more generally. The GPNI believe the starting gun has been fired on the debate, and that the likelihood of a referendum in the short-

to-medium-term has significantly increased while most Green activists would define NI as not being 'ready' for a referendum now given the debate is only beginning. The GPNI, like Alliance, believe preparations and conversations must occur in order for NI to be 'ready' for a referendum. There are a variety of potential options available here. First, there is a broadly participative approach which would mean not a formal CA right now, but a much more grassroots debate, alongside sector specific debates in trade unions, farmers, health workers etc. The hope here is that this may see a consensus on some issues (at least among UI advocates) narrowing down the areas where a CA might help.

While the activists might be open to a greater range of alternatives, maybe the 'hyper-support' for CAs or even civic forums in the GPNI could actually limit activists understanding of alternative models/mechanisms for constitutional dialogue (or potentially even more political party-led forums). Even one GPNI activist (5) openly admits that all they really know about is CAs in terms of preparing for a referendum, '*So the conversations and the preparations…need to…ready the ground for what kind of futures we're looking at both north and south…What they are is a bit trickier…I suppose I don't really know anything other than…things like citizens assemblies, but it would be really interesting to know what other countries have done in this regard, like when Germany reunified…'.*

Activists also feel a more civic style of preparation for a referendum are the types of discussion that their party could really play a role in or lead, which inclines them towards it. It is the type of engagement that GPNI can actually get involved with or lead, compared to other parties. For example, one activist (5), thinks it would be interesting to see how it would go if the Greens ran some kind of civic forum, imagining a future UI or a vision for the future. Also, another activist (16) notes as the conversation across the

island progresses, the GP has a role in ensuring that civic engagement and a direct democracy model is central to how those policies and the plan for a UI are drawn up. To take on such leading roles in a referendum, even if it could be seen as not explicitly neutral on the constitutional question, would be a position the Greens could thrive in because they know they will be able to justify the need for civic-led mechanisms based on green principles of grassroots democracy. In this way, they can decouple the constitutional connotations around taking on such roles because there is a need for the 'people's voice' in building a referendum or UI. Of course, another simpler reason that the GPNI activists are particularly pro-citizens' assemblies is due to the fact that the ROI ran lots of CAs that GPROI attended. This was also a component of the ethos the Scottish Greens sought to develop around their approach to independence.

Tie to vision for the future in New Ireland with assembly / opportunity to develop civic ethos

Building on this previous point, the Scottish Greens campaigned for independence in their manifesto: '*With independence, Scotland can develop a new written constitution for Scotland through a citizens' constitutional convention. Scotland can become an independent republic based on participatory, local democracy, where politicians are always elected through proportional representation'* (Scottish Greens, 2014, p. 12). There is complementarity to how the GPNI activists consider citizen assemblies a tool to 'discuss' a referendum or a UI, but also in how their civic ethos is mirrored in how they envision building a New Ireland. Activists are not just promoting an inclusive process in constitution-making or following the GP principle of grassroots democracy, but by actively encouraging overall increased citizen participation, they actually showcase their desire to build a truly democratic New Ireland. For example, one activist (15) would like

to see mechanisms for civic input being used to shape any new constitution, and these mechanisms themselves being included within any constitution: *'It has to be a much more deliberative process in that, that involves people…the Irish state already has mechanisms for citizens' assemblies, and the Good Friday Agreement was supposed to have…Civic Forum…there are those ideas around ordinary people having for a, it has been a part of both parts of Ireland. So, I think that it would be great to have them in the constitution but also use them as a way of having a constitutional conversation that...we really build a kind of a new jurisdiction that people can agree on.'*

Notably, those in Alliance seem comparatively less focused currently on the use of CAs in contrast to the GPNI and sometimes can be quite critical. Alliance activist (2) for example outlines the view that politicians are citizens too, and so CAs would just be what is already in the Assembly as this is the primary venue for representation. Even though they are critical, the activist is still though supportive of co-design and more generally, Alliance activists still also don't think the conversations and preparations around a referendum should be dominated or only dominated by the political parties. They also recognise the potential for civil society and/or businesspeople-led conversations to become their own echo chambers and/or the need to try to pull in ordinary people and diverse voices into these types of discussions. Ultimately though, the GPNI is the party of the centre-ground that embraces these deliberative mechanisms most directly and this is rooted in the party's values and broader ethos both in terms of how to structure debate but also potentially the new society they foresee as potentially emerging from this debate.

Factor 7: Building a New Ireland – a 'Utopia'?

Some GPNI activists, as above, will support a UI as a New Ireland and a means of building a vision of a new future and the opportunity for that. Others will not, and will, as above, base their decision on the evidence, which is dependent on the alternative in the UK and/or dependent on who governs a new ROI-style Ireland and what that looks like (see Factors 1 and 3 above). For those supporting a more radical position, there is a question as to whether GPNI activists' ideas border on 'unrealistic utopian thinking' about what a UI would involve, that, if accurate, would reflect some Alliance activists' view of the Greens as lacking logical thinking.

Rather than treating this thinking as simply naïve, it is worth exploring what it means to be 'utopian' in one's thinking in this context. Levitas argued that imagining an alternative society involves an idealised representation of the present. Accordingly, utopias can be conceptualised as visions for better societies that emphasise equality, progress, and social justice. More specifically, an active utopia fires up our social imagination of an open future and generates hope in the possibility of a reimagined social world (Webb, 2013). From this, it is worth exploring what 'Designing a New Ireland' constitutes, how this should happen, and what the New Ireland should prioritise and involve as this is a paradigm that both Greens and others apply to the notion of a UI. As Todd (2021) discusses, '*On a New Ireland Paradigm, the task would be to create a new constitution that would affirm a set of constitutional values by reference to which the specific institutions and cultural provisions on the island would be assessed over time. On the New Ireland Paradigm, identities are in a process of evolution and change, and thus a new political symbolism is appropriate to a united Ireland.'* From this perspective GPNI activist (1) would posit the potential 'New Ireland' as *'…if the united Ireland can be this*

kind of like chance to almost create a kind of – I know this sounds really utopian, but, like a new socialist society, then amazing…'. However, many of the ideas that GPNI activists have about building a new constitution, have already occurred in the ROI without a UI even happening, so this is clearly not too 'unrealistic.' For example, activist (12), explains what would appeal to them and GP members is a new constitution which is progressive, socially liberal and embeds certain rights like the rights of nature. Many of these have already been enacted (e.g., the abortion and marriage equality referendums), or are in progress, so this should not necessarily be considered utopian thinking, as this is already part of contemporary ideas of a better ROI. There is some partial overlap here with thinking from Alliance activists. Alliance activist (15) also think thinks '*a UI could create a chance to really revisit and redo everything and try and make it better*'. However, there is an illustrative contrast here with the GPNI in that the same Alliance activist also emphasises that this perspective would be '*the idealist in them the politician in them would see it as being a dog's dinner*'. In this way, there is evidence of the differential attitude to 'utopian thinking' in the two parties of the centre-ground.

For other activists though, visions of a UI are potentially unrealistic, vague, and can colour a rational debate. For example, GPNI activist (13) said regarding their preference for devolved assemblies in a '*united Ireland…this is, it's my sort of pie-in-the-sky, [laughter] thinking that on a provincial basis…'* and more broadly is slightly sceptical of the catch-all nature of discussion of what a UI would involve *'…If those were concrete ideas, I would have more faith in "New Ireland" as a label.'* For this type of activist, the debate returns to the considerations of the current ROI, the current UK, the direction of travel in and likely governments of each state. Often both GPNI and Alliance activists also make a comparison between the UI referendum and Brexit referendum. They do not want 'a Brexit 2.0' whereby the campaign was full of

lies and people did not know what Brexit actually meant (e.g. GPNI activist 7).

Moreover, in constructing a new society, certain activists would not like the idea of manufacturing national symbols, including under a UI. For example, one activist (9) thinks all these symbols, flags and other languages can exist in their own right in any region and another activist (13) - who likes the idea of a civic constitutional conversation - also sees how artificially building symbolic elements can result in a messy mix of traditions. Specifically, in terms of flags and anthems the activist's (13) preference would be against trying to fit something new and to just allow these things to develop naturally, rather than synthetically try and create what would end up being a pretty uncomfortable mishmash of different traditions. While there is an understanding of the need to build new institutions and the need for a new constitution and constitutional civic conversations, as a post-ethnic party there is certain scepticism expressed by activists about the need to reconstruct the symbols of nationalism.

On building a New Ireland again there is a battle between certain ways of accommodating the unionists in a hypothetical UI, and again the GPNI's working-class identity or anti-conservative or leftist priorities. For example, one GPNI activist (10), states they do not feel attachment to what they view as 'conservative' unionist symbols despite coming from that background. That activist (10), who comes from a Protestant background, but is more likely to vote for a UI, also expresses their aggravations with symbols of the unionist/pro-union movement precisely because they associate these with very conservative values that they reject and the activist admits they need to remind themselves of the validity of such a position. The activist feels the same way about the monarchy and sees it as '*where classism starts in the UK'* although on balance if keeping the monarchy would mean more unionists would keep the

calm in a UI, than they would make the concession for the sake of peace. This is similar to views expressed by supporters of Scottish independence about avoiding potentially alienating support from those who feel a tie to the Royals. Notably, assessments of the ROI's accommodation of identity groups are not straightforwardly explained by identity affiliations. Furthermore, one activist (5) without strong roots in an NI ethno-national community thinks the ROI may not be so experienced, compared to NI anyway, with addressing minority accommodation. Specifically, that activist says NI might be more used to than the ROI in talking about *'how do you make minority populations feel welcome and share civic space',* so 'how to accommodate' is probably the conversation that the ROI needs to start having in advance of any UI. Although even in NI currently they still believe the language act and flags policies only go so far in accommodating Irish-identifying people too. In contrast, activist (9), who, themselves is strongly British, feels in contrast that the ROI is very accommodating of different identities and groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has mapped the constitutional mindset of GPNI activists across seven interlocking factors. It is issue-filtered in that constitutional preferences are assessed as to how these contribute to wider issue priorities such as climate change as seen through frameworks differentially emphasising effective policy implementation versus more radical frameworks. There are impacts of Brexit dependent on attitudes towards Europe which vary from pro-Remain to left-coded euroscepticism. It is also varied as the activist base contains nationalist-coded greens, green-coded nationalists, several activists who have gradually moved from unionist backgrounds towards pro-UI positions through experience and decolonisation reasoning, and at least one green-

coded unionist producing a diversity that the party's formal constitutional neutrality papers over without resolving which will be a challenge into the future. There is a focus on procedure with activists united in their preferences about how any constitutional change should be deliberated and decided through citizens' assemblies, inclusive civic processes, and non-violent democratic engagement. There is also to some extent a focus on vision and opportunity as there is a significant mode of thinking about a New Ireland that is aspirational and ‘utopian’ while the more analytically rigorous among them acknowledge the practical requirements of accommodation.

Conclusions

Summary and Contributions

This thesis has examined, from the ground up, the identity and constitutional mind-set of activists in NI's two main parties of the political centre-ground: the Alliance Party and the Green Party of Northern Ireland (GPNI). Drawing on forty-four semi-structured interviews conducted across the post-Brexit period, supplemented by archival and media analysis, it has pursued an intrinsic case study of what it means, internally and practically, to occupy the centre-ground in a post-conflict divided society.

The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 1 argued that the most analytically defensible definition of the centre-ground combines two markers: civicness and non-alignment to ethnic interests, and constitutional neutrality on the binary question of Northern Ireland's constitutional status. This definition identifies Alliance and the GPNI as the contemporary centre-ground's core instances while preserving meaningful distinctions between them and the aligned moderate parties with which they are sometimes conflated (see conceptualisation chapter). The empirical design then explores these parties as an intrinsic case study to provide an examination of the activist base that constitute these parties as the centre-ground in NI. This core approach worked conceptually and methodologically. This research design allowed for the analysis of the centre-ground in a manner that was conceptually coherent by internally assessing parties from the ground-up and interrogating how the 'people-level' of parties personified by the activists who articulate and debate positions in party discussions and exert the key influence within the party over party policy positioning and organisational strategy. This provides a rich understanding of the diversity of internal perspectives within the parties and the reflections on identity, ideology and constitutional thinking of those

who make up the key collective actors, the centrist parties, representing the centre-ground in contemporary NI at a time when this is a critical growing cohort in NI politics and a 'swing vote' in a potential constitutional referendum. There was a strong willingness of party activists to participate with a large sample of forty-four interviewees across Alliance and the GPNI with substantial variation by age and length of service, employment status from those of college age to those of retirement age, spatial variation across Northern Ireland with interviewees from urban and rural areas and West and East Ulster, diversity of identities including those from nationalist, unionist and non-NI backgrounds, and seniority within the parties including grassroots activists, councillors and MLAs. This provides substantive qualitative empirical richness adding depth and detail to the literature on Alliance and constituting the largest such study of the GPNI as a growing centre-ground force in Northern Ireland politics.

The thesis also advances our understanding of national ideologies among the centre-ground by going beyond the catch-all term of the 'neithers' to explore the complex realities of de-alignment, or as it is better understood, less(er) alignment. By engaging with those who are day-to-day activists and political practitioners within the centre-ground, there is a clear demonstration that in concrete terms the centre-ground blends those who have distanced from traditional identity blocs, but in some cases retain residual influences from their backgrounds and socialisation, those who prioritise forms of cross-community engagement, and those for whom distinct ideological, national, or especially issue orientation for the GPNI all condition a more multi-faceted and intersectional identity even among those thought of as 'neither' identity. The thesis, more broadly, demonstrates that a version of nested, multiple identities exists for many in the centre-ground of NI politics rather than a 'straightforward' rejection of 'either' identity that the 'neithers' label often seems to imply.

There are also a number of key empirical contributions. The first of these concerns the identity of Alliance activists. Chapter 3 demonstrated that non-alignment, foundational to Alliance's public self-presentation, is better understood as an ongoing aspiration than an achieved condition. Activists are more accurately characterised as 'less-aligned' (Kulle, 2003): they have distanced themselves from the communal backgrounds in which they were socialised yet retain residual attachments that surface in unreflective discourse, and in moments of re-alignment with the communities they nominally stand apart from. This provides an extension on existing literature on Alliance, in particular the work of Tonge et al (2024), which illustrates that there is no clear majority for a national identity group within Alliance and finds that while there is a plurality of members that identify as Northern Irish, there are also sizeable cohorts who identify primarily as Irish and to a slightly lesser degree British and Other (Tonge et al., 2024, Table 9.1). The findings from this thesis confirm Tonge et al's findings that Irish identity is still holding firm within Alliance, but there is a complexity, overlap and intersection of many of these identities for Alliance activists rather than these existing as separate categories even if Irish identity seems to be a stronger affiliation for those who combine Northern Irish and Irish identity. This is, interestingly, also the case for most of those born outside of NI in other parts of the UK who take on Irishness and Northern Irishness as connected, grounded identities based on their new home in NI and on the island of Ireland.

Chapter 3 also documented a notable and multi-causal decline in British identification among activists which further confirms the findings of Tonge et al.'s (2024) survey of members. However, this dynamic is one that does not follow straightforwardly and only from Brexit, but reflects longstanding discomfort with the unionist inflection of Britishness in NI, a growing proportion of Catholic-background members, and a broader scepticism about British

identity as a straightforward category. Critically, this declining Britishness has not generated corresponding Irish nationalism; Irish identification, where present, is civic, geographic, and situational rather than constitutionally sovereign. It is worth noting that while it did not emerge from the interviews conducted for this project, it is possible that these patterns are also partially explained by a decline in Protestant participation in Alliance.

The constitutional neutrality manifests as strong support for a conscience vote within the party on the CP. The findings from this thesis correspond with the patterns identified in Tonge et al (2024) in this respect. There are constraints on the degree of comfort in expressing a position for many activists and those who are decided in their preference express this in a manner that is not determined by party allegiance, but is expressed in line with a distinctly Alliance flavour of values and ethos. There are those who are more relaxed about Alliance taking a position and are less concerned about the consequences for the party. Most in Alliance see few key gains from the party taking a position and are conscious of potential pitfalls.

Activists similarly consider there to be significant internal organisational challenges if the party were to seek to take a firm position as this would restrict the space and time available to engage with issues they consider to be of greater importance. It is difficult to assess the breakdown of preferences within the party given many present as floating voters and/or cannot assess straightforwardly the preferences of others in the party themselves as the constitutional question is not a major issue in the party currently. There is though greater willingness to engage with the issue externally in the public arena.

There is also variation from activists on the roles they envision their party could take on should a border poll process become a

stronger prospect. Activists fit within a spectrum as to how they understand the role that Alliance should play through this process. At one pole, some activists see a quite limited role for Alliance in which the party largely performs, for example, informational checks on the discourse of other parties while at the other end of the spectrum, Alliance performs a much more significant role akin to an ‘architect’ of accommodation of all communities in a UI.

The next contribution concerns constitutional deliberation among Alliance activists. Chapter 4 demonstrated that the party's self-image as a repository of evidence-based, 'rational neutral' decision-making, while genuinely held, requires qualification. Activists acknowledge, with more candour than the rational-neutral framing suggests, the indirect influence of socialisation and background on their constitutional thinking. The chapter identified seven factors shaping reflective deliberation to different degrees and through varying mechanics: identity and socialisation; economic performance under each constitutional outcome; the future of healthcare arrangements; the accommodation of the unionist community in any prospective UI; Brexit as a significant, but contextually variable and less decisive factor than is often assumed; procedural and logistical conditions for a legitimate border poll; and societal and institutional stability as a prerequisite for constitutional transition. Most activists, including those with a personal constitutional position, support the party's institutional neutrality because that neutrality is itself part of Alliance's political appeal, and because most regard the conditions for a legitimate border poll as unmet.

There is also a clear empirical contribution in the exploration of the GPNI's activist base, and this thesis constitutes the largest study to this point of this distinct centre-ground party within the NI political landscape. Chapter 5 examined three major manifestations of conceptual markers; party issue orientation, the

relative influence of class and ethno-nationalism, and constitutional neutrality among activists, finding each more internally differentiated and more requiring of active maintenance than the markers themselves imply. Activists associate strongly with the party's issue-based identity and the commitment to eco-socialism is well-embedded as the root of political mobilisation. There is a strong working-class emphasis, but this is negotiated alongside the distinct material backgrounds of a number of activists and intersects in notable ways with ethno-national backgrounds in a manner that varies extensively across the activist base. Most significantly, the chapter established that the GPNI's issue-based ethos generates a different logic of neutrality than Alliance's: for a party defined by engagement with major questions of the day, remaining silent on the CQ becomes increasingly difficult to sustain as that question rises in salience. GPNI activists are, in general, more open to their party actively engaging with constitutional deliberation than their Alliance counterparts.

The thesis also maps GPNI activists' distinctive constitutional mind-set in Chapter 6. GPNI activists assess the constitutional question through an eco-socialist interpretive framework that reorganises conventional considerations: environmental sustainability and post-growth economics are first-order concerns, and constitutional options are evaluated substantially in terms of which outcome would better enable all-island environmental governance and social transformation. This produces genuine internal diversity between those emphasising an approach grounded in effective implementation versus more radical nation-building visions. It is critical to activists in forming a preference to consider the potential governing parties of a UI, in particular the avoidance of a replacement of the UK Tories with 'Irish Tories' and concerns about the nature of a potential future SF government and its comparability to the currently constituted SF in NI and the ROI as well as questions about the Green parties' own future. The

thesis identified nationalist-coded Greens, Green-coded nationalists, activists who have gradually shifted from unionist backgrounds through biographical experience and decolonisation reasoning, and Green-coded unionists which the party's formal neutrality subordinates, but still this variety persists. This thesis also advances the work of Todd and McEvoy's (2024) work on deliberation on constitutional questions by illustrating the centrality of deliberative processes to the GPNI's approach to the constitutional issue in particular. For the GPNI, deliberation is at the heart of their collective values as a party and functions as a core party principle, but also serves as a central plank of their approach to how a United Ireland should be designed as well as how the structures and constitution of a New Ireland should operate should it come into being by being embedded in the state's operations from the outset and used as a means of reflection and reform as needed as the state takes shape. The GPNI's pronounced preference for citizens' assemblies and participative and particularly nonviolent, democratic mechanisms as vehicles for constitutional deliberation reflects both the party's principled commitment to grassroots democracy and a practical recognition that facilitated deliberation may be the most effective way to engage with the CQ without prematurely abandoning neutrality.

More broadly, the thesis demonstrates how activists from both centre-ground parties engage in reflective consideration of their positions and approaches to ideological, identity and constitutional issues themselves during interviews. This evidences at the 'people-level' the processes and operation of deliberation as it occurs on these major questions. This offers insights into how reflection and re-consideration can occur among the cohorts that actually decide on and shape collective party policy and engagement on issues extending further on the wider patterns of deliberation analysed in Todd and McEvoy (2024).

Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

Like all such projects, limitations bear acknowledgement. The purposive interview sample, while appropriate for inductive pattern-finding, does not support statistical generalisation about all Alliance or GPNI members or voters. The fieldwork was conducted primarily during the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, and some perspectives will have evolved; most notably in light of Alliance leader Naomi Long's 2025 retreat from an earlier signal that the party would 'undoubtedly' take a constitutional position in the future.

These limitations point towards productive avenues for further research. A longitudinal study tracking the evolution of activist views as the constitutional debate develops would allow researchers to assess whether the conditionality culture documented here generates genuine engagement or indefinite deferral. Given the valuable insights provided by examining parties from the inside through engagement with party activists that ‘constitute’ the party, there is significant scope to expand the analysis of party activists in Northern Ireland. By speaking to activists from the traditional aligned parties, SF and the SDLP on the nationalist side and the DUP, UUP and TUV on the unionist side, insights can be derived on how internally alignment and identity are understood and the extent of heterogeneity in activists’ perspectives on how the parties’ constitutional positions and strategy to communicate these are interpreted and understood as well as how activists feel these may need to better reinforced and/or reconciled with a changing political landscape in the coming years. As these activists shape party strategy and positioning internally, these activists can offer clear avenues to understand how the parties will approach constitutional debates and any potential referendum. It would also be productive to engage with activists from these aligned parties to better understand, in

particular, how these parties will seek to reach out to win over non-aligned voters from the centre-ground in any potential referendum on Northern Ireland's constitutional status and the activists' perceptions of the most effective means of communication and appealing to these voters.

Comparative research across other divided societies such as Scotland, Catalonia, Belgium, and Bosnia would test which findings are specific to NI and which reflect more general dynamics of civic party activism in ethnically saturated political systems. Examining aligned parties in these contexts such as the Scottish National Party or Plaid Cymru through interviews with activists again potentially offers additional understanding of how these parties vary internally in their identities, articulation of their constitutional preferences, how they personally believe the question of constitutional status should be approached, and how this compares to how they believe the parties organisationally should approach it. There is also the opportunity for further work on cohorts within Northern Ireland using alternative methods to further understand the nature of the centre-ground. A generational study focused on the GFA cohort within both parties would illuminate how the centre-ground is changing as biographical exposure to the conflict recedes. Qualitative research with ordinary voters and party sympathisers, rather than activists, would assess how far the patterns documented here extend into the broader centre-ground electorate.

Concluding Reflections

The picture that emerges from this thesis is neither the idealised post-ethnic politics the centre-ground is sometimes taken to represent nor the simple midpoint between unionism and nationalism to which its critics sometimes reduce it. It is something

more interesting and more difficult. It is a space in which people with genuinely diverse backgrounds, identities, and constitutional preferences are attempting with internal contradiction, and against the grain of deep socialisation to practice a politics not defined by which side they are on. The clearest commonalities between the two parties are the multi-faceted and complex nature of de-alignment and lesser alignment from identity backgrounds among the activist cores of the parties as well as the strong support for a conscience vote on any potential constitutional position either party may take. However, beyond this there is significant variation between the two parties.

There is evidence of greater internal coherence within the GPNI on the constitutional question as they tend broadly as a party to clearly cohere around engaging on issues and as such this leads to widespread support within the party for constitutional engagement, even if this does not mean there is necessarily support for a clear constitutional position to be taken. At the same time, if there was to be such a position taken, there appears to be a prediction and/or preference for a United Ireland based on this sample. This is notable given there are a number of activists from Protestant-Unionist backgrounds within the party who are leaning towards a United Ireland position. There is similarly solidity and cohesion to the internal party support for deliberative processes in civic conversations in the run-up to and civic constitution-building in a potential United Ireland in which the party would play a role. For Alliance, there is a lesser surety on the question of how the party should approach constitutional engagement with a wide spectrum of perspectives and positions among activists on how much, what form, and the degree of comfort with constitutional engagement the party may engage in with any prospective border poll referendum. There is also widespread diversity in the opinions Alliance activists express on the constitutional question and it is difficult to identify any clear prediction or assessment of the

constitutional position the party make take, not least because activists cannot clearly assess themselves the positions their party colleagues hold or may hold. There is also something of a structural ‘neutrality by default’ within Alliance given the diversity of opinions on the issue and on constitutional engagement – this is a party defined by its neutrality (whether this is a product of a ‘reaction’ to the traditional blocs or not) and as such, there is a fundamental concern about both internal party unity and potential negative consequences externally for the party if it was to take such a position or perhaps even engage in a manner that many activists as arrayed along the spectrum of preferences discussed above were uncomfortable with.

The following constitute the major takeaways of the project. First, the centre-ground is populated by the less-aligned rather than the non-aligned: people who have distanced themselves from ethno-national backgrounds without escaping them, and whose political identity is an ongoing negotiation with, rather than a transcendence of, inherited affiliations. Second, the two parties of the centre-ground practice constitutional neutrality differently. Alliance practice as a core identity marker generating institutional restraint and the GPNI as a position increasingly conditioned by an issue-based ethos that demands engagement. These different cultures will likely produce divergent trajectories as the constitutional debate intensifies. Third, the conditionality culture of the centre-ground is both principled and potentially self-limiting: it reflects genuine commitments to deliberation, inclusion, and evidence, but in its most demanding forms risks setting terms for engagement that are challenging to meet, potentially deferring participation in the constitutional conversation. Whether the centre-ground can translate these values into effective political influence in the constitutional debate that NI increasingly appears likely to face is among the most consequential political questions of the coming decade. This thesis equips future researchers,

practitioners, and citizens with a richer and more accurate understanding of the activists who will be at its heart.

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Appendix A – Ethical Materials

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Ms. Louisa Barry
School of Law and Government
DCU Institute for International Conflict Resolution

Prof. John Doyle
School of Law and Government
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20th May 2022

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2022/090**

Proposal Title: **The Centre-Ground and the United Ireland Debate**

Applicant(s): **Ms. Louisa Barry, Prof. John Doyle, and Dr. Erika Biagini**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to expedited review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Melrona Kirrane

DCU
Research & Innovation

Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

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Dublin City University – Research Project and Interview Procedures

Introduction to the Research

Research Title: "The centre-ground in Northern Ireland and the United Ireland debate".

This research is conducted within Dublin City University's (DCU) School of Law and Government and the Institute for International Conflict Resolution and Reconstruction (IICRR). The IICRR awarded the Clinton PhD Scholarship in 2020 to Louisa Barry, who is completing this project as part of her PhD in Peace Studies. As of the 1st September 2022, this research is being funded by the Irish Research Council (IRC).

Principal Investigator(s):

Professor John Doyle is the Director of DCU's Institute for International Conflict Resolution and Reconstruction (email address: john.doyle@dcu.ie). Professor John Doyle is the primary supervisor of the research project.

Ms Louisa Barry is a PhD student with DCU's Institute for International Conflict Resolution and Reconstruction and in the School of Law and Government (email address louisa.barry29@mail.dcu.ie)

Other Investigators:

The research project is being jointly co-supervised by Dr Erika Biagini who is an Assistant Professor in the School of Law and Government (email address 304rika.biagini@dcu.ie).

Research Project

This research aims to gain insight into how the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and the Green Party Northern Ireland, and their supporters, are approaching issues related to the prospect of a border poll, constitutional change and the region's future.

Expectations of the Participant

If a participant decides to participate in this research project, they will be expected to partake in at least one in-person or online interview, which the researcher will request to record (audio only). Participants' audio will not be recorded without their permission. Interviews may last between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours, depending on the time that the participant is able to make themselves available.

Types of Questions

Along with questions on their political party support, participants will be asked questions on themes of constitutional change, Irish unity, Northern Ireland's future and EU membership. For instance, they might be asked to share their ideas on how Alliance and Green Party Northern Ireland

supporters think about constitutional change or their positions on the future of the region as part of the centre-ground. These questions might explore the participant's political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or racial or ethnic origin.

Important Note for Participants on Questions

The decision lies with the participant on whether they would like to share a particular opinion or stance. Participants will also have the option to select whether they provide their information 'on the record' (i.e. they are named) or 'off the record' (i.e. they are not named)

Protocol for Online Interviews

If interviews are conducted online the researcher will use Zoom in a manner which is compliant with data protection requirements, and any other legal or regulatory requirements. The researcher will only use the DCU licenced version of Zoom and will implement the necessary procedures to make Zoom a safe environment for the researcher and the participants. Zoom will be set up to automatically store recordings in the Zoom cloud (which is a safe, password protected online storage method to which only the researcher has access). Additionally, files will not be transferred through the chat function on Zoom.

The Use of the Data

Participant data is being requested for the purposes of research for a PhD in Dublin City University (DCU). DCU's Data Protection Officer is Mr. Martin Ward who can be emailed at data.protection@dcu.ie or called on 01 7005118 / 01 7008257. A participant may wish to contact the Data Protection Officer if they believe their rights associated with data protection or GDPR legislation have been violated.

A transcription service may be used to transcribe data. The transcription service will never have access to the names of those interviewed. Audio recordings will be deleted/ destroyed once transcription is completed in full. Participants should be aware that data will not be retained indefinitely. After the PhD is awarded, hard copy files of interviews will be destroyed. Additionally, data in electronic files will be held in a fully anonymized form until the researcher has exhausted publication.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Participants can request for their data to be 'on the record' or 'off the record' (they are not named). In the case where 'off the record' is requested, personal data will be separated from direct identifiers so that a direct linkage to an identity is no longer possible.

Participants should be aware that confidentiality of information provided cannot always be guaranteed by researchers. This is a genuine issue in all research fields conducted in small contexts/communities. In these contexts, there are additional (local) limits to confidentiality, that is, due to the small sample size participants' identities may be recognized by others based on statements participants make or the titles held by

elected representatives. Therefore, if there is any doubt about potential guess-work identifying people due to the small pool of participants, then participants should be reassured that the text of the PhD will not include any contextual data to allow this secondary identification. Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law – i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Voluntary Involvement
Participants have the right to change their mind at any stage and can withdraw from the research project at any point. If a participant requested to be 'on the record', they will be asked to consent to their data being used should they withdraw. If a participant requested for their data to be 'off the record', their data will be disposed of should they withdraw.

Rights Protections
Participants have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission. https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/contact/how-contact-us). If a participant wishes to enact their right to access their personal data, please contact DCU's Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward, who can be emailed at data.protection@dcu.ie or called on 01 7005118 / 01 7008257

Potential Risks
There is a risk that the participant may experience emotional distress when speaking about political topics or face implications from political parties, groups or people who do not share their political positions. However, participants can withdraw from the project at any point or request to pause/ stop their individual interview.
If a participant wishes to contact support services for any reason, such a service in Northern Ireland is listed below.

- Lifeline is a free, confidential telephone helpline (Telephone number: 08088088000/ Textphone: 1800108088088000)

Potential (direct or indirect) Benefits
By taking part, participants will contribute to a study on two political parties which are under-researched in academia. Participants will have the opportunity to share their voice and reflect upon their personal views. Participants' insights will help inform the growing public debate on Northern Ireland's constitutional future.

Other Relevant Information
Participants should be aware that given the number of elected officials from the parties under study are small, the confidentiality of participant identity will require some generalisation of description.
Participants should be aware that their data potentially will be used at a later date for the purposes of publication.

Participants will be emailed when the research project is completed and made available in the DCU DORAS open access depository.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Appendix B – Example of Interview Guide – GPNI[75]

Main questions for your interview with Louisa

1. With reference to your own reasons for supporting the Green Party Northern Ireland (*henceforth, GPNI*), what does the GPNI offer that is distinctive from the other parties in Northern Ireland?

2. It is recognised that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement ensures the power lies with the people to determine Northern Ireland's constitutional future. However, could you share your personal feelings around the prospect of the GPNI taking a constitutional position in the future?

3. My research drew attention to the idea that it does not matter which position a political party or its representatives take on a border poll as at the end of the day the people will determine the vote outcome. Could you share your thoughts on this idea?

4. If a border poll was called in the next 5 years, what 'factors' or 'issues' do you think could be/ would be influential for you personally as a GPNI supporter, when deliberating which way to vote?

5. If a border poll was called in the next 5 years, what 'factors / issues' do you speculate could sway 'undecided' GPNI voters towards voting one way or another?

6. Are there any 'factors / issues' that would be particularly or uniquely influential for GPNI supporters in a border poll?

7. We often hear about the different 'conversations and preparations' that should proceed the calling of a border poll. What should these 'conversations and preparations' look like and who has the real responsibility for preparing (not calling) for a potential border poll?

8. If a border poll was called in the next 5 years and Northern Ireland votes to support the constitutional status quo, what may be the positive / negative impacts of this result for you?

9. If unification happened, how do you think it would impact your life?

[75] This is essentially identical to an Alliance interview guide with adaptations.

10. My research informed me about the diverse perspectives on how the Irish identity can be accommodated for in Northern Ireland. While some put their faith in tangible solutions like establishing an Irish Language Act or developing a legacy (flags, parades, the past) policy, others hope that Northern Ireland can work as a community to implement the values of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement as a means to allow all identities to feel welcome. Excluding these examples, what else do you think can be done in Northern Ireland to help those citizens who identify stronger with Ireland over Britain feel more accommodated for within a Northern Ireland that remains in the UK?

11. What do you think it means to be Irish / British / Northern Irish in Northern Ireland?

12. If a united Ireland happened, what are your thoughts on introducing all new symbols (flags, anthems etc) and a new constitution, or should distinct symbols of 'Britishness' and 'Irishness' co-exist?

13. What do you think could be done to help those citizens who identify stronger with Britain over Ireland feel more accommodated for under a hypothetical united Ireland?

14. Do you think that any aspect of your traditional identity or communal background could have an influence in how you vote in a border poll?

15. Has Northern Ireland losing its EU membership made you revisit or re-evaluate your thinking around a united Ireland, if so in what way?

16. Has, or could, the (successful / unsuccessful) implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol make you revisit or re-evaluate your thinking around a united Ireland, if so in what way?

17. Although it is the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's decision when to call a border poll, do you think Northern Ireland as a community will ever be ready for a border poll?

18. Finally - do you think there are any important issues or points that relate to the shape of Northern Ireland's constitutional future and the GPNI that I did not touch upon?