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# Election results can decrease intergroup threat and through that positively affect intergroup relations

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## Abstract

Previous research has established that intergroup threat is pivotal to intergroup relations in divided societies. We used the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections in 2022 as a unique chance to investigate how elections can affect feelings of threat and intergroup relations between communities with a history of violent intergroup conflict. We argued that because of their conflicting goals, if Sinn Féin (i.e., a Republican party that promotes a united Ireland) gains more votes than the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP, i.e., a party promoting Northern Ireland's union with the United Kingdom), it would threaten DUP supporters and vice versa. We assessed whether participants supported Sinn Féin or DUP relatively to each other, intergroup threat, and intergroup bias before and after the elections ( $N = 285$ ). Following an election outcome where Sinn Féin gained more votes than DUP, Sinn Féin supporters showed decreased feelings of threat which in turn decreased their intergroup bias. DUP supporters, the party that received fewer votes, showed no changes in their feelings of threat or intergroup bias. This research highlights how electoral results affect intergroup relations in postconflict societies.

## KEYWORDS

electoral outcome/decision, intergroup bias, intergroup conflict, Northern Ireland assembly elections, social identity/intergroup threat

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The present research aimed to investigate whether elections in divided societies are destabilizing. Divided societies are often characterized by conflicting interests between people with different social identities that are represented in political parties pursuing conflicting goals (Devine & Robinson, 2014). In those polarized political contexts, perceived intergroup threat, the belief that a given outgroup is in some way harmful to one's ingroup (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015), is likely to emerge. Perceived intergroup threat can elicit cognitive and behavioral responses that damage positive intergroup relations by increasing intergroup bias—differences in evaluating and treating members of different social groups (Hewstone et al., 2002; Stephan et al., 2009). Schmid et al. (2008) have demonstrated that perceived threat can increase intergroup bias and negative behavioral tendencies towards the outgroup. In line with this theorizing, intergroup threat (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015), and the negative consequences of threat for outgroup attitudes and behavior (Tausch, Hewstone, et al., 2007; Tausch, Tam, et al., 2007), are likely to be associated with polarization that may accompany electoral politics.

Elections may particularly play a role in increasing intergroup threat when political parties promote conflicting goals. In divided societies, where people with different identities hold competing political aspirations that are associated with competing goals, outgroup goals are not only antithetical to those held by the ingroup but can also be threatening to their existence (Kelman, 2001). Thus, when one party gains more votes, this may imply that the goals of the competing party cannot be reached which increases intergroup threat particularly among party supporters whose party receives fewer votes. An increase in intergroup threat may hamper intergroup relations fueling outbreaks of intergroup violence. Intergroup bias is likely to drive discrimination and intergroup conflict (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014). In this article, we investigated whether elections in a divided society where the main parties promote conflicting goals and associated agendas drive up intergroup threat and promote intergroup bias between communities.

Whereas previous research has demonstrated that intergroup threat can affect party support (e.g., Green et al., 2016; Knowles & Tropp, 2018; Van de Vyver et al., 2018), the present research investigated intergroup threat as an outcome of party support. Recent research has provided initial evidence that party support can be associated with intergroup threat and intergroup bias (Lin & Haridakis, 2022). We are not aware of any research that has tested this relationship before and after elections. We further extend previous research by investigating whether party support can affect threat between associated communities and harmony or conflict between them. We tested the theorizing that elections increase intergroup threat which in turn increases intergroup bias in the case of Northern Ireland.

## Politics, threat, and division in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland, where this study was undertaken, has a history of intergroup conflict and has been among the most violent regions in Europe for over 50 years (Muldoon, 2004). Northern Ireland remains a socially and politically divided society. Despite being complex, like many violent conflicts, divisions are demarcated by identities and their conflicting goals about the future political position of Northern Ireland. The conflict is often perceived as occurring between the religious groups of Protestants and Catholics, although it is not driven primarily by religion. Instead, the conflict can be seen as focusing on the interplay between national identity, territorial allegiances, constitutional preference, and political affiliation (Devine & Robinson, 2014). In fact, most political parties in Northern Ireland are aligned on constitutional issues that tend to overlap with religious identity. Religious identities then are closely linked to the two main political parties in Northern Ireland with Catholic community membership overlapping with Irishness and a nationalist political orientation, supporting nationalist and republican parties such as Sinn Féin. This group tends to desire the unification

of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. On the other hand, Protestant community membership in Northern Ireland overlaps with Britishness and a unionist political orientation, predominantly supporting unionist parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP; Devine & Robinson, 2014). This group tends to promote Northern Ireland's union with the United Kingdom.

Despite the array of national, religious, and political identities underpinning the conflict (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014; Muldoon et al., 2007), the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, widely conceived as a consociational settlement, recognizes and emphasizes two main political traditions in Northern Ireland: Nationalist and Unionist (Tilley et al., 2021). Parity of esteem, power sharing, and the principle of consent are key tenets of the Agreement, in a bid to protect group identities and interests of both Unionists and Nationalists (Murphy & Evershed, 2022). The Agreement states that the First and deputy First Ministers be elected with the cross-community support of the Assembly. However, there were problems with its implementation, particularly with power sharing (Anthony, 2008). Political tensions led to suspension of the Assembly in 2000, which was ended following an agreement at St Andrews in 2006 that included a commitment to power sharing. Additionally, First and deputy First Ministers would no longer be elected together. Instead, the political party receiving the largest number of seats in the legislative Assembly can nominate a First Minister, with the party gaining the next largest number of seats nominating a deputy First Minister. Thus, the party with most votes will get most seats and the privilege to nominate the First Minister. While the positions of the First and the deputy First Minister are created as having equal power, the First Minister is perceived as being more prestigious and the leader of the Assembly. This along with the history of zero-sum identity politics in Northern Ireland (Muldoon et al., 2007) has given rise to the view that elections are “won” or “lost” by the two main parties.

For this reason, it has been argued that though the agreement initiated more peaceful times, it has also given rise to a polarized political context. The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (EU: Brexit), however, has brought the constitutional issues underlying the conflict into sharp relief once again (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). The Brexit referendum in 2016 reinforced political divisions, with unionist parties (DUP and Ulster Unionist Party) supporting the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, while republican and nationalist parties (Sinn Féin, Social Democratic, and Labour Party) being in support of remaining within the EU. Most British nationals in Northern Ireland voted for the United Kingdom to leave the EU whereas most Irish nationals in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU (Gormley-Heenan et al., 2017). Since then, tensions around the implementation of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's withdrawal from the EU regulating customs, immigration, and trade have challenged political relationships and institutions (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022).

In early 2022, in protest against the withdrawal agreement the First Minister, Paul Givan (DUP) resigned leading to a collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive, prompting Assembly elections around which we based this study. So, while there is some evidence of an emerging middle-ground party in the Alliance party, the two political traditions represented by the DUP and Sinn Féin and their opposing political goals have come to dominate the political landscape in Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2020). It is the views of their supporters that are the focus of this study.

## Northern Ireland assembly elections

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, the key democratic institution arising from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, has had a checkered past since its establishment in 1998. It has undergone several lengthy periods of suspension due to tensions and deadlock in power sharing amid issues of contention around flags and the use of symbols, the Renewable Heat Initiative (a failed renewable energy incentive scheme which cost the public almost £500 million

and ultimately lead to collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive), and the Irish Language Act (an act that would give equal status to the Irish and English languages in Northern Ireland). Despite these difficulties, over the last 25 years since the Agreement a region beset by violence has had a period of uneasy peace (Mac Ginty, 2014).

An election (using Single Transferable Vote<sup>1</sup>) to the Northern Ireland Assembly was held on May 5, 2022—3 months after the First Minister had resigned. This election was perceived as providing an opportunity to gauge relative support for the two main parties: DUP, a unionist party and Sinn Féin, a republican party. It was also seen as an important indicator of support for the Northern Ireland Protocol which would allow a trading relationship and an open border with the Irish Republic as part of the Brexit withdrawal agreement. Given the tension between the two communities and the crucial role of the elections for achieving progress towards the shared goal of maintaining peace as well as their potential for amplifying division between groups, the present research investigated perceived intergroup threat before and after the elections among those who supported Sinn Féin or DUP relatively to each other. We also considered the role of any change in threat on intergroup bias.

## The present study

Given the increased tension in Northern Ireland and the relevance of the 2022 Assembly elections for the future of Northern Ireland, the present study investigated whether democratic elections can in fact destabilize society. Specifically, we investigated the effect of the elections on perceived intergroup threat of members of the two main communities, Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland who either supported Sinn Féin over DUP or vice versa.

Intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2009; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) suggests that a competition over power, resources, and interests drives intergroup threat that in turn can harm intergroup relations (also see Chang et al., 2016). In the current political climate, the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Election represented such a competition. Anchored in a context of a history of intergroup conflict this election was likely to increase perceived intergroup threat with potential negative effects on intergroup relations.

We specified the following hypothesis:

**H1a.** People who are supporting the party that gains fewer votes (i.e., missing the privilege to nominate the First Minister) than the competing party (Sinn Féin or DUP) will increase their feelings of intergroup threat compared to those people who are supporting the party that gains more votes.

**H1b.** People who are supporting the party that gains fewer votes than the competing party will increase their feelings of intergroup threat compared to those people who are supporting the party that gains more votes which in turn will increase intergroup bias.

While Hypothesis 1a focuses on the effect of party support on intergroup threat, Hypothesis 1b hypothesizes a follow-up effect on intergroup bias through intergroup threat. In line with intergroup threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) and previous research in Northern Ireland showing that intergroup threat increases intergroup bias and violence

<sup>1</sup>Single Transferable Voting (STV) is a multiwinner electoral system in which voters have the option to rank candidates and allows for transfers if a preferred candidate is eliminated from the election.

against the outgroup (Tausch, Hewstone, et al., 2007; Tausch, Tam, et al., 2007), we assessed bias in intergroup attitudes as a precursor for bias in behavioral intentions to approach members of the respective groups (despite not specifying this sequence in the preregistration). While intentions are a proximal indicator of behavior, attitudes usually drive these intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Specifically, after testing the effect of party support on (1) intergroup threat, we tested the effect of intergroup threat on (2) bias in intergroup attitudes and (3) bias in behavioral intentions in a sequential mediation. To test for mediation, we calculated change scores between perceived intergroup threat and intergroup bias before and after the elections. We measured intergroup attitudes with ratings of positive and negative traits of Catholics and Protestants and behavioral intentions towards both groups. Thus, we tested whether supporting the party with fewer votes (vs. the party with more votes) increased intergroup threat and whether any increase in threat was associated with increased intergroup bias in attitudes and consecutively increased bias in behavioral intentions.

## METHODS

We preregistered this study (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Q24TP>, <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/WUFMS>) where materials, anonymized data, and code can also be found (<https://osf.io/6mvzj/>).

### Design

We used a longitudinal quasi-experimental design, collecting data 2 weeks before the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections (T1) and again 2 weeks after the election (T2). Election outcome served as our independent variable. All participants were supporting one of the two polarized political parties in Northern Ireland over the other. Based on the outcome of the election, participants were considered supporters of either the party with fewer votes or the party with more votes. Participants completed all measures at T1 and T2 (demographics were only collected at T1). Feelings of intergroup threat and intergroup bias were the dependent outcomes.

For the first time in history, Sinn Féin received the largest proportion of first preference votes (29%) and won 27 seats. In contrast, DUP received 21.3% of first preference votes and won 25 seats. Thus, Sinn Féin were entitled to the post of First Minister, and DUP for deputy First Minister—a reversal of the previous positions. Although an important result politically, there was also a rise in support for the Alliance party, who gained 13.5% of first preference votes and won 17 seats (up from eight seats in 2017; Kelly, 2022). This political party can be seen to transcend the traditional ethnoreligious boundaries in Northern Ireland, but its support was not part of our study.

### Participants

We recruited participants using the online crowdsourcing platform *Profilic*<sup>TM</sup> and posted the survey to residents in Northern Ireland of Irish or British nationality as per prescreening criteria. Participants indicated their community affiliation (Protestant, Catholic, other) irrespective of their religious beliefs. In line with the preregistered inclusion criteria, we collected data only from those who self-identified either as belonging to the Protestant or Catholic community. At T1, 378 participants took the Qualtrics survey. From the participants at T1, we excluded those who did not take part at T2 ( $n = 58$ ), failed the attention check at T1 or T2

**TABLE 1** Breakdown of participants by their indicated religious, national, and political identity.

<i>Religious identity</i>	
Protestant	135 (47.5%)
Catholic	119 (41.9%)
Other	30 (10.6%)
<i>National identity</i>	
British	102 (35.9%)
Irish	103 (36.3%)
British and Irish	56 (19.7%)
Other	23 (8.1%)
<i>Political identity</i>	
Unionist	103 (36.6%)
Nationalist	108 (38.0%)
Other	73 (25.7%)
<i>Northern Irish</i>	
Yes	208 (73.2%)
No	76 (26.8%)

*Note:* Those who indicated “Other” regarding their religion mostly indicated being nonreligious, one identified as Buddhist and one as Christian. Those who indicated “Other” regarding their nationality mostly specified being Northern Irish, one indicated being born in the United States of British decedents, one being English and two indicated being British and Northern Irish. Those who indicated “Other” regarding their political identity specified being “Neither” or “Neutral,” some participants refused the label of Unionist and Nationalist and a few indicated a different party affiliation (i.e., Alliance and/or Green) or general political orientations (i.e., liberal, socialist, progressive, centrist, humanitarian, central-left).

( $n = 10$ ), changed the party they supported from T1 to T2 ( $n = 10$ ), had no party preference (i.e., party support score = 4, scale 1–7;  $n = 14$ ), and who did not indicate their community affiliation ( $n = 2$ ).

The analyzed sample included 284 participants (70.4% women, 28.5% men, 1.1% indicated Other,  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.5$ ,  $SD = 11.9$ , range 19 to 75 years of age). Regarding their indicated community affiliation, 46.1% had a Catholic background and 53.9% indicated Protestant. Of these participants, 88.7% reported to have lived in Northern Ireland their entire life, 8.8% more than 10 years, 1.4% between 5 and 10 years, 0.4% between 1 and 5 years, and 0.7% reported that they did not currently live in Northern Ireland. Overall, 73.2% self-categorized as Northern Irish. For a breakdown of participants' religious, national, and political identities, see Table 1. All participants were eligible to vote in the Assembly Elections. Participants completed the study on average in 6.23 min at T1 and in 5.57 min at T2. We compensated them with £0.63 at T1 and £0.84 at T2.

## Measures

Answers to items of all scales were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) unless stated otherwise. Within each scale, items were presented in random order.

## Party support

We assessed relative support for Sinn Féin over DUP with four items (e.g., “I support Sinn Féin (SF) over the Democrat Unionist Party (DUP)”); “I prefer Sinn Féin (SF) rather than the Democrat

Unionist Party (DUP) to win the 2022 assembly elections”). At T2 we adjusted two of the four items to account for the fact that election results were published (e.g., “I would have preferred the Democrat Unionist Party (DUP) rather than Sinn Féin (SF) to win the 2022 assembly elections”). To compute the party-support score, we averaged all items of T1 ( $\alpha = .98$ ) and T2 ( $\alpha = .98$ ). Scores above 4 indicated relative support for Sinn Féin and were coded as +1 for the dichotomous variable of party support whereas scores below 4 indicated relative support for DUP and were coded as -1. We used this dichotomous variable for testing Hypothesis 1a, whether supporting DUP versus Sinn Féin increased intergroup threat. Second, we used the continuous variable with higher scores indicating relative support for Sinn Féin and lower scores relative support for DUP for testing Hypothesis 1b, the mediation that any increase in threat is associated with increased intergroup bias. Notably, results remained the same irrespective of the kind of coding used.

## Perceived intergroup threat

We adapted five items from Schmid and Muldoon (2015) to assess perceived intergroup threat regarding participants' community membership as Protestant or Catholic. The item phrasings depended on the community affiliation that participants had self-indicated at the beginning of the survey (e.g., “I feel threatened that the political parties in power in Northern Ireland do not represent the goals of my Catholic/Protestant community”). The higher the computed average score the more participants felt threatened (T1:  $\alpha = .69$ , T2:  $\alpha = .60$ ).<sup>2</sup>

## Intergroup bias in attitudes

We assessed intergroup attitudes towards Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland with six trait ratings: *warm, pleasant, good, and cold, unpleasant, bad* (Turner et al., 2012; Wildschut et al., 2014). After reverse coding the negative traits, we subtracted outgroup ratings from ingroup ratings and averaged the difference scores. The higher the resulting score, the more participants favored their ingroup community over the outgroup community reflecting intergroup bias in attitudes (T1:  $\alpha = .92$ , T2:  $\alpha = .93$ ).

## Intergroup bias in behavioral intentions

We assessed behavioral intentions towards Catholics and Protestants with six items (e.g., “I want to spent time with them”; Turner et al., 2012; Wildschut et al., 2014). We again subtracted outgroup ratings from ingroup ratings and averaged the difference scores. The higher the resulting score, the more participants indicated intentions to approach ingroup members over outgroup members reflecting bias in behavioral intentions towards the groups (T1:  $\alpha = .94$ , T2:  $\alpha = .93$ ).

## Descriptive variables

We assessed three additional variables to describe the present sample and for exploration. First, we assessed the extent to which participants perceived the goals of both parties to be

<sup>2</sup>In exploratory follow-up analyses we excluded one ambiguous item: “Irrespective which party got into power, they would work towards the benefit of all people in Northern Ireland, whether Catholic or Protestant.” Removing that item increased internal consistency to  $\alpha = .78$  at T1 and  $\alpha = .72$  at T2. Using the more internally consistent scale that excludes this item in the analyses yields the same results as those reported.

competing with four items (e.g., “Sinn Féin [SF] and the Democrat Unionist Party [DUP] have competing goals”, T1:  $\alpha = .79$ , T2:  $\alpha = .80$ , with higher scores indicating the perception of more competing goals). Second, we assessed whether participants perceived the Catholic and the Protestant communities to be incompatible with each other, with three items (e.g., “The Catholic and Protestant community in Northern Ireland are incompatible social groups [there is conflict between the groups in terms of norms, values, and rules],” T1:  $\alpha = .84$ , T2:  $\alpha = .83$ , with higher score reflecting perception of incompatible communities). Finally, we assessed ingroup identification with the respective community background with five items (Leach et al., 2008; e.g., “I feel committed to the Catholic/Protestant community in Northern Ireland”, T1:  $\alpha = .90$ , T2:  $\alpha = .91$ ) with higher scores reflecting stronger identification.

## Demographics

Participants indicated their age and gender (*male*, female, other, prefer not to say). We asked them to self-categorize (“I am ...”) regarding their nationality (*Irish*, British, Irish and British, other), religion (*Catholic*, Protestant, other), political orientation (*Unionist*, Nationalist, other), and whether they self-categorize as Northern Irish (“I am Northern Irish.” *Yes*, No). We checked whether they are residing in Northern Ireland (*Yes*, No) and for how long they have been living in Northern Ireland (*all my life*; more than 10 years; 5 to 10 years; 1 to 5 years; less than a year; I do not live in Northern Ireland). Finally, we assessed whether they are eligible to vote in the 2022 Assembly Elections (*Yes*, No).

## Procedure

We used the same procedure at both time points. After giving informed consent, participants were asked to indicate their community affiliation (*Catholic*, *Protestant*, *Other*). For those who indicated *Other* the study finished. All other participants then indicated their party support before perceived intergroup threat followed by intergroup bias in attitudes and behavioral intentions. We randomized the order in which the intergroup attitudes and the behavioral intention scales were presented. The behavioral intention scale included an attention-check item. Afterwards, we assessed the descriptive variables; perceived competition of goals of both parties, perceived compatibility of Catholics and Protestants, and community ingroup identification. At the end of T1 only, participants provided demographic information.

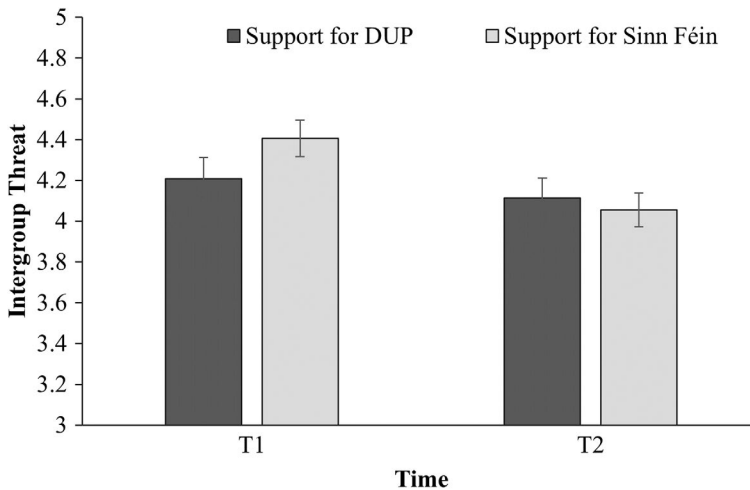
## RESULTS

We analyzed data with IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0. All reported *p*-values are based on two-tailed tests with a statistical significance level of  $p < .05$ .

### Preliminary exploratory analysis of participants

Of the participants,  $n = 163$  supported Sinn Féin over DUP (76.7% of Catholics, 23.3% of Protestants), and  $n = 121$  supported DUP over Sinn Féin (5% of Catholics, 95% of Protestants).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The correlation between party support and community affiliation was  $r = .71$ ,  $p < .001$ , for the dichotomized party support measure (1 = Sinn Féin, -1 = DUP) and  $r = .77$ ,  $p < .001$  for the continuous party support measure (1–7).



**FIGURE 1** Perceived intergroup threat before (T1) and after (T2) the elections. Error bars represent standard errors. DUP=Democratic Unionist Party. Sinn Féin is the party with the larger number of votes or the ‘winning’ party entitled to nominate the First Minister.

To explore our assumption that both parties, Sinn Féin and DUP, in fact are perceived to support competing goals, we used a one-sample *t*-test against the scale mean (i.e., 4, scale 1–7). At both time points participants perceived both parties to have competing goals, T1:  $M=5.56$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ,  $t(283)=25.40$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=1.51$ , and T2:  $M=5.39$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ,  $t(282)^4=21.88$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=1.30$ . Interestingly, an exploratory comparison of T1 and T2 indicated that participants perceived less competition in goals after the elections compared to before,  $t(283)=2.77$ ,  $p=.006$ ,  $d=0.17$ . This decrease in perception was also reflected in a decrease in perceived incompatibility between members of the Catholic and Protestant communities, T1:  $M=3.95$ ,  $SD=1.43$ , and T2:  $M=3.78$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ,  $t(282)=2.79$ ,  $p=.003$ ,  $d=1.67$ . Whereas communities were neither perceived to be compatible or incompatible at T1 as indicated by a *t*-test against the scale midpoint, T1:  $t(283)=-.54$ ,  $p=.590$ ,  $d=-0.03$ , at T2 communities were actually perceived to be more compatible than incompatible, T2:  $t(282)=-2.66$ ,  $p=.008$ ,  $d=-0.16$ .

Finally, data indicated that participants substantially identified with their respective Catholic or Protestant community as indicated by *t*-tests against the scale midpoint at both time points, T1:  $M=4.29$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ,  $t(283)=3.23$ ,  $p=.001$ ,  $d=0.19$  and T2:  $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ,  $t(282)=5.46$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=0.33$ .

## Party support and intergroup threat before and after the assembly elections

To test Hypothesis 1a that participants who supported DUP over Sinn Féin perceived increased intergroup threat compared to those who supported Sinn Féin over DUP, we conducted a mixed-factorial ANOVA with perceived intergroup threat as dependent variable. Time (T1 vs. T2) was the within-subjects independent variable and relative support (dichotomized variable) for Sinn Féin (1 = scores above 4) versus DUP (–1 = scores below 4) was the between-subjects independent variable.

As predicted results showed a time  $\times$  party support interaction,  $F(1, 282)=7.54$ ,  $p=.006$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.03$  (see Figure 1). There was also a main effect of time,  $F(1, 282)=22.68$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.07$ :

<sup>4</sup> One participant had dropped out at T2 when these exploratory variables were assessed.

over time, overall participants showed a decline in perceived intergroup threat (T1:  $M=4.32$ ,  $SD=1.15$ , vs T2:  $M=4.08$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ). There was no main effect of party support,  $F(1, 282) = .31$ ,  $p = .578$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ . Contrary to the prediction that DUP supporters would increase their threat, Sinn Féin supporters substantially decreased their threat (T1:  $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=1.19$ , vs. T2:  $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ) mostly driving the overall observed decline in intergroup threat over time,  $F(1, 282) = 33.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ . For DUP supporters the decrease in threat (T1:  $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=1.09$ , vs. T2:  $M=4.11$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) was not significant,  $F(1, 282) = 1.77$ ,  $p = .184$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .006$ . There was no significant difference in intergroup threat between Sinn Féin and DUP supporters at any of the time points, T1 Sinn Féin:  $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=1.19$ , vs. T1 DUP:  $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ,  $F(1, 282) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .152$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$  and T2 Sinn Féin:  $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=1.11$ , vs. T2 DUP:  $M=4.11$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ,  $F(1, 282) = .21$ ,  $p = .647$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ .

## Mediation of party support on intergroup bias via intergroup threat

To test Hypothesis 1b that change in intergroup threat from before (T1) to after the elections (T2) would mediate any relationship between party support and change in intergroup bias, we conducted a serial mediation analyses using PROCESS (Model 6; Hayes, 2017). We operationalized party support as a continuous variable with higher scores indicating relative support for Sinn Féin and lower scores relative support for DUP. Table 2 displays means and standard deviations along with zero-order correlations for party support (Sinn Féin > 4, DUP < 4), change in perceived intergroup threat, change in intergroup bias in attitudes, and change in bias in behavioral intentions. We operationalized change as Time 1 scores subtracted from Time 2 scores; the higher/more positive the score is, the more intergroup threat, intergroup bias in attitudes, and bias in behavioral intention increased from Time 1 to Time 2. Lower/more negative values indicate a decrease in intergroup threat and bias from Time 1 to Time 2.

We performed the sequential mediation analysis with party support (higher values indicate more support for Sinn Féin relative to DUP) as the predictor, change in intergroup threat as the first mediator, change in intergroup bias in attitudes as subsequent mediator, and change in bias in behavioral intentions as the criterion. Positive values in change (T2–T1) indicate an increase from T1 to T2, negative values a decrease. The mediation model is depicted in Figure 2.

First, we estimated the association between the predictor party support on the mediator change in perceived intergroup threat:  $b_1 = -.06$ ,  $SE_1 = .02$ ,  $p = .003$ . Second, we estimated the association between the change in intergroup threat and the change in intergroup bias in attitudes while controlling for party support:  $b_2 = .19$ ,  $SE_2 = .06$ ,  $p = .002$ . Finally, we estimated the association of change in intergroup bias in attitudes on change in bias in behavioral intentions while controlling for party support and change in intergroup threat:  $b_3 = .23$ ,  $SE_3 = .10$ ,  $p = .002$ . Then, we tested if the proposed indirect effect differs from zero, confidence intervals (CI) were computed using bootstrapping with 10,000 samples and heteroskedasticity-consistent standard

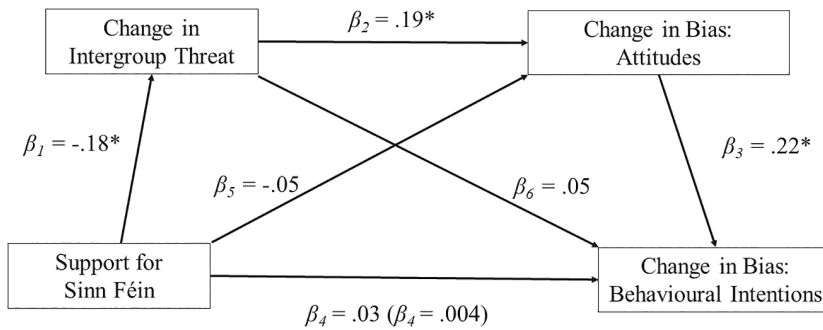
**TABLE 2** Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among main variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4
1. Party support	4.47	2.27	–.18**	–.08	.004
2. Change threat	–.24	.79		.20**	.08
3. Change IGB: Attitudes	–.03	.79			.22**
4. Change IGB: Intentions	–.04	.83			

Note: Change = T2 – T1; Party Support: scale 1–7 with Sinn Féin > 4, DUP < 4.

Abbreviation: IGB, intergroup bias.

\*\* $p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 2** Sequential mediation model. \* $p < .05$ ; Coefficients are standardized coefficient weights; Support for Sinn Féin over DUP: scale 1–7 with  $<4$  relative support for DUP and  $>4$  relative support for Sinn Féin; Change =  $T2 - T1$  with positive scores indicating increase and negative scores decrease.

errors (HC3; Davidson & MacKinnon, 2004). The confidence intervals did not include zero indicating a statistically significant sequential indirect effect:  $b = -.003$ ,  $SE = .002$ , 95% CI  $[-.007, -.0003]$ ,  $\beta = -.008$ ,  $SE = .005$ , 95% CI  $[-.02, -.0008]$ . The total effect of party support on change in intergroup bias in behavioral intentions was not significant ( $b = .001$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .954$ ). Still, the strength of association between party support and change in behavioral intentions significantly increased when accounting for change in intergroup threat and change in bias in attitudes as indicated by the statistically significant indirect effect (see above). The direct effect, when controlling for the mediators, was also not significant ( $b = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .659$ ).

Results show a substantial decrease in intergroup threat among those who supported Sinn Féin and an associated decrease in their intergroup bias between T1 and T2. That means those supporting Sinn Féin showed decreased intergroup threat which decreased their intergroup bias in attitudes which in turn decreased their bias in behavioral intentions. In other words, results show a mediated decrease in bias in behavioral intentions via a decrease in intergroup threat that went along with a decrease in bias in attitudes that was significantly stronger for supporters of Sinn Féin compared to supporters of DUP.<sup>5</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The present research investigated perceived intergroup threat of members of two communities with a history of conflict and intergroup bias between them in the wake of crucial elections. Applied to the context of Northern Ireland, we assessed how intergroup threat and intergroup bias changed from before to after the 2022 Assembly Elections depending on which of two competing parties (Sinn Féin vs. DUP) people supported more. For the first time in Northern Ireland's history Sinn Féin won the highest number of Assembly seats, qualifying for the post of the First Minister. Our hypotheses were partially supported. Although the present data do not support the hypothesis that supporters of the party (i.e., DUP) that gains fewer votes than the competing party would *increase* perceived intergroup threat, they show that supporters of the party (i.e., Sinn Féin) that gained more votes *decreased* intergroup threat. This finding fits with the present theoretical framework

<sup>5</sup>We also explored this mediation replacing the continuous variable party support with the dichotomous equivalent (party support score  $>4 = 1 =$  Sinn Féin and  $<4 = -1 =$  DUP). Results replicate a significant indirect effect,  $b = -.006$ , 95% CI  $[-.015, -.0004]$ . In addition, the same mediation with community affiliation (Catholics = 1, Protestants = 0) instead of party support as predictor also was significant,  $b = -.01$ , 95% CI  $[-.02, .035]$  conceptually replicating this finding. For more details see the online supporting information at <https://osf.io/6mvzj/>.

that relevant elections in a region with a history of intergroup conflict are associated with intergroup threat. Perceived intergroup threat overall *decreased* from before to after the elections. Notably, the decrease in intergroup threat among those who relatively supported Sinn Féin, compared to those relatively supporting DUP, was greater. Additionally, these decreased feelings of intergroup threat in those supporting the larger or “winning” party was indirectly associated with decreased intergroup bias in attitudes and consecutively in behavioral intentions.

## Threat reduction

Overall, participants in general reported lower intergroup threat after the election than before. There are at least two possible explanations for that. First, the observed overall decline could have resulted from a constantly high level of intergroup threat associated with supporting polarized political positions in divided societies. Irrespective of whether people supported DUP or Sinn Féin, because of the instability in Northern Ireland and the identity threat posed by Brexit (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022), feelings of intergroup threat may be high all the time. This experience of intergroup threat may have been ameliorated somewhat for those supporting Sinn Féin over DUP following a favorable election outcome. So while feelings of threat may reduce for supporters of the party with a favorable outcome (i.e., Sinn Féin supporters), no such change is evident in those whose preferred party has lost ground (i.e., the DUP).

On the other hand, the observed decline in intergroup threat could have resulted from an initial increase in intergroup threat due to the anticipation of important elections. Those increased levels of intergroup threat preelection could be due to uncertainty that exists prior to knowing the outcome of an election (Çolak et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Uncertainty is a cognitive phenomenon that influences the way people think about others (Stephan et al., 1999). Anxiety is a “generalised and unspecified sense of disequilibrium” (Turner, 1988, p. 61) and the affective equivalent of uncertainty. In intergroup contexts, the consequences of anxiety are amplified cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses and are usually negative (Stephan et al., 1999). Intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2016) is a revised and updated version of integrated threat theory which considers intergroup anxiety as an antecedent of threat. In line with this understanding of intergroup anxiety, it may be that uncertainty or anxiety associated with not yet knowing the outcome of the election caused uncertainty/anxiety, and this led to higher levels of intergroup threat preelection. Regardless of the outcome (whether the election was won or lost), postelection this uncertainty is less, and therefore threat is reduced.

Interestingly, our exploratory analysis indicated that after the elections our participants perceived less competition in the goals of the parties. Theory suggests that intergroup competition increases intergroup threat (Riek et al., 2006). Thus, the decrease in perceived conflict in the party's goals may have decreased the perceptions of intergroup threat (correlation of change in threat and change in perception of goal competition:  $r = .19, p = .001$ ). This could have been a psychological strategy to protect oneself from the adverse feeling of threat. Alternatively, it could reflect less adversarial and competitive politics required to broker the necessitated consociational government postelection. However, given that the Assembly had been in suspension for several months at the time of the election, it could reflect disengagement or lack of confidence that the Assembly would be reinstated. However, these ideas are speculative, and the present data only indicate a small correlation and no indication of whether reduced perceptions of competition decreased perceived threat or vice versa. Nonetheless, this may be an important avenue for further research.

Another potential contributing factor to the observed higher perceived intergroup threat prior to the election compared to afterwards is the ubiquitous media coverage, the presence

of election posters, and canvassing by election candidates. These communications emphasized the importance of the upcoming elections to both the Brexit negotiations and the constitutional future of Northern Ireland. The backdrop of political uncertainty regarding Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol likely contributed to heightened threat perceptions. Brexit not only poses a threat in Northern Ireland (Shelly et al., 2023), it is entangled with Northern Ireland's constitutional question that represents the opposing goals of the DUP and Sinn Féin (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Thus, increased threat prior to the election could have been influenced by perceptions about how the outcome may impact on the ongoing Brexit situation. Previous research has demonstrated that threat can be increased by, for example, newspaper editorials (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). The media coverage therefore is likely to have increased what was perceived to be at stake in the election and its outcome, and associated electioneering is likely to have heightened perceived intergroup threat before elections also.

Altogether, one could speculate that political campaigns increase the salience of intergroup threat before elections. After elections media coverage may move away from focusing on intergroup competition towards finding common ground and thereby reducing perceived intergroup threat particularly in contexts of consociational forms of government.

The present data demonstrate a stronger decrease in perceived intergroup threat in supporters of the party that gained more votes compared to supporters of the party that gained fewer votes. The distribution of power has traditionally been unequal in Northern Ireland. Historically unionists have been in the majority and more advantaged in terms of power and resources in Northern Ireland. In this election the party lost more than 40,000 votes (Tonge, 2022). At the same time, a smaller party—Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV)—gained a similar number of votes (Tonge, 2022). Nevertheless, the DUP won 25 seats—only three less than 2017 (Garry et al., 2022). We did not observe the hypothesized increase in perceived intergroup threat in DUP supporters despite them having lost the prestigious role of the First Minister. However, in line with our theorizing, DUP supporters did not perceive a significant decrease in perceived threat as was observed in Sinn Féin supporters. This may reflect a recognition of the ongoing reduction in unionist power which has been in decline over many years. This has given rise to ongoing feelings of threat in this community (Mac Ginty & Du Toit, 2007). In fact, the present election results have prompted debate about the timing and relevance of a border poll for Irish reunification. The anticipation of this could also be seen as threatening to Protestant/Unionists in the present climate.

On the other hand, Sinn Féin and republicanism is in an ascendant political position in Northern Ireland. Because of their lead in the polls, gaining fewer votes than the competing party would have been very disappointing for their supporters and perceived as a loss of a chance. Recent work suggests that heightened Brexit threat among nationalists is associated with perceptions of the likelihood of a united Ireland (Shelly et al., 2023). Thus, feelings of heightened intergroup threat in this group may well have been linked to a pressure to deliver an electoral result because of a sense among this group that an opportunity to deliver the long wish for united Ireland has come.

Those dynamics of relative support for these two main political parties in Northern Ireland may have affected the present results. Observing a chance playing out instead of losing it may have contributed to a stronger decrease in intergroup threat in Sinn Féin supporters compared to DUP supporters. For DUP supporters a sense of intergroup threat due to losing the prestigious First Minister role may have gone along with a sense of relief of not losing even more seats in the Assembly. These two opposing forces on perceived intergroup threat in DUP supporters may have balanced each other out resulting in neither decrease nor increase of perceived intergroup threat.

## Intergroup threat and intergroup bias

In line with theorizing and previous research, the present data demonstrate that perceived intergroup threat is associated with intergroup bias (Schmid et al., 2008; Smeekes et al., 2017; Stephan et al., 2009; Tausch, Hewstone, et al., 2007; Tausch, Tam, et al., 2007). Specifically, a decrease in perceived intergroup threat was associated with a decrease in intergroup bias in attitudes that in turn was associated with a decrease in bias in behavioral intentions. Furthermore, in line with our predictions the decrease in intergroup threat and its positive association with a decrease in intergroup bias in attitudes significantly suppressed any association between gaining the most votes in the election and the reduction in behavioral bias. These results indicate that the change in intergroup threat that was positively associated with a change in intergroup bias in attitudes contributed to explaining the association between relative party support and change in behavioral intentions bias; although it was a *decrease* in intergroup threat that positively affected change in intergroup attitudes and consecutively change in behavioral intentions differently as hypothesized.

## Limitations and future research

Notably, the present findings that election results decrease intergroup threat particularly among supporters of the party that gained the prestigious First Minister role for the first time in history and its positive effect on intergroup relations may be limited to the present context of Northern Ireland and a context where the leading parties have competing goals for the future of the region. While the Northern Irish context is representative for a society with conflicting intergroup and party dynamics, the governmental model is more consociational than other governments in divided societies. The power sharing between the two parties with most votes could have dampened the effects of elections on intergroup threat and associated intergroup relations. However, electoral change effects are difficult to notice in many multiparty systems, but getting the First Minister is clear-cut. This direct relationship between number of votes and the First Minister role could have increased any effects on outcomes. Future research could test whether results replicate in divided societies with a majoritarian electoral system and no power sharing.

The present research only focused on support for the two main parties in Northern Ireland, and we assessed the support of one party relative to the other. Therefore, our party-support measure reflects a preference for Sinn Féin over DUP instead of real voting behavior or party affiliation. Thus, people who voted for any of the other parties (e.g., Alliance party) were included if they showed a preference for Sinn Féin or DUP.

The present longitudinal design covered 2 weeks before and after the election. Future research could usefully examine whether threat builds up in the weeks and months prior to the election date as coverage and divisive electioneering peaks. Second, even though we build our theorizing and interpretation of the present data on general social psychological mechanisms that have been established in previous research, it is still possible that the observations are specific to the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections and members of the Catholic and the Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. Future research could investigate whether elections in general increase intergroup threat between members of distinct communities that support competing parties and whether intergroup threat decreases postelections. Again, a comparison between countries with a more versus less consociational model of government could yield important insights.

Furthermore, all observed effects were small. Thus, intergroup threat decreased from preelections to postelections; however, the elections only explained a small amount of the variance in intergroup threat. Of course, in a postconflict region there are many other

factors contributing to perceived intergroup threat and intergroup relations. Therefore, despite these multiple contributing factors, the present data did indicate that elections affected perceived intergroup threat with influence on intergroup bias. Notably, whereas the effect of election outcomes on intergroup threat is based on quasiexperimental data, the mediation of intergroup threat on intergroup bias is not. Therefore, the suggestion that decreased threat decreased intergroup bias is theory based; data merely show an association between these variables.

## CONCLUSION

Are elections destabilizing or divisive or may they be helpful for intergroup relations? Contrary to our predictions that electoral outcomes would increase intergroup threat in supporters of the party that gained fewer votes than the opposing party, the present results indicate that election results decrease intergroup threat particularly among supporters of the party that gained most votes. In turn, this decrease in intergroup threat went along with a decrease in intergroup bias in attitudes and behavioral intentions towards members of communities indicating potential for improved intergroup relations. In a context with a history of intergroup conflict where parties support opposing goals, the present research indicates that election outcomes can contribute to stabilizing and unification of communities. One may speculate that democracy at work may allow people to feel represented. At least, the present study shows that the outcomes of elections are not only results of competing interests of different groups and mobilizing voters, but they can themselves affect threat and bias among social groups and thus contribute to social conflict or peace.

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