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Item Type	Article
Authors	Shelly, Catriona;Muldoon, Orla;Roth, Jenny
Citation	Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology
Publisher	American Psychological Association
Download date	2026-05-08 14:26:20
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/
Link to Item	https://doi.org/10.34961/researchrepository-ul.23092022

Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology

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Online First Publication, May 4, 2023. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pac0000682>

CITATION

Shelly, C., Muldoon, O. T., & Roth, J. (2023, May 4). Brexit: Threat or Opportunity? Nationalist Identification Is Related to the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pac0000682>

Brexit: Threat or Opportunity? Nationalist Identification Is Related to the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland

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Northern Ireland has long been a contested territory. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement seemed to offer a resolution to the long-standing conflict. However, it has been reawakened by Brexit. Brexit presents a threat in Northern Ireland because it raises the divisive question of the United Kingdom's sovereignty over the region and the issue of the border. However, despite Nationalists'—a political identity group associated with the political ideology of Irish reunification—initial opposition to Brexit, many in this group now view Brexit as a potential opportunity to achieve their political goal of Irish unity. The aim of the present research is to examine the combined influence of the Nationalist's identity and perceived Brexit threat on people's understanding of the proximity of this political goal. We specifically test whether Nationalists' strength of group identification, and the threat of Brexit, is linked to how likely people believe a United Ireland has become. In two studies, we found evidence for the prediction that strong ingroup identification is related to the perception that a United Ireland is more likely. In the second study, path analysis showed that this relationship is conditional on perceived threat. For Nationalists with stronger ingroup identification, the threat of Brexit is greater. Combined, these factors are linked to an increased sense that a United Ireland is likely. In the discussion, we consider the implications of our findings for polarization in this postagreement society.


Public Significance Statement


This study suggests that, in contexts of political instability, strong group identification and threat may be associated with people's perceptions of political opportunity. Additionally, it highlights the importance of considering the role of identity and threat to understand people's political preferences in a society with preexisting divisions.

Keywords: Brexit, Northern Ireland, Nationalist, ingroup identification, threat

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000682.supp>

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The present research was funded by the Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme (Grant GOIPG/2021/1051)—awarded to Catriona Shelly. The funders had no role in study design, data collection or analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the article. The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the

content of this article.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were approved by the University of Limerick research ethics committee and conducted in accordance with the Code of Professional Ethics of the Psychological Society of Ireland; with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards; and also with the APA ethical standards in the treatment of the sample. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study, and participants signed informed consent regarding publishing their data. All authors consented to the submission of this article.

Catriona Shelly, Orla T. Muldoon, and Jenny Roth designed the study. Jenny Roth conducted the data collection, and Catriona Shelly conducted the data analysis. Catriona Shelly wrote the article with critical revisions from Orla T. Muldoon and Jenny Roth. All authors read and approved the final article prior to submission.

The data generated and/or analyzed during the present study are available in the online Supplemental Materials.

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Brexit is problematic in Northern Ireland because it accentuates the long-standing division between the political identity groups Unionists and Nationalists (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Traditionally, Nationalists/Republicans—the minority group made up of predominantly Irish Catholics—reject a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and want Northern Ireland to be reunited with the Republic (Elliott, 2000). On the other hand, the majority group made up of Unionists/Loyalists support the same border and Northern Ireland's continued status within the United Kingdom (MacKay, 2000).

Northern Ireland endured 30 years of violent political conflict that largely centered on the issue of the United Kingdom's sovereignty over Northern Ireland. In 1998, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (BGFA) marked the end of the conflict and began what is known as the peace process in Northern Ireland. The BGFA strived to resolve the seemingly incompatible aspirations of an independent United Ireland for Nationalists and continued status within the United Kingdom for Unionists (Muldoon et al., 2007). Significantly, there was the “precarious but essential paradox” (Hayward, 2018, p. 250): Northern Ireland would remain a constitutional part of the United Kingdom if favored by a majority, otherwise, a border poll will be initiated to vote on unification with the Republic of Ireland.

Membership to the European Union (EU) complemented Northern Ireland's peace process as it provided Unionists and Nationalists with a context that surpassed their ideological, political, and territorial differences (Hayward, 2018; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Murphy & Evershed, 2021). Critical to this was access to the EU single market, which facilitated the free movement of goods and people across the previously contested Ireland–Northern Ireland border, and as such reduced its salience in everyday life (Hayward, 2018).

Now, Brexit and the associated “border question” fuels the political question regarding Northern Ireland's constitutional status and as such disrupts the ability of the BGFA to balance Unionists' and Nationalists' conflicting political preferences (Çoymak & O'Dwyer, 2020; Doyle & Connolly, 2019; Hayward, 2018; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). With the political future of Northern Ireland at stake, Brexit represents both a potential opportunity and a threat, for these political identity groups (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, 2021), reproducing a zero-sum context that Northern Ireland had hoped to transcend (Mac Ginty & Du Toit, 2007).

From the outset, Brexit was divisive and mostly patterned along the usual “Unionist versus Nationalist” identity lines (Garry, 2016): The majority of Unionists voted to leave the EU because they saw Brexit as an opportunity to strengthen Northern Ireland's union with the United Kingdom (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), whereas most Nationalists voted to remain. At the same time, however, there was intragroup variability within these political groups. Within Unionism, for example, a considerable portion of Unionists (34%) voted to remain in the EU. Indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party—the second largest, and more moderate Unionist political party in Northern Ireland—recommended its supporters to vote remain (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). There was also a smaller number of Eurosceptic Republican dissidents who voted to leave the EU in the belief that it would rally support for a United Ireland and radicalize young Nationalists to “the cause” (Hoey, 2019; Mooney, 2017). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the differences

within these groups as well as between these groups, and it speaks to the complexity of identity in Northern Ireland (see Todd, 2010, for an overview).

For the majority of Nationalists, the prospect of Northern Ireland leaving the EU, and the potential return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, threatened this group (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). Notably, however, despite Nationalists' initial opposition to Brexit, this group has somewhat translated Brexit into a potential opportunity to achieve their political goal of Irish unity. Leaders of the Sinn Féin political party—the largest Nationalist/Republican party in Northern Ireland who also have representation in the Republic of Ireland—referred to Brexit as “the opportunity of a lifetime” to achieve Irish reunification (Libreri, 2020). Furthermore, recent research among Nationalists in Northern Ireland demonstrates that this group is more expectant of a United Ireland and also more in favor of it because of Brexit (Connolly & Doyle, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020). The aim of the present research is to examine the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit among Nationalists in Northern Ireland. We specifically test whether Nationalists' strength of ingroup identification and the threat of Brexit are linked to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. In divided societies like Northern Ireland, where Brexit represents a significant change to the political status quo, changes to group identities can have damaging ramifications for peace (Kelman, 2001). So, while it is critical to understand the rising appetite of Nationalists for a United Ireland, we also discuss whether this has the potential to increase polarization in this postagreement society.

Group Identification and Construction of Political Preferences

According to the social identity approach, the identity groups people belong to, such as political and religious groups, provide them with beliefs, values, and norms through which they interact and interpret the world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). The extent to which these identities shape people's behavior and cognition is contingent on one's strength of group identification, that is, the strength of the psychological meaning of the group to the self (Turner, 1984). Importantly though, group identification is believed to be dynamic and sensitive to contextual shift (Turner et al., 1994). This means that identity groups, and what they constitute, are not fixed but in a continuous process of construction shaped by the wider social reality (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). For instance, Todd (2005) provided a comprehensive account of how the introduction of the BGFA—a sociopolitical change—triggered society-wide shifts to the Irish and British identities in Northern Ireland and people's identification with these identities. Often, this identity reconstruction is strategic: it embodies group identity projects and vision of a desired social world (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Identities can, therefore, have strategic political functions and changes in political context can result in group members seeking and acting to avail of new political opportunities (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). In the context of Brexit, Nationalists may see the new political context as offering a chance for Irish reunification (Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020). Therefore, not only is it possible that

altered political contexts are associated with identity shift, but social change may be made possible by the new understandings of identity (Hopkins et al., 2006).

Recent research demonstrates that Nationalist identification is stronger than it has been since 1998 (Hayward & Rosher, 2020)—the introduction of the BGFA. While group identification within the Irish Nationalist community has been demonstrably higher than other groups in Northern Ireland (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014). Brexit has made identities salient and like other social identities, political identities (e.g., Nationalist) are significant in shaping one's political reality (Cohen, 2003). The extent that people identify with political groups is important as group members with strong identification are more engaged in seeking political ambition and strategic opportunities (for a discussion, see Huddy, 2013). When a political identity group faces a potential loss (e.g., the political future of Northern Ireland following Brexit), those with strong identification are more likely than those with weaker identification to reinforce the preferences of their group and reject information that contradicts their group (Flynn et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2018). For example, Huddy et al. (2018) demonstrated identification strength is an important predictor of confidence in electoral victory across the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Given that those with strong political identification are more inclined to support versions of the political reality that are favorable for the ingroup (Huddy et al., 2018), in the present research, Nationalists' strength of identification should be consequential to their political preferences.

Brexit Threat Strengthening Political Preferences

Threat is also important to consider in the formation of political preferences (e.g., Gomez et al., 2019; Van de Vyver et al., 2018). In an analysis of voters in England and Scotland, the perceived threat of immigration was a significant predictor of the leave vote in the Brexit referendum (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018; Van de Vyver et al., 2018). This suggests that political preferences can be driven by a need to establish control over perceived threats (Van de Vyver et al., 2018). Indeed, the political event itself (e.g., Brexit) can be experienced as a threat that may influence political preferences (Gomez et al., 2019). For example, Gomez et al. (2019) demonstrated that in the United States, in response to the threat of losing the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton supporters increased their support for the policies of the Clinton campaign. Essentially, in response to threat, group members increased support for their group's political agenda.

In addition, people who have strong group identification may be more likely to experience threat and in turn may be more likely to engage in strategies to defend the group (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; de Hoog, 2013; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2002). Thus, the experience of threat, and its relation to group identification, is centrally relevant to understand people's political preferences, particularly in divided societies like Northern Ireland (Canetti et al., 2018).

Perceptions of Brexit threat may also be linked to perceptions of political opportunity due to reappraisal of the event. According to social identity/self-categorization model of stress (Haslam, 2004), stressors in the environment, that is, events that present a potential threat, such as Brexit, can be reappraised into a more positive experience, like an opportunity, if people have the relevant resources

to do so. Such resources can include the access to cognitive alternatives, whereby the ingroup that is experiencing the threat is motivated and able to positively reinterpret the event (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2004, 2005). As mentioned previously, the grounds for a United Ireland are embedded within the BGFA and since the referendum, Nationalist political leaders have used Brexit as a basis for pushing a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Therefore, the structural and ideological factors now available to Nationalists may facilitate their ability to perceive Brexit as both a threat and an opportunity.

Brexit potentially poses realistic and symbolic threats in Northern Ireland (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Realistic threats involve threats to the political power and resources of the ingroup and also fears over individual physical safety stemming from the outgroup (Stephan et al., 2016). These issues have always been writ large in Northern Ireland (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Recent research from the border counties in Northern Ireland demonstrates people perceive Brexit as a realistic threat to cross-community relationships, the peace process, and economic stability of Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2021). Participants also reported that they felt Brexit had hardened people's political views in Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2021). This alludes to Brexit as a symbolic threat, threatening the ingroup's values, beliefs, and ideology (Stephan et al., 2016). For Nationalists, whose political goal is a United Ireland, Brexit is particularly threatening because it represents a further separation from the Republic of Ireland (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017).

Nationalist/Republican political parties in Northern Ireland opposed Brexit. The acceleration toward a United Ireland within the Sinn Féin party has arisen alongside the need to mitigate the very real economic and political risks of Brexit to Ireland, North and South (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Indeed, Evershed and Murphy (2022) describe Brexit as a moment of both "unparalleled opportunity and profound threat for Irish Republicanism" (p. 245). Therefore, Nationalists' increased appetite for a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020) may be in response to the threat of Brexit. In line with previous research, Nationalists pushing their political agenda may reflect efforts to defend the group and establish control over the threat. Therefore, we suggest that perceiving Brexit as threatening will also be linked to the perception that a United Ireland is more likely among Nationalists.

The Present Study

The present study aims to examine ingroup identification and political preferences among Nationalists in the Brexit context in Northern Ireland. Have Nationalists, who initially opposed Brexit, translated their Brexit threat into a potential opportunity for a United Ireland? Is their strength of group identification associated with this process? In two studies, we test whether Nationalists' strength of ingroup identification is linked to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit. Because of previous evidence showing the significance of threat in shaping political preferences, we consider whether this relationship is conditional on perceived threat. In the first study, we investigate the relationship between Nationalists' strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Given the research that demonstrates gradations in identification are important in shaping political preferences, we expect that

the stronger Nationalists identify with their ingroup, the more they will perceive that a United Ireland is more likely.

While Study 1 merely tests the predicted correlation between Nationalists' strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, Study 2 replicates and extends Study 1 as it tests whether this relationship is conditional on perceived Brexit threat. Previous research has shown that threat is experienced most by those with strong ingroup identification. Therefore, we expect that the stronger Nationalists identify with their ingroup, the more they will experience Brexit threat. Altogether, we hypothesized that the link between Nationalists' identification strength and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland will be conditional on their experienced Brexit threat.

The present research was conducted in 2020 during the United Kingdom's transition period of leaving the EU (which ended on December 31, 2020). Like in the rest of the United Kingdom in 2020, in Northern Ireland, there was political uncertainty as the United Kingdom and EU attempted to formulate a trade agreement, and "no deal" remained a possibility (Beesley, 2020). In January 2020, the Nationalist/Republican party Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party resumed the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. At the same time, in the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin made significant gains in the election, opening up new opportunities for Sinn Féin to intensify debate on the constitutional question of Northern Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). The Northern Ireland Protocol and the associated Irish sea border had not yet come into effect in Northern Ireland.

Study 1

Method

Design

Study 1 uses cross-sectional data from the 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT). We used a correlational design assessing the relationship between Nationalists' strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit.

Participants and Procedure

The NILT survey uses a systematic random sample of addresses obtained from the Postcode Address File database of addresses. This provides the most up-to-date and complete list of addresses in the United Kingdom and is considered a good sampling frame for high-quality social surveys. As the NILT survey is an open-access resource, there was no requirement for the authors to obtain ethical approval for analysis purposes.

One eligible member of the household (18 years or older) was randomly selected to take part in the survey using the "next birthday rule." Data were collected through a large-scale computer-assisted web-interviewing survey. The interviews were conducted between October 8, 2020, and December 8, 2020.

From the total sample of 1,292 respondents, we included participants who self-identified as Nationalist in the present analysis $N = 247$ (19.2%). We excluded five participants who did not indicate their strength of Nationalist identification. A total of 242 participants were included in the analysis. Their age ranged from 18 to 65 years and older, with 47.8% of respondents aged between 35 and 54 years

and 59.5% identified as female. A majority ($n = 188$; 77.5%) described their nationality as Irish, 19.8% as Northern Irish, five as other, one as British, and one as Ulster. In terms of religion, 82% of the sample were Catholic, 15.3% no religion, and 2.7% were Protestant.

Measures

Strength of Identification. Participants indicated their strength of Nationalist identification through selection of either the *very strong Nationalist*, *fairly strong*, or *not very strong* response option. This measure of identification has been included in the NILT survey every year since 2004 (apart from 2007).

Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland as a Consequence of Brexit. Participants answered the question "Do you think that the UK leaving the EU [Brexit] has made a United Ireland more likely, less likely, has it made no difference, or don't know?" by selecting one of the four response options (*Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely*, *less likely*, *has made no difference*, *do not know*). We coded the response *more likely* with 1 and collapsed all the remaining responses (*less likely*, *has made no difference*, *do not know*) to represent the perception that Brexit *has not* made a United Ireland more likely and coded it with 2. This was done because some of the expected cell counts were below five and did thus not meet assumptions for a χ^2 test (Field, 2017).

Results

From the analyzed sample of Nationalists 16.9% identified as *very strong*, 40.9% identified as *fairly strong*, and 42.2% identified as *not very strong*. A χ^2 analysis was undertaken to explore the relation between the strength of Nationalist identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Table 1 shows the observed counts, expected counts, and adjusted standardized residuals for each response. We set the significant threshold for standardized residuals to the conventional ± 1.96 , $p < .05$, ± 2.58 , $p < .01$. Results showed a significant association between strength of Nationalist identification and perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, $\chi^2(2, N = 242) = 10.11$, $p = .006$, Cramer's $V = .20$. Although there was an overall trend for respondents to report that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. In line with the hypothesis, only Nationalists with *very strong* identification were significantly more likely than expected by chance to perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. Those with *very strong* identification were also significantly less likely to perceive that Brexit *has not* made a United Ireland more likely. In contrast, Nationalists with *not very strong* identification were significantly less likely than expected by chance to perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. Those with *not very strong* identification were also significantly more likely to report that Brexit *has not* made a United Ireland more likely.

Overall, the results provide preliminary evidence for the prediction that the stronger Nationalists' ingroup identification, the more Nationalists perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely.

Study 2

Study 2 aims to replicate and extend Study 1's findings with a second sample of Nationalists in Northern Ireland. The data

Table 1

Observed Counts, Expected Counts, Observed Frequencies, and Standardized Residuals for Strength of Nationalist Identification (Rows) and the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland (Columns)

Nationalist identification	Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely	Brexit has not made a United Ireland more likely
Very strong		
Observed count	39	2
Expected count	34.73	6.27
Observed frequencies	95.12%	4.88%
Adjusted standardized residuals	2.03*	-2.03*
Fairly strong		
Observed count	88	11
Expected count	83.86	15.14
%	88.89%	11.11%
Adjusted standardized residuals	1.50	-1.50
Not very strong		
Observed count	78	24
Expected count	86.40	15.60
%	38.05%	64.86%
Adjusted standardized residuals	-3.04**	3.04**
Total	205 (84.7%)	37 (15.3%)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

collected were part of a wider research project exploring Brexit in Northern Ireland. For the present purpose, we aimed to replicate that Nationalists with stronger group identification perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. In addition, we tested whether stronger identification will be positively associated with greater perceived Brexit threat, which in turn will contribute to explaining why identification is related to the perception that a United Ireland is more likely. The present data set did not include a measure of Nationalist identification strength, but it included identification with Irish. Given the high degree of overlap between identities in Northern Ireland, in which identities are often indicative of other factors such as political views (Muldoon et al., 2007), we believe that for self-identified Nationalists in Northern Ireland identification with Irish provides a suitable proxy for their strength of identification with the political identity—Nationalist.

Method

Design

This study uses a cross-sectional survey design. Parallel to Study 1, participants that selected Nationalist as their preferred political identity were included in the analysis. We examined the relationship between strength of identification with Irish and perceived Brexit threat on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland among Nationalist respondents.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 666 individuals consented to participate in the research, of whom 231 self-categorized as Nationalist and/or Republican. After excluding four participants who categorized as both Unionist and Nationalist, two participants below the age of 18, three participants who did not live in Northern Ireland, and a further seven

participants missing responses on key variables of interest, a total sample of 215 participants were included in the analysis. Of the analyzed sample, participants were aged 18–64 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.06$, $SD = 9.95$, and 65.1% of the sample identified as female. A majority of participants ($n = 157$; 73%) described their national identity as Irish and 16.7% as Northern Irish. This closely matches the 77.3% of Nationalists who identified as Irish and 19.8% who identified as Northern Irish in Study 1. In terms of religion, 80.5% of the sample were Catholic. See Supplemental Materials, for a full list of reported national and religious identities.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences research ethics committee. The time frame of data collection mirrored Study 1, taking place between October and December 2020. Participants were recruited through the online platform Prolific. The survey—that included several other measures—took approximately 12 min to complete, and participants were paid £1.20 each for their participation. Only people who were residents of Northern Ireland were invited to take part in the online survey hosted using Qualtrics.

Measures

Strength of Identification. As a proxy for strength of Nationalist identification, we used the implemented 10 items from a thoroughly validated measure of social identification (Leach et al., 2008) that assessed identification with Irish (e.g., “I feel committed to Irish people,” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .80$). A higher score represented greater identification strength.

Perceived Threat of Brexit. For perceived threat of Brexit, we used three adapted items from previous research on threat (de Hoog, 2013; Roth et al., 2017; e.g., “To what extent does Brexit make you feel threatened?”; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*, $\alpha = .89$). A higher score indicated greater perceived threat.

Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland as a Consequence of Brexit. Perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit was measured with an adapted version of the NILT item from Study 1. Participants indicated their agreement with the statement, “To what extent does the UK leaving the EU make a United Ireland more likely?”; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*. A higher score indicated greater support for the contention that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely.

Results

Data were exported from Qualtrics to SPSS 28 for analysis. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the measures are reported in Table 2. Replicating the results of Study 1, the data showed a statistically significant positive association between identification strength and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. There was also a significant positive correlation between perceived Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland along with a positive correlation between identification and perceived threat of Brexit.

We used a PROCESS (Hayes, 2022, Model 4, 10,000 bootstrap samples) simple mediation model to test the relations between our variables. The total effect of strength of identification on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland was significant, $b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(1, 213) = 4.00$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.70]. Stronger identification was associated with greater Brexit

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables, Study 2 ($N = 215$)

Study 2 measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3
1. Strength of identification	5.65	0.91	.21**	.26***
2. Perceived threat of Brexit	5.62	1.47		.34***
3. Perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit	4.93	1.61		

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

threat, $b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(1, 213) = 3.06$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.55], and Brexit threat was positively associated with the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland when strength of identification was controlled for, $b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(2, 212) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.46]. Strength of identification and perceived Brexit threat accounted for 15% of the variance in the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, $R^2 = 0.15$, $F(2, 212) = 19.22$, $p < .001$. Path analysis showed that the total effect of strength of identification on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland was significantly reduced when perceived Brexit threat was accounted for but, a significant direct effect remained, $b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(2, 212) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.59]. The indirect effect was significant, $b = 0.11$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.24]. Thus, in line with the hypothesis, the relation between the strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland was partially conditional on perceived Brexit threat (see Figure 1).

In accordance with best practice in assessing cross-sectional mediation models, we tested two theoretically plausible alternative models (Fiedler et al., 2018). First, we examined strength of identification as a moderator of the association between perceived Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. This analysis revealed a nonsignificant interaction effect, $b = -0.04$, $SE = .06$, $p = .497$. Thus, strength of identification did not moderate the association between Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland.

Next, we investigated whether the relationship between Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland is conditional

on strength of identification. This indirect was significant, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.007, 0.099]. Therefore, we cannot rule out this alternative mediation model.

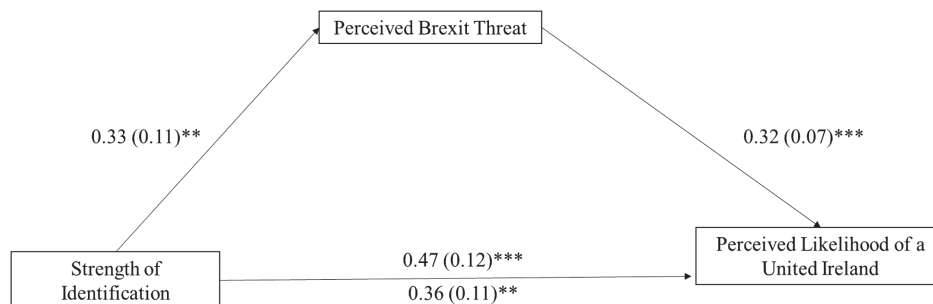
Discussion

The present studies investigated the Nationalist identity in Northern Ireland in relation to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. In line with our hypothesis, the results demonstrated that stronger identification among Nationalists goes along with the view that Brexit may make a United Ireland more likely. Further, as expected, the path analysis showed that this relationship is partially conditional on the perceived threat of Brexit. It demonstrated that for those Nationalists with stronger identification, the threat of Brexit is greater, which in turn explained some of the shared variance between identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Together, the present findings indicate that in this divided society, where Brexit represents a significant sociopolitical change, the Nationalist group also sees Brexit as presenting possible progress toward their political agenda for a United Ireland. Here, the results demonstrate that the perception that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely is associated with strong group identification and perceived threat.

The present findings provide support for the strategic political function that identities can have (Huddy, 2013; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). The results demonstrated that in Northern Ireland, highly identified Nationalists who initially opposed Brexit (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), and substantially voted against it (Garry, 2016), now demonstrate support for the view that Brexit has made their political ambition of a United Ireland more likely (Connolly & Doyle, 2021; Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020). While Irish reunification may represent the basis of the Nationalist identity, these findings indicate the altered political context has given this identity group the means to reconstruct Brexit as a potential opportunity that benefits their identity projects (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Indeed, the timing of the research coincides with Sinn Féin's electoral triumph in the Republic of Ireland presenting them with new opportunities to push for a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Further, the data were sampled during the Brexit

Figure 1

The Indirect Path of Strength of Identification to the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland Through Perceived Brexit Threat



Note. Unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in the bracket. The total effect is reported above the line, and the direct effect is below the line.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

transition period and as such prior to the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol and Irish sea border, which reduces the contention that this view of Brexit for Irish unity is fueled solely by practical incentives. Rather, it suggests that this shared political outlook has emerged among Nationalists to potentially avail of new political opportunities (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

These findings, along with the fact the majority of Nationalists voted against Brexit (Garry, 2016; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), may indicate that the shift in Nationalists' political preferences for Brexit from opposition to possible opportunity (Connolly & Doyle, 2021; Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020) may be associated with identity and threat. Similar to previous evidence, the results indicated that there was strong identification with the Nationalist identity in the current Brexit context (Hayward & Rosher, 2020), and in support of previous research, those with stronger identification demonstrated greater support for the contention that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. Thus, in this Brexit context, greater identification strength may be associated with seeking strategic opportunities (Huddy, 2013) and supporting a political reality that favors the ingroup (Flynn et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2018). In accordance with previous literature, those with stronger identification were also more likely to feel threatened (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; de Hoog, 2013; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2002), and this Brexit threat may influence strong identifiers to perceive a United Ireland as more likely. Therefore, we argue, our findings extend current research by demonstrating the relevance of identity and threat to shaping political preferences in a new context. Our findings imply that even in Northern Ireland, where there is political intransigence (Mac Ginty et al., 2007), political preferences are associated, at least in part, by identity and threat concerns, which are equally shaped by the wider shifting sociopolitical context.

In terms of practical implications, the present findings support previous work demonstrating that Brexit is presenting a threat in Northern Ireland (the high mean score of perceived Brexit threat in Study 2) and this threat could be driving polarization (Hayward, 2021; Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Recent research in Northern Ireland demonstrates a fall in the middle ground—with fewer people identifying as “neither Unionist nor Nationalist” and an increase in people identifying with the political positions of Unionists and Nationalists (Hayward & Rosher, 2020). Our findings suggest that highly identified Nationalists are particularly threatened by Brexit, therefore they may have become more concerned with pushing their own political agenda for a United Ireland. Indeed, this momentum for Brexit to deliver a United Ireland among Nationalists is likely to threaten Unionists and this will likely harden their political views also. Therefore, while Northern Ireland's politics have a long history of being polarized (Todd, 2010), Brexit delivers another frontier to further polarize the political positions of Unionists and Nationalists. As such, we would expect that reducing Brexit threat is necessary to curb the risk of further polarization and erosion of intergroup harmony that has progressed across these communities since the BGFA (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

While the present research provides an important snapshot of current political preferences for Brexit in Northern Ireland from

two different Nationalist samples, we cannot infer causality due to the cross-sectional nature of the design. Furthermore, an alternative model, where the relationship between perceived Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland is conditional on strength of identification, is also plausible. This means that while we demonstrated a relationship between Nationalist ingroup identification, Brexit threat, and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, we cannot distinguish between the two models. Rather, our model built upon previous social identity theorizing along with empirical evidence that demonstrated the positive effect of identification strength on supporting preferential information about the ingroup (Flynn et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2018), and threat as an intervening variable of this relationship (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). In this applied context, it is likely that there are reciprocal relations, and we think that it is important to acknowledge. As such, when strength of identification is high so is threat, and when threat is high, we are likely to see more group identification (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Future research using experimental methods should address the causal relations between these variables.

Another limitation of the current research is that Study 2 examines Nationalists' strength of identification with the Irish identity rather than directly measuring identification with the Nationalist political identity. As such, the variable is not necessarily representative of Nationalists' strength of political identification but mostly represents Nationalists' national identification. However, we note that there is a high degree of overlap between identities in Northern Ireland, and national identification can be indicative of other factors such as political views (Muldoon et al., 2007). Additionally, even though Study 2 included Nationalists' identification with Irish rather than identification with Nationalist, the relationships observed were in the expected direction, that is, stronger identification is linked to experiencing more threat and the perception that a United Ireland is more likely.

In addition, it is also important to acknowledge that a sizeable proportion of Nationalist participants in this research (18% in Study 1 and 19.5% in Study 2) is not drawn from the traditional “Irish Catholic” community. The diversity within our sample reflects the nuances of a real-life sample and demonstrates that identities in Northern Ireland are not monolithic but complex (e.g., Coakley, 2007; Todd, 2010). Thus, the results do not seek to represent the political preferences of the Nationalist community in its entirety. Rather we offer insight into potential mechanisms influencing perceptions of a United Ireland while recognizing the diversity of the sample.

Although our research adds an important contribution to the psychological literature exploring the timely topic of Brexit and identity in Northern Ireland, it fails to address the experiences of those from the Unionist community who have equally faced significant sociopolitical upheaval. However, examination of the Unionist population was beyond the aims and scope of this research that was specifically interested in the increased momentum for a United Ireland in Northern Ireland among Nationalists. Future research should endeavor to explore the political preferences of Unionists to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Brexit context in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

Brexit has reproduced a “Unionist versus Nationalist” political dynamic in Northern Ireland. The present research has shown that

many Nationalists', particularly those with strong ingroup identification, are now focused on how Brexit can benefit their group by delivering a United Ireland. Our findings suggest that this hardening of Nationalists' political preferences for a United Ireland may partially be explained by threat. In line with social identity theorizing, we propose that examining group identities and threat is important to understand how political contexts are shaped. In particular, attending to identity and threat in a society with preexisting conflict allows us to better understand why events like Brexit can be divisive and damaging.

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Received September 22, 2022

Revision received January 20, 2023

Accepted March 2, 2023 ■