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# **Menace without Mandate? Is there any sympathy for ‘dissident’ Irish**

## **Republicanism in Northern Ireland?**

### **Abstract**

Dissident Irish republicans have increased their violent activities in recent years. These diehard ‘spoilers’ reject the 1998 Good Friday Agreement power-sharing deal between unionist and nationalist traditions in Northern Ireland. Instead dissident IRAs vow to maintain an armed campaign against Britain’s sovereign claim to Northern Ireland and have killed British soldiers, police officers and civilians in recent years. These groups have small political organisations with which they are associated. The assumption across the political spectrum is that, whereas Sinn Fein enjoyed significant electoral backing when linked to the now vanished Provisional IRA, contemporary violent republican ultras and their political associates are utterly bereft of support. Drawing upon new data from the ESRC 2010 Northern Ireland election survey, the first academic study to ask the electorate its views of dissident republicans, this article examines whether there are any clusters of sympathy for these irreconcilables and their modus operandi. The piece assesses whether there are any demographic, structural, ideological, religious or party trends indicating republican dissident sympathies. It also assesses the extent to which dissidents are seen as a threat and examines whether this perception is shared evenly across Northern Ireland’s two main communities.

### **Introduction**

Northern Ireland has witnessed an increase in dissident Irish republican violence in recent years. The hopes of the British and Irish governments that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, introducing power sharing between the Protestant-Unionist-British and Catholic-Nationalist-Irish traditions, would create an enduring peace and remove entirely the ‘armed tradition’ associated with Northern Ireland, have been tempered by over 130 subsequent deaths from political violence. Since the Good Friday Agreement was updated in 2006, via the St Andrews Agreement, the activities of dissident Irish republican groupings, notably the

Real IRA (RIRA) and Continuity IRA (CIRA) (and most recently Oglaiigh na hEireann) have confounded orthodoxy that armed Irish republicanism was consigned to history. Dissident activity has existed ever since the Good Friday Agreement, the Real IRA killing 29 people in the Omagh bombing shortly after the deal was concluded. Subsequent activity has been episodic, but has never been entirely eradicated, the dissident IRAs killing two British soldiers and two police officers since 2009. Dissidents purport to reject any political agreement falling short of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland and the establishment of an independent united Ireland.

One question begged by the continuation of armed Irish republicanism, albeit in much more sporadic form than that practised by the Provisional IRA (PIRA) from the 1970s until the 1990s, is whether dissidents attract any public sympathy. Quantifying the extent of sympathy for violent organisations or their political affiliates is difficult. One of the mantras of the peace process, repeated by the British and Irish governments, the political parties across the communal divide and the police, has been that dissident republicans are bereft of any backing. To suggest otherwise risks talking up a disparate, seemingly desperate, band of diehards. It also disturbs the orthodoxy that Northern Ireland lies securely in the box marked 'solved'. Yet the assumption that dissidents are entirely isolated has been mainly that – an assumption, untroubled by much actual evidence, either way. This article uses new data, drawn from the 2010 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Northern Ireland General Election survey (a representative sample of 1,002 face-to-face interviews with the region's electorate)<sup>1</sup> to examine whether there is any sympathy towards dissident republican actions or organisations. The 2010 election survey was the first study to combine questions on attitudes to dissident republican violence with an exploration of attitudes to

the political alter egos of the dissident groups. In addition to examining the very limited previous evidence concerning support for dissidents, the article draws upon evidence from the ESRC survey to test whether dissidents are seen as a threat and analyses if there are particular categories of the Northern Ireland population, identifiable via demographic and attitudinal exploration, which may offer a modicum of sympathy to dissident republican positions. Before examining this evidence, however, we need to understand the context in which the armed Irish republican 'tradition' has been perpetuated, identify the groups which have been 'doing the perpetuating' and assess the extent of their activity.

### **The enduring militant republican 'tradition'**

Few academics cautioned that post-Agreement armed republicanism might not become extinct. Coakley (2004) and Hayes and McAllister (2001) were notable exceptions in their contentions concerning the possible durability of the 'physical force' tradition and the 'logic' of continued violence. Martyn Frampton's (2010: 286) detailed analysis has correctly indicated that the growth of dissident republicanism reflects the capacity of a tradition to endure and that its vitality has 'not been determined by the waxing and waning of the institutions in Northern Ireland'. Beyond academia, two themes have emerged. The dissidents do now constitute a threat, but they have scant backing. MI5 has responsibility for security intelligence in Northern Ireland. In 2010, its Head, Jonathan Evans, referred to a 'a real and increasing security challenge in Northern Ireland' , highlighting that there had been 30 attacks on national security targets from January to September 2010, compared to 20 throughout 2009 and declaring:

...our working assumption was that the residual threat from terrorism in Northern Ireland was low and likely to decline further as time went on and as the new constitutional arrangements there took root. Sadly that has not proved to be the case. On the contrary we have seen a persistent rise in terrorist activity and ambition in Northern Ireland over the last three years. Perhaps we were giving insufficient weight to the pattern of history over the last hundred years which shows that whenever the main body of Irish republicanism has reached a political accommodation and rejoined constitutional politics, a hardliner rejectionist group would fragment off and continue the so-called 'armed struggle'.

For Evans, there was, however:

a crucial difference from the position fifteen years ago. The Provisionals at their height could claim the political support of a significant body of public opinion in Northern Ireland and did develop a credible political strategy to operate alongside their terrorist campaign, but we see little evidence of a viable political programme on the part of the dissident republican splinter groups. Their political base is small and localised.

The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, used his address to 2010 Conservative Party conference in Birmingham to insist that 'as the threat of dissident Irish republican terrorism increases we will protect our people with every means at our disposal'. Addressing the same conference, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Owen Patterson, declared:

There are still some dangerous armed groups out there, who want to destroy what has been achieved and drag Northern Ireland back to its bloody past. And even though they have virtually no popular support, their activities have increased in recent years. And we don't underestimate the threat that they pose. But they offer nothing and we will not let them succeed.

Levels of sympathy for violence in Northern Ireland are notoriously difficult to judge. With the arguable exception of Sinn Fein's 1918 election victory,<sup>2</sup> militant republicanism has *never* enjoyed a popular majority amongst the Irish people, but it has endured, often in limited form. Sinn Fein won over 100,000 votes in Northern Ireland at the 1955 General

Election, fielding some republican prisoners as candidates, yet support was not converted into backing for the IRA's 1956-62 armed campaign. Sinn Fein did not contest elections from 1970 until 1981 but the Provisional IRA (PIRA) to which it was linked clearly enjoyed significant, if unquantifiable, support during this period, without which it could not have sustained its major armed campaign. When the extent of backing was tested electorally, from 1982 onwards, Sinn Fein captured one-third of the nationalist vote, but only became the majority nationalist party after the PIRA had declared a ceasefire.

As Augusteijn (2003: 22) notes, 'reliance upon the will of the people has continued to condition the [republican] movement away from simple elitism and led to an obsession with legitimacy and democratic credentials'. Sinn Fein indeed travelled this journey. However, for a rump of republican ultras, legitimacy and mandates are not drawn from contemporary elections, but are instead taken from the historical 'right' of Irish people to resist a British sovereign claim to any part of Ireland. The term 'dissident' to describe such ultras is problematic, reducing Irish republicanism, an ideology with many strands and much longevity, to a measurement against two organisations; the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein, from whose peace and political strategies militants dissent. Yet the Provisional IRA only existed from 1970 until 2005 and began life as a dissident organisation, rejecting the compromises offered by the 'Official' IRA. As such, it represents only one, temporary aspect of Irish republicanism.

## **Who are the 'dissident' republicans?**

Use of the lumpen label of 'dissident' overlooks the considerable heterogeneity within militant republicanism, itself divided over the utility of 'armed struggle' and split, often over arcane disputes, over what constitutes authentic republican politics. Insofar as the term dissident has meaning, it is to identify those republicans opposed to the Good Friday Agreement. That deal is viewed by the differing strands of republican 'ultra-ism' as a betrayal of the ideal of a united Ireland. Dissidents see the deal as a consolidation of partition, merely allowing Sinn Fein a share of sectarian spoils via ministerial offices in a Northern Ireland whose status is no longer seriously contested by that party. The extent to which Sinn Fein has departed from republican principles is contested within republicanism and amongst academics and journalists. As mere examples, Frampton's (2009) academic analysis denies the repudiation of republican beliefs and aspirations by Sinn Fein, whilst acknowledging (2010) the propensity of diehards to always regard any compromises with contempt, whereas the journalist Ed Moloney's (2002) account of the peace process credits the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams with extraordinary Machiavellian powers in hoodwinking republicans and steering them towards the compromises they had always fervently opposed.

Dissidents emerged as early as 1986, with the formation of Republican Sinn Fein, opposed to Sinn Fein's recognition of the Irish Parliament at Leinster House, which presides over the 26 Counties of the Irish Republic. Republican Sinn Fein argued that recognition of one 'partitionist' parliament on the island of Ireland, not responsible for governing the entire island, would ultimately lead to acceptance of a second partitionist institution, a Northern Ireland legislature. This development duly occurred via the Good Friday

Agreement, despite Sinn Fein's Deputy Leader, Martin McGuinness, having offered at the time of the 1986 split a commitment that the party had no intention of going into Westminster or Stormont (abstention from Westminster remains) and that the IRA would continue its armed campaign (Lynn 2002; Tonge 2004). McGuinness insisted that 'ultimately it is not votes but the cutting edge of the IRA that will end British rule in Ireland' (BBC 1985). Republican Sinn Fein's founding President and leader until 2009, Ruairi O'Bradaigh, insists that constitutional politics inevitably results in compromise, reform and an unsatisfactory agreement falling well short of a sovereign united Ireland (White 2006). Republican Sinn Fein's emergence was followed ten years later by the emergence of the CIRA, whose activities it promotes via the newspaper *Saoirse*, whilst denying formal links. Republican Sinn Fein and CIRA offer 'purist' republicanism, rejecting both 'partitionist' parliaments on the island of Ireland and claiming to eschew cooperation with other 'impure' republican militants.

The 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM), arose during the mid-1990s from internal frustration within Sinn Fein over the party's shift towards an agreement short of securing a British commitment to withdraw from Northern Ireland. The militant grouping was soon expelled from Sinn Fein. Although the connection is informal, the 32CSM tends to propagandise Real IRA activity. The RIRA was formed in 1997, following the PIRA's revival of a ceasefire, in order to maintain some form of armed campaign against British rule and as part of what was described as 'a well-defined policy to protect and conserve traditional republicanism' (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003: 43). The RIRA's limited growth was halted by its killing of 29 civilians in the Omagh bombing in August 1998, only four months after the Good Friday Agreement, but the organisation revived sufficiently to launch a low-level bombing



campaign in England in 2000. Although dormant and internally divided for much of the 2000s, the standing down of the PIRA in 2005 and Sinn Fein's decision, taken in 2007, to support the Police Service of Northern Ireland, appeared to create new space for the RIRA. An offshoot also appeared in the form of Oglagh na hEireann and, combined, the organisations began a new, episodic armed campaign. The political ambitions of the 32 CSM do not differ from Republican Sinn Fein in terms of the absolute commitment to Irish unity. Moreover, the sense of 'betrayal' by Sinn Fein unites dissidents. Both dissident groupings, especially Republican Sinn Fein, rely upon historical determinism, grounded in the inevitability of armed resistance to British rule, as a key resource for sustenance and morale.

There are, however, disagreements amongst dissident groupings over strategies and tactics, the utility of 'armed struggle' and the desirability of mutual assistance. The 32 CSM is far less concerned with the 26 County Irish parliament, effectively recognising its legitimacy in presiding over the 'liberated' part of Ireland. For Republican Sinn Fein, the willingness to accept the 26 County Irish parliament has been described as the 'biggest betrayal ever' (O'Neill 2005) even though it was followed by far more dramatic political turns in subsequent years. The emphasis from the founders of Republican Sinn Fein has been upon how 'traditional republicans didn't fight and lay down their lives for a reformed Stormont, nor for a puppet government in Leinster House' (George Harrison, cited in English 2003: 316). The generational transmission of an unyielding, inflexible ideology is sloganised by Republican Sinn Fein as 'continuity not compromise'.

For the 32 CSM, the downgrading by Sinn Fein of all that was principle to the status of mere tactics is also excoriated, as is the content of the Good Friday Agreement. This was most famously and pithily expressed by Bernadette Sands-McKevitt, sister of Bobby Sands,

the first republican to die in the 1981 republican hunger strikes, who declared that ‘Bobby did not die for cross-border bodies with executive powers. He did not die for nationalists to be equal British citizens within the Northern Ireland state’ (cited in English, 2003: 317). It is the ‘liberation’ of the ‘North’ that matters to the 32 CSM, not arcane disputes concerning the legitimacy of the Dublin parliament. Moreover, unlike Republican Sinn Fein, the 32 CSM is prepared to make common cause with other groups, arguing for example, in its Easter 2009 statement, that ‘all republican banners are welcome because all republican banners are needed and that republicanism could not simply rely upon old ‘theological’ certainties:

We need to set our case against British occupation in a way that is relevant to our people’s needs today. Our aims cannot solely be the product of the past nor can they be a slave to that past. British reasons for remaining in Ireland will change according to modern British interests. Republican strategies opposing these interests must adapt accordingly (*Sovereign Nation*, May-June 2009).

Beyond the political cheerleaders of the armed groups exists the Republican Network for Unity, an organisation formed principally by former republican prisoners (mainly ex-PIRA) and which attempts to provide an umbrella for the disparate groupings rejecting the Good Friday Agreement. Republican Network for Unity claims not to support an armed campaign, with some former prisoners arguing that if the PIRA’s violence failed to achieve goals, there is little prospect of dissident IRAs achieving more. The non-support (but not condemnation) of ‘armed struggle’ is also true of Eirigi, a republican organisation which does not have an armed wing and argues for socialist politics. There are also a number of independent, non-party political republican societies. These were formed after Sinn Fein’s decision to support the PSNI and condemnation of continuing republican armed actions, including Martin McGuinness’s denunciation of the perpetrators of the 2009 killings of

British Army soldiers and a police officer as 'traitors to Ireland'. Hardline republicans insisted that McGuinness 'did not speak for us' (McCaughey 2010) a viewpoint reinforced by Brian Arthurs, a former PIRA member who left Sinn Fein in 2008:

No one can deny that there have been changes in the North, but is an equality agenda being pursued [by Sinn Fein]. People did not die, they did not take up arms, for equality. They did so for Irish freedom. Yet a huge £100m MI5 building has been built in the North and 5,000 British soldiers remain here. A special British military intelligence unit has just been deployed in Derry...as republicans we were committed to fight on until Britain made a declaration of intent to withdraw from Ireland... It can be argued that that an armed campaign is not advisable at this point in time but it will never be right to inform on those who decided otherwise (*Sunday Tribune*, 24 October 2010).

### **Dissident republican activity and communal asymmetry of threat perception**

The Good Friday Agreement did not end violence related to the security situation in Northern Ireland. Between 2000-1 and 2009-10 there were 1,820 shootings and 1,012 bombings in the region (Police Service of Northern Ireland 2010: 4). Between April 2009 and March 2010 alone, there were 127 casualties of paramilitary shootings and assaults (more than double the 61 recorded in the previous year) whilst almost 35,000 rounds of ammunition were found and 169 persons were arrested under the Terrorism Act in relation to the security situation in Northern Ireland, with 36 charged (Ibid: 3). The 2009-10 total for bombings and shootings had already been matched by 31 August 2010 in the following year's (April 2010 to March 2011) tally. Meanwhile, incidents with a sectarian motivation totalled 7,249 from April 2005 to the end of July 2009, a rate of 139 per month, whilst sectarian crimes amounted to 5,234 during the same period, a monthly average of 95 (Police Service of Northern Ireland 2009).

In November 2009, the Independent Monitoring Commission, which tallied paramilitary activity for the British and Irish governments from 2004-10, reported that the CIRA and RIRA were 'extremely active and dangerous' and that 'dissident republican activity since the summer of 2008 had been consistently more serious than at any time since we had started to report it in April 2004'. (Independent Monitoring Commission 2009: 4-5). The Commission's warnings were followed in September 2010 by the raising of the dissident republican threat in Britain from 'moderate' to 'substantial' by the British government, meaning that an attack is considered a strong possibility.

Yet dissident activity has produced markedly different perceptions of the threat these ultras constitute, according to religion (and, by default therefore in Northern Ireland, membership of the Unionist or Nationalist communities). Table 1 indicates that Unionists may fear the rise of the old problem of the IRA, whereas Nationalists are less troubled by the 'rebirth' of armed republicanism. Asked in the 2010 Northern Ireland election survey whether the 'dissidents' constituted a 'major', 'minor' or 'no' threat, the reaction of a majority (53 per cent) of Protestants in the survey is to view dissidents as a 'major threat', compared to only 17 per cent of Catholics who think likewise. Overall, only 7 per cent of those surveyed dismissed the 'micro-groups' as 'no threat'. The differences have been reflected in the coverage offered by Northern Ireland's daily newspapers. The nationalist *Irish News* has tended to play down the problem, whereas the Unionist *News Letter* has highlighted concerns over the rise of dissident activity.<sup>3</sup> Unionist perceptions have leant towards that of the return of the old 'IRA bogeyman'.

[Table 1 about here.]

Perceptions of the scale of the threat posed by dissidents also vary, although to a lesser extent, according to age. Those of more advanced years and sceptical of prospects for a permanently peaceful polity, having lived through sustained conflict, are more fearful of the perpetuation of violence, whereas young people, with little or no memory of the 1970-1998 phase of conflict, appear more sanguine.

[Table 2 about here.]

Community background, determined by religion, and age, are thus important indicators (much more so than class or denomination) in terms of how dissident activity is viewed. The strong sense of threat felt by many Protestants is despite the lack of targeting of their community. It is Catholic police officers, recruited on a 50-50 quota basis with non-Catholics, who have been targeted particularly, as part of a dissident strategy designed to deter those from a nationalist background joining the PSNI and enhancing its legitimacy.

### **Assessing the extent of sympathy for ‘dissidents’: the data**

Prior to the 2010 Northern Ireland General Election survey, only two surveys, both conducted for the BBC Northern Ireland *Hearts and Minds* programme, in 2002 and 2006 respectively, had listed Republican Sinn Fein or the 32 CSM as options for respondents. Combined support for these groups in each poll came to 7 per cent of nationalists, a small, if not negligible, showing. However, in the only election where dissident tested their support, the 2007 Northern Ireland Assembly contest, they managed to achieve only 3 per cent of the nationalist vote, amounting to only 8,000 votes. Due to prohibitions placed upon their organisations, ‘Republican Sinn Fein’ candidates were obliged to stand as ‘independents’,

given party policy which declines to repudiate 'armed struggle' for Irish unity. The Electoral Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 and subsequent updating legislation requires election candidates to renounce proscribed organisations (the CIRA and RIRA are both illegal) and also renounce terrorism connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland.

The candidate label issue may not have assisted, but outright rejection and the certainty of Sinn Fein victories in most of the areas contested were probably far more important in explaining dissident 'under-performance' relative to the *Hearts and Minds* polls. The poor electoral performance led to further scorn being heaped upon dissidents from 'mainstream' republicans in Sinn Fein. To question Sinn Fein's political changes has risked ostracism and isolation within nationalist communities where the party enjoys a hegemonic position. Many former IRA prisoners have been elected as Sinn Fein representatives or hold prominent positions within the local state. Shirlow et al (2010) found that only 15 per cent of former prisoners could be classified as 'neo-dissidents', unconvinced by the new political direction of Sinn Fein and still prepared to offer sympathy to those engaged in continuing 'armed struggle', although a higher percentage suggested that those republicans currently imprisoned were 'political prisoners'.

So what is the real extent of sympathy for dissident republicanism? In order to test this, four exploratory questions were deployed in the 2010 ESRC Northern Ireland General Election survey. One asked the level of sympathy ('a lot', 'a little', or 'none') with 'the reasons why some Republican groups (such as the Real IRA and Continuity IRA) and often called "dissident republicans" *continue* to use violence, even if you don't condone the violence itself'. A second asked whether respondents 'strongly support', 'support', 'neither support nor oppose', 'oppose' or 'strongly oppose' the Police Service of Northern Ireland',

the force which replaced the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 2001 in a bid to achieve cross-community acceptance of policing. A third question asked electors if they ‘strongly agreed’, ‘agreed’, ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’, ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with the proposition that ‘the Police Service of Northern Ireland is very similar to the old Royal Ulster Constabulary’. Finally, respondents were asked whether they ‘strongly liked’, ‘liked’, ‘neither liked nor disliked’, ‘disliked’, or ‘strongly disliked’ Republican Sinn Fein and the 32 CSM. The raw percentage scores are reported in Table 3.<sup>4</sup>

[Table 3 about here.]

The overall figure of 8.2 per cent declaring that they have ‘sympathy for the reasons why some republican groups (such as the Real and Continuity IRAs) continue to use violence’ might be seen as surprisingly high, amounting to 14 per cent of nationalists, using the survey weighting and approximating to almost one-third of those *self-identifying* as nationalists. Levels of attraction to Republican Sinn Fein and the 32 CSM, associated with the CIRA and RIRA, are also small but not negligible. Given the tendency of survey respondents to produce ‘socially acceptable’ answers, which resulted in a severe under-reporting of Sinn Fein’s vote in opinion polls throughout the Troubles, when the party was ‘inextricably linked’ to the IRA, these figures in terms of dissident sympathy could be interpreted as a possible understatement of dissident leanings. Eleven per cent of respondents (approximately 18 per cent of nationalist background respondents) believed the PSNI to be very similar to the old RUC.

Several important caveats must however be highlighted. Firstly, the use of the term ‘sympathy for the reasons for dissident violence’, with the rider that the respondent need not condone such violence, is palpably a ‘softer’ option than asking a question directly

asking whether someone 'supports' violence. Nonetheless, it is a legitimate question, deployed in previous Northern Ireland surveys, given that if the term 'support' is used it can be avoided. A common republican reply regarding past violence was that no-one 'supported' violence; rather it was a very unfortunate 'consequence' of British rule in Northern Ireland. As such, there is no guarantee that the use of the term 'support' would have elicited representative replies. Secondly, a liking for either Republican Sinn Fein (who may be confused by some respondents with the 'main' Sinn Fein) or the 32 CSM may not translate into (wasted) votes for either, even should they ever contest elections. Thirdly, believing that the PSNI is similar to the RUC (the highest figure on the tests applied) does not automatically equate to dissident sympathy. Fourthly, the figure of almost one-third of those self-identifying as nationalists sympathising with the reasons for dissident violence may appear startling. However, only 24 per cent of all respondents identified themselves as nationalists, a figure which matches exactly the level of nationalist identification in the most recent (2009) of the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys of political (and other) opinion ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2009/Political Attitudes/UNINATID.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2009/Political%20Attitudes/UNINATID.html)). Northern Ireland electors are eschewing the traditional unionist and nationalist labels, 42 per cent rejecting such labelling in the ESRC 2010 study (43 per cent did likewise in the 2009 Life and Times survey). Expressed as one-third of one-quarter of all respondents, the dissident sympathy figure is much less striking.

It is important to emphasise that no demographic category comes close to displaying an overall proclivity to sympathy for dissidence. What does emerge, however, are clusters where there is at least a measurable level of sympathy.<sup>5</sup> Those who do indicate dissident leanings are found in what intuitively might be regarded as the most likely categories: they



are predominantly male and youngish, being mainly aged below 45. As one might expect, opposition to the PSNI is age and community related and there is a monotonic increase in support for the police service the older the respondent. Young Catholics, especially working-class males, are least likely to support the PSNI, even though it is older Catholics who have been politically socialised over many years to reject a Northern Ireland police force. Religiously practising older Protestants are most likely to back the PSNI, with professionals also particularly likely to offer backing. Almost one-in-five Catholics agree that the PSNI is similar to the RUC and there is no age trend. The working class most sees the similarity.

In terms of sympathy with the reasons for dissident republican violence, the only age group reaching 15 per cent sympathy overall is the 26-35 category. All other age groups fall within the 5 per cent to 10 per cent band. Infrequent religious worshippers and the non-religious tend to be more sympathetic than regular churchgoers. Sympathy is highest among the working class and routine non-manual workers, where it reaches 10 per cent. Again, the 26-35 age category yields the highest percentage of those who strongly like or like the dissident republican political groups. Patterns of support in respect of religiosity and social class are similar to those found in respect of expressed sympathy for the reasons behind the violence. Older people (over-65) are most hostile to the dissident groupings; younger people are more likely to indicate support and there is also a high level of ambivalence (approaching 25 per cent) amongst the under 35s. Whilst dissident organisations draw their backing from those within the 'Catholic community', a large portion of their (limited) support do not identify as belonging to a particular religion.

### *Method*

We now need to go beyond such descriptive data to assess what, if anything, assumes significance as an identifier of dissident sympathies. The indicators of possible sympathy for dissident Republicanism are quite disparate in their content and coding and consequently, whilst it would be of potential interest to construct a dissidence sympathy scale, and test the underlying social and attitudinal predictors of this, any combination of the items used in Table 3 may have insufficient validity because of underlying dimensionality to responses. Moreover, some individual items may suffer from ambiguity relating in interpretation: the question regarding whether the PSNI represents a change from the RUC, for example, has a number of different possible interpretations, which may not *necessarily* indicate dissidence.

We therefore limit ourselves to testing sympathy for dissidence as tapped by the question least prone to ambiguity, namely the question regarding sympathy for the reasons for dissident violence. We code this 1 for a lot or a little sympathy, and 0 for no sympathy. All other responses are excluded. Substantively, this is also the most interesting question – in a post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland, sympathy for the reasons behind the most aggressive forms of Republicanism, as opposed to views on political actors or manifestations of institutional outcomes, PSNI included, indicates a possible social encapsulation of attitudes promoted as anachronistic and untenable by the mainstream process.

In the resulting binary logit model, we introduce key sociodemographic variables as possible explanatory variables of sympathy for Republican violence. In addition to a gender control, we include a categorical measure of age in six bands (18-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-55; 56-65, and the reference, over 65); a six-category Goldthorpe measure of class, based upon current or previous occupation (professionals and salariat; routine non-manual; self-

employed; technicians, supervisors and skilled manual; semi-skilled and unskilled manual; and a not employed reference), following analyses linking political support and radicalism to class bases<sup>6</sup>; and a three-category religious variable, contrasting practising and non-practising Catholic categories together with a 'other / no religion' reference category.

We also include two attitudinal measures. Firstly, we tap 'normal' political attitudes, using the survey's 11-point left-right scale in which respondents were invited to place themselves on an axis. This political attitudinal heuristic has been seen as increasingly salient in a Northern Ireland politics traditionally defined by the sectarian cleavage. Secondly, we include a nationalism item, tapping respondents' self-identification as nationalist or not through a simple dummy variable. We would expect nationalist identifiers to be more likely to sympathise with dissident violence. Lastly, we include one of the previous measures of dissidence sympathy, namely the questions tapping support for the longest-standing 'dissident' Republican organisation, Republican Sinn Fein, coding this 1 for respondents expressing a positive view (strongly like or like).<sup>7</sup> Clearly, we might expect an individual supporting a party closely associated with dissidence to be more likely to have sympathy for violence than someone who condemns Republican dissidence. However, it is evident that covariance between nationalist self-identification and support for Republican SF is likely to be high,<sup>8</sup> washing out one or other of the items when included together. We therefore expect to run a separate model including just the eventual non-significant item to check for such collinearity. Model 1, then, includes the sociodemographic predictors alone. Model 2 adds the two attitudinal items and the party support item. Finally, Model 3 provides a simple diagnostic of association between nationalism and support for Republican Sinn Fein, Model 2 having identified independent effects for each.

## The Model and Analysis

Table 4 presents the findings of the three models.

[Table 4 about here.]

Looking firstly at Model 1, there are no significant effects amongst the age or gender controls. Confirming the descriptive analysis, sympathy for dissidence appears greater amongst those for whom the conflict already existed in their formative years (26-55 year olds), but the effect does not reach significance. Sympathy for dissidence is greater amongst males but again the gender effect does not reach significance.

However, religiosity effects are significant. Practising Catholics are significantly more *hostile* towards dissidence than non-practising Catholics, who do not appear to be significantly different from those of other / no religion, in their attitudes towards dissidents. Clearly religious practice, rather than religion per se, matters, as those exercising their Catholic faith regard continued violence as unwarranted and morally wrong. This might be seen as unsurprising, given the unremitting hostility of the Catholic Church to successive IRA campaigns. During the years of the 'main' conflict, when Sinn Fein was linked to the Provisional IRA, practising Catholics were far more likely to support the more constitutional nationalists of the SDLP, controlling for the usual socio-demographic variables (McAllister 2004).

Of some surprise is the class profile of those registering sympathy for the reasons behind dissident republican violence, inasmuch as there are almost no significant differences between groups. The only group reaching significance is the self-employed,

which is less likely to support dissidence. Whilst support for militant republicanism in Ireland has *never* been confined to the working-class (particularly outside urban areas), structural disadvantages pertaining to the nationalist section of that class played a significant role in fuelling support for the PIRA. Any sympathy for dissidents may be drawn from a more eclectic class base and is not reducible to social class. This suggests that the structural basis to militant republicanism may have expired; the limited numbers sympathising with dissidents may offer backing for other reasons than inferior social position.

Although dissidence is not reducible to social class, turning to the attitudinal items included in Model 2, respondents identifying themselves further to the right are less likely to sympathise with dissidence compared to other respondents.<sup>9</sup> Those who perceive themselves as left-wing are more likely to offer succour to the dissidents. The adoption of left-wing attitudes may occur irrespective of social class and such attitudes concur with the avowed positions of dissident groups. Whilst republican militants might be dismissed as unreconstructed 'Green fascists' by their many opponents, they purport to offer a democratic socialist agenda and have attempted to popularise their political approach in recent times with threats made against bankers and capitalists.

Most marked of all, however, is that those self-identifying as nationalist are more likely to support dissidence. Those amongst the population who unashamedly label themselves as Irish nationalist are significantly more likely to offer sympathy to the *reasons* for dissident violence (not necessarily the violence itself, it is important to reiterate). A very substantial proportion (one-third) of the nationalist community supported Sinn Fein when the Provisional IRA was active from 1982 until 1997, fighting unambiguously for full British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. Votes cast for Sinn Fein during that era might be

interpreted as indicators of sympathy for 'armed struggle'. Not all such sympathy is likely to have magically dissipated, given the non-realisation of a united Ireland, even amid the palpably changed political situation in Northern Ireland, with Sinn Fein now playing prominent roles in a power-sharing government.

As expected, the other nationalist item, namely the Republican Sinn Fein variable, is not significant, given the strong association with nationalist identity, and so we include it separately, without the nationalist item, in Model 3. Here the strength and significance of supporting this party, the longest-standing dissident group, increases markedly as a predictor of sympathy for the reasons for dissident violence, although it is not as strong in its effect as the previous nationalist item, unsurprisingly so given that Republican Sinn Fein remains very much a fringe ultra party of no electoral significance.<sup>10</sup> Also, notably, the model fit does not decline substantially, and is still a major improvement on Model 1.

From the lack of independent effect in Model 2, then, it is evident that a liking for Republican Sinn Fein, a marginal party, is of far less importance than nationalist identification in an era where nationalist (and unionist) labels are diminishing relative to avowed 'non-alignment' in the zero-sum ideological game in Northern Ireland. Nationalism is the main, but not the sole basis for support for dissidence, as the Left-Right dimension retains importance, with those identifying themselves as left-wing most likely to support dissidence.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is notable that the coefficient remains identical across Models 2 and 3. Previous research confirming Left-Right and nationalist identification as orthogonal remains valid. It perhaps should be asked whether sympathy for dissidence from the most left-wing elements is a causal factor or simply a covariate. Those from the radical Republican core have historically identified with strong socialist ideologies. That they still do may be

evidence of their continued fidelity to this, rather than a political motivation to sympathy for violence *per se*.

The inclusion of the nationalist item does not wash out the religious antipathy effect. On the contrary, the disparity between the practising Catholic reference and all other religious categories becomes stronger, and the non-practising Catholic category contrast even attains significance. Once the confounding nationalist effect has been controlled for, sympathy for dissidence amongst those practising as Catholics, or at least identifying themselves as members of that religion, is even less evident.

## **Conclusion**

A mandate from the living continues to elude dissident republicans (and will surely continue to do so) who claim justification from the martyrdom of the 'patriot dead'. Nonetheless, there is some limited evidence that the isolation of republican ultras, although considerable, is perhaps not *quite* as utterly comprehensive as might previously have been assumed or declared. A level of popular support is important in maintaining an armed campaign, although quantifying levels of backing remains difficult. The Provisional IRA fought its 'war' from 1970 until 1981 without votes being cast for its political arm, Sinn Fein and clearly had some, even considerable, popularity but never held a majority mandate. Nonetheless, Sinn Fein has tended to contrast the contemporary lack of support for dissidents with the 1970-1997 conflict as if 'Provisionalism' was a mass movement, rather than one backed merely by a bigger minority of the minority population in Northern Ireland.

For those whose 'war' has still not ended, the supposed 'mandate' comes from the necessity of resistance to 'foreign occupation' and from history, via the supposed popular will of the Irish people when last expressed as a single unit, in 1918. There remain those impervious to pleas to abandon residual sympathy for the violence with which Irish republicanism has often been historically associated. Two earlier BBC surveys have indicated the republican hardcore, if measured in terms of support for Republican Sinn Fein and/or the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, the political 'associates' of dissident IRAs, to amount to around 7 per cent. Our more recent evidence, drawn from the 2010 ESRC election survey, suggests some sympathy exists towards the reasons for dissident violence, but it is questionable whether that will ever translate into electoral support for dissident organisations, should they decide (or be allowed) to contest elections under their current names. Our figure of 14 per cent of those from a nationalist background who sympathise with the reasons for dissident republican violence is higher when the population is reduced to those *self-identifying* as nationalists.

Dissident sympathisers are drawn from the 'Green-Red' strata of society, nationalists of a left-wing orientation. The 'Green' element is not to be confused with Green Catholic nationalism; Catholics, especially practising ones, are demonstrably unsympathetic to dissident republicanism. Rather, the dissident sympathisers are drawn from those who readily identify as nationalist (only one-quarter of the population) and fuse their nationalism with socialism not religion. However, these two ideological traits are not reducible to social class, which is not significant in terms of dissident sympathies. This may be because, unlike situational and structural Provisional urban working-class republicanism, rooted in social context and conditions of relative disadvantage, dissident republicanism is a reversion to



the older, ideological and territorial form not amenable to structural amelioration (see also Patterson 2011). Perhaps contrary to expectations therefore, dissident republican sympathies are not structurally determined, nor are there particularly strong demographic factors at work. Instead, dissident sympathies appear to be products of ideological choice, based upon deep nationalism. This is similar to the marginal militant republicanism which flickered, largely inconsequentially but with considerable enduring commitment from adherents, in Northern Ireland for much of the state's existence. The 'structural republicanism' of the Provisionals, whilst hugely destabilising at its height, was not necessarily deeply ideological (McIntyre 1995).

There exist a modestly sized group of people, reduced considerably from the main era of conflict in the late C20th, still not reconciled to the partition of Ireland, unsupportive of the political and policing institutions of Northern Ireland and sympathetic to dissident organisations. The capacity for growth of this grouping may be limited. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between sympathy for the reasons for dissident violence and unequivocal support, which can only be tested by actions and by explicitly frank survey questions which may not elicit honest responses. We tentatively suggest that a 'they-have-no-support' narrative for dissidents may need to switch to a critique based more upon the futility of an armed campaign in attaining long-term political goals. Additionally, perception may be more important than reality. The clear asymmetry in threat perception, with Unionists much more fearful of dissident IRAs than nationalists, demonstrates how older fears remain embedded in the Unionist psyche. Yet, whilst some republican violence towards Unionists remains evident in, for example, attacks upon Orange halls, a dissident republican modus operandi has been to target Catholic police officers, due to ease of such

targeting and to deter other Catholics from joining. The absence of large-scale support for dissidents within the nationalist community has not yet removed the traditional fears of many Unionists over the nature of republican violence.

## NOTES

1 The 1,002 face-to-face interviews, based on a 90-question questionnaire, were conducted by MRNI in the three weeks immediately after the 2010 General Election, across each of Northern Ireland's 18 parliamentary constituencies, using clustered stratified random sampling. The full results data file, sampling method and questionnaire are all archived at the Economic and Social Data Service, SN6653.

2 In *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*, Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry question the comprehensiveness of Sinn Fein's mandate even in 1918, pointing out the large number of uncontested seats and highlighting that Sinn Fein 'only' won 56 per cent of the vote. Even Sinn Fein's former Director of Publicity, Danny Morrison, in his book *The Good Old IRA* (1985, Belfast: Sinn Fein) accepted that the 1918 vote was not really a vote for violence. See also Brian Hanley's book, *The IRA – A Documentary History 1916-2005*, 2010, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan).

3 See as examples the editorial, 'Dissident support a wake-up call', *News Letter*, 6 October 2010 and Alex O'Kane's article, 'Wrong to dismiss the dissident threat', *News Letter*, 11 October 2010.

4 With hindsight, the questionnaire on which the face-to-face interviews were based might usefully have deployed some follow-up questions to those indicating sympathy with the reasons for dissident violence, or the perception that the PSNI is similar to the RUC, to ask *why* such views are held. In mitigation a) the questionnaire was already very long due to the

mass of election questions b) we perhaps underestimated the reported level of sympathy and c) this was the first quantitative foray into levels of sympathy for 'dissidents'.

5 A full set of the demographic descriptives are available from the authors on request.

6 For general examples of this see T.H.Greene's classic study, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements*, London: Prentice Hall (1974). For a class-based Northern Ireland analysis of the evolution of Irish republicanism see Pat Walsh's *Irish Republicanism and Socialism: The Politics of the Republican Movement*, Belfast: Blackstaff (1994).

7 We would have liked to include a similar parameter for 32 CSM support. However, the number of supporters of this party in the dataset was too small to allow this to be modelled robustly.

8 Indeed, the chi-square score for the association between these two items is very high – 162.87 (1df,  $p < .001$ ).

9 Left-Right position was included as a single continuous scale, rather than categorised, to ration degrees of freedom. A reduced model including Left-Right categorisation broadly confirms the same monotonic trend, with only the Moderate Left bucking the trend by missing significance, probably due to very small numbers placing themselves at points 2 and 3 on the scale. This model is available from the authors on request.

10 We were aware that some respondents might confuse Republican Sinn Fein with Sinn Fein and tested for this using another survey question which asked views of all parties, which yielded divergent views of the two. Running the dissident models using both parties, only liking for Republican Sinn Fein yielded significance in terms of dissident sympathy (in Model 3).

11 As in previous surveys, Catholic respondents offer more left-wing responses than others. However, when religious affiliation is controlled for, the effect remains.

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Table 1 Perceptions of the 'dissident' threat by religion

%	Catholic	Protestant	Other
Major threat	17.2	53.0	26.3
Minor threat	34.0	22.9	26.3
No threat	9.8	3.5	7.9
Don't know	26.6	17.9	36.8
Refused	12.4	2.7	2.6
N	429	515	38

Source: ESRC Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2010

Table 2 Perceptions of the 'dissident' threat by age

%	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	Over 65
Major threat	23.5	30.7	39.5	40.0	40.9	42.1
Minor threat	20.0	35.2	28.9	26.9	32.1	22.0
No threat	7.6	8.9	6.8	5.5	4.4	3.8
Don't know	42.4	20.7	16.8	17.2	14.5	23.3
Refused	6.5	4.5	7.9	10.3	8.2	8.8
N	170	179	190	145	159	159

Source: ESRC Northern Ireland General Election survey 2010.



Table 3 Attitudes to dissident violence, dissident groups and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (%)

	Lot of sympathy	A little sympathy	No sympathy			Don't know	Refused
Sympathy with reasons for dissident violence	4.4	3.8	75.3			5.6	10.9
	Strongly support	Support	Neither support nor oppose	Oppose	Strongly oppose	Don't know	Refused
Police Service of Northern Ireland	24.6	30.6	30.8	2.3	1.5	6.4	3.8
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Refused
The Police Service of Northern Ireland is very similar to the old Royal Ulster Constabulary	1.7	9.5	35.4	16.4	14.2	19.2	3.6
	Strongly like	Like	Neither like nor dislike	Dislike	Strongly dislike	Don't know	Refused
Republican Sinn Fein	3.3	4.5	17.1	5.9	45.0	10.6	13.7
32 CSM	0.7	3.1	22.5	3.6	42.7	13.7	13.8

N= 1002

Source: ESRC Northern Ireland General Election Survey 2010

Table 4 Binary logistic regression predicting support for dissident violence by social profile and political attitudes

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
<b>Constant</b>	-1.71*	.84	1.60	1.01	1.36	.99
<b>Female</b>	-0.46	.31	-0.56	.34	-0.50	.33
<b>Age</b>						
18-25	-0.73	.71	-1.05	.76	-1.13	.77
26-35	0.76	.52	0.28	.57	0.38	.56
36-45	0.50	.53	0.21	.58	0.27	.57
46-55	0.72	.54	0.75	.59	0.89	.59
56-65	-0.01	.59	-0.16	.63	-0.11	.63
<i>Over 65</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Religion</b>						
Practising Catholic	-1.68*	.74	-3.62***	.89	-2.65**	.76
Non-practising Catholic	0.49	.36	-1.09*	.63	-.02	.44
<i>Other /no religion</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Occupation</b>						
Professionals and salariat	0.25	.67	0.13	.72	0.37	.73
Routine non-manual	0.14	.64	0.16	.69	0.26	.70
Self-employed	-1.47*	.84	-1.26	.92	-1.06	.90
Technicians, supervisors and skilled manual	-0.52	.69	-0.32	.72	-0.25	.73
Semi-skilled and unskilled manual	-0.18	.62	-0.18	.65	-0.02	.67
<i>Not employed</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Political positions</b>						
Left-Right (0-10)			-0.44***	.07	-0.44***	.07
Nationalist			1.76**	.66		
<b>Strongly like or like Republican Sinn Fein?</b>			0.33	.56	0.89*	.52
N	653					
Model chi-square	33.83*** (13df)		93.33*** (16df)		84.68*** (15df)	
Nagelkerke pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.11		.30		.27	

\* p < 0.1 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001