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Northern Ireland's Catholics and Protestants: issues in the 2001 census

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The outputs of the April 2001 Northern Ireland census were eagerly awaited by Unionists, who want to stay within the United Kingdom, and Nationalists, seeking reunification with Ireland. Both were keen to discover how their respective population totals measured up at this, as at every previous, ten-year census, and hence the current demographic load of the two communities—Protestant and Catholic. The mood was particularly tense as the long-standing conflict which has riven the province, with its accompanying political violence and party divisions, had heated up throughout 2002.

Demographers' forecasts of each community's share of population lay within a wide bracket of 44% to 46% for Catholics, and 54% to 56% for Protestants. But politicians were less circumspect. Buoyed up by its success in the 2001 parliamentary elections, the Nationalist party Sinn Fein was already claiming victory over its rivals, while the Unionists gave an advance welcome to the stagnation in Catholic numbers which they argued ruled out any reunification.

The political issue in the census stemmed directly from the Good Friday Agreements (1998), which provided for a referendum on reunification or staying within the United Kingdom on the "one man, one vote" principle. But even were the Catholics to make up a majority in the population, they would not automatically have a majority in the vote on reunification because the Catholic population is on average younger

than the Protestant population and so has a lower share of the electorate. Also, not all Catholics want to break away from the United Kingdom, whereas most Protestants are against a reunited Ireland.

◆ Cold comfort for Catholics?

The initial outputs (tables 1 and 2) brought disappointment to the Catholics: despite a sharp rise in their population share from 1981 to 1991, with 40.3% of the population based on self-reported religion, and 43.8% taking religion brought up in, the 2001 totals fell short of demographers' forecasts.

Table 1 - Population of Northern Ireland, 2001

| | Religion (question A)(1) | | Religion brought up in (question B)(2) | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|--|------|
| | total | % | total | % |
| Protestant | 767 924 | 45.6 | 895 377 | 53.1 |
| Catholic | 678 462 | 40.3 | 737 412 | 43.8 |
| Other religion | 5 028 | 0.3 | 6 569 | 0.4 |
| No religion, religion not stated | 233 853 | 13.9 | 45 909 | 2.7 |
| Total | 1 685 267 | 100 | 1 685 267 | 100 |

(1) Question A was: "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?", and if so, "What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?"

(2) Question B was: "What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?" if the reply to question A was "no".

Source: Northern Ireland Statistics Agency 2002 (1)

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Table 2 - Proportion of Catholics in Northern Ireland (%)

| Year | 1911 | 1926 | 1937 | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Proportion | 34.4 | 33.5 | 33.5 | 34.5 | 35.6 | 36.8 | 38.5 | 42.1 |

Source: Northern Ireland adjusted census data

◆ A sharper overall drop in Catholic fertility

After the partition of Ireland in 1921, Catholic but not Protestant fertility began to rise, and excess Catholic fertility (more than 50% over Protestant) fuelled Nationalist beliefs that their majority population share would enable them to reclaim power. But by 1991, Catholic fertility (averaging 2.55 children per woman) was only 31% above Protestant levels (1.95). This was conjectured as a short-term dip, and that excess fertility would return to its previous levels. But the decade closed with no Catholic fertility surge—anything but.

The recent community-specific fertility data has not yet been published, but the area outputs by district may give some pointers. So, Catholic and Protestant fertility are close to the fertility of the five districts with the highest Catholic and Protestant populations, respectively. While both communities' fertility has declined, Catholic fertility has dropped more—down to 2.05 children per woman (from 2.55 in 1991) compared to Protestant fertility of 1.61 (from 1.95 in 1991) (figure 1). The narrowing fertility gaps reduce the Catholic future population growth advantage.

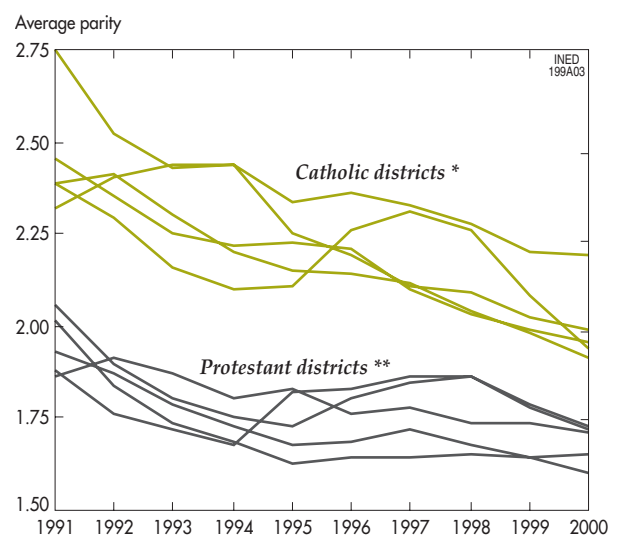
◆ The political importance of the residual categories

With the two communities jockeying for the demographic load advantage, fractions of percentages assume immense importance, and the "residual" categories—other religion, none, not stated—are crucial [2]. A small number reported themselves as neither Catholic nor Protestant (1). The Unionists laid claim to these on the grounds of their being "non-Catholic". The underlying assumption is that every Irish person has a religion. Whether now agnostic or atheist, they carry their religious origins with them.

Were a referendum to be held on the future of

(1) Accommodating the political and security situation may be one reason for some concealing their religion. There are precedents: in 1981, Sinn Féin called for Catholics to boycott the census, and either not report or conceal their religion. In other cases, Catholic and Protestant minorities in a district or village have kept quiet out of caution.

Figure 1 - Period fertility rate of Catholic and Protestant majority districts



* Newry and Mourne, Derry, Omagh, Strabane, Magherafelt.

** Newtownabbey, Castlereagh, Ards, North Down, Carrickfergus.

Northern Ireland, the minutest percentage point could swing the balance, making it essential for the two protagonists to have a firm allocation of the residual categories. Immigration doubled the proportion of people reporting "other religion" (Islam, Hindu, Judaism, etc.) between 1991 and 2001, but it still remains tiny (0.4% of the population in 2001).

In the aggregate, 2.7% of people reported having "no religion" or no stated religion, but percentages vary between districts, the share stating "no religion" being generally lower in inverse proportion to the reported Catholic population (figure 2).

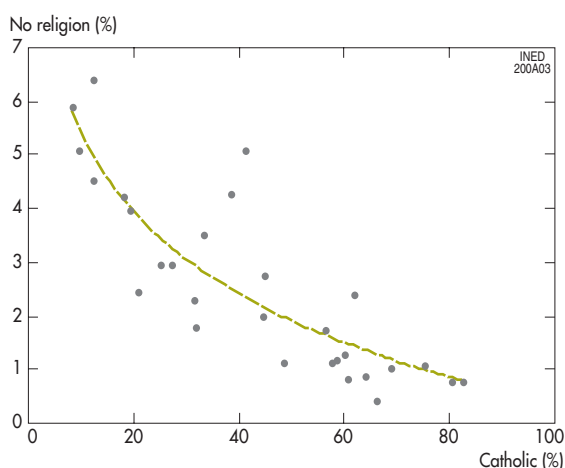
With the political and security reasons for abstaining a thing of the past, abstention now comes down more to personal beliefs. It may be that Northern Ireland's Protestant community is more individualistic and secularized, and more tolerant of religious differences than Catholic society. Almost all abstentions on the religion question were from Protestant communities [3].

◆ Population projections in the debate on the country's political future

Projections are made a tool of politics. A positive spin on one side's demographic profile may endeavour to help boost fertility (or return migration), sow doubt in the opposing camp, prompt it to rein in fertility or step up emigration [4].

The projections for the 1990s forecast population equilibrium between Catholics and Protestants by 2021 or 2031 according to the assumptions. The new data

Figure 2 - Respondents reporting as Catholic or no religion, by district, 2001, %



Interpretation: each point represents a district whose position on the chart is determined by the share of respondents reporting as Catholic (horizontal axis) and as having no religion (vertical axis). A regression curve has been plotted as a dotted line.

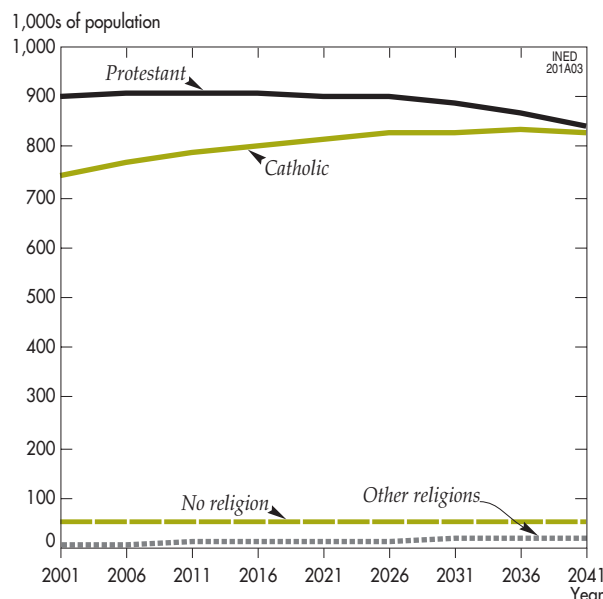
now suggest a later date still. The population of Northern Ireland (1,689,000 in 2001) is forecast to stand at 1,723,000 in 2043 having peaked at 1,775,000 in 2026 according to the most recent projections published at the end of 2002 [5]. The questions are: what will the Catholic/Protestant balance be, and how many will claim another religion, or no religion? Claimed emigration levels, it now transpires, have been more fanciful than real on both sides, whence the modest projections in the low hundreds annually from each side.

Population change in the coming years will be fertility-driven. If Catholic and Protestant fertility converge early, in 2006 (low variant), the Catholic lead may never materialize, leaving the Protestants with a comfortable numerical majority (53%), especially in the voting population, by 2041. Later convergence, in 2021 (2) (medium variant), would not achieve level-pegging by 2041 (figure 3). In fact, only the somewhat unrealistic high variant assumption of Catholic fertility holding steady at near-replacement (2.05 children per woman) with Protestant fertility trailing 25% below could guarantee a lead in the total population by 2037 and in the electorate by 2041. But continuing fertility of two children per woman in Western Europe is a big assumption to make. It is hard to see why Northern Ireland's Catholics should continue to have such parity when Tunisian and Iranian Muslims are already below two and could fall to under 1.5 within ten years.

In the closing decade of last century, Northern Irish

(2) 2021 is the centenary of the partition of Ireland.

Figure 3 - Projected population of Northern Ireland by religion, medium variant



Catholic fertility was in a steady decline begun in the Sixties, and return migration was not cancelling out the drop in births. The change in their demographic behaviours reflects the declining influence of traditional institutions—the Catholic church, Nationalist parties, paramilitary groups, etc.—over the Catholic community and an alignment between their attitudes and those of the Protestant majority. Ironically, the “cradle wars” are petering out at the very time when Nationalists are laying aside the Armalite for the ballot box to achieve their aim of a reunited Ireland. But they will not command a majority of votes without support from vigorous population growth. It is clear that the Catholic community continues to support what its political parties stand for, but is not delivering the demographic wherewithal for success: more voters in the coming years, many more births today.

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- [4] Youssef COURBAGE - “Utilisation politique de l’analyse démographique des minorités”, IUSSP International Population Conference, Salvador, 2001
- [5] Government’s Actuary Department - *2001 - based Principal Projection Northern Ireland*, November 2002 <http://www.gad.gov.uk/>

Current events

UN scales down world population projections

The United Nations has just published revised population projections [1]. The current world population of 6.3 billion people is projected to rise to 7.4 billion by 2050 on a low variant fertility decline from the current world average of 2.7 to 1.5 children per woman by 2050; a fertility decrease to only 2.5 children (high variant) would give a population of 10.6 billion; while a drop to 2 children (medium variant) would produce a world population of 8.9 billion by 2050. The latter figure is below previous estimates—the UN's medium variant projection in 1996 forecast 9.4 billion by 2050 (table).

For the past thirty years, the UN's medium variant population projections have been consistently based on future fertility of close to 2.1 children per woman everywhere in the world. In countries already below this—like most industrialized countries—it was forecast to rise incrementally to 2.1, then flatline, and in higher fertility countries, to fall to 2.1 and then level off.

The future average parity convergence level of 2.1 children owed more to faith in equilibriums than observed

behaviours. A hypothetical group of 100 15-year-old females all surviving to 50 with a mean number of 2.1 children ever born per woman will as a whole have had 210 children. Male births slightly outnumber female births (just short of 105 males to 100 females), so the 210 children will on average comprise 108 males and 102 females. Even assuming developed country-style low mortality, there will always be some infant mortality. Of the 102 new-born females, for example, only 100 on average will survive to age 15, the other two having died in infancy. Overall, the initial 100 young females will have been replaced by 100 young next generation females, so the population size will have remained unchanged.

Setting a mean number of 2.1 children ever born per woman as the fertility convergence level equates to an assumption that the world population and that of each component country will stabilize over time, effectively ruling out the alternative scenarios of future decline and attrition in the world population if fertility remained below 2.1 children long-term, or conversely, indefinite growth with sustained fertility above that level, an equally unlikely scenario.

The UN's revised projections take as their medium variant future fertility convergence on a mean of 1.85 children per woman, i.e., well below 2.1

children. UN demographers have abandoned the 2.1 children benchmark for two reasons. One is that comparatively low fertility for two to three decades in many industrialized countries now looks like more than a trend dip and arguably heralds a new and probably sustainable family model. The other is a sharp drop to or even below 2.1 children in a number of recently high-fertility developing countries like Iran and Tunisia. As a result, the UN's new medium variant forecasts that three quarters of developing countries will have dropped below this level by 2050.

Africa's fertility and mortality remain emphatically highest of all continents (table). The UN's revised projections estimate that it will take longer to catch up than thought. The AIDS epidemic is projected to have a bigger demographic impact in Africa than previously thought, and the recovery will be slower, though fertility will take longer to fall. All in all, AIDS notwithstanding, Africa's population is projected to more than double to high-on 2 billion by 2050.

Gilles Pison

[1] UN Population Division - *World population prospects: the 2002 revision*. New York, 2003 (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/>) (see also the 1996 revision).

Table - Existing and projected population trends to 2050, UN medium variant

| | Fertility (mean number of children per woman) | | | Life expectancy (years, both sexes) | | | Population (millions) | | |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------|------------|--|------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | 2000-2005 | projected in 2045-2050 | | 2000-2005 | projected in 2045-2050 | | 2003 | projected in 2050 | |
| | | Projection year | | | Projection year | | | Projection year | |
| | | 1996 | 2002 | | 1996 | 2002 | | 1996 | 2002 |
| Africa | 4.9 | 2.1 | 2.4 | 48.9 | 72.4 | 64.9 | 851 | 2 046 | 1 803 |
| Asia | 2.6 | 2.1 | 1.9 | 67.2 | 77.0 | 76.0 | 3 823 | 5 443 | 5 222 |
| Latin America & Caribbean | 2.5 | 2.1 | 1.9 | 70.4 | 78.3 | 78.5 | 543 | 810 | 768 |
| Europe | 1.4 | 2.0 | 1.8 | 74.2 | 80.1 | 80.5 | 726 | 638 | 632 |
| Northern America | 2.1 | 2.1 | 1.9 | 77.4 | 81.9 | 81.8 | 326 | 384 | 448 |
| Oceania | 2.3 | 2.1 | 1.9 | 74.1 | 80.8 | 80.9 | 32 | 46 | 46 |
| World | 2.7 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 65.4 | 76.6 | 74.3 | 6 301 | 9 367 | 8 919 |

Source: UN (1)