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The Challenges of Powersharing in Implementing the Good Friday Agreement: Twenty-Five Years of Intermittent Shared Governance

The attempts to implement the Good Friday Agreement have often been frustrated by Unionist parties' reluctance to share power given their discontent with the difficulties in achieving decommissioning and more recently the Northern Ireland Protocol that was part of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement. Given the continuing difficulties in operationalizing the institutional framework negotiated in 1998, Nationalist and Republican parties, especially Sinn Féin, have begun a discussion on a joint referendum that would bring Irish unification. This paper explores the changing narrative of Northern Ireland politics from peaceful powersharing to a transition toward Irish unity.

Keywords: Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland, powersharing, Irish unity, Brexit.

Izzivi delitve oblasti pri izvajanju Velikonočnega sporazuma: Petindvajset let občasnega deljenega upravljanja

Poskusi izvajanja Velikonočnega sporazuma so bili zaradi nepripravljenosti unionističnih strank na delitev oblasti, ki izhaja iz njihovega nezadovoljstva s postopkom razorožitve in nedavnim severnoirskim protokolom k sporazumu o izstopu iz EU, pogosto neuspešni. Zaradi nenehnih težav pri operacionalizaciji institucionalnega okvira, dogovorjenega leta 1998, so nacionalistične in republikanske stranke, zlasti Sinn Féin, sprožile razpravo o skupnem referendumu za združitev Severne Irske z Republiko Irsko. Prispevek obravnava spremembe v stališčih severnoirske politike od mirne delitve oblasti do združitve irskega otoka.

Ključne besede: Severna Irska, delitev oblasti, združitev Irske, brexit.

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1. Introduction

The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA) envisioned powersharing as a means to govern a highly divided society. Historically, unionists benefitted from a demographic advantage facilitated by gerrymandered boundaries of constituencies that ensured Protestant control of the Stormont Parliament from the 1920s through the 1960s. To overcome a system that privileged the Protestant majority the 1998 Agreement, built on a parity of esteem for both political traditions in Northern Ireland (Ruohomäki 2010), sought to guarantee Catholics access to power without disempowering the unionist community. Inevitably, an agreement that asked a group who historically had all the power to share power was going to be difficult to establish and sustain. Several political issues have emerged over the past twenty-five years that have made the institutions of governance only intermittently operational. Unionist parties have undermined the powersharing system established in the GFA first because of their frustration with the difficulties in achieving decommissioning and more recently with the uncertainty associated with Brexit and their anger with the Northern Ireland Protocol that was part of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement. Given the continuing difficulties in operationalizing the institutional framework negotiated in 1998, Nationalist and Republican parties, especially Sinn Féin, have begun a discussion on a joint referendum on Irish unification. This article explores the changing narrative of Northern Ireland politics from promising peaceful powersharing to more serious and proximate calls for Irish unity.

2. The Good Friday Agreement

The promise of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was that it would transform Northern Ireland's highly divided politics. Blackbourn (2015) claims that the Agreement has failed to normalize politics in Northern Ireland, and Mitchell (2015) contends that a lack of reconciliation has led to difficulties governing Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, we have not witnessed a return to large scale and continuous cross-community violence. Even though the GFA has reduced intercommunal violence and fostered elite level cooperation, sectarianism remains and grassroots peace has not been achieved (Mitchell et al. 2018). The era of the Troubles from the late 1960s through the 1990s demonstrated that failed political institutions led to violence and political instability. Political scientists have long decried the failure of political institutions as the cause of political disorder and decay (Huntington 1968). The lack of effective institutions in Northern Ireland led to direct rule from Westminster with the collapse of the Northern Ireland Parliament and local executive in 1974. The failure of the local police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), to maintain order led the British government to place British troops on the streets of Northern Ireland in 1969. While

initially welcomed by Irish Nationalists, British policies of internment and army action that supported the RUC and in some instances Loyalist paramilitaries quickly led to Catholic anger and resentment of the British military presence. It seemed to justify the Irish Republican Army's (IRA's) use of violence to some as a means of defending the Catholic community. As the Troubles evolved from the late 1960s through the 1990s, both the British government and the IRA came to learn that there was no way to defeat completely the other side. Thus, both sides confronted what Zartman (2008) identified as a "hurting stalemate".

The negotiated settlement of April 1998 had to be ratified in referenda in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The inclusive and public nature of negotiations leading to the Agreement was critical in developing support for the referenda (Amaral 2018). Due to the promise of peace and the expectation that powersharing would provide a fairer distribution of resources in Northern Irish society, Nationalists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly to ratify the Agreement. The unionist community in Northern Ireland was more divided regarding the merits of the Agreement. Ian Paisley and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) opposed the Agreement as they saw no guarantees of decommissioning and believed the Agreement was a concession to terrorists, the IRA. David Trimble and his more moderate unionist party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), had to convince Protestants that they had no better option. The alternative to this Agreement presented to wavering unionists was a return to violence that no one sought. Hence, the Agreement was the best one could hope for under the circumstances. This convinced a slight majority of Protestants to vote to ratify the Agreement (Hancock 2011). The success of the referenda provided democratic legitimacy to an elite driven peace process (Filardo-Llamas 2011; McEvoy 2018).

After the vote to ratify in June of 1998, opposition to the Agreement and the powersharing institutions it created was most visible when dissident Republicans detonated a bomb in the center of Omagh on August 15th, 1998. As McGlinchey (2019) has detailed, there is a continuing threat of violence from Republicans who never accepted the GFA. The overwhelming support for the Agreement in the Nationalist and Republican communities suggests that the threat from dissident Republicans is not for a return to large scale cross-community violence but random acts of terror that seek to undermine continued cooperation between Unionists and Nationalists. The near unanimous condemnation of the Real IRA and Continuity IRA for the Omagh bombing led to many in the dissident Republican movement to cease the use of violence. During negotiations and after the Agreement was signed, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness worked diligently to convince fellow Republicans of the need to eschew violence and take the road to peace promised by the GFA (Owsiak 2017). Thus, Goddard (2012) claims that the presence of "brokers" was critical to undermining spoilers in the Northern Ireland peace process. Despite the effective marginalization of po-

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tential spoilers in the Republican community, it is important to recognize that the threat of future violence has not been eliminated. Disgruntlement with the need to accept something short of a thirty-two-county republic means that at least some remain dissatisfied with the failure to realize the ultimate goal of Irish unity. The prospect of Irish unity coming sooner rather than later after Brexit has undermined the long-term threat to peace and political stability posed by dissident Republicans.

While the opposition in the Republican community to the peace process and the political institutions created by the GFA has been minimal in the past twenty-five years, there has been much more antipathy toward the Agreement expressed among Unionists. For most of the past twenty-five years, Unionist leaders have often found it advantageous to play to the fears and sense of loss in the Unionist community rather than affirm a positive future for Unionists. Given that the GFA guaranteed Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom (U.K.) as long as a majority in Northern Ireland continued to support this constitutional position, Unionist political elites have failed to re-imagine their identity in a way that supported powersharing and political stability (White et al. 2016). In the initial five years after the Agreement, Paisley and the DUP gained support in the Unionist community for their opposition to the Agreement. Even after agreeing to share power in 2007, the DUP has proven willing to suspend or not participate in Stormont powersharing when they believed it is not in their interest. Increasingly, many have come to criticize the veto the DUP has employed to protest developments they find unacceptable, especially in the wake of Brexit. Thus, initial hesitancy to support the Agreement and the institutions it created in 1998 has only increased over time with political developments that Unionists find alarming and not in their interests.

The political arrangements created by the 1998 Agreement that provided for institutionalized powersharing in Northern Ireland built upon a logic that had been attempted by the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. This Agreement had called for powersharing between Catholics and Protestants, but the Ulster Workers Strike of 1974 prevented this effort at powersharing from being realized. Coakley (2011) and McGarry and O'Leary (2016) have identified the institutional powersharing among Nationalists and Unionists created by the GFA as consociational. Dixon (2005) has contended that the logic of the political arrangements in Northern Ireland may not fit the strict requirements in Lijphart's (1977) definition of consociationalism. Those who negotiated the Agreement have testified that they did not seek to construct a "consociational" settlement (Dixon 2018). Bew (2006) contends the politicians devised a negotiated settlement not based on a complex theoretical framework but from diplomatic exchanges and a search for an agreement acceptable to all.

A strict consociational interpretation of the Northern Ireland peace process fails to appreciate the fundamental dynamic of identity development and change

over time, including those of Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland. Todd (2016, 92) argues "ethnic distinctions in Northern Ireland are not only embedded and polarized, but also fluid and permeable". The different groups involved in negotiating the GFA not only modified their negotiating positions but redefined their long-term goals and near-term strategies based on the negotiation process. Hazleton (2013) has stressed how different leaders learned different lessons, and Dixon (2019) contends that the negotiators of the Agreement learned to coordinate their policy and negotiation positions based on the positions of the other actors in the peace process. In the twenty-five years since the signing of the GFA, politicians and parties have learned to advance their community's interests whether in the institutions of Stormont or by refusing to agree to operate within these institutions and allow the British government to govern Northern Ireland directly. Therefore, the most recent scholarship has moved beyond consociationalism to explain powersharing more generally in the Northern Ireland context (McEvoy 2015; 2019).

The GFA addressed three critical relationships that needed institutional means to resolve conflicts. First, the institutions of the executive and Assembly at Stormont were designed for Unionists and Nationalists to share power. The second strand of the Agreement developed a North-South Ministerial council to facilitate cooperation between those living in the north and south of Ireland. The third strand of the GFA created a Council of the Isles to address issues of common concern with those living on the islands off the west coast of the continent of Europe. While the Agreement created political institutions designed to address these three relationships, it did not settle all issues that parties identified in the negotiations. Nationalists complained about the history of one-sided and faulty policing by the RUC. Unionists did not get a specified process of decommissioning in the Agreement. Both of these contentious issues were ultimately dealt with by Independent International Commissions that successfully if slowly were able to reform a police force and oversaw a process of delayed decommissioning (Walsh 2017). The success of these international commissions has been critical in supporting the peace process and allowing the institutions of powersharing to focus on less contentious issues. While the issue of decommissioning has been more or less resolved, its delay allowed paramilitaries to police their own communities (Gallaher 2017). This has left the reformed police organization, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), in a liminal state significantly different from the RUC but not completely reformed in a way as to establish a completely new and different identity (J. Murphy 2019).

3. Powersharing Institutions

One of the continuing refrains of criticism toward the institutions created by the GFA has been their inflexibility. Going back to the work of Huntington (1968),

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political scientists have stressed the need for institutions to be flexible and adaptable in order to survive and provide stable governance. The difficulty of altering the institutions in order to address what many perceive as common-sense solutions to governance prevents reasonable reforms that would make government work more easily and efficiently (Wilford 2015). The powersharing arrangements provided in Northern Ireland often fail because party elites have little incentive to allow for necessary reforms (Doyle 2021). While there have been minor reforms of the institutions and processes of governance since 1998, the fundamental logic of powersharing and the need for leaders and parties from both communities to cooperate remains intact.

Recent research has stressed that the powersharing arrangement in Northern Ireland is based on the continuing consent and cooperation of the different parties (White 2021). There have been several interruptions in the process of shared governance in the twenty-five years since the signing of the Agreement. This has been primarily based on Unionist concerns. These have varied over time, but they indicate a continuing discomfort for sharing power among a political group that long dominated politics in Northern Ireland. One could argue that it was likely if not inevitable for the group who historically monopolized power to be reluctant in sharing power. In these circumstances the political elites leading the group who historically held power must demonstrate leadership and provide a vision that compels this reluctant group to share power.

The golden age of powersharing and political stability in Northern Ireland after the GFA was the period from May of 2007 through January of 2017. It was in this period that two unlikely political enemies came to share power, Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley. Even after Paisley's retirement in 2008, McGuinness successfully shared power with Paisley's two successors as leaders of the DUP, Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster. The ability of the leaders of the two extreme parties to share power and work under the institutional framework created by the GFA seemed to validate the effort to create institutions that would bring peace and stability to Northern Ireland after decades of violence through a powersharing arrangement.

In the years immediately after the ratification of the Agreement, the moderate and largest parties in each community, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and UUP, lost electoral support. The more extreme parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, became the largest parties in the Protestant and Catholic communities respectively. This happened for different reasons. In the case of the SDLP, its demise was based on the retirement of its two principal leaders, John Hume and Seamus Mallon. They had worked most of their adult lives to achieve powersharing and gain better rights and policies for Catholics in Northern Ireland. Once they had achieved the Agreement and Mallon served initially as Deputy First Minister, both leaders retired from politics. This left a void of experienced leadership in the SDLP. In addition, Nationalist voters came to see

Sinn Féin as increasingly legitimate as they had supported the Agreement and gradually played a role in promoting IRA decommissioning. This made Sinn Féin appear to be the strongest party advocating for Nationalists' interests. The leaders of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, were reaching their prime as political leaders and had evolved from their days either in the IRA or linked to the IRA violence of the 1970s and 1980s.

Similar to the mainstreaming of Sinn Féin, the DUP became seen as an effective vanguard party for Unionists. Its leader, Ian Paisley, had opposed the GFA, but the DUP worked within the institutions created by the Agreement (Mustad 2019). In the late 1990s and early 2000s as the IRA failed to decommission, Unionists became increasingly reluctant to share power. The UUP and its leader, David Trimble, appeared to be duped and not a strong enough advocate for the Unionist position. As a result, by 2003 the extreme parties had become the largest parties in each community as a process of intra-ethnic outbidding had taken place (Moore et al. 2014).

The political ascent of the two extreme parties appeared to make the process of powersharing and compromise more difficult. However, if the extremes could come to a deal to share power, the operation of the political institutions created by the GFA would be more enduring. The institutions of Stormont remained closed from October of 2002 through May of 2007, but the ultimate deal struck first in the St. Andrews Agreement in October of 2006 and in early May of 2007 led to a decade long period of peace and successful powersharing in Stormont. As we look back on this period, we can identify several factors that facilitated this powersharing. By 2007, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, as the Taoiseach of Ireland and the Prime Minister of the U.K., had a decade of collaboration. They had worked tirelessly to achieve the Agreement, and both of their reputations and positive legacies are built on this Agreement. After signing and ratifying the GFA, Ahern and Blair relentlessly pursued implementation of the Agreement by overcoming obstacles such as the delayed decommissioning. The close and effective diplomatic relations not just between these heads of government but their cabinets and civil service had created mutual respect and effective cooperation in pursuing the realization of peace based on the powersharing arrangements of the GFA. In the spring of 2007, Blair's threat to jointly rule Northern Ireland with Ahern precipitated Paisley to accede to powersharing.

4. Anglo-Irish Relations, Brexit, and the Border

Historically, Anglo-Irish relations have not always been so close and collaborative as that achieved by Blair and Ahern. Historically, British governments saw Ireland through a colonial lens that tended to discount the impact of British policies on domestic developments in Ireland (O'Leary 2014). In the period since Brexit, the British government and its several leaders have not only sought to

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achieve separation from the European Union (E.U.), but their single-minded pursuit of a Brexit deal led to policies that jeopardized the peace in Northern Ireland. As a result, Brexit served to undermine British-Irish diplomatic and governmental cooperation in facilitating peace and shared governance in Northern Ireland (Laffan & O'Mahoney 2021; M. C. Murphy 2019).

The majority in Northern Ireland had voted to remain in the E.U. in the Brexit referendum of June 2016. Nevertheless, the British government had indicated it was seeking to withdraw all the U.K. from the E.U. This reawakened fears of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Historically, the partition of Ireland in 1921 had huge ramifications. Crossing the border meant invasive checks. After partition, the jurisdictions moved further and further apart in terms of governance and policies, and cultural differences persisted and grew overtime due to little contact across the border (Ferriter 2019; Moore 2019). Thus, partition had been a major complaint of Irish Nationalists ever since the signing and ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The border separating Northern Ireland and the Republic had become seamless after the GFA as the territory on both sides of the border was part of the E.U. In these circumstances, the border did not function as a physical separation of people or goods as it had before both the U.K. and Ireland joined the E.U. in 1973. Moreover, with the abatement of violence and especially the disarming of the IRA, the border no longer represented a security threat to the British government's administration of Northern Ireland. The free flow of goods and people across the border satiated Irish Nationalists' aspirations for Ireland to no longer be divided. Thus, as Goddard (2006) posited, the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland was a social construction whose meaning could change over time. Because the border could be re-imagined by Irish Nationalists during the peace process, Coakley (2017) claims the Irish irredentist claim to Northern Ireland transitioned to a norm of consent.

The Agreement allowed actors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to transcend the fundamental challenge of the border and partition. Cross border cooperation, including economic activity, was a tangible sign of the peace that had been achieved (Hayward et al. 2011). However, Brexit re-awakened concerns over the Irish and thus Brexit has clearly destabilized the politics of Northern Ireland and the U.K. As British governments began to negotiate with the E.U. regarding the terms of its departure, the complex and difficult case of Northern Ireland would have to be at the center of such negotiations (M. C. Murphy 2018). Within the context of British politics, Nicolaidis (2019) claims that Brexit means not only the departure from the E.U., but a reckoning that may well require sacrifice for British citizens. O'Toole (2018) depicts Brexit as the failed effort of a collapsing empire to attempt to assert itself.

The collapse of powersharing in Northern Ireland in January of 2017 was based on the desire by Martin McGuinness to have the DUP leader and First

Minister, Arlene Foster, temporarily step aside to investigate the Cash for Ash scandal (McBride 2019). Foster's reluctance to have an independent investigation into claims of corruption among DUP operatives in the government forced the resignation of McGuinness. While this scandal was the proximate cause of the collapse of powersharing, the shadow of the Brexit vote that had come just seven months prior to the scandal had created an uncertainty over the future of Northern Ireland. Cochrane (2020) refers to Brexit as an external shock to the peace that had been created by the GFA. After the collapse of Stormont powersharing in January of 2017, parties increasingly blamed each other across the sectarian divide for the problems preventing a resumption of powersharing. The uncertainty of the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland while the British government negotiated the terms of withdrawal with the E.U. coincided with increased support for Nationalist parties. This led to increased reluctance of Unionists to share power (Birrell & Heenan 2017). Todd (2017) stressed the lack of specificity and agreement on the governing arrangements and the need for British-Irish cooperation to restart powersharing at Stormont.

The political impasse in restoring Stormont continued in 2018. Repeated attempts to restore devolution failed and deadlines established by the British to restore powersharing were ignored by the political parties in Northern Ireland, especially the DUP. Birrell and Heenan (2018) contended that a lack of trust, poor leadership, and limited consequences for the political parties caused the political stalemate and collapsed Stormont to continue. After the resignation of David Cameron who had opposed Brexit and staked his future as Prime Minister on the referendum, Teresa May sought to negotiate an agreement to withdraw the U.K. from the E.U. as the new British Prime Minister. Her proposed agreement called for a backstop that guaranteed that there would be no hard border on the island of Ireland. The E.U., heavily influenced by arguments of the Irish government had insisted that the U.K. withdrawal process not jeopardize the peace achieved by the GFA. This included open borders between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Meanwhile, May had to balance simultaneously the need to find a negotiated agreement with the E.U. and retain Unionist support for her government as she relied on Unionist support to hold her majority in the House of Commons. May had trouble satiating the Unionists, E.U. negotiators, and critics in her own Conservative Party. Led by Boris Johnson, Brexiteers in the Conservative Party failed to support their own party's Prime Minister and opposed May's proposed withdrawal agreement with the E.U. This led to Teresa May's resignation. Boris Johnson succeeded May as leader of the Conservatives and Prime Minister. He quickly called for an election in which his party won a large majority in the House of Commons. With expanded support, he was able to quickly negotiate a Withdrawal Agreement with the E.U. that included the Northern Ireland Protocol. This Agreement thus guaranteed that Northern Ireland would de facto remain in the E.U. in terms of trade, and

that the border between the U.K. and the E.U. would be the Irish Sea and not on a land border in Ireland.

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While extremely unpopular with Unionists, the Withdrawal Agreement stabilized politics in Northern Ireland enough for devolution and powersharing to be temporarily restored. In early 2020, the Irish and British governments brought increasing pressure and a common approach to convince the parties in Northern Ireland to re-start powersharing in Stormont. This was a rare example of effective British-Irish diplomatic cooperation and engagement regarding Northern Ireland in the aftermath of Brexit. Tánaiste and Foreign Minister Simon Coveney and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Julian Smith worked closely together to coordinate the resumption of powersharing which was restored on January 10, 2020, with Arlene Foster serving as First Minister and Michelle O'Neill as Deputy First Minister. The agreement that re-established powersharing – New Decade, New Approach – introduced institutional reforms which make powersharing more sustainable and limited the often abused "Petition of Concern" in the Assembly (Haughey 2020). The United States (U.S.) supported the re-opening of Stormont and continuing efforts to operationalize the GFA. In September 2020 the U.S. Speaker of the House at the time, Nancy Pelosi, spoke to the Irish Dáil emphasizing the continued American support of peace in Northern Ireland. Along with the Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee at the Time, Richard Neal, Pelosi stressed that Congress would not support a U.S.-U.K. Trade Agreement if it in any way threatened the Northern Ireland Protocol or the GFA.

By early 2021, dissatisfaction with Foster's leadership within the DUP and as First Minister led to her resignation as leader of the DUP in May and as First Minister in June of 2021. The frustration with Foster reflected dissent within the Unionist community regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol which had been negotiated by Boris Johnson. The realization that the Irish Sea separated Northern Ireland from the U.K. became a continuing source of frustration. Edwin Poots succeeded Foster as leader of the DUP in late May of 2021, but he only lasted a month in power. On June 30th of 2021, Jeffrey Donaldson became leader of the DUP and has based his leadership on opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol and the need to renegotiate the terms of British withdrawal from the E.U. as it effects Northern Ireland. Rather than seeking less restrictive economic flows between all of the U.K. and the E.U., Donaldson and the DUP want to end the division of the U.K. in the Irish Sea and appear willing to reinstitute a hard border on the island of Ireland. This is a non-starter for the E.U. and the Republic of Ireland. The most likely outcome of negotiations regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol would be to ease all trade flows between the E.U. and the U.K. and thereby minimize the barriers to trade across the Irish Sea.

Further Unionist frustration came with the May 2022 elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly. As the DUP lost four seats, Sinn Féin held their

27 seats and became the largest party represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly. This would mean that Michelle O'Neill as parliamentary leader of Sinn Féin, the largest political party in Northern Ireland, would become First Minister. Paul Givan, the parliamentary leader of the DUP in the Assembly would become Deputy First Minister. However, the DUP refused to share power due to their dislike of the election outcome and continuing frustration with the Northern Ireland Protocol (Tonge 2022). This has prevented the re-establishment of powersharing. Murphy (2023) contends that the DUP's losses were primarily caused by the loss of moderate voters to the Alliance Party. Simultaneously, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) squeezed away some more extreme voters. The result was that the DUP faces a threat from the middle and far right as it seeks to recapture its position as the largest single party in Northern Ireland. The rise of these middle voters and those who do not identify with traditional unionism or traditional nationalism may hold the balance in the future of Northern Ireland, including potential future referenda for Irish unity, as the percentage of Nationalists and Unionists is not likely to form a majority in the near future (Diamond & Colfer 2023).

The stalemate between the U.K. and the E.U. regarding the implications of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol has led to the DUP continuing its refusal to accept powersharing and operationalize the Stormont Assembly. In order to address the DUP concerns, the British have drafted a U.K. Internal Market Bill that the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen claims violates Article Five of the Withdrawal Agreement and contradicts the Northern Ireland Protocol. However, von der Leyen has stressed that practical issues regarding the facilitation of trade to and from Northern Ireland and the remainder of the U.K. can be resolved as long as new policies do not create a hard border on the island of Ireland. The Biden administration has signalled increased interest in both political stability and economic investment in Northern Ireland by choosing Joseph Kennedy III as Special Envoy to Northern Ireland on December 19, 2022. This position had remained unfilled after Mick Mulvaney resigned on January 6, 2021. The U.S. has historically supported the peace process as it was an important priority under President Clinton, and successive Presidents selected envoys to attempt to promote the implementation of the GFA. American efforts to promote democracy and human rights globally has led American diplomacy to cooperate with the Irish and British governments as well as with local parties and groups in Northern Ireland to achieve these goals. The recent American effort supports the new British government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak that has been intensively negotiating with the Irish government to overcome the current impasse and re-open Stormont. However, the DUP remains reluctant to do so.

5. Conclusion

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While Unionists have had trouble coming to grips with the changes brought by the GFA and Brexit, Nationalists and Republicans have perceived developments in Northern Ireland's politics as trending toward their desired ultimate goal of a united thirty-two county republic (Humphreys 2018). Increasingly, a narrative is emerging that Brexit has led to a more serious and proximate discussion of Irish unification (Connolly & Doyle 2019). This discussion is most prominent among long-time Republicans and Sinn Féin but extends to more mainstream politicians in the Irish context. For example, when Micheál Martin was Taoiseach, he promoted a policy of shared futures on the island. There has also been increasing discourse north and south of the border in the media and the public. Specific details of what kind of government system would operate in a unified Ireland and how institutions that operate separately north and south of the border would evolve in a united Ireland remain (Coakley 2022), but the aspiration for a thirty-two county republic is more realizable than in any time in the last century. The institutions created by the GFA may prove to be transitional moving Northern Ireland away from its Protestant past in the U.K. to a powersharing arrangement for Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland, and toward a Northern Ireland integrated into or part of an Irish republic.

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