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Public Support for Political Violence and Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

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Most of the research on paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland has concentrated on either the historical origins of paramilitary organizations or the background characteristics of individuals who engage in this activity. Less attention has been given to analyzing public attitudes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland toward the use of paramilitary violence as a political tool within this society. In this paper we argue that one of the reasons for the intractability of the conflict and the current impasse over the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons is the widespread latent support for paramilitary activity among the civilian population in both these societies. Overall, the results suggest that only a lengthy period without political violence in Northern Ireland will undermine support for paramilitarism and result in the decommissioning of weapons.

Northern Ireland was born in violence. Between 1920 and 1922, or the years immediately surrounding the Anglo-Irish Treaty (which led to the formation of Northern Ireland in 1921), an estimated 428 people were killed—two-thirds of whom were Catholic. Although the level of violence significantly decreased over the following four decades as Northern Ireland settled down to a period of relative calm, sporadic outbreaks of political violence continued—most notably the IRA campaign of the mid-1950s, which resulted in the deaths of a further 26 people.[1] The present (or post-1968) conflict, however, easily outranks all other episodes in scale, intensity, and duration. More people have died in communal violence in the past quarter century in Northern Ireland than in any similar period in Ireland over the past two centuries, with the possible exception of the 1922–23 Irish Civil War.

Comparative studies show that Northern Ireland is easily the most intense violent conflict in Europe, accounting for the majority of terrorist incidents in Europe.[2]

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The various paramilitary organizations that operate in the province are the most highly organized and equipped in Europe, particularly on the republican side. The statistics of violence suggest that in its duration and intensity relative to population size, the conflict approaches that of a war rather than a local insurgency, with substantial numbers of the population being exposed to many aspects of the violence—from intimidation and physical injury to being caught up in a bomb explosion or riot.[3]

Most of the research on political violence and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland has concentrated on either the historical origins of paramilitary organizations or the background characteristics and motivations of the individuals who engage in this activity.[4] Less attention has been given to analyzing public attitudes toward the use of paramilitary violence as a political tool within this society. This is particularly the case in the Republic of Ireland where (with one notable, albeit controversial, exception)[5] public support for paramilitary activity has rarely been assessed. It is with this omission in mind that this article focuses on public attitudes toward the role of paramilitary activity in the post-1968 period of political conflict in Northern Ireland.

The article proceeds in three stages. First, the nature and extent of political violence in Northern Ireland—most notably paramilitary activity since the late 1960s—is briefly outlined. Second, using data from the 1999–2000 European Values Study in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland,[6] public attitudes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland toward the use of paramilitary violence are examined in depth. Finally, we investigate the relationship between public support for paramilitary violence and current attitudes toward decommissioning within both these societies.

The Nature and Extent of Political Violence in Northern Ireland

The most visible and dramatic manifestation of the post-1968 Northern Ireland conflict has been political violence. The post-1968 violence dwarfs any previous conflict in scale, intensity, and duration. More people have died in communal violence in the past quarter century in Northern Ireland—3,352 by the end of 2002[7]—than in any similar period in Ireland over the past two centuries, with the possible exception of the 1922–23 Irish Civil War[8] (see Table 1). In addition, 48,029 people have been

Table 1. The scale of political violence, 1969–2002

		Estimates	
	Northern Ireland	Great Britain	United States
Deaths	3,352	125,700	607,550
Injuries	48,029	1,801,000	8,705,300
Shooting incidents	37,034	1,388,800	6,712,400
Bomb explosions	16,360	613,500	2,965,250
Persons charged with terrorist offenses	19,666	737,500	3,564,500

Note: Figures for persons charged with terrorist offenses date from July 31, 1972.
Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland (http://www.psni.police.uk).

injured, representing just over 3 percent of the population. If we extrapolate these figures to Great Britain, some 126,000 people would have died, with 1.8 million people injured. This represents just under half of all British deaths (265,000) during World War II. Further extrapolating the deaths to the United States, some 608,000 would have died, notably more than died during World War II (405,000) and nine times the American war dead in Vietnam.

The large number of incidents underlines the intensity of the conflict, with just over 37,000 shooting incidents and 16,360 bomb explosions. Many of these bomb explosions have occurred in Belfast or Derry, which were the targets of intense and sustained bombing campaigns by the IRA during the 1970s.[9] Such levels of violence, maintained over a long period of time, have inevitably drawn many people into the paramilitary organizations. Estimates of paramilitary membership are difficult to make with any accuracy, but police statistics show that since 1972, nearly 20,000 people have been charged with terrorist offences. It is a reasonable conclusion that more people in Northern Ireland have participated in illegal paramilitary organizations than at any time since the United Irishmen rising of 1798. Once again, extrapolating these figures to Great Britain or the United States shows the intensity of the violence; shooting incidents alone would have numbered around 1.4 million in Great Britain, and nearly 7 million in the United States. Nearly three-quarters of a million British people would have been charged with a terrorist offence, and 3.5 million Americans. By any standards, what Ulster people euphemistically call "the Troubles" is, in fact, a war.

The main casualties in war are generally civilians, and the Northern conflict is no exception to this pattern.[10] Of the 3,352 deaths that have occurred in Northern Ireland since 1969, the overwhelming majority—2,395 by the end of 2002—have been civilian (see Table 2). At 71.4 percent of the total, civilians now account for seven out of every ten deaths that have occurred during the course of the present conflict. This is in direct contrast to the security forces, which have experienced a smaller proportion of deaths. Among security forces, the British Army (the second largest group) emerges as the second major casualty, accounting for 452 individuals—or just over one in every ten deaths. Thus, whatever the expressed motivations of the perpetuators of the violence, to date the human cost of the Troubles has been borne predominantly by the civilian population.

Two main agencies have been responsible, in various ways, for the deaths that have occurred during the course of the conflict. Republican paramilitaries have been

Table 2. Characteristics of those killed, 1969–2002

	Percentages
Police	6.0
Police Reserve	3.0
Army	13.5
UDR/RIR	6.1
Civilian	71.4
(N)	(3,352)

Note: Figures include Royal Irish Regiment (Home Services Battalions).
Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland (http://www.psni.police.uk).

Table 3. Agencies responsible for those killed, 1969–2001

	Percentages
Police/Police Reserve	1.4
Army	8.2
UDR/RIR	0.2
Republicans	58.6
Loyalists	29.2
Other	2.4
(N)	(3,670)

Source: McKittrick and McVea, 2001, 327.

responsible for by far the largest number of deaths—2,151 by mid-September 2001, or 59 percent of the total (see Table 3).[11] Among the latter, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) has been the most active republican group, accounting for 1,780 deaths. The second main agency, the various loyalist organizations, has been responsible for 1,073 deaths, or 29 percent of the total. The most active group is the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) which despite its historic name dates back only to 1966 in it present form when it planned and executed a series of sectarian murders in Belfast.[12] The UVF has been responsible for 552 deaths. Combining these two paramilitary groups results in a total of 3,324 deaths, or 88 percent of the total. The third agency, the security forces—combining the British Army, the Ulster Defense Regiment/Royal Irish Regiment (UDR/RIR) and the police—have caused the fewest number of deaths.[13] The British Army has been responsible for 301 deaths, or 8 percent of the overall total, and the police and the UDR/RIR have been responsible for 58 deaths.

It is important to note, however, that although paramilitary organizations have been responsible for nearly nine out of every ten deaths during the course of the present conflict, the number of deaths does not adequately capture the scale of the violence engaged in by paramilitary groups. As self-designated "protectors" of their community, paramilitary groups have also been engaged in a range of other violent activities, including racketeering, bank robberies, and particularly so-called "punishment beatings."[14] In fact, in some instances (most notably within Republican areas) they have set themselves up as a de facto police force, reserving the exclusive right to punish criminals (such as drug dealers, petty criminals, or those deemed by the paramilitaries to be antisocial elements) operating within their own communities.

Table 4 shows the nature and extent of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland since 1981.[15] The main form of violence undertaken by paramilitaries is so-called "punishment" attacks, or assaults and beatings, which do not involve guns. Between 1981 and 2002, paramilitary organizations engaged in 2,096 such incidents, 1,052 on the republican side and 1,044 on the loyalist side. Overall, this activity accounted for 46 percent of all paramilitary violence between 1981 and 2002. It is interesting to note, however, that whereas the second main form of violence engaged in by loyalist paramilitary groups was assaults or injuries resulting from the use of guns—656 incidents by the end of 2002—republican paramilitary violence has been almost equally divided in terms of gun–related injuries and murder. In fact, republicans have been responsible for by far the largest number of murders—741 by the

Table 4. Nature and extent of paramilitary violence, 1981–2002

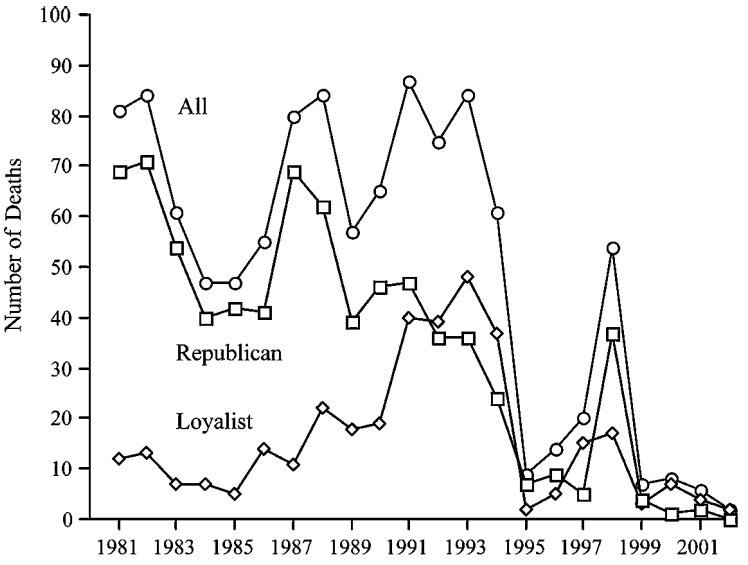
	Percentages		
	Republican	Loyalist	All
Murders	30.0	17.0	24.1
Casualties due to shootings	27.4	32.0	29.5
Casualties due to assaults	42.6	51.0	46.4
(N)	(2,471)	(2,047)	(4,518)

Note: Figures for casualties due to assaults date from 1982. Shootings refers to paramilitary "punishment" attacks involving guns; assaults (or beatings) refers to paramilitary "punishment" attacks that did not involve guns.

Source: Elliott and Flackes, 1999 and updates from Police Service of Northern Ireland (http://www.psni.police.uk).

end of 2002—accounting for 30 percent of all republican paramilitary activity since 1981. Loyalists, in contrast, have been responsible for under half this amount, or 347 murders in total.

Although Republican paramilitaries have been responsible for the largest number of murders between 1981 and 2002, since the 1990s the number of murders attributed to loyalist paramilitary activity has gradually outstripped that of their republican counterparts. As the data in Figure 1 clearly shows, although the number of murders attributed to paramilitary organizations has shown a notable (albeit fluctuating) decline since the mid-1990s, loyalists have become increasingly more likely to engage in this activity than republicans. For example, whereas the number of

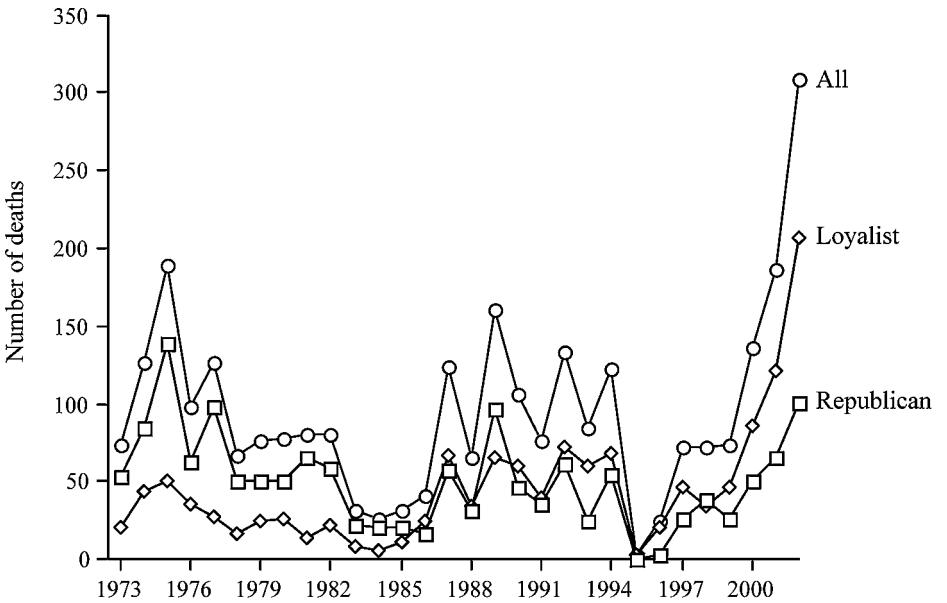


Source: Elliott and Flackes, 1999 and updates from Police Service of Northern Ireland (http://www.psni.police.uk)

Figure 1. Murders committed by paramilitaries, 1981–2002.

republicans who engaged in this activity outnumbered loyalists by a ratio of approximately 4.5:1 throughout the 1980s,[16] by the early 1990s loyalists have increasingly replaced republicans as the primary perpetuators of this activity. In fact, since the start of this century, loyalists have undertaken 81 percent of all paramilitary murders, 13 in total, as compared to under a quarter of this amount, or 3 murders, by republicans. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that these murders by paramilitary organizations have occurred despite the reintroduction of a republican cease-fire in July 1997, the earlier combined loyalist and republican cease-fires in 1994 having been abandoned by republicans in February 1996.[17]

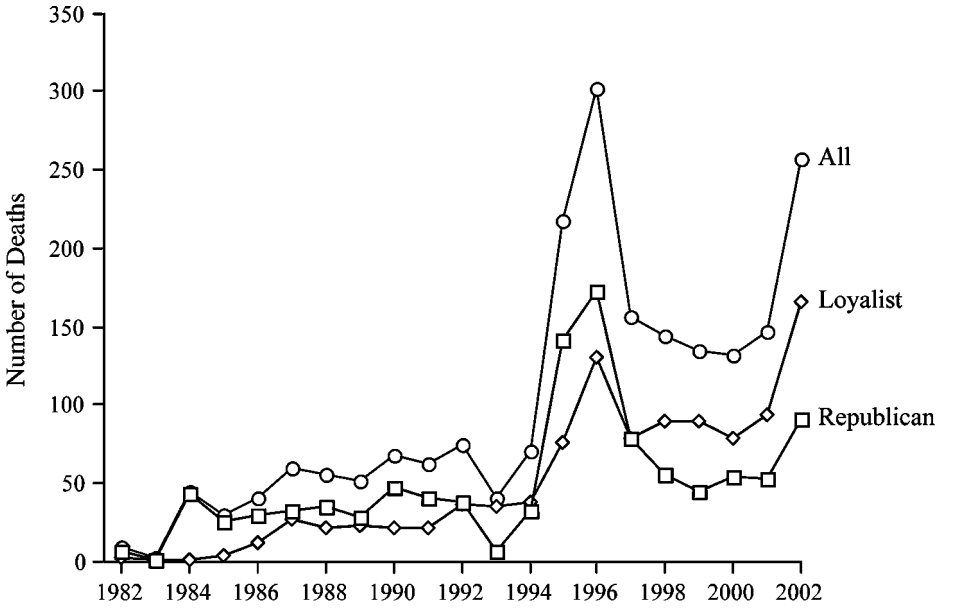
A similar pattern emerges when differences in paramilitary-style shootings or assaults are examined (see Figures 2 and 3). Although republican paramilitary organizations have traditionally been more likely to engage in these activities than loyalist paramilitaries, since the late 1980s, responsibility for these activities has become increasingly attributed to loyalists. For example, between 1973 and 1985, whereas the number of republicans who engaged in paramilitary-style shootings outnumbered loyalists by a ratio of approximately 2.5:1,[18] since then this pattern has been reversed. In fact, throughout the 1990s loyalists have increasingly replaced republicans as the primary perpetuators of this activity. For example, between 1991 and 2002, loyalists have been held responsible for 62 percent of all shooting incidents (805 in total) as compared to 485 attributed to republicans. A similar result is echoed when casualties as a result of paramilitary-style assaults are investigated. Although throughout the 1980s the primary perpetuators of this activity were again republican paramilitaries, since then it is loyalists—and not republicans—who have



Note: Shootings refers to paramilitary "punishment" attacks involving guns.

Source: Elliott and Flackes, 1999 and updates from Police Service of Northern Ireland (http://www.psni.police.uk)

Figure 2. Casualties as a result of paramilitary-style shootings, 1973–2002.



Note: Assaults (or beatings) refers to paramilitary "punishment" attacks which did not involve guns.

Source: Elliott and Flackes, 1999 and updates from Police Service of Northern Ireland (http://www.psni.police.uk)

Figure 3. Casualties as a result of paramilitary-style assaults, 1982–2002.

predominantly engaged in this activity.[19] In fact, since the start of this century loyalists have undertaken 63 percent of all paramilitary-style assaults (337 in total) as compared to 198 by republicans. Finally, it is important to note that the nature of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland has significantly changed over the last two decades. Although the total number of murders engaged in by paramilitary organizations has undergone a notable decline since the 1990s, paramilitary-style shootings and assaults have significantly risen over the same period.

Public Support for Paramilitary Violence

Perhaps more than anything else, the Northern Ireland conflict has been sustained by the popular ambiguity that exists toward the use of political violence. Latent support for the use of violence often occurs in societies where political institutions have emerged from war or civil conflict. However, such support is usually transitional; once the principle of the orderly transfer of political power following democratic elections becomes established, support for violence fades. The Irish state emerged out of a successful war against the British followed by a deeply divisive civil war; nevertheless, by 1932 the republicans who had lost the civil war had been returned to office in a democratic election and the parliamentary tradition was securely entrenched.[20] This is not to deny, however, the continuing importance of republican aspirations for a united Ireland among the general population. In fact, throughout much of the twentieth century not only did a significant majority of citizens within

the Republic of Ireland explicitly endorse the view that the island of Ireland should be reunited, but a notable minority condoned the use of paramilitary methods to achieve this goal.[21]

In Northern Ireland, by contrast, two traditions of achieving political change have been entrenched in the political system. The constitutional tradition seeks to attain political change primarily through political parties competing in democratic elections, as well as through pressure and interest group activity. These are the familiar (and exclusive) forms of political activity in the established democracies. The extraconstitutional tradition seeks to achieve political goals through the use of force, either through protest activity (and an implicit threat of physical force) or through the use of armed force itself (the explicit threat of physical force). These two traditions have operated in parallel for two centuries, with each being dominant at particular periods. For example, the Irish Party's success in bringing the Irish question to the forefront of British politics in the late nineteenth century made the constitutional tradition dominant; with the failure of the third Home Rule Bill, physical force became dominant—leading to the 1916 Easter Rising and the eventual formation of the Irish state in 1921.

Two characteristics of how these two traditions have operated in Northern Ireland are important. First, the decision whether or not to use constitutional or extraconstitutional methods is less a moral one than a matter of expediency and practicality; if violence is seen to have the greatest chance of achieving the required political goals, then it will be utilized. Second, while the two traditions are analytically separate, groups and individuals nominally in one tradition may invoke the means of the other in order to advance a political aim. For example, Charles Stewart Parnell recruited a wide and politically heterogeneous following by refusing to define how far he would deviate from constitutional politics to attain his demands.[22] In contemporary Northern Ireland a similar strategy is followed by the republican movement, which sustains an electoral organization, Sinn Fein, as well as an armed force, the IRA—in what has been immortalized as the strategy of the "armalite and the ballot box."[23]

The ambiguity surrounding the use of physical force, which is clearly apparent in many of the main political organizations and leaders in Northern Ireland, is also found within the general population. Using public opinion surveys to gauge public support for political violence is problematic; most respondents are loath to admit their support for physical force in a personal interview and, in any event, such support is usually contingent upon the particular circumstances at the time. Mindful of this factor, the survey question relating to political violence deals with the level of sympathy expressed by respondents for both republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations. The question was phrased so as to permit respondents to indicate sympathy, while not at the same time explicitly supporting the use of force. Table 5 shows that significant minorities within both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland lend support to paramilitary groups. A total of 26 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland express some level of sympathy for republican paramilitaries, while the figure for those sympathizing with loyalists is almost identical, at 27 percent. An even stronger level of support is echoed in the Republic of Ireland. Here, whereas a total of 40 percent of respondents express some level of sympathy for republican paramilitaries, the figure for those sympathizing with loyalists is somewhat lower, at 32 percent. By any standards, these are significant numbers of people within a society who have empathy with the methods and goals of terrorist organizations.

Table 5. Religious differences in public support in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for the use of paramilitary violence, 1999

	Percentages					
	Northern Ireland			Republic of Ireland		
	Prot.	Cath.	Total	Prot.	Cath.	Total
Republicans:						
A lot of sympathy	0.0	7.4	3.6	0.4	8.8	6.9
A little sympathy	10.2	34.6	21.9	20.3	36.4	32.8
No sympathy	89.8	58.0	74.6	79.2	54.8	60.3
(N)	(410)	(376)	(786)	(236)	(816)	(1,052)
Loyalists:						
A lot of sympathy	4.6	1.9	3.3	0.4	3.2	2.6
A little sympathy	19.5	28.9	24.0	24.7	31.3	29.8
No sympathy	75.9	69.2	72.7	74.9	65.4	67.6
(N)	(410)	(377)	(787)	(235)	(804)	(1,039)

Note: The questions were as follows: "Now thinking about the reasons why some Loyalist groups have used violence during the troubles, would you say that you have any sympathy with the reasons for violence, even if you don't condone the violence yourself? And, thinking about the reasons why some Republican groups have used violence during the troubles, would you say that you have any sympathy with the reasons for violence, even if you don't condone the violence yourself?"

Source: Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland European Values Study, 1999–2000.

As a group, however, Catholics were notably more sympathetic to paramilitary groups than Protestants and this pattern remained regardless of whether republican or loyalist paramilitary organizations were considered. For example, whereas 42 percent of Catholics as compared to just 10 percent of Protestants in Northern Ireland expressed sympathy for republican paramilitary groups, the equivalent figures for the Republic of Ireland were 45 percent and 21 percent, respectively. A second notable pattern in the table is the level of sympathy expressed for the other community's paramilitaries. For example, although hardly any of the respondents said that they had a "lot of sympathy" for the other side's paramilitaries, 29 percent of Catholics had "a little sympathy" for loyalist paramilitaries, and one in ten Protestants "a little sympathy" for republicans in Northern Ireland.

A similar, albeit less pronounced, pattern is echoed in the Republic of Ireland. Here, nearly a third of Catholics had "some sympathy" for loyalist paramilitaries, and just over one fifth of Protestants "some sympathy" for republicans in the Republic of Ireland. This pattern is all the more curious when we take into account the ferocity of the conflict between the two main paramilitary groupings in Northern Ireland. The explanation seems to rest on how the activists on both sides regard the conflict as a war, and their own role in it as one of "soldiers" fighting for a just cause; both paramilitary groupings regard their members serving jail sentences as "prisoners of war." In turn, these "soldiers" and their sympathizers legitimate their own status in the conflict by showing respect for the motives of their opponents.[24]

The opinion poll evidence in both societies about support for physical force tells a remarkably consistent—and shocking—story. As in previous research,[25] the results show that significant minorities within both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (as well as within each of their respective religious communities) support the use of violence for political ends. There is perhaps no other advanced industrial society where such large numbers of people effectively condone terrorism. The explanations can be traced to the complex interaction between constitutional and extraconstitutional politics throughout Irish history, and to the successes of republicans in achieving political independence through the use of force and of unionists in securing exclusion from these new arrangements through the threat of force. For each community, the activities of contemporary paramilitary groups resonate with the iconographic figures of their history. Perhaps more pertinently, the message learned from Irish history is that the use of physical force does bring political gains, a fact that has not been lost on constitutional politicians.

The main combatants in wars are generally young males and, as Table 6 confirms, supporters of paramilitary organizations are no exception to this pattern. Irrespective of whether Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland is considered, the three main predictors of public attitudes toward both republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations are religious affiliation, gender, and age. As a group, Catholics are significantly more likely to express sympathy for paramilitary organizations, as are men and the young. Of these various factors, however, religious affiliation stands out as the strongest predictor within both societies. For example, whereas Catholics are ten times more likely than Protestants (exponential of 2.31) to express sympathy for republican violence in Northern Ireland, they are three times more likely than Protestants (exponential of 1.12) to do so in the Republic of Ireland. It is interesting to note, however, that although Catholics are also significantly more likely to support loyalist paramilitary organizations than Protestants in Northern Ireland, religious affiliation is not a significant predictor of loyalist support in the Republic of Ireland. Rather the sole predictor of attitudes in this instance is age: older individuals are significantly less likely to express sympathy for loyalist organizations than their younger counterparts.

There are two possible explanations for this absence of a significant religious denominational effect on public attitudes toward loyalist paramilitary organizations in the Republic of Ireland. First, exposure to paramilitary violence has been unevenly distributed across the two societies. Since the start of the present phase of the conflict, the overwhelming majority of deaths and violent incidents have occurred in Northern Ireland. With one notable exception, the Monaghan/Dublin bombings in May 1974 in which thirty-three people died, the Republic of Ireland has had little direct experience of the Northern Ireland conflict.[26] Second, in contrast to republican paramilitary organizations which have traditionally found support and recruited members on both sides of the Irish border, recruitment to loyalist groups has been an almost exclusively Northern Irish (albeit Protestant) affair. It is these two factors—the lack of exposure to the Northern Ireland conflict by Catholics in the Republic of Ireland as well as their traditional sympathy for the aims and objectives of republican paramilitary organizations—which we suggest explains the absence of a significant difference between Protestants and Catholics in the Republic of Ireland in relation to support for loyalist paramilitary organizations.

Table 6. Factors affecting public support for paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, 1999

	Logistic regression coefficients							
	Northern Ireland				Republic of Ireland			
	Republican		Loyalist		Republican		Loyalist	
Socio-demographic background								
Gender (male)	1.17**	(0.24)	0.89**	(0.21)	0.44*	(0.18)	0.20	(0.18)
Religion (Catholic)	2.31**	(0.28)	0.59**	(0.22)	1.12**	(0.26)	0.31	(0.21)
Church attendance (attends)	−0.88*	(0.40)	−1.17**	(0.31)	−0.37	(0.33)	−0.28	(0.34)
Age (years)	−0.03**	(0.01)	−0.02*	(0.01)	−0.01	(0.01)	−0.02**	(0.01)
Education:								
Tertiary (omitted category)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Secondary	−0.26	(0.31)	0.03	(0.28)	0.15	(0.21)	0.01	(0.21)
No qualification	0.19	(0.36)	0.45	(0.32)	0.30	(0.24)	0.21	(0.24)
Occupation (nonmanual)	0.42	(0.26)	0.58*	(0.23)	−0.08	(0.18)	−0.03	(0.18)
Labour active (yes)	−0.86**	(0.28)	−0.21	(0.25)	−0.19	(0.23)	−0.28	(0.24)
Constant	−0.875		–0.526		−0.850		0.191	
% cases correctly predicted	78.5		72.6		60.6		63.6	
(N)	(580)		(580)		(719)		(711)	

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. *means significant at the 0.05 level; **means significant at the 0.01 level. The dependent variables are scored 0 (no sympathy) and 1 (some/little sympathy).

Source: Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland European Values Study, 1999–2000.

Attitudes toward Decommissioning

Disagreement over the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons highlights the ambiguity surrounding the use of political violence. Even the Good Friday Agreement is ambiguous on the decommissioning issue. It commits the signatories "to use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums North and South of the agreement and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement." Republicans viewed this goal as an aspiration; once democratic institutions (which included Sinn Fein) were established and accepted, arms would gradually be decommissioned.[27] By contrast, unionists saw it as binding that decommissioning would be underway prior to the formation of the executive and that the process would be (at the very least) well advanced by May 2000, as laid out in the Good Friday Agreement. For many unionists, it was an article of faith that they would not share government with an organization that maintained arms.

In fact, it was disagreement over the decommissioning issue which led to the collapse of the first attempt to establish the executive on July 15, 1999.[28] Although the executive was eventually established on November 29, 1999, with ten ministers taking their seats (the most controversial being the allocation of two seats to Sinn Fein), because of continuing unease in relation to the decommissioning issue much ambiguity and uncertainty surrounds its future. In fact, since its formal establishment on November 30, 1999,[29] the British government has been forced to suspend the assembly and reintroduce direct rule on four separate occasions. In each case, the decision to suspend the assembly—the most recent occurring on October 14, 2002—was in reaction to unionist threats to resign their executive positions over the perceived lack of progress on the decommissioning of IRA weapons.

However, when asked about their views on this issue, the overwhelming majority of adults in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland support decommissioning as one of the main components of the Good Friday Agreement (see Table 7).

Table 7. Religious differences in attitudes towards decommissioning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, 1999

	Percentages					
	Northern Ireland			Republic of Ireland		
	Prot.	Cath.	Total	Prot.	Cath.	Total
Strongly support	69.5	38.7	54.8	57.1	44.8	47.5
Support	27.9	46.9	37.0	34.4	43.1	41.2
Neither	1.2	8.2	4.5	7.1	8.5	8.2
Oppose	0.9	4.9	2.8	1.3	3.3	2.9
Oppose strongly	0.5	1.3	0.9	0.0	0.2	0.2
(N)	(426)	(388)	(1,045)	(224)	(821)	(1,045)

Note: The question was as follows: "There has been much discussion recently about some of the suggested constitutional and executive changes proposed in the Good Friday Agreement of last year. Looking at a list of some of these changes on this card, could you tell me how you feel about. . .the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons?"

Source: Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland European Values Study, 1999–2000.

For example, whereas 92 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland either support or strongly support the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the equivalent figure in the Republic of Ireland is only slightly lower at 89 percent. However, the figures also reveal that Protestants in both jurisdictions are significantly more supportive than Catholics in relation to this issue, and this is particularly the case in Northern Ireland. In fact, Protestants in the North were almost twice as likely to be strongly supportive than Catholics, indicating the depth of Protestant feelings about the issue within this society. By contrast, just 2 percent of Protestants and 6 percent of Catholics opposed decommissioning in Northern Ireland, while the equivalent figures within the Republic of Ireland were just 1 and 4 percent, respectively. Indeed, of the eight major proposals contained in the Good Friday Agreement, decommissioning received the strongest popular endorsement across both jurisdictions, although the ranking of the other seven major proposals differed somewhat between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.[30]

When the relationship between attitudes toward decommissioning and sympathy for paramilitary organizations was investigated the results were as expected: individuals who expressed sympathy for paramilitary organizations were notably less likely to offer their unqualified support for decommissioning than their nonsympathetic counterparts (see Table 8). It is important to note, however, that even among individuals who express sympathy for paramilitary organizations, the overwhelming majority in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland support decommissioning. For example, whereas 83 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland who expressed "some sympathy" for republican paramilitary organizations either supported or strongly supported the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the

Table 8. Relationship between attitudes toward paramilitaries and decommissioning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, 1999

	Percentages			
	Republicans		Loyalists	
	Sympathy	No Sympathy	Sympathy	No Sympathy
Northern Ireland				
Strongly support	39.7	61.7	48.1	59.7
Support	42.8	33.3	42.0	32.9
Neither	8.3	2.9	6.5	3.3
Oppose	7.0	1.3	3.1	2.7
Oppose strongly	2.2	0.7	0.4	1.4
(N)	(229)	(690)	(262)	(657)
Republic of Ireland				
Strongly support	41.8	51.3	45.5	48.8
Support	44.0	40.2	42.7	40.5
Neither	9.0	6.2	8.1	6.9
Oppose	4.9	2.0	3.6	3.3
Oppose strongly	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.4
(N)	(445)	(614)	(358)	(691)

Source: Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland European Values Study, 1999–2000.

equivalent figure in the Republic of Ireland is almost identical at 86 percent. An equivalent, albeit slightly more pronounced, pattern emerges when the relationship between support for loyalist paramilitaries and attitudes toward decommissioning is examined. For example, whereas 90 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland who expressed "some sympathy" for loyalist paramilitary organizations either supported or strongly supported the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the equivalent figure in the Republic of Ireland is almost identical at 89 percent.

However, the figures also reveal significant differences between the two groups in terms of their patterns of support in relation to this issue. Across both jurisdictions, whereas individuals who did not express sympathy for paramilitary groups were notably more likely to strongly support decommissioning, republican and loyalist sympathizers were almost equally divided in terms of their strength of support in relation to this issue. For example, whereas 40 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland who expressed "some sympathy" for republican paramilitary organizations "strongly" supported the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the equivalent figure among those who chose the "support" category was almost identical at 43 percent. This is not to deny, however, the overwhelming level of support for decommissioning in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland even among those sympathetic to paramilitary organizations. In fact, of those who expressed "some sympathy" for republican paramilitary organizations, just 9 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland and 5 percent in the Republic of Ireland opposed decommissioning in Northern Ireland. The equivalent figures in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland among individuals who expressed "some sympathy" for loyalist paramilitary organizations were just 3 and 4 percent, respectively.

Multivariate analysis confirms the importance of sympathy for paramilitary organizations, albeit exclusively toward republican groups, in predicting attitudes toward decommissioning (see Table 9). Even when a range of background variables were included in a regression equation, sympathy for republican paramilitary organizations was a significant negative predictor of attitudes toward decommissioning in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As a group, individuals who expressed sympathy for republican paramilitary organizations were significantly less likely to support decommissioning than their nonsympathetic counterparts within both these societies. This is not the case, however, in relation to attitudes toward loyalist paramilitary organizations. By contrast, sympathy for loyalist paramilitary groups had no significant effect on levels of support for decommissioning in both jurisdictions.

This difference in findings among individuals sympathetic to republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations may be related to the differing roles of the paramilitaries within Northern Irish society. Although loyalists have tried to defend their use of violence by arguing that their objectives were the same as those of the British security forces (or would be if the British government could be trusted as a true defender of the Union) in reality loyalist paramilitary activity has traditionally being nothing more than a reactionary response to republican violence.[31] Republican violence, in contrast, has been a long-standing feature of Irish politics used in the promotion of Irish unity. For example, not only do republicans argue that their violence derives its legitimacy from the fact that it served a goal shared by constitutional nationalists, but the use of this violence has been enshrined in the constitution of the Irish Republic, the very existence of which owed much to earlier phases of republican violence.[32]

Table 9. The impact of socioeconomic background and attitudes toward paramilitary violence on attitudes toward decommissioning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, 1999

	Regression coefficients: OLS			
	Northern Ireland		Republic of Ireland	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Socio-demographic background				
Gender (male)	−.01	(−.03)	−.01	(−.03)
Religion (Catholic)	−.01**	(−.21)	−.01**	(−.21)
Church attendance (attends)	−.01	(−.02)	−.01	(−.02)
Age (years)	.01**	(.22)	.01**	(.22)
Education				
Tertiary (omitted category)	—	—	—	—
Secondary	.01	(.03)	.01	(.03)
No qualification	−.01	(−.06)	−.01	(−.06)
Occupation (nonmanual)	−.01	(−.05)	−.01	(−.05)
Labour active (yes)	.01*	(.10)	.01*	(.10)
Attitudes toward paramilitaries				
Republican (sympathy)	−.01**	(−.16)	−.01**	(−.16)
Loyalists (sympathy)	.01	(.06)	.01	(.06)
Constant	0.813**			
R-squared	0.134			
(N)	(570)			

Note: Standardized regression coefficients are in parentheses. *means significant at the 0.05 level; **means significant at the 0.01 level. The dependent variables are scored from 0 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support).

Source: Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland European Values Study, 1999–2000.

It is the differing historical and strategic reasons proposed for the justification of the use of violence by the various paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland which we suggest explains the differences between loyalist and republican supporters in terms of their attitudes toward decommissioning. Other significant predictors of attitudes toward decommissioning were religious affiliation and age. As a group, Catholics are significantly less likely to express support for decommissioning, as are the young. Of these various factors, however, religious affiliation and age stand out as the strongest predictors of attitudes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Conclusion

The use of political violence has been a long-standing feature in Irish politics. Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were born in violence. In contrast to the Republic of Ireland, however, (where the use of violence to achieve political ends had all but "exhausted" itself by the end of the 1922–23 Irish Civil War)[33] sectarian tensions and civil disturbances continued to occur sporadically in Northern Ireland

throughout the first half of the century.[34] The post-1968 violence, however, dwarfs any previous conflict in scale, intensity, and duration. More people have died in communal violence in the past quarter century in Northern Ireland than in any similar period in Ireland over the past two centuries, with the one possible exception of the Irish Civil War.

The political violence has touched almost all sections of Northern Irish society. For example, recent survey estimates from 1998 suggest that whereas approximately one in five adult persons in Northern Ireland have had a family member or close relative injured or killed in the violence, more than half personally knew someone who has been killed or injured, and exactly one-quarter claim to have witnessed either an explosion or a riot, while about one in seven reported that they had been a victim of a violence incident since the current phase of the Troubles began.[35] In fact, during the 1970s alone, over 15,000 families in the Belfast area were driven from their homes either because of bomb damage or intimidation in what has now been recognized as one of the biggest population movements in Western Europe since World War II.[36]

Despite these high levels of exposure to political violence among the general population at large, to date most of the research on political violence and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland has concentrated on either the historical origins of paramilitary organizations or the background characteristics and motivations of the individuals who engage in this activity. Less attention has been given to analyzing public attitudes toward the use of paramilitary violence as a political tool within this society. This is also the case in the Republic of Ireland where, with one notable exception,[37] public support for paramilitary activity has rarely been assessed. In fact, most of the research on the Northern Ireland problem has assumed that paramilitary violence is a consequence of the political problem and once a permanent settlement is reached, violence will become irrelevant and swiftly disappear. This optimistic scenario, however, ignores two factors.

First, Northern Ireland maintains two traditions of achieving political change, one constitutional and one extraconstitutional—the latter fostered by a historic communal enmity and, since 1972, by the major political gains that have been delivered by republican violence. Since the decision whether or not to use extraconstitutional methods for political ends is a practical rather than a moral judgment, its future use cannot be excluded. Second, as we have shown in this paper, a significant minority of people in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland express support for paramilitarism. More importantly, however, this support for paramilitary organizations leads to a disinclination to support the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, and this is particularly pronounced among those who express sympathy for republican paramilitary organizations.

Only a sustained period of peace is likely to negate this historical tradition of political violence. The Irish Republic's experience in nation building suggests that the transition to an exclusively parliamentary tradition can become established in a decade, although much of that was promoted by the ruthless suppression of the IRA by both pro- and anti-treaty governments. Despite this transition to an exclusively parliamentary tradition, significant numbers of the population continue to remain sympathetic to not only the aims of the republican movement but also their use of violence to achieve them. The larger numbers of individuals who have been exposed to and directly influenced by political violence suggest that in Northern Ireland the demise of the physical force tradition will take much longer. The current

impasse over the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons in Northern Ireland also indicates that while all parties may have been signatories to what they believe to be a lasting settlement, most (and particularly the republican paramilitaries) wish to maintain their military capacity in the event of a breakdown. Whatever the political outcome of the collapse in the latest phase of the negotiations at Leeds Castle in September 2004, it suggests that, irrespective of whether the assembly is reestablished or not, latent support for paramilitary groups in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will continue for some time in the future.

Notes

1. Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry. *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 21.

2. U.S. Secretary of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1998* (Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 1999).

3. Bernadette C. Hayes and Ian McAllister, "Sowing Dragon's Teeth: Public Support for Political Violence and Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland," *Political Studies* 49, no.5 (2001): 901–22.

4. For a comprehensive account of this issue see Steve Bruce, *The Red Hand: Protestant Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Steve Bruce, "Victim Selection in Ethnic Conflict: Motives and Attitudes in Irish Republicanism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no.1 (1997): 56–71; Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Macmillan, 2003); Brendan O'Duffy, "Violence in Northern Ireland 1969–1994: Sectarian or Ethno-National?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 18, no.4 (1995): 740–72; Peter Taylor, *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Fein* (New York: TV Books, 1997); Peter Taylor, *Loyalists: War and Peace in Northern Ireland* (New York: TV Books, 1999); Robert W. White, "The Irish Republican Army: An Assessment of Sectarianism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no.1 (1997): 20–55.

5. E. E. Davis and R. Sinnott, *Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland Relevant to the Northern Ireland Problem* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, Paper No. 97, 1979).

6. The 1999 Northern Ireland European Values Study was conducted by Bernadette C. Hayes, Tony Fahey, and Richard Sinnott and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It is based on a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults. The 1999–2000 Republic of Ireland European Values Study was conducted by Tony Fahey, Bernadette C. Hayes, and Richard Sinnott and funded by a private donor who wishes to remain anonymous. It is based on a nationally representative sample of 1,012 adults. However, given the obvious expectation that an insufficient number of Protestants would turn up in the purely random nationwide representative sample (the actual number was just 25 in this instance) an additional booster sample of 232 Protestants was also obtained. See Tony Fahey, Bernadette C. Hayes, and Richard Sinnott, *Conflict and Consensus: A Study of Values and Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005) for a comprehensive discussion of this issue. All the results reported here for the Republic of Ireland include the nationwide representative sample plus the additional booster sample of Protestants. The further selection of Protestants was carefully controlled and led, we believe, to a sample of a reasonably representative character. Additional analysis, which compared the results from the combined nationally representative and booster Protestant sample reported here to that of the purely random nationwide representative sample confirms this view. In all cases, there was no difference in substantive findings between these two data sources.

7. Estimates of deaths due to political violence vary. The most reliable statistics concerning deaths in Northern Ireland come from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (http//www.psni.police.uk). However, they do not provide details of the agencies responsible for those killed. David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles* (London: Penguin, 2001) provides this additional information, the details of which are presented in Table 3.

8. Estimates of deaths during the Irish Civil War vary considerably, from 600 to 4,000 (see O'Leary and McGarry, *Politics of Antagonism*, 21).

9. In 1984, the British government changed the name of the city council from "Londonderry" to "Derry," although the official name of the city and county remains Londonderry. However, whereas the overwhelming number of nationalists (including John Hume) refer to the city as "Derry," the unionist community continues to use the official title, "Londonderry," see Sydney Elliott and W. D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: A Political Dictionary, 1968–1999* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999), 229.

10. See also Marie-Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey, and Marie Smyth, *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The Human Cost* (London: Pluto, 1999) for a detailed analysis of the patterns of deaths. Qualitative analysis of the deaths and their impacts on families and friends can be found in David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, and Chris Thornton, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (London: Mainstream, 1998).

11. Although numerous separate organizations have been responsible for paramilitary violence during the course of the conflict, all of them can be categorized as either republican or loyalist.

12. Bruce, *The Red Hand*.

13. This is not to deny the view among some that the state perpetuates the conflict. See Fionnula Ni Aolain, *The Politics of Force: Conflict Management and State Violence in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2000) for a comprehensive argument in favor of this position.

14. For a comprehensive account of this issue see Alan Bairner, "Paramilitarism," in *Northern Ireland Politics*, eds. Arthur Aughey and Duncan Morrow, 159–72 (London: Longman, 1996); John D. Brewer, Bill Lockhart, and Paula Rodgers, "Crime in Ireland 1945–95," in ed. Anthony Heath, Richard Breen, and Paul Whelan, 161–86 *Ireland North and South: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Adrian Guelke, "Political Violence and Paramilitaries," in *Politics in Northern Ireland*, ed. Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford, 29–51 (Colorado: Westview Press, 1999); Keith Maguire, "Fraud, Extortion and Racketeering: The Black Economy in Northern Ireland," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 20, no.3 (1993): 273–92; Sarah Nelson, *Ulster's Uncertain Defenders* (Belfast: Appletree, 1984).

15. Consolidated figures prior to 1981 are unavailable.

16. Between 1981 and 1989, whereas the number of murders attributed to republicans was 478, the equivalent figure attributed to loyalists was less than one-quarter of this amount at 109.

17. Despite a similar, albeit more gradual, return to violence by loyalist paramilitary organizations, the Combined Loyalist Military Command (an umbrella group representing the leaderships of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), and the Red Hand Commandos) have never officially declared the termination of their 1994 cease-fire. Even in July 2001, after loyalist paramilitaries had been engaged in an extremely bloody internal feud involving the UVF and the UDA, the UDA continued to insist that its "cease-fire was intact." In fact, so great was the level of violence engaged in by the UDA between 2000 and 2001 (albeit predominantly under the cover name of the Red Hand Defenders) that in October 2001, John Reid (then secretary of state for Northern Ireland) officially announced that the UDA was in breach of its cease-fire obligations and accused the organization of "actively stirring up sectarian hatred" (see Brian Rowan, *The Armed Peace: Life and Death after the Ceasefires* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2003), for a comprehensive account of this issue).

18. Between 1973 and 1985, whereas the number of paramilitary-style shootings attributed to republicans amounted to 776 incidents in total, the equivalent figure for which loyalists were held responsible was less than half this amount at 308.

19. Figures prior to 1982 are unavailable.

20. Brian Farrell, ed., *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973).

21. Davis and Sinnott, *Attitudes in the Republic*, Bernadette C. Hayes and Ian McAllister, "British and Irish Public Opinion towards the Northern Ireland Problem," *Irish Political Studies* 11 (1996): 61–82.

22. F. S. L. Lyons, "Charles Steward Parnell," in *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition*, ed. Brian Farrell, 193 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973).

23. The actual statement, made by Danny Morrison at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis in 1981, was: "Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? Would anyone object if, with a ballot paper in one hand and the armalite on the other, we take power in Ireland?' (quoted in Taylor, *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Fein*, 328).

24. Bairner, "Paramilitarism," 161.

25. Davis and Sinnott, *Attitudes in the Republic*, 77–79, 97–100; Hayes and McAllister, "Sowing Dragon's Teeth," 914; Edward Moxon-Browne, *Nation, Class and Creed in Northern Ireland* (Aldershot: Gower, 1983), 26–27.

26. Michael A. Poole, "Political Violence: The Overspill from Northern Ireland," in *Political Violence in Northern Ireland: Conflict and Conflict Resolution*, ed. Alan O'Day, 153–77 (London: Praeger, 1997) for a detailed analysis of the victims and perpetuators of political violence in both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom as well as mainline Europe.

27. Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, "The Belfast Agreement: Context, Content and Consequences," in *After the Good Friday Agreement: Analyzing Political Change in Northern Ireland*, ed. Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, 25 (Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 1999).

28. Bernadette C. Hayes and Ian McAllister, "Who Voted for Peace? Public Support for the Northern Ireland Agreement," *Irish Political Studies* 16 (2001): 73–93 for a detailed discussion of this issue.

29. Rick Wilford, "Introduction," in *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*, ed. Rick Wilford, 1–10 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

30. The rank ordering of the proposals, together with the percent supporting, in Northern Ireland was as follows: decommissioning at 92 percent (89 percent in the Republic of Ireland); the guarantee that Northern Ireland will remain part of the Uinted Kingdom as long as a majority of people in Northern Ireland wish it to be so at 81 percent (68 percent in the Republic of Ireland); the setting up of a Northern Ireland Assembly at 78 percent (81 percent in the Republic of Ireland); the requirement that the new executive is powersharing at 77 percent (84 percent in the Republic of Ireland); the creation of North-South bodies at 67 percent (81 percent in the Republic of Ireland); the removal of the Republic of Ireland's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland at 60 percent (49 percent in the Republic of Ireland); the creation of a commission to look into the future of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) at 47 percent (72 percent in the Republic of Ireland); and the early release of prisoners at 22 percent (35 percent in the Republic of Ireland).

31. Colin Crawford, *Defenders or Criminals? Loyalist Prisoners and Criminalisation* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1999), 5–11.

32. Bairner, "Paramilitarism," 160–61.

33. J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603–1923* (London: Faber, 1971), 461.

34. T. G. Fraser, *Ireland in Conflict, 1922–1998* (London: Routledge, 2002).

35. See Hayes and McAllister, "Sowing Dragon's Teeth," 908–09.

36. M. C. Keane, "Segregation Processes in Public Sector Housing," in *Geographical Perspectives on the Belfast Region*, ed. Paul Doherty (Newtownabbey, Co Antrim: Geographical Society of Ireland Special Publications, 1990), 20–37.

37. Davis and Sinnott, *Attitudes in the Republic*.