



# Disentangling the Demographic Drivers of Religious Population Change in Northern Ireland

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate the components of religious population change in Northern Ireland between 2001 and 2011. The results will provide a better understanding of the demographic drivers behind the well-documented decline of the Protestant population and growth of the Catholic population. Previous studies researching Northern Ireland's changing religious demography have relied on aggregate census data and church records to derive estimates of fertility, mortality and migration differences between religious communities. Data from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study now makes it feasible to measure the relative importance of births, deaths, migration and inter-census religious identity change. Findings show that the Catholic population grew predominantly from a surplus of births compared with deaths. For the first time, this paper reveals that a significant proportion of Catholic population growth is attributed to immigration. The decline of the Protestant population was caused by secularisation and emigration, with natural population change playing a reduced role. Now constituting a large minority, the non-religious population grew as a result of all three demographic drivers. Religious conversion and immigration were important factors in the significant population growth of NILS members belonging to Other religions and faiths.

**Keywords:** *Northern Ireland, religious demography, Protestant population decline; Catholic population growth*

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Few countries have a greater fascination with its religious demography than Northern Ireland (Gráda & Walsh, 1995). The intense interest paid to the relative size of the Protestant and Catholic communities has its genesis in the formation of Northern Ireland as a political entity in 1921. The country was formed as a political compromise between the irreconcilable demands of Irish Nationalists predominantly from a Catholic background who demanded complete independence from the United Kingdom (UK) and Protestants concentrated in the province of Ulster determined to remain an integral part of the UK (Clayton, 1998). Northern Ireland's boundary was drawn to reflect the underlying religious geography and to ensure the country would have a long-term Protestant majority of at least two thirds (Neville, Douglas & Compton, 1992). Discontent with being separated from the rest of Ireland, the minority Catholic population posed little threat in the decades following Northern Ireland's establishment. However, since the 1970's the Catholic population has grown in size challenging the Protestant/Unionist majority (Compton & Boal, 1970). Given the overlap between religion and politics, the shift in the population has had political implications. As the share of the Nationalist electorate has grown so has demands for a referendum to remove the border to make way for a United Ireland, with implications on the political future of Northern Ireland. The population change has weakened the demographic tenant on which Northern Ireland was created and endured since partition. Given the constitutional and political ramifications, the ongoing religious demographic shift has attracted considerable public, political and academic interest (Anderson & Shuttleworth, 1994).

Studies investigating the cause and magnitude of religious population change have been hindered by a historical lack of suitable data. The most acute challenge has been the absence of birth and death registration data disaggregated by religious affiliation. To counteract this problem, researchers have relied on aggregate census data to derive estimates of fertility, mortality, and migration. This has led to studies focusing on one demographic component in isolation particularly fertility and migration differences between Protestant and Catholics. A historic inability to acquire a holistic understanding of the driving factors behind religious demographic change has often led to simplistic interpretations of its cause. Political commentators and politicians have tended to explain this shift in often sectarian terms, with fertility differences cited as the main contributor leading to proclamations by some that Protestants were actively being out-bred in a numbers race to a United Ireland.

This study seeks to contribute to the literature by using longitudinal data from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) to provide a contemporary insight into the components of religious change between 2001 and 2011. By linking census data with birth and death registrations this study aims to quantify the relative contribution natural population change, migration and inter census religious identity change have each played. The aim is to provide a critical review of narratives that has made its way into public discourse, in particular the importance placed on fertility differences and secularisation of Protestants. In addition to better understanding the Protestant and Catholic populations, this paper also includes analysis of Other religions and non-religious populations which have often been overlooked. This provides a methodological template for similar studies explaining ethnic and religious population change in other parts of the UK using constituent longitudinal studies.

## **2.0 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Religious Demography and Politics in Northern Ireland**

The seeds of current division between Protestants and Catholics are said to have been sown during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Plantation of Ulster. The Plantation saw a wave of mainly Scottish and English Protestant planters settle in the province of Ulster (Brewer, 2003). Two key factors made the Ulster Plantation different to previous, largely failed endeavours which has an impact on the current religious dynamics of the country. Firstly, the plantation took place after the Reformation which meant that the mostly Protestant settlers arriving to the mono Catholic country of Ireland had a distinct faith, creating an immediate dichotomy between Protestant-settler and Catholic-native (Clarke, 1986). Secondly, learning from the previous mistakes of the Munster plantation, the Ulster Plantation was organised around strategically located garrison towns such as Londonderry and Enniskillen where a clear social distance could be maintained from the Irish native population. Practices such as selling of land and marriage to Catholics was strictly prohibited (Gillespie, 2012). This ensured the two communities occupied separate spheres, minimising contact and ultimately preventing the assimilation of Protestant planters into Irish society.

The Plantation would have a lasting legacy on the political landscape on the Island of Ireland, helping to underpin the partition of Ireland in 1921. The fundamental differences in national

identity between Protestants in Ulster and Catholics in the rest of Ireland is exemplified during the Irish revolutionary period. With a large concentration of Protestants attesting to a British identity in the North East corner of Ireland it would in 1921 act as the basis for the creation of Northern Ireland whilst the rest of Ireland became independent. The underlying religious geography of Ireland acted as the guiding factor in determining the boundary around which the newly created state of Northern Ireland was drawn (Neville, Douglas & Compton, 1992). The ancient boundary of Ulster was rejected on the basis that three of its counties namely Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan contained large Catholic majorities posing a potential political threat to the long-term sustainability of NI (Rankin, 2008). Instead, a more restrictive 6 county solution was reached which followed the contours of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Ulster Plantation by mainly Scottish settlers ensuring Northern Ireland would be comfortably two-thirds Protestant (Rankin, 2008). According to Darby (1976) this set-in motion a perpetual link between the relative size of the religious population and political power in what he terms the ‘politics of population’. Whilst commanding a comfortable majority, Protestant leaders and its community have been fearful of the more fertile Catholic population which if left unchecked would inadvertently threaten NI’s religious population and constitutional stability. This fear is encapsulated by the words of Sir Basil Brooke in 1934 in which he proclaimed to gatherers “before we know where we are, we shall find ourselves in the minority instead of the majority” (cited in Sandal, 2017, p. 38).

In the decades that followed the establishment of Northern Ireland, the Catholic minority posed no demographic threat to the Protestant political establishment (Gregory, Cunningham, Ell, Lloyd & Shuttleworth, 2013). A naturally high Catholic fertility rate was counteracted by a substantial outflow of young emigrating Catholics in a process known as the demographic ‘safety valve’ (Barritt & Carter, 1972; Compton, 1982: 91). The demographic safety valve ensured that the traditionally less fertile Protestant population maintained its majority position, continuing to elect Unionist members of Parliament, administering pro Unionist policies (Brew, Gibson & Patterson, 2001).

Amidst global socio-economic structural change beginning in the late 1960’s, the winds of demographic change began to blow. Deindustrialisation meant that once economically lucrative destinations where low skilled industrial jobs were available to young, work seeking Catholics no longer proved economically viable including to the rest of the UK, United States, Canada and Australia (Compton & Power, 1991). Increasingly, Catholics choose to remain in

Northern Ireland. From the 1980's, Protestants were becoming increasingly likely to leave Northern Ireland to attend universities in Great Britain where provision was growing at a faster rate, a pattern which has continued to the present day (McQuaid & Hollywood, 2008). It became increasingly apparent from the 1970's that the Catholic population was beginning to grow and the Protestant population was in decline. Given that religion is the strongest predictor of voting patterns, Protestants with a British identity voting for Unionist parties and Catholics supporting Irish Nationalist parties, a change in the religious population would have political implications (Beach, 1977; Doherty & Poole, 2002; Evans & Duffy, 1997). This has been compounded with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 which has as its central tenant the 'principle of consent' which recognised that the constitutional position of NI can only be changed through the democratic consent of voters. Since then, elections have been treated as informal referendums on the constitutional integrity of Northern Ireland, which Anderson and Shuttleworth (1994) term a 'sectarian headcount'. The growth of the Nationalist share of the electoral vote has sparked differing responses by the respective religious communities. The shift has sparked a psychological fear amongst Protestants that they are being actively 'outbred' in a numbers race towards an inevitable United Ireland (Compton, 1974; Southern, 2007). Protestants fear that they are no longer in control of the destiny of Northern Ireland and feel increasingly under threat which has been translated into a high negative and defeatist identity often referred to as the 'siege mentality' (Jardine, 1994; McGladdery, 2002). Meanwhile, Nationalists have taken a more upbeat tone, often viewing a United Ireland as an inevitable outcome of a naturally growing Catholic population (Doherty, 1996).

## **2.2 Researching Religious Demography**

The changing religious makeup of Northern Ireland caught the attention of demographers who were intrigued to ask if the emerging trends observed in the early 1970's continue at what point in the future would the Catholic population eclipse the Protestant population (Compton, 1989). It is in this nexus that demographers have used aggregate census data to empirically estimate the significance of fertility, mortality and migration have played. Hampering such efforts has been the long-standing inability to acquire birth and death records disaggregated by religion (McGregor & McKee, 2016). This stems from a UK wide convention that birth and death registrations refrain from collecting information on religious or ethnic identity. This means that there is no publicly available disaggregated breakdown of births and deaths by religion, requiring researchers to adopt indirect demographic estimation methods (Norman, Rees & Wohland, 2014).

The most researched demographic component of Northern Ireland's religious population has been fertility. As religion is not officially recorded at the time of birth, researchers have used alternative data sources including the Northern Ireland Fertility Survey (Compton & Coward, 1989), life tables from the census (Compton & Boal, 1970) along with baptismal records from the main religious churches to estimate fertility (Compton, 1985). Using the 1961 Census, Walsh (1970) estimated that the Catholic birth rate was around 28.3 per 1,000 women compared with a Protestant rate of 19.5 per 1,000 women. The differential was later validated by Compton (1989) who estimated in 1977 the Catholic fertility rate to be around 21.1 per 1000 women compared with a Protestant rate of 13.5 (Compton, 1989, p. 396). The higher fertility rate was also complemented with an increasing rate of marriage during the 1960's and 1970's along with a growth in the proportion of Catholic women of reproductive age. A contemporary assessment of inter-religious fertility differences between 1997 and 2007 by McGregor and McKee (2016) using longitudinal data from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) established that whilst the Catholic population continues to have a higher fertility rate compared with Protestants there are signs of an emerging convergence between the two communities.

With the use of life tables, researchers have been able to derive an estimate of the age-specific death rate for each religious community. Owing to lower levels of fertility coupled with an aging population Compton (1989) noted that the Protestant population had a higher crude mortality rate compared with the relatively younger, more fertile Catholic population. Similarly, O'Reilly and Stevenson (1998) remarked a higher level of crude mortality amongst Protestants after controlling for deprivation.

Migration is undeniably the hardest demographic component to estimate and forecast (Disney, Wiśniowski, Forster, Smith, & Bijak, 2015; Russell, 2016). Migration is both difficult to measure and is more prone to fluctuate in response to time period effects such as the prevailing health of the economy and it is difficult to forecast due to the inability to foresee potential socio-political developments such as the enlargement of the EU in 2004 (Disney, Wiśniowski, Forster, Smith, & Bijak, 2015; Raymer et al, 2012). Findings to date have overwhelmingly shown that up until the 1970's Catholics were almost twice as likely as Protestants to leave Northern Ireland (Barritt and Carter, 1972; Coleman, 1999; Wallace, 1971). However, a trend reversal occurred from 1970's which saw the out-migration of Catholics slow down and a growth of out-migration for Protestants. The trend from the 1970's reflected declining economic conditions in migration destinations favoured by Catholics, this occurred at a time of the expansion of the welfare state providing a safety net for unemployed, migrant latent Catholics (Coleman, 1999). The increase in Protestant outmigration can be partly explained by the growth of higher education provision in Great Britain relative to Northern Ireland, where a growing number of middle-Class Protestants have attended university (Cormack & Osborne, 1994). Meanwhile, a greater number of Catholic young people choose to remain in Northern Ireland, increasing the Catholic composition of Northern Irish universities. In a study of young people leaving Northern Ireland McGregor, Thanki and McKee (2002) found that Catholics who left Northern Ireland were more likely to return than Protestants.

Based on the 1971 Census Compton (1989) made a number of predictions on the future religious composition of NI. Based on birth and fertility rates alone, a simple Catholic majority can be expected by 2011 and a voting age majority by 2026. With the inclusion of migration data, there is a delayed simple majority by 2031 and a voting age majority reached by 2046.



### 3 DATA

This paper is able to overcome the data and methodological constraints that have hindered demographic studies in the past by drawing on individual level census data linked to birth and death records from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS). The NILS reflects a c.28% sample of the Northern Irish population which equates to approximately 500,000 people (O’Reilly, Rosato, Catney, Johnston & Brolly, 2012). NILS offers linked census data to administrative, death and birth registration data at the individual level. Members are added to the study based on two preconditions; firstly, the anonymised individual must have a health card registration and secondly their birth date must exactly match one of the 104 randomly selected dates dispersed across the year (O’Reilly, Rosato, Catney, Johnston & Brolly, 2012).

To disaggregate inter-census changes to the religious population, it was important to select an appropriate census variable that captures religious identity in a temporally consistent fashion. Since 2001, religion in the Northern Ireland Census has been defined and conceptualised in two ways; the first derives from the religious affiliation the member records at the time of the census and the second asks the respondent to describe their religious/community background as a marker of ethno-national group membership. The second definition of religion was created as the number of people in Northern Ireland declaring no religion has risen over time. For this paper, the first definition of religion will be used as it better captures the level of religiosity within Northern Ireland. The religious identity question provides scope for the individual to define their religion in a myriad of ways and for this reason this paper has categorised responses in 2001 and 2011 into ‘Catholic’, ‘Protestant’, ‘Other religions’ and ‘non religious’ as shown in table 1. To acquire a complete overview of population change, the study will also account for Non-Applicable (NA) responses. Whilst the numbers are relatively low, it is important to retain this category to investigate inter-census religious identity change.

Catholic	Protestant and ‘Other’ Christian	Other religions and philosophies**	No religion or religion not stated
Catholic Roman Catholic	Presbyterian Church of Ireland Methodist Other Christian	Muslim Hindu Buddhist Jewish	No Religion Religion not stated Atheist

Table 1: Religious categories in Northern Ireland based on responses from the 2001 and 2011 Census. \*\*This is not an exhaustive list of possible responses for this religious category.

Whilst providing unappalled access to rich socio-demographic information, the census does suffer from several limitations. Historically, the accuracy of the religious population has suffered from high rates of non-response to the census. Amidst political tension that surrounded the Republican Hunger Strikes in 1981, influential nationalists called on Catholics to boycott the intrusive British census (Compton and Power, 1986). In protest a substantial minority did not fill out the census form or refused to answer the religious identity question. Work carried out by Compton and Power (1986) on the 1981 census revealed a significant under enumeration of Catholics. From the 1990s onwards response levels to the census have since increased significantly greatly improving its validity. Whilst under enumeration is not a significant problem in modern times, there continues to be relatively high levels of non-response rates amongst certain subgroups including immigrations, students and young males who either fail to fill out the entire form or miss certain questions (Martin et al, 2002). A key problem which affects the methodology of this paper is the accuracy of international migration data. The census collects both internal and international migration in the year preceding the census. Therefore, migration events which take place outside of this time frame is not officially recorded. The next section will explore in greater detail how this paper deals with migration between and within the UK and abroad.

#### **4.0 METHODOLOGY**

To calculate the demographic components of religious population change between 2001 and 2011, this paper has adopted the demographic mass balancing equation (Simpson, Finney & Lomax, 2008). The demographic balancing equation is applicable to longitudinal studies such as NLS where the start and end populations are known. To disentangle the relative contribution natural population change (births-deaths), international migration and inter-census religious conversions have played in the reconfiguration of the religious population three samples ('left', 'entered' and 'remained' in the study) were created each serving a unique purpose.

The first sample is made up of NLS members who were enumerated in the 2001 Census only, which implies that members left the sample in the period after the census and therefore were not present for the 2011 Census. There are two main ways NLS members can leave the sample, this includes death or emigration. By linking NLS members to the death register it is possible to identify the month and year the NLS member died and from this calculate the total number of deaths that occurred between April 2001 and March 2011. As emigration is not directly measured, an indirect method was implemented which involved calculating the residual from those that had died.

The second sample comprises of NLS members that can only be linked to the 2011 Census, and therefore represent new entrants to the NLS study. Entry to the study can occur through birth or immigration. Linking birth registration data to NLS members provides information on the month and year of occurrence from which it is possible to ascertain if the NLS member has joined through birth. Using a similar method to identify emigrants leaving the sample, it can only be assumed that the remaining residual population entered the study through immigration either from the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) or abroad.

The third sample consists of NLS members present in both the 2001 and 2011 Censuses and therefore have remained in the study throughout. The sample is necessary in order to identify whether an individual changed their religious affiliation between the two censuses which can play an important and often overlooked role in the changing size of religious populations. This task is achieved by comparing NLS members 'current religion' in 2001 with their response in 2011, creating a matrix of possible religious changes. From this a quantification of the number of NLS members leaving and entering each religious group can be acquired.

## 5.0 RESULTS

### 5.1 Religious Population Change

Northern Ireland is unique in a wider UK and Western European context in terms of its level of religious adherence. 83.1% of the NILS population in 2011 identified themselves as Christians belonging to either a Protestant denomination or Roman Catholicism. Protestantism is the largest religious group at 42.4%, with Catholicism slightly smaller at 40.7%. Differing from patterns in the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has a relatively small non-religious population. According to the 2011 census, 25% of people in England and Wales described themselves as non-religious compared with 16.2% in Northern Ireland based on NILS data (ONS, 2012). Owing to lower levels of immigration to Northern Ireland, individuals belonging to Other religions and faiths represent 0.8% of the total population. This is in stark contrast to figures in the Republic of Ireland and in Great Britain.

	2001		2011		Population Change	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Catholic	182193	40.4	196352	40.7	14159	7.8
Protestant	211575	46.9	204736	42.4	-6839	-3.2
Other religions	1223	0.3	3676	0.8	2453	200.6
No Religion	56285	12.5	78000	16.2	21715	38.6
Total Population	451276		482764		31488	7.0

Table 2: Religious population change between 2001 and 2011.

Consistent with the findings from the 2001 and 2011 aggregate Censuses, results from NILS contained in table 2 show that Northern Ireland has witnessed a change in the composition of its religious population. Between 2001 and 2011, 60,439 new Catholics members joined the NILS study, meanwhile 46,280 Catholic members left. This has resulted in a Catholic population surplus of 14,159 members equating to an inter census population growth of 7.8% and its share of the population to rise by 0.3% points. In comparison, the Protestant population gained 52,458 new members and lost 59,287 members resulting in a net loss of 6,839 Protestants. With a greater number of members leaving the NILS study, the Protestant population experienced a -3.2% population decline and its share of the population to fall by 4.5% points. The net impact of a growing Catholic population and a declining Protestant population has been a reduction in the absolute size difference between the two communities from 6.5% points in 2001 to 1.7% points in 2011.

Between 2001 and 2011, the non-religious population experienced a significant growth of 38.6%. This is attributed to 58,210 new non-religious NLS members joining the study and 36,495 members leaving equating to a net increase of 21,715 people. The smallest and fastest growing community in Northern Ireland is composed of members who belong to Other religions and faiths. Over the two time points this religious community has grown by 2,453 members arising from 3,216 new members joining the sample and 763 leaving, giving rise to a population growth of 200.6%.

## 5.2 Births, Immigration, and Identity Change by Religious Background

The main analysis will begin by disaggregating the pathways by which new members have joined the NLS study as shown in table 3. 42.8% of new Catholic entrants to the NLS can be attributed to 25,845 births between 2001 and 2011. Births are followed by immigration as the next largest source of new Catholic membership with 24,385 people belonging to the Catholic faith entering Northern Ireland equating to 40.3% of new Catholics. Compared with the other religious and non-religious communities in Northern Ireland, religious conversion to Catholicism contributed the least to new Catholic membership with 10,209 NLS members becoming Catholic between 2001 and 2011, contributing to 16.9% of all new members. A disaggregation of transfers into and out of religions in table 4 show that NLS members with no-religion in 2001 were the most likely to declare themselves as Catholic in 2011. Given the fractious relationship between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland, a relatively low proportion of Protestants in 2001 converted to Catholicism in 2011.

	Births		Immigration		Identity Change		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Catholic	25845	42.8	24385	40.3	10209	16.9	60439
Protestant	20486	39.1	13193	25.1	18779	35.8	52458
Other	351	10.9	1418	44.1	1447	45	3216
No Religion	11147	19.1	16004	27.5	31059	53.4	58210

Table 3: Entrants to the NLS study by births, immigration, and existing NLS members who changed their religious affiliation/identity.

For Protestants, births attributed to 39.1% of new Protestants entering the study between 2001 and 2011. Inter census religious conversions to the Protestant faith was the second most significant source of new Protestant membership. Between 2001 and 2011, 18,779 NLS members became Protestant equating to 35.8% of new NLS entrants. Protestantism gained the greatest number of new members from people with no-religion in 2001, with relatively few

numbers transferring from Catholicism (table 4). Meanwhile, immigration contributed the least important role at 25.1%, which is significantly lower compared with the other communities.

Results for the Other religions and faiths reveal that religious conversions was a significant source of new entrants to the study at 45%. NLS members with a Protestant faith in 2001 were the most likely to convert to this religious group. Religious conversions were closely followed by immigration (44.1%) as the next largest source of membership, which is the highest across all groups. Births were the least important source of new entrants at 10.9%, this figure is the lowest compared to the other groups.

For the non-religious population, 53.4% of the 58,210 new entrants added to the study came from people leaving a faith/religion in 2001 and declaring no faith in the 2011 Census. NLS members with a Protestant faith were most likely to be non-religious in 2011, however a sizeable number also left Catholicism. In comparison to the other communities, religious identity change was the largest source of new membership relative to the other demographic components. The next greatest source of new members derived from immigration with 16,004 members entering Northern Ireland with a non-religious identity contributing to 27.5%. Births were the least important demographic component with 11,147 births representing 19.1% of total new entrants.

Religious Identity Change	Count
<b>Stable Catholic</b>	<b>135913</b>
Catholic-Protestant	1086
Catholic-Other	134
Catholic-No religion	11078
Catholic-NA	1703
<b>Stable Protestant</b>	<b>152278</b>
Protestant-Catholic	906
Protestant-Other	770
Protestant-No religion	19218
Protestant-NA	1232
<b>Stable Other</b>	<b>460</b>
Other-Catholic	31
Other-Protestant	52
Other-No religion	226
Other-NA	13
<b>Stable No religion</b>	<b>19790</b>
No religion-Catholic	7627
No Religion -Protestant	16382
No Religion – Other	532
No Religion – NA	300
<b>Stable NA</b>	*
NA-Catholic	1645
NA-Protestant	1259
NA-Other	11
NA-No Religion	537
* cell count of less than 10	
NA – Non Applicable	

Table 4: Inter-census religious identity change.

### 5.3 Deaths, Emigration, and Identity Change by Religious Background

The paper will now move on to explore the processes by which NILS members have left the NILS study and identify variations between the different groups as shown in table 5. Between 2001 and 2011 46,280 Catholics left the NILS study. The largest source of loss was from emigration which saw 20,070 Catholics leave Northern Ireland to other regions of the UK or abroad, contributing to 43.4% of total Catholic loss. Emigration is followed by religious conversions as the next greatest source of population loss. Between 2001 and 2011 14,001 Catholics left the religion with the largest proportion becoming non-religious as shown in table 5. Deaths contributed least to the loss of Catholics from the NILS study, over the period 12,209 Catholics died equalling a loss of 26.4%.

	Deaths		Emigration		Identity Change		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Catholic	12209	26.4	20070	43.4	14001	30.3	46280
Protestant	21872	36.9	15299	25.8	22126	37.3	59297
Other	49	6.4	392	51.4	322	42.2	763
No Religion	3586	9.8	8068	22.1	24841	68.1	36495

Table 5: Disaggregation of deaths, emigration and identity change by religious/non-religious affiliation

Results relating to the Protestant community reveal that the largest driver behind the exiting of Protestant from the NILS study was through religious conversions (table 5). 22,126 NILS members left a Protestant religious denomination by converting to Other religions or no-religion which contributed to 37.3% of the total loss (table 4). Like the findings from the Catholic community, Protestants were also highly unlikely to radically change their religion to become Catholic. The second driver behind Protestant loss was from deaths, between the 2001 and 2011 Census 21,872 Protestants died which equates to 36.9%. Emigration played a reduced yet significant factor with 15,299 leaving Northern Ireland contributing in proportional terms to 25.8% of total loss.



Analysis shows that 68.1% of former non-religious NILS members became religious between 2001 and 2011. According to table 4, 16,382 people declared a Protestant denomination in 2011 and 7,627 people became Catholic. Meanwhile, transitions to other religions from non-religious equated to 532 people. Emigration out of Northern Ireland resulted in a further 22.1% loss of non-religious members from the NILS study between 2001 and 2011. This figure is relatively lower than other religions and faiths. Deaths contributed least to non-religious departures from the study at 9.8%, this may be attributed to the youthful demographic makeup of the non-religious composition in comparison to the established religious communities in Northern Ireland.

Analysis of the causes that have resulted in NILS members belonging to Other religions to leave the study reveals a number of deviations from the two main religious communities in Northern Ireland. Emigration was the largest source of NILS members leaving the study, as this group is likely to be composed of immigrants, it is likely that a proportion of individuals have returned to their country of origin or have a higher propensity to migrate to other countries. An inter-census change of religious identity was also an important contributor for NILS members belonging to Other religions to leave equating to 42.2%. Deaths contributed the least to NILS members leaving the study at 6.5% significantly lower than the main religious communities. This finding may reflect the relatively youthful nature of this community who have recently immigrated to Northern Ireland.

#### **5.4 Components of Population Change**

Table 6 provides a breakdown of the three main demographic drivers of population for each religious and non-religious community in NI. Results show that natural population change was the primary driver behind the 7.8% increase in the Catholic population between 2001 and 2011. This reflects a higher number of Catholic births compared with deaths. An inflow of immigrants to Northern Ireland was also an important demographic driver of Catholic population growth. Population loss through religious conversions out of the Catholic faith was outweighed by the other demographic components. For the Protestant population, the three demographic drivers all interacted to cause the population to decline by -3.2%. Religious conversions out of the Protestant faith contributed to 48.95% of the population decline. A net loss of Protestant migrants resulted in 30.79% of the population decline. A greater number of Protestant deaths compared with births equated to a further 20.27%. For the non-religious

population, the inter census growth was more evenly distributed across the main demographic drivers particularly net migration followed by natural population change and finally net conversions into the community. Other religions and faiths grew predominantly from religious conversions (45.9%) and immigration (41.8%).

	Catholic		Protestant		Other Religions		No Religion	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Natural Change	13636	96.31	-1386	-20.27	302	12.31	7561	34.82
Net Migration	4315	30.48	-2106	-30.79	1026	41.83	7936	36.55
Net Conversions	-3792	-26.78	-3347	-48.94	1125	45.86	6218	28.63
Net Change	14159	100.00	-6839	-100.00	2453	100.00	21715	100.00

Table 6: Summary of components of religious population change.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION

To date, research on religious demographic change in Northern Ireland has overwhelming focused on the magnitude of population change over time and its political implications on the constitutional future of the country. Owing to data limitations, much less is known of the cause of these patterns. With access to individual level census data, this paper has sought to add to this body of literature by quantifying the relative importance of all demographic drivers including religious identity change to understand the processes behind the changing composition of Northern Ireland's population.

The findings of this paper confirm that the Catholic population grew predominately as a result of natural population change, arising from a greater number of births compared with deaths. This finding is not in itself novel, a large body of literature has unanimously established that the Catholic population in Northern Ireland has a relatively youthful age structure along with a naturally high, above replacement fertility rate (Compton, 1989; McGregor & McKee, 2016; Walsh, 1970). Several explanations have been put forward to explain this phenomenon. Theological teachings of the Catholic church on abstinence before marriage along with prohibiting the use of contraception and the immorality of abortion contrasts with a more liberal position taken by mainstream Protestant denominations (McQuillan, 2004). However, in contemporary times the influence of religion on family planning has been contested as strict Catholic adherence begins to fall across the Island of Ireland (McGregor & McKee, 2016).

Outside of religion, research has shown that fertility behaviour is transmitted from one generation to another. Individuals who grow up with multiple siblings are themselves more likely to have a larger family compared with those with one sibling or none. Higher levels of fertility among Catholics in Northern Ireland has been linked to its 'minority status' (Kennedy, 1975; Coward, 1980). A higher fertility rate acts as a demographic mechanism to heighten political power and increase social mobility within society.

In addition to natural population change, immigration was also an important contributing factor in the growth of the Catholic community. The growth in the Catholic population between 2001 and 2011 coincided with an enlargement of the European Union which saw the accession of eight central and Eastern European countries each with large Catholic populations. It is estimated that between 2000 and 2010 almost 122,000 migrants arrived to Northern Ireland (Russell, 2012: 3). Data from the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) show that the migrants arrived predominantly from the A8 accession countries in the period from 2004 and 2007 (Russell, 2012).

Secularisation was found to be the largest contributor to a net decline of the Protestant population. Closer analysis of the net flows out of Protestantism indicate that a large proportion of former Protestants in 2001 declared themselves as non-religious in the 2011 census, with a relatively small proportion becoming a Catholic or declaring an affiliation to other religions and faiths. The findings reported confirm earlier work by Doebler and Shuttleworth (2018) on religious switching in Northern Ireland. Using the NLS the authors found that less than 1% of people switched between Protestantism and Catholicism between 2001 and 2011. A larger number of Protestants switched to no religion compared with Catholics. Well educated, socially upwardly mobile Protestants were more likely to become non-religious, this pattern was not the case for Catholics where an education effect was not present. Meanwhile, for Catholics and Protestants unemployment and social deprivation was associated with moves from organised religion to non-religious affiliation.

Net emigration was the second largest source of net population loss for the Protestant community. This builds on previous findings (Cormack & Osborne, 1994; McGregor, Thanki & McKee, 2002) that Protestants are more likely to leave Northern Ireland for study or work and not return. Natural change contributed least to the overall decline of the population equating to around 20%. This finding demonstrates that focusing on fertility differences alone to explain why this community has declined is insufficient. As young people are more likely

to leave Northern Ireland along with becoming secular these processes are likely to have a knock-on impact on the fertility levels of the community and further accentuate population aging and decline.

Having been overlooked by the academic community, this study also considered the drivers behind a population growth of the non-religious. As a result of its growth, the non-religious community now plays an elevated role in the political life of the country through non-religiously aligned political politics such as the Alliance party. The results showed that this community grew as a result of all three demographic drivers including immigration into Northern Ireland, natural population change and secularisation. As young people in their child bearing years are most likely to become non-religious, this has an amplified effect with reduced mortality and increased fertility, leading to the population growth observed between 2001 and 2011. Experiencing population growth from each demographic driver, it is highly likely that the population growth observed between 2001 and 2011 will be replicated in the 2011 to 2021 inter-census period.

## **7.0 CONCLUSION**

2021 marks 100 years since the establishment of Northern Ireland following the partition of Ireland in 1921. The current religious composition of the country is in stark contrast to the rationale used in 1921 that Northern Ireland would be created to have a comfortable Protestant majority. With the Protestant population making up less than 50% of the population, demographic change has placed Northern Ireland's constitutional future in the spotlight. This paper has sought to contribute to this debate by using longitudinal data from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study to shine new light on the demographic drivers which are contributing to religious population change. With the benefit of linked death and birth records to individual level census data, this paper has found that the Catholic population grew predominantly from natural population change and immigration. Secularisation and the non-return of emigrating Protestants were primarily responsible for the decline of the Protestant population. Interestingly, the Other Religions of Northern Ireland grew from religious conversions and immigration.

The non-religious community grew from all three demographic drivers. Owing to the continued existence of NILS, it is hoped that post the publication and linkage of the 2021 census, a future study can be carried out to identify whether the patterns noted here continue to be experienced

or whether a new pattern of demographic change has occurred. Looking to the next census, it will be of interest whether Brexit is likely to have any impact on the flow of EU nationals to Northern Ireland. The out-migration of EU nationals may have an impact on the Catholic population in particular. It would also be interesting to explore whether the rate of secularisation witnessed by Catholics in the Republic of Ireland has had any impact on fellow Catholics in Northern Ireland.

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