Assessing the Predictors of Political Engagement among Northern Irish Youth

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Abstract

Functioning societies aim to have their youth engage in the political sphere and Northern Ireland is no exception. To wit, Northern Irish academia devoted much effort to this issue with institutions such as its Institute of Conflict Research considering the matter a prime area of inquiry. This secondary data study, being focused on contributing to this discussion, employed a country-wide survey of Northern Irish youth to construct variables representing political engagement and its theory-grounded predictor constructs: social connectedness, income, gender, and educational attainment. Using these variables, a multi-linear regression model was constructed that accounted for 11.2% (r^2) of the observed variance of reported political engagement where gender (strongest), education level, social connectedness, and income (weakest) were all significant predictors/factors. The implications of the research are two-fold. On one hand, the model and its components' being statistically significant imply that the research has identified the areas of inquiry needed to address the Northern Irish youth political engagement question. On the other, the observed weakness of the model's predictive strength implies that more research is needed to unpack the measurements needed to properly address the issue.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; Youth Political Engagement; Survey Research, Secondary Data Research.

Introduction

The precept that a politically engaged society is an essential characteristic of a 'healthy' democratic society drives this study. This report is interested in exploring the political engagement of Northern Irish youth and the factors that might predict it. The supposition that a politically engaged society is a well-functioning one is not without precedent. Flanagan & Sherrod (1998) have argued that "political participation by citizens is considered a prerequisite for successful democratic societies" (p. 447) when presenting an overview of youth political development in America from the 1950's onward. Changing the focus from America to Northern Ireland, the Institute of Conflict Research (2004) has noted that, "involvement in the democratic process among young people in Northern Ireland has been poor" (p. 4), referencing survey and interview data, and past research. Jowell & Park (1998), and Smyth & Scott (2000) have also been instances of work focused within Northern Ireland claiming that the youth there are not politically engaged. The question of Northern Irish youth political engagement is actually an inquiry into the health of the six counties' democracy.

The purpose of this secondary data-driven study was exploratory in trying to uncover these different predictors of political engagement among Northern Irish youth using an expansive survey given to a randomly selected sample of 16 year-olds from Northern Ireland. This survey was the 'Young Life and Times Survey' (YLT) and has been conducted annually by Access Research Knowledge – Northern Ireland (ARK, 2012a) for more than a decade. The survey's purpose was breath across a wide range of topics rather than depth vis-à-vis politics in particular. Consequently, unavoidable limitations arose and placed this study in the exploratory realm because the study was limited in the construction and choice of its employed variables.

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This study's novelty and associated value despite the aforementioned constraints, came from the observation that the bulk of the mixed methods/quantitative works on this issue (specifically within Northern Ireland) had seen only descriptive statistics used (e.g. see Institute of Conflict Research, 2004; Finlay & Irwin, 2004) and these inquiries therefore acted as introductory forum studies. This report explored deeper. Political engagement and its predictive factors were defined theoretically and then operated into a multi-linear regression model where the latter's ability to predict the former, via inferential statistical principles, was considered. By focusing on creating a causal explanation relative to this issue where significance, power, other considerations facilitate generalizable and testable claims (Connolly, 2007), this report presented a trustworthy reference point for further investigation into the issue. The model, specifically, ascertained the predictive power of the four relevant/available constructs or predictors: 1 - gender (Carroll 2001; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Burns, 2007; Gallego, 2007; Norris, 2002), 2 - income (Oliver, 2001; Brady, 2004; Solt, 2008), 3 – educational attainment (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001), and 4 - social connectedness (Jarvis, Montoya & Mulvey, 2005) had vis-à-vis political engagement among the YLT's (ARK, 2012a) respondents. A comprehensive literature review established these four constructs as the study's predictors. The implications of the study suggested that further research: 1- operate and explore the predictive factors therein or 2 – expand on it adding more predictors to the ones established in this undertaking.

Presentation of Research Questions

There are two research questions that drove this inquiry and govern the aforementioned purpose of the study:

1. What is the association between these noted predicators and engagement in politics among Northern Ireland's youth?
2. What is the relative predictive strength among these constructs?

Literature Review

Defining Political Engagement

From the literature, there has been a clear trend to conceptualize political engagement (especially, among youth) as a confluence between knowledge thereof and interest therein.

Molloy, White & Hosfield (2002) when providing reasons why young UK citizens/subjects were not engaged with politics listed a lack of knowledge and interest as the strongest reasons via qualitative inquiry. The National Centre for Social Research (2000) echoed this notion of interest and knowledge as constructing engagement in politics by suggesting that the way to engage young people in the UK in politics is to make it seem more interesting and assessable (in terms of understanding). Focusing on the Northern Irish context, the Institute of Conflict Research (2004) conducted mixed-methods research examining young people's political attitudes and habits and found that these persons had an "overriding view…that politics was boring and complicated which did not act as an incentive to become involved" (2004, p. 3). The words 'boring' and 'complicated' related back to the interest and knowledge themes uncovered in the aforementioned studies. Through the quantitative element of the study, survey research, the Institute expanded on this qualitative finding. They found that 65% of respondents (Northern Irish youth aged 16-17 – study failed to overtly mention its sample size) were not very interested in politics by virtue of their responding with varying degrees of disinterest or being merely 'interested.' Among the same age group, 34% of respondents reported having 'poor' knowledge of politics, while 50% reported 'average.' The study did offer data, however, that this observed dearth of political interest and knowledge among pre-18 year olds lessened as the respondents' age approached 24. The findings of the Institute fell in line with what Smyth & Scott (2000) found in their survey research, which was that Northern Irish youth reported feelings of apathy and scepticism, which precluded against political engagement. Interestingly enough, Smyth and Scott's conception of political engagement corresponded to the dualist knowledge/interest construction observed in other related studies. Finlay & Irwin (2004) in a mixed methods study similar to the approach taken by the Institute of Conflict Research were another instance of the literature defining engagement as a merging of interest and knowledge relative to politics. Their findings were somewhat different in that they found that participants actually were knowledgeable and interested in politics in the slight majority.

While the findings may have been divergent in some cases, the commonality observed has been that research into political engagement globally, and especially in Northern Ireland has seen political knowledge and corresponding interest as chief definers of engagement in politics.

Past Studies' Predictors/Factors of Political Engagement
Past research into the predictors of political engagement revealed that social connectedness (Jarvis, Montoya & Mulvey, 2005), income (Oliver, 2001; Brady, 2004; Solt, 2008), gender (Carroll, 2001; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Burns, 2007; Gallego, 2007; Norris, 2002), and education level/attainment (see Jarvis, Montoya & Mulvey, 2005; Highton & Wolfinger, 2001) were the most often employed and appropriate factors in explaining or predicting political engagement. Within Northern Irish-centric studies, this observation was also noted (see below).

Social Connectedness
Huckfeldt & Sprague (1995) posited that one's social connections foster engagement. Lee & Robbins (1995) in a similar vein also described social connectedness as the extent to which one feels connected to his social world. These conceptions in and of themselves were too abstract for this study and the literature argued that social connectedness could be further differentiated along the following more concrete lines (especially within Northern Ireland): 1 - religious identity importance, 2 – national identity importance, 3 – desire or plan to emigrate (not tourism), 4 – minority ethnic group identification.

Connectedness as Defined by Religion and Nationality
In the aforementioned study conducted by the Institute of Conflict Research (2004), a focus group participant described politics in Northern Ireland as being, "different in that it (politics) is based on religion and conflict – it makes it more personal" (p. 37). This conflict was presented as being differentiated along the lines of religion (Protestant versus Catholic) and national identity (Loyalist/Unionist versus Nationalist/Republican) (Wilson & Wilford, 2003). Some such as Hart (1998) tried to merge the two, and he did so in a historical argument that the armed Irish independence struggle, 1916 to 1922, was ultimately driven along by indivisible and conjoined religious and nationalist motives. In the realm of social science, however, religion/religious importance and its nationality counterpart were more often left separate than not (see Institute of Conflict Research, 2004; Finlay & Irwin, 2004; Smyth & Scott, 2000). The survey, which governs this study (ARK, 2012a), also appeared to treat them as conceptually different in the wording of the survey and the coding of its results.

The census of the research, considering the above, has been that the more importance one affixes to her national and religious identity, the more socially connected she is within the Northern Irish setting. Remembering the qualitative observation that politics in Northern Ireland is in no small part still beholden to conflicts, which break along national and religious lines, this is not unexpected.

Connectedness and Ethnicity
Yoon et al. (2012) contended that members of a society who are a part of a minority ethnic community had two arenas to which they establish connections: the ethnic community and mainstream society. What is of interest to this current study was the process by which such members of society established and increased their level of connectedness with mainstream society. Yoon, Lee & Goh (2008) offered that acculturation (understanding and adhering to the main stream's normative state when required) and enculturation (the learning of these norms) were the means by which connectedness increases relative to the main stream. They contended that these processes were defined by such cultural phenomena as language, food, customs and habits and are beholden to the individual's psychological and personal predispositions. Both Yoon et al. (2012) and Yoon, Lee & Goh (2008) were not arguing that these members of society lost or abandoned their ethnic community norms and values but rather progressed to a point where the cultural identities of the mainstream and their minority group's were concurrently internalized with their not being diametrically opposed. Connectedness, in this framework, was a point of equilibrium between these two cultural realities. Lieberson & Waters (1988), in the

same vein as Yoon et al. (2012) and Yoon, Lee & Goh (2008), argued that the way one identified oneself relative to the ethnic/main stream dichotomy spoke to connectedness.

Considering hypothetical examples, a fourth generation Italian-American would most likely not consider himself a member of a minority immigrant group while still acknowledging and even celebrating his Italian heritage. Alternatively, a second-generation Irish-American living in New York may actually consider himself a part of the 'Irish' ethnic group irrespective of his thoughts about his American-ness. What is salient is that, according to this framework, the Italian-American is more connected than the Irishman living in America.

Connectedness and Emigration

Through interactive qualitative research among 16- and 17-year olds in Northern Ireland, Ewart & Schubotz (2004) found that some of the participants reported wanting to leave the country because of the social and cultural conditions (namely, sectarian events such as Marching Season). They found, in other words, youth who wished to disassociate themselves from the North Irish social/cultural space.

Black (2012; 1998) offered a compelling theoretical framework which could explain why people leave a certain social space and it can be applied to this aforementioned Northern Irish study. His argument was that when distances along cultural, social and vertical (economic) lines between the individual or group of individuals and the rest of society or mainstream reached a critical point, then conflict and corresponding social control ensued. Lynching, judicial punishment and the like were offered by Black as examples of top-down social control. Bottom-up social control included rioting, striking and *avoidance*. According to Black, avoidance occurred when the marginalized group or person had the ability to leave and society as a whole was not heavily interdependent with them/him. From this point of view, observed emigration or reported desire to emigrate (as in Ewart & Schubotz, 2004) was a result of increased cultural, social and vertical distance.

Income

Relevant research into political engagement (both among youth and the general public) appeared to argue that there has been a positive relationship between income and engagement. Solt (2008), accordingly, contended that "lower-income citizens can be expected to become more and more likely to quite rationally conclude that there is little point to being engaged in politics" (p. 50). Oliver (2001) and Brady (2004) agreed with Solt's conclusion about the relationship between income and political engagement. These three studies were set in the American context but Finlay & Irwin (2004) offered an observation that this relationship might also exist in Northern Ireland by referencing an interviewee who described Northern Irish politicians as wealthy compared to the general public. Their point was that this disconnect might have hindered youth from lesser means from engaging in politics. In a more general sense, Smyth & Scott (2000) included income as a crucial measurement in their survey of Northern Irish youth and suggested that the variable could be used vis-à-vis phenomena within the realm of politics.

Gender

The literature has been quite divergent when it comes to addressing gender's role in predicting political engagement in terms of the direction of the association (male vs. female). There has been however no disagreement that it is a chief predictor of political engagement.

Burns (2007), Gallego (2007) and Norris (2002) provided data which points to the perceived gender gap in political engagement in Western societies where men are more engaged than women. There were studies challenging this notion however. Carroll (2001) examined women in American politics and concludes there was an observable trend where this gap had been ever lessening. Staying within the American setting, Schwindt-Bayer (2006) researched into the growing political engagement observed among Hispanic Americans and like Carroll found the gender gap to be lessening with female engagement increasing. Coffè & Bolzendahl (2010) synthesised these differing findings through their study of 18 advanced Western democracies in finding, through quantitative inquiry, that women significantly engaged in more proactive political activities such as petition collection and signing, boycotting, and donating when the traditionally activities such as voting and party membership.

Within the Northern Irish content, both the Institute for Conflict Research (2004) and Finlay & Irwin (2004) offered evidence that politics and engagement therein has been male dominated.

Educational Attainment
Both Highton & Wolfinger (2001) and Jarvis, Montoya & Mulvey (2005) employed regression models similar to what this study employed to demonstrate a positive relationship between education and political engagement. Both studies grounded the inclusion of this independent variable in a wealth of past research that had also done so. Interestingly enough, the studies set in Northern Ireland (e.g. Finlay & Irwin, 2004; Institute of Conflict Research, 2004) failed to look at education level as an overt predictive factor yet both argue that education in politics at the different levels of schooling are needed to promote better engagement among youth.

Presentation of Hypothesis

From the above literature review, a number of factors are uncovered as predictors of political engagement: 1 – social connectedness, income, gender, and educational attainment. Social connectedness, in this study, is theoretically differentiated into the following areas: religious importance, nationality importance, ethnicity, and avoidance/desire to emigrate. From these considerations comes the following (alternative) hypothesis, which addresses the research questions found in section *Presentation of Research Questions*:

- Gender, income, social connectedness (differentiated at the levels of religious and nationality importance, ethnicity, and desire to stay in Northern Ireland), and educational attainment (IV's) are significant predictors of political engagement (DV) among Northern Irish Youth.
- Running corollary to this hypothesis is the assumption that the predicators (IV's) differ from each other in predictive strength.

This hypothesis operates within the realm of survey data. All variables within this postulate are, therefore, qualified with 'as reported by respondents on the 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012a). Moreover, this hypothesis is treated as a singular hypothesis where the predictors are simultaneously offered considering that relative literature, and the assumption of their working in concert together to predict political engagement is justified by the studies within the Northern Irish setting which has seen them to varying degrees juxtaposed to one another (see Institute of Conflict Research, 2004; Finlay & Irwin, 2004; Smyth & Scott, 2000; Ewart & Schubotz, 2004).

Methodology

Design
The study was operated the hypothesis presented in section *Presentation of Hypothesis*. The 2011 Northern Ireland Life and Times (YLT) Survey (ARK, 2012a), was employed to construct the measures or variables from appropriate items within the survey which represented the various concepts found in the hypothesis. These variables were used to construct a multi-linear regression model and the model was then assessed for statistical power.

The 2011 YLT Survey: Participants and Testing Tool
Overview of Survey
The 2011 YLT (Young Life and Times) Survey (ARK, 2012a) was the fourteenth year that the survey was conducted and it was operated with a methodology in place since 2003. The survey's purpose was "to record the views of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of issues such as community relations, health, politics, sectarianism and education" (ARK, 2012b, p. 1). The instrument also collected typical demographic data.

Sample Construction and Data Collection
The survey's sample is taken from the Child Benefit Register (via Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs agency) and in 2011, this sampling frame included all youth in Northern Ireland (Dr. Dirk Schubotz, 14 February, 2013, personal communication). It consisted of all persons in the database whose 16th birthday was in February or March of 2011(ARK, 2012b) and randomized sufficiently. Once the sample was constructed, surveys were sent out to the prospective respondents alongside measures of acquiring parental consent and allowing those selected to opt out. Surveys could have been completed online, via

post (paper), or over the phone. The data were obtained directly from the respondents in other words. The advantages to doing over this school-based samples and collection procedures were that there were "no gatekeepers; (was the) inclusion of everybody regardless of ability and school type attended, and improved confidentiality" (Dr. Dirk Schubotz, 14 February, 2013, personal communication).

Summary of Survey Collection

3,835 persons were in the selected sample of eligible respondents (ARK, 2012b). 1,434 surveys were returned resulting in a response rate of 37%. The vast majority of surveys were completed using the paper option (N = 1,336; 93.2%). The rest were completed over the phone with one respondent opting for the online method. The data was entered into an SPSS dataset and steps were taken to ensure anonymity. According to the technical notes, the data had been checked extensively and found no bias in the sample relative to the population and therefore the "data should not be weighted" (ibid., p. 4). The noted response rate of 37% was therefore not a concern.

Appropriateness of Survey

Given the random sampling employed by the survey and its time-tested methodology and presentation and assessment of data (absence of sample bias), the 2011 YLT survey met the needs of this study in terms of facilitating generalizable claims relative to the Northern Irish population. The extensive scope of the survey moreover had items corresponding to the concepts in this study's hypothesis.

Measurement Construction

To operate this study's hypothesis and the conceptual entities therein survey items from the 2011 YLT were utilized. At the end of this process, one scale variable (from two ordinal variables) was constructed to act as the dependent variable and seven dummy variables were constructed as the independent variables. Admittedly, these measures were not optimal but the limitations of the 2011 YLT prevented better measures from being constructed. Nevertheless, steps were taken to ensure that the variables were as suitable as possible for this study's purpose. SPSS version 20 was employed for the statistical computations within this description.

Political Engagement -- Dependent Variable

The literature (see section *Defining Political Engagement*) argued that political engagement could be understood as the confluence of knowledge of politics and interest therein. The 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012a) contained items which measured each, KNOWPOL (Item 18) and POLITICS (Item 17) – see below for details:

Table 1: *2011 YLT Items 17 and 18 with Descriptive Statistics (Reported using Connolly's, 2007, framework)*

17. How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics? ✓	Descriptive Statistics for POLITICS (Item 17)
A great deal ☐ 1 Quite a lot ☐ 2 Some ☐ 3 Not very much ☐ 4 None at all ☐ 5 Don't know ☐ 6	Frequency: '1 – a great deal' (N = 80; 5.6%); '2' (N = 114; 7.9%); '3' (N = 348; 24.3%); '4' (N = 465; 32.4%); '5' (N = 412; 28.7%); '6' (N = 12; 0.8%); *missing (N = 3; 0.2%)*
18. How much do you feel you know about politics in Northern Ireland? ✓	Descriptive Statistics for KNOWPOL (Item 18)
A great deal ☐ 1 Quite a lot ☐ 2 Some ☐ 3 Not very much ☐ 4 None at all ☐ 5 Don't know ☐ 6	Frequency: '1 – a great deal' (N = 40; 2.8%); '2' (N = 180; 12.6%); '3' (N = 386; 26.9%); '4' (N = 584; 40.7%); '5' (N = 226; 15.8%); '6' (N = 15; 1.0%); *missing (N = 3; 0.2%)*

Source: (ARK, 2012c, p. 4)

Item 17 appeared to be validly constructed to measure interest in politics and likewise with item 18 and knowledge about politics and have been included in the survey since 2004 and therefore could be assumed to have been sufficiently validated and reliable. The only issue was that item 17 did not have the 'Northern Ireland' qualifier that item 18 did but for the purposes of this study, it was negligible.

Items 17 and 18 were reverse coded so that: $1 \rightarrow 5$; $2 \rightarrow 4$; $3 \rightarrow 3$; $4 \rightarrow 1$; $5 \rightarrow 1$; $6 \rightarrow$ missing. This was done so that the higher the observed values were, the more interested or knowledgeable the respondent reported being. 'Don't Know' was coded as missing because the value did not fit into the theoretical conception of engagement employed by this study and the observed responses of '6' ($N = 12$; 17) were low enough to omit.

The variable for political engagement was constructed by adding recoded POLITICS and KNOWLEDGE and dividing the sum by 2 to create a mean:

- Political Engagement = [POLITICS (recode) + KNOWLEDGE (recode)]/2

The variable was treated as a scale variable (valid cases, $N = 1408$; mean = 2.374; SD = 0.988; 95% CI [2.321, 2.425]). Because political engagement would act as the DV in a linear regression model it was standardized according to the framework offered by Connolly (2007) and reiterated by Vesey et al. (2011). The variable used by this study for political engagement to build its model had the following features:

Table 2: *Political Engagement Measurement (DV) Presentation*

Label	Political Engagement – standardized
Valid Cases	N = 1408
Missing Cases	N = 26 (1.8%)
Mean, SD	M < 0.00000005; 1 < SD < 1.00000005
Internal Reliability Co-efficient (Cronbach's α)	α = .833 (good – see Kline, 1999) – constructed by assessing: POLITICS (recode) & KNOWLEDGE (recode)
Normality	- Not normal according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov's Test for Normality (Z = 6.543; p < 0.0005). - Approximately normal (with a slight positive skew) when assessed by a review of the variable's histogram and Normal Q-Q plot (see Appendix A.). Also, the mean of political engagement (unstandardized) > 2*the SD of political engagement (unstandardized) and therefore passes another informal test of normality (see Indrayan, 2008)

The variable for political engagement did have a strong grounding in literature and the survey items used to operate it did seem to measure what was required. Furthermore, the variable was sufficiently normal enough to use in a linear regression model (see Vesey et al., 2011). The weakness of the variable is in its robustness and reliability because it is ultimately the combination of two ordinal variables but there was nothing to be done about this given the constraints of the study using an already completed survey. Nevertheless, the 'good' Cronbach's alpha value between the variables making the scale did suggest they were governed by an overlapping construct, which this study assumed to be political engagement. The study, given these observations, considered the variable valid, reliability and conforming to the assumptions of linear regression enough to be employed.

The Independent Variables

As mentioned in section *Measurement Construction*, the IV's were constructed from survey items to represent all predictor constructs in the hypothesis. These items were recoded into dummy variables given the nature of the 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012a) and the conditions to employ linear regression. The study paired concept to survey item to dummy variable (named for the '1' value). Outside of gender where 1 was coded as female because females outnumbered males, the one value was assigned to be the 'more likely to be politically engaged' group relative to theory. The process of creating these variables was: 1 – match survey item to concept; 2 – test correlation between DV and survey items; 3 – make dummy variables for significantly correlated survey items; ascertain of each dummy variable could significantly group the DV (assessed via independent T-tests).

Matching Survey Items to Concepts

Table 3: *Survey Item to Conceptual Predictor Pairing (Frequency of Responses Given)*[2]

Gender	Item 1: Are you (1) male or (2) female? – Nominal Male: 642, 44.8%; Female: 780, 54.4%; Missing = 12, 0.8%
Income	Item 12: How well off do you think your family is financially? – Ordinal[3] (valid N = 1414, 98.6%; missing N = 20, 1.4%) 1 – Not at all well off (4.0%); 2 – Not very well off (14.7%); 3 – Average (55.4%); 4 – Well off (20.3%); 5 – Very well off (1.0%) ---- 6 – Don't know (3.1%)
(Planned) Education Attainment	Item 8: What do you think you will be doing in two years time, in October 2013? – Nominal Full time uni/college: N = 718, 50.1%; Part time uni/college: N = 433, 30.2%; Work full time: N = 143; 10%; Work part time: N = 16; 1.1%; Unemployed: N = 12; 0.8%; On a training scheme: N = 51; 3.6%; Other: N = 23; 1.6%; Missing: N = 38; 2.6%
National Importance	Item 27: Some people feel very strongly about their national identity, that is, whether they feel British or Irish or something else. Other people say that their national identity is not important to them. How important is your national identity to you? – Ordinal (valid N = 1431, 99.8%; missing N = 3, 0.2%) 1 – Very important (25.3%); 2 – Quite important (31.0%); 3 – Neither/nor (21.5%); 4 – Not very important (13.2%); 5 – Not at all important (7.7%) ---- 6 – Don't know (0.9%)
Religious Importance	Item 25: Some people feel very strongly about their religious identity, that is, whether they are Catholic, Protestant or something else – even if they don't go to church. Other people say that their religious identity is not important to them. How important is religious identity to you? – Ordinal (Valid N = 1423, 99.2%; missing N = 11, 0.8%) 1 – Very important (18.3%); 2 – Quite important (25.6%); 3 – Neither/nor (19.0%); 4 – Not very important (13.0); 5 – Not at all important (15.2%) ---- 6 – I do not have a religious identity (8.1%)
Minority Ethnicity	Item 6: Do you consider yourself to be a member of a minority ethnic community? – Nominal Yes: N = 154; 10.7%; No: N = 1176%; Missing: N = 104; 7.3%
Desire to Stay (in NI)	Item 91: Thinking about the future, do you think that you yourself will stay in Northern Ireland, or do you think that you will leave at some point? Nominal -- *a review of the next question (item 92) made it clear that leaving for tourist purposes was outside of scope of this question.* Stay: N = 443, 30.9%; Leave: N = 677; 47.2%; Don't Know: N = 264, 18.4 %; Other: N = 26, 1.8%; Missing: N = 24, 1.7%

All the selected survey items (except item 6) met the 5% missing data threshold to avoid unmotivated bias (Pallant, 2010). Considering the observed missing percentage was only 7.3% and the survey data (ARK, 2012b) had been assessed and found not to need a weighting, the study moved forward without implementing alternations or 'cleaning'.

The decision to use items 1 and 12 for income and gender were easily made and the justification for doing so is clear. The other choices were guided by two factors: 1 – the data being derived from a survey and 2 – the age of the respondents. The respondents, thinking about their age, were still in compulsory secondary school; it was therefore decided that item 8 best captured respondents' attitudes toward their goals for educational attainment and the roles it will have in their lives. Similarly, the difference between being Indian and Polish was not of interest but whether or not a Polish saw himself as an ethnic community member was. Therefore, item 6 was used. Similar rationales were employed in selecting the other survey items.

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[2] For nominal variables, N and % are provided for each category. For ordinal, valid and missing N and % are stated, and then % are given for each category (per Connolly's, 2007, framework).
[3] The survey employed an opt-out value for their ordinal variables. Therefore, the value '6' is separated from the presented ranking values.

Testing for Correlation

After the items were selected, each was compared to the study's DV using Spearman's rho correlations. The purpose of doing this was not to make strong causal claims per se but rather to decide whether or not to carry the individual items further along the variable construction process. All correlations were weak ($-.3 \leq$ rho $\leq .3$) but statistically significant. Some of the findings (e.g. item 91 – rho = 0.062; p = 0.02) approached practical insignificance given the large sample size. Items 1, 25, and 27 did however clear the ±0.10 correlation co-efficient threshold (-0.150; -0.127; -0.208). Nevertheless, all items displayed and a significant relationship with the DV and were then recoded into dummy variables (see Appendix B. for full correlation results).

Constructing the Dummy Variables

All survey items having past the significant correlation threshold were re-coded into dummy variables. The study conflated the '1' and '0' grouping so that '1' represented values which the literature suggested were the more likely to be politically engaged (except in the case of gender where the literature is inconclusive). Values that were coded as 'missing' in the original survey were left as so. The new variables were named after the '1' group. The conflation process only coded values as '1' that made definitive statements in line with what the theory proposed. For example, Highton & Wolfinger (2001) and Jarvis Montoya & Mulvey (2005) suggested that going to university correlated to more political engagement. Therefore, only the values that overtly corresponded to going to university were coded as one. Regarding income, Solt (2008) and Finlay & Irwin (2004) suggested that people who were not well off saw politics as something outside of their control and were consequently reluctant to engage politically. The study therefore only coded values that clearly saw the respondent reporting herself as well off as '1.' According to this logic, the 'don't know' values associated with the selected ordinal variables were coded as '0' because in choosing this, the respondent had associated himself outside of the theoretically-defined predictor '1' group. Additionally, the nominal variables where the literature suggested that only value would see greater political engagement (e.g. item 91: '1' - planning to stay in NI) vis-a-vis the other values saw the former coded as '1' and the latter values coded as '0.' The coding went as follows:

Table 4: *Coding the Dummy Variables (IV's)*

Concept – Survey item	Variable	1	0
Gender – item 1	*being* Female	'2-*original coding*' Female *Frequency is same as item 1*	'1' – Male
Income – item 2	*being* Well off	'4' – well off '5' – very well off (N = 306, 21.3%)	'6' – don't know '1' to '3' – not at all well off to average (N = 1108, 77.3%)
Educational Attainment – item 8	*planning on* Going to uni.	'1' – going full time '2' – going part time (N = 1151, 80.3%)	All other values (N = 283, 19.7%)
Nationality Importance – item 27	*expressing* Nationality Importance	'1' – very important '2' – quite important (N = 808, 56.3%)	'6' – don't know '3' to '5' – neither/nor to not at all important (N = 623, 43.4%)
Religious Importance – item 25	*expressing* Religious Importance	See box above ↑ (N = 629, 43.9%)	See box above ↑ (N = 794, 55.4%)
Ethnic Minority – item 6	*reporting* Not *being in an* Ethnic Minority	'2' – no (N = 1176, 82.0%)	'1' – yes (affirmative to identifying oneself as 'a member of a minority ethnic community') (N = 154, 10.7%)
Desire to Stay in NI – Item 91	planning to Stay in NY	'1' – stay (N = 443, 30.9%)	All other values (N = 967, 67.4%)

Notes: The missing values for each of the new dummy variables are the same for the corresponding survey items.

The limitations of each facet or subconstruct of social connectedness being operated by a single dummy saw the study unable to construct a single aggregate scale for the governing construct.

Testing the Significance of the Dummy Variables (IV's)
Because the study engaged in a subjective process of conflating the '1' and '0' values, the study ran a series of independent t-tests (as the DV was scale and a mean) to ascertain if the new binary variables could significantly group the DV. The results showed that each IV or dummy variable was able to significantly group the DV (see Appendix C.). That being said, the observed mean differences between the '0' and '1' groups were small (e.g. going to uni. – '0 – not planning on going,' M = -.318; '1,' M = .075). Nevertheless, the observed p-values were highly significant and the study while acknowledging that the observed mean difference between the '0' and '1' groups might be approaching practical insignificance concluded that the t-test results met the criteria laid out to guide the dummy variable construction. The study therefore went forward with using each in the regression model addressing the governing hypothesis.

Suitableness of IV's for Linear Regression
As with the dependent variable, this study created independent variables that were less than ideal for the statistical computation planned. Nevertheless, the study took all possible measures to ensure that the dummy variables were as valid as possible while fitting broadly into the assumptions of linear regression modelling. The procedures described above spoke to this.

Procedure
The variables were placed into a multi-linear regression model. The independent variables would only be included in the final predictive model and corresponding results reporting if their co-efficients were significant. The analysis reported the model as whole and the individual predictive strength of each IV. Using data from the model, the model's avoidance of type 2 errors and corresponding generalizability to the population as a whole were assessed by computing β (type 2 error probability) and $1 - \beta$ (the model's statistical power). All results were reported as transparently as possible (following the framework offered by Connolly, 2007) with enough information and detail to insure conclusion validity or the "accuracy of a conclusion regarding the relationship between variables" (Vesey et al., 2011, p. 16) while still being parsimonious.

Results

Analysis
SPSS version 20 was used to construct the multi-linear regression model which tested this study's hypothesis. The model's statistical power $(1 - \beta)$ was then tested using G*Power version 3.1.5 (Faul et al., 2007 – hereafter un-cited) with data from the model.

Hypothesis Testing: The Linear Regression Model
Because the model (constructed using the multi-linear regression function in SPSS) was testing a single hypothesis, the predictor variables were entered simultaneously ('Enter' – SPSS) and both the model the coefficients for the individual IV's had their significance assessed without Bonferroni's Correction (Connolly, 2007) and therefore the significance threshold remained at p $\leq$ .05 for both. A 95% confidence interval was calculated for each unstandardized coefficient to assess the generalizability of the respective findings.

Presentation of the Model
The results of the model suggest that the predicator variables do significantly account for 10.7% of the DV's variance ($r^2 = 0.112$; adjusted $r^2 = 0.107$; p < 0.0005; F = 22.741; df = 7, 1260). Using G*Power, the observed effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.120$) and calculated using the adjusted r^2 value. The null hypothesis of the alternative hypothesis presented in section *Presentation of Hypothesis* could therefore be rejected with the caveat that the observed adjusted r^2 and corresponding Cohen's f^2 are weak and the findings might be approaching practical insignificance despite the observed p value. The model produced the following results of the included independent variables:

Table 5: *Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Selected Predictors of Political Engagement (standardized)*

IV	Unstandardized Co-efficient --B	B – Std. error	Standardized Co-efficient *Beta*	T	Sig. (p)	95% CI for B
Constant	-0.551	0.111		-4.946	<0.0005	[-.0769, -0.332]
Female	-0.361	0.055	-0.179	-6.612	<0.0005	[-0.468, -0.254]
Well-off	0.131	0.064	0.055	2.039	0.042	[0.005, 0.257]
Going to uni.	0.439	0.073	0.164	5.988	<0.0005	[0.295, 0.583]
Nat. Import.	0.317	0.058	0.156	5.500	<0.0005	[0.204, 0.430]
Rel. Import	0.141	0.057	0.069	2.449	0.014	[0.028, 0.253]
Not Ethnic Min.	0.230	0.086	0.072	2.681	0.007	[0.062, 0.399]
Stay in NI	-0.213	0.059	-0.098	-3.642	<0.0005	[-0.328, -0.098]

Model fit: see above for values of p, F and df

From the results, it was observed that all the predictors were significant and fit into the 95% confidence interval. Consequently, all of these variables were used in constructing a predictive model for the DV using the format of: y (DV-predicted) = y-intercept + B_1IV_1 + B_2IV_2…+ error where B = the unstandardized co-efficient and describes the gradient for each IV. The following model, therefore, was constructed to predict political engagement:

Table 6: *Predictive Model of Political Engagement*

Political Engagement (stand.) = -0.551 + -0.361X(female) + 0.131X(well-off) + 0.439X(planning on going to uni.) + 0.317X(nat. importance) + 0.141X(rel. importance) + 0.230X(not ethnic minority) + -0.213X(Stay in NI)   *Error (.950) was not included in the model per the framework of Connolly (2007).*

This study was also interested in assessing the relative strength of each predictor (IV) (see RQ2 in section *Presentation of Research Questions*). This was done using the standardized co-efficient or *beta* values. The strongest predictor was respondents' being male/not (-) being female (beta=-0.179), followed by planning on attending university (beta=0.164), expressing nationality importance (beta=0.156), not (-) staying in NI/planning to emigrate (beta = -0.098), not reporting being a part of an ethnic minority (beta=0.072), expressing religious importance (beta=0.069), and thinking of their family as well off (beta=0.055), respectively.

Power Considerations
Using G*Power version 3.1.5, a post hoc statistical power (1 – β) analysis of the model was "computed as a function of significance level *α* (entered as 0.05 but observed p was lower), sample size (N = 1434; 1268 of which were valid in the model and therefore used in the calculation), and population effect size (sample effect size – Cohen's f^2=0.120)[4]" (from Faul, Erdfelder & Lang, 2009, p. 1149 – values added). The test chosen was 'linear multiple regression…deviation from zero' given that the model included a "criterion variable (DV) *Y* and a set of *m* predictor variables" (ibid, p. 1155) where the predictors were not blocked and entered simultaneously in the testing of a single hypothesis. The probability of a type 2 error was computed to be negligent (β < .00000005). The statistical power of the model was observed to be approaching the limit of 1 (1 – β > .9999999). The very large sample size could have

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[4] Ideally, an estimation of the population effect size would have been more appropriate but the literature is lacking to a degree where estimating the population effect size was not possible. Instead, the observed sample effect size had to be used.

accounted for the observed power. Nevertheless, the model's observed β and 1- β values offered evidence that it had the ability to make generalizable claims vis-à-vis the population and that type 2 errors were sufficiently avoided.

Discussion

Remembering the exploratory nature of this study, the results of the study are discussed relative to informing further research into Northern Irish youth political engagement.

Hypothesis and Model
The model and the observed results which it produced did allow the study to accept its governing alternative hypothesis (see section *Presentation of Hypothesis*) that income, gender, planned educational attainment and different manifestations of social connectedness, operated as variables measuring its different aspects, significantly predicted reported political engagement of Northern Irish youth (r^2=0.112; adjusted r^2=0.107; p<0.0005; F=22.741; df=7, 1260). Given the observed value for effect size (Cohen's f^2=0.120), it might have been that the findings were statistically significant while approaching practical insignificance. Recognizing this, the study still assumed that the model did have value relative to the political engagement of Northern Issue youth question. The sample size was large and randomized and the 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012b) also appeared to mitigate sample bias. Given these observations, the tendency of social science to have lower thresholds for effect size (see Connolly, 2007) and the high power observed (close to 1), the study was comfortable generalizing the findings of the model to the general population and argue that a small amount, approximately 10% of political engagement among Northern Irish Youth could be explained by the concepts reflected in the models predictor variables.

Addressing the Individual Independent Variables
For the most part, the theoretical framework found in section *Literature Review* was reflected in the model's findings. Of the four differentiations of social connectedness, only 'stay in NI' had a negative predictive relationship with the dependent variable (B=0-.213; beta=-0.098); other than this area, the theory and results corresponded to each other (see sections *Connectedness as Defined by Religion and Nationality*; *Connectedness and Ethnicity*). The conclusion of the Institute of Conflict Research (2004) that nationality and association therewith had a positive relationship with political engagement among young Northern Irish people was echoed in this study. The unexpected negative association between 'stay in NI' and political engagement could be a product of the study's error in including it into the model as an operation of social connectedness, or perhaps, the finding is credible and subsequent research could investigate the issue. Assuming the latter as being true, an interesting question uncovered by the study's findings therefore would be why do these seeking to 'avoid' (see Black, 1998; 2012) Northern Ireland still find themselves more politically engaged than those who do not. Perhaps, these respondents, given their age, chose to leave not because of a lack of social connectedness but by a sense of curiosity and this curiosity in turn positively affected reported political engagement, but this study cannot support this notion and it would need to be researched further. Regarding income as a predictor, the study's findings matched those of Finlay & Irwin (2004) and indirectly, Scott & Smyth (2000), in that being well off positively associated with political engagement. This finding however was tempered by the observation that being well off was the weakest income predictor. What was interesting about this finding, nevertheless, was that it fit into the more global argument of Solt (2008) that being not well off or poor dissuades one from politically engaging. The literature regarding gender's role in political engagement was divergent and the articles that argued that males are more politically engaged than females (see Burns, 2007; Gallego, 2007; Norris, 2002) were reflected in the findings of this study. The study also was able to reproduce the observations of Highton & Wolfinger (2001) and Jarvis, Montoya & Mulvey (2005) that saw educational attainment (in this study qualified with 'planned') as a significant and strong predictor (2nd strongest in this study – see section *Presentation of the Model*) within the presented model.

Considering the Predictors of Political Engagement

This study had always been constrained the 2011 YLT's (ARK, 2012a) not having been constructed for the expressed purpose of this undertaking. Considering these constraints associated with using less the ideal measures and the highly significant (often $p \leq 0.01$) yet weak predictive (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.120$) results, the study was able to reach to possible conclusions about the actual predictors of political engagement among Northern Irish youth:

> 1. The predictors identified in this study's hypothesis could be used to substantially and significantly predict youth political engagement in NI if the measuring instrument were constructed for that purpose.
> And
> 2. The observed predictive weakness of the model (see section *Power Considerations*) meant that more qualitative and mixed-methods work (in line with Institute of Conflict Research, 2004; Finlay & Irwin, 2004) would be needed to conceptually uncover more predictors.

Unfortunately, the study did not have enough data to establish precedence between the two options but both were considered.

Improving the Model

Vesey et al. (2011) and Pallant (2010), as cited in the methods section of this report, argued that the assumptions of linear regression are best met when the variables in the model are scale and normally distributed while meeting other related assumptions. While this study has shown that the variables employed did satisfy these requirements in a broad manner and illustrated a small causal relationship, which was significant and powerful, the constraints of the 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012a) prevented the construction of 'optimal' variables for linear regression modelling. Ultimately, a scale variable lacking robustness was predicted with a series of dichotomous factors.

It is possible, therefore, for a researcher to take this study and operate the concepts found in its tested hypothesis into scale variables where a multitude of ordinal variables measure each and can be computed into mean scores. In fact, the only variable that would need to remain as categorical is gender. If this were to be done via an instrument constructed expressly for the purpose of measuring political engagement, it would be possible that the same predictors (at the conceptual level) in this study could have a higher effect size than what was observed. The theoretical support for gender (see section *Gender*), income (section *Income*), educational attainment (section *Educational Attainment*) and social connectedness (section *Social Connectedness*) as predictors of political engagement exists both a global connotation and specifically within Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the study has found the required predictors of engagement successfully but could not fully operate them given the secondary-data nature of its methodology. If such a robust effort were employed, it would be entirely possible that political engagement could be predicted with a better effect size than observed by this study using essentially the same predictors but having them better operated.

Finding New Variables

The study's effect size (just clearing the 0.10 'weak' threshold) led to an alternative assumption presented in section *Finding New Variables* that perhaps there were other predictors to be uncovered at the conceptual level. While the report has undertaken a somewhat extensive literature review, it could have been the case that it failed to uncover all the predictors. The aforementioned predictive weakness of the model spoke to this.

Fortunately, the literature that guided this study has provided a model by which to uncover these new predictive factors. Both the Institute of Conflict Research (2004) and Finlay & Irwin (2004) employed a mixed methods approach where a qualitative inquiry inquired predictors which were then measured quantitatively in the production of descriptive statistics (e.g. a survey item, ordinal variable measuring respondent knowledge of politics).

The hypothetical study would begin with the predictors employed by this study because they have been shown to significantly predict political engagement among Northern Irish youth within a model of high statistical power with a somewhat validated and reliable instrument. As

mentioned earlier, this new purpose-specific instrument would need to be improved. This proposed study would then engage in qualitative methods to find additional predictors at the conceptual level and operate these in their quantitative measuring instrument. A regression model could then be built including more predictors and further light could therefore be shed on the question of what predicts political engagement among the youth of Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

This study was an exploratory study using a secondary data source to explore political engagement among Northern Irish youth and the theory-grounded predictors thereof. The findings, although somewhat underwhelming as evidenced by the observed weak effect sizes, were successful in contributing to the conversation of assessing what drives young people in the six counties to be politically engaged and the findings could be used to drive further study. Additionally, the study, despite its noted limitations, has contributions and implications to the political youth question outside of Northern Ireland.

Limitations

This study had unavoidable issues that must be considered when reviewing its findings and implications. The survey was not designed for the purpose of measuring respondents' political engagement and the predictors thereof and therefore was not an ideal instrument. The employed measurements, essentially a poorly-constructed scale variable and a set of dummy variables, were therefore somewhat ill-suited to the study's stated purpose. The observed weak effect sizes conjoined with the large sample size presented another limitation because all the observed associations might have been practically insignificant or erroneous despite the observed statistical significance. Thus, the discussion and conclusion of this report can only be read in a circumspect and conservative manner. Ultimately, the study was constrained by these.

Contributions and Implications

The implications of this project and its findings fall into three areas: 1 – contributing to the Northern Irish youth political engagement question; 2 – contributing to the issue outside of Northern Ireland; and 3 – illuminating the need for surveys to be constructed robustly to facilitate sound quantitative secondary studies. These implications should be considered with the aforementioned limitations of the inquiry.

   The findings of this study as noted in the previous section contribute to the body of research that underpinned this inquiry. Namely, the predictor constructs established in past literature, gender, income, social connectedness, and educational attainment, have an empirical relationship with political engagement among Northern Irish youth. This means that future inquiries into the issue can begin with this baseline and extend from it. In the opinion of the researcher, the following questions, in light of this inquiry's findings, move to forefront in terms of being worthy for future inquiries:

- Why are Northern Irish youth who plan on leaving the country more politically engaged?
- Why are these youth planning on leaving? What categories do these factors fall into, economic, political, both?
- Does the greater observed strength of national importance as opposed to religious importance reflect a broader trend in the conflict?
- Why are males more engaged? What could be done to bridge this gap?

   The underpinning literature for this study was not confined to Northern Ireland and therefore this inquiry has implications that extend into the broader context. Solt (2008) was an instance of the poor being less engaged than others. This study has replicated that finding and it is probably

time for serious inquiry not only into its manifestation but also ways to promote engagement among low-income youth. As noted in the methods section, social connectedness was poorly operated due to the limitations presented by the 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012a). The four dummy variables being significantly associated with political engagement though reinforces the need for future research to fully explore this relationship with better instruments and variables.

The 2011 YLT (ARK, 2012a) as noted various times was not constructed with this study and its purpose in mind. This reality led to several issues lessening the robustness. Obviously, it would not be prudent for the operators of large-scale surveys to consider the goals and aims of every researcher and their prospective projects but the design. Using the interest in politics construct as an example, the designers of the YLT could have included more items operating the construct to facilitate the construction of a proper aggregate scale variable operating the construct. The overarching point is that some might wish to go further than mere descriptive statistics in large-scale surveys such as the YLT (its 2011 version, at least) are not constructed to easily facilitate this. On the other hand, the nature of the YLT is to concurrently serve several different purposes and needs so there could be practicality factors working against this proposed revision of the YLT's construction.

In sum, this report was constructed to explore the political engagement among Northern Irish youth and, despite its drawbacks, has added to the conversation.

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