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“It Will Do No More than Annoy the Protestants”: The 1991 Northern Ireland Census and the Irish Language

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ABSTRACT

Making use of archival sources, this article reconstructs the decision-making process behind the addition of an Irish language question to the 1991 Northern Ireland census. It highlights a distinctive feature of the case: whereas such decisions usually result from state-society interactions, the question was rather suggested by the Irish government, using the role granted to it by the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement to act as a kin state to promote the cultural interests of nationalists in Northern Ireland. Officials in Belfast were initially reluctant to accede to this request, though feared refusal might result in a repeat of nationalist boycotts of previous censuses. Ultimately, the precedent set by language questions employed in Wales and Scotland made exclusion hard to justify and officials reluctantly agreed to the question, coming to see the precedent as a useful argument with which to fend off potential unionist opposition, which they feared might have resulted in a rival boycott. The inclusion of the question has subsequently had significant consequences for political claims-making about the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Disputes about the status of the Irish language have been a recurrent feature of politics in post-settlement Northern Ireland. During the 2007 to 2011 session of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) vetoed an Irish Language Act and Sinn Féin responding by boycotting meetings of the executive.¹ For 3 years after Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness resigned as deputy First Minister in January 2017, Northern Ireland was without devolved government. While the immediate prompt for McGuinness’s resignation was a scandal about a green energy scheme that involved the First Minister, Arlene Foster of the DUP, his resignation letter also cited the DUP’s “negative attitude to nationalism and to the Irish identity and culture.”² Since the Assembly’s power-sharing arrangements require a cross-community executive, McGuinness’s resignation triggered its collapse. Sinn Féin’s campaign for the resulting 2017 election highlighted the DUP’s failure to agree to an Irish Language Act,³ and this proved to be a major sticking point in negotiations between the parties over the reestablishment of power-sharing.⁴

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Recognition of Irish has become an important symbolic issue. While not used in daily life by more than a small proportion of the population, the language is associated with Irish national identity in the North, such that “support for and/or knowledge of the Irish language has been one of the most unambiguous indicators of membership of the Catholic and broadly Irish nationalist community.” While Irish was historically spoken and promoted not only by Catholics but also by some Protestants – a tradition that has been revived in recent initiatives to teach the language in places such as East Belfast – for many Protestants and unionists, “this association with their political opponents has imbued the language with an alien and threatening meaning.”⁵ Tonge and Evans note the degree of political polarization over recognition of Irish, with 84% of Sinn Féin voters but only 10% of DUP voters supporting an Irish Language Act, according to a 2017 election survey.⁶

While this polarization has prevented the adoption of legislation giving Irish equal legal status to English, the language does enjoy some forms of recognition. Irish can be studied at some schools as part of the statutory curriculum, and the state funds Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, an organization promoting and facilitating the delivery of Irish-medium education. Irish-language street signs are also a common sight in many towns and cities across Northern Ireland. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which established the Stormont power-sharing institutions, recognizes “the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.” The 2006 St Andrews Agreement, which restored power-sharing after a period of suspension, stated that “[t]he Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.” In 2001, meanwhile, the UK ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, designating Irish as one of the languages to which its commitments apply.⁷ The ‘New Decade, New Approach’ agreement, which in January 2020 restored the Stormont executive, recommitments the parties to legislation providing official recognition of Irish.⁸

A different form of recognition came in 1991, when a question about Irish was included in the census for the first time since Northern Ireland’s creation in 1921. Census questions about aspects of group identity such as ethnicity, religion and language are inherently political, not simply reflecting preexisting social realities but helping to construct and officialize them. The decision to include a language question or category, usually resulting from state-society interactions facilitated through lobbying or formal consultations, confers both symbolic recognition on that language and enables certain claims to be made for resources and entitlements. Curtis argues that “[w]hen incorporated into administrative policy and adopted as common sense, the results of census making shape trajectories of social development. They provide resources that sustain or run counter to political projects.”⁹ Especially in deeply divided societies, then, the census is not merely a technical exercise, but one which various social actors attempt to shape in pursuit of political interests.¹⁰

This article starts from the premise that we should take seriously the inclusion of language questions in the census. While a less significant form of recognition than an Irish

Language Act – which remains elusive – the introduction of an Irish language question in Northern Ireland’s census three decades ago is an important, if under-appreciated, element in the history of the language’s official recognition. Not only did the question offer a form of recognition in its own right, it also facilitated the production of statistics that have proved vital for political claims-making. How did policy-makers come to introduce the question, and why did they do so in 1991, then? To answer these questions, I make use of declassified government files from the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and the National Archives (TNA) alongside contemporary newspaper coverage, which allow us to understand the actors and interests involved, and to reconstruct policy-making deliberations.

The significance of census language questions

It is by now well established in the literature that censuses and other statistical exercises are not simply technical exercises that enumerate preexisting social facts, but that they play a role in constructing and officializing those realities. Statistics are, as Urla puts it, “technologies of truth production.”¹¹ This is especially apparent when we consider the census as “an instrument for forging ethnic, religious, and national identities.”¹² The enumeration of identities can be both symbolically and instrumentally significant, and this is true for questions about language as much as it is questions about ethnicity or religion. Census questions about languages confer a form of recognition but they also result in the production of statistics that can underpin policies such as service provision in minority languages, funding allocations for language education, the setting of quotas, and recognition of the rights of linguistic minorities that meet certain population thresholds.¹³ Importantly, these statistics are not solely used in the implementation of preexisting language policies, but can also shape those policies or be used to justify new ones.

Some accounts of the relationship between the census and identities emphasize the power of the state to shape those identities, resulting from its ability to determine categories of enumeration.¹⁴ However, in democratic contexts there is often significant scope for bottom-up engagement, activism and mobilization in relation to the census, which might variously seek to shape the inclusion of questions and their design, influence people’s responses to the census, and use results to agitate for policy action. As Urla notes, then, while official statistics often serve state interests, “minorities may also turn to statistics as a means of *contesting* state power and hegemonic constructions of social reality.”¹⁵

Where the state collects data on languages, this can be because it is necessary to determine whether the speakers of a minority language meet the population threshold set for the state to be required to provide services in that language.¹⁶ Beyond specific population-based entitlements in relation to language rights, both state and grassroots actors have attempted to shape census questions and their results for more symbolic reasons. Davé, for instance, demonstrates how the design of the language question in Kazakhstan’s first post-Soviet census suggested that policy-makers wanted to “to demonstrate the ‘steady success’ of [their] ethno-linguistic policies” – namely apparent growth in knowledge of the state language, Kazakh.¹⁷ In Scotland, meanwhile, the

addition of a Scots language question in the 2011 census came after two decades of sustained efforts by language activists, coinciding with the rise to power of the Scottish National Party, which seeks both independence for Scotland and to nurture the Scots language.¹⁸

Interaction between state and social actors continues to be relevant beyond the design of the census. Once a question or category's inclusion has been secured, grassroots activism often moves on to efforts to mobilize populations and influence their answers, as 'ethnic entrepreneurs' seek to maximize a group's share of the recorded population. In Croatia, for instance, Serb minority mobilization has been incentivized by the link between census results and language rights at the local level – playing out in debates about the use of Cyrillic script in the eastern city of Vukovar in particular – and in Macedonia, a population threshold of 20 per cent for the official recognition of minority languages at the local level has driven census mobilization.¹⁹ Once statistics are available, linguistic minorities have used them as the basis for political claims-making. For example, Basque nationalist language organizations have used ways of categorizing and visualizing data on speakers of Basque to project an image of the language as at risk and come to see statistics as a vital part of language revitalization efforts.²⁰ In Québec too, census results have been used to warn about the threat posed by creeping Canadian Anglicization.²¹ In Scotland, meanwhile, the significance of results from the 2011 census, showing that almost a third of the population claimed the ability to speak Scots, was interpreted in quite different ways by statistical officials on the one hand and language activists on the other.²²

The context of the 1991 census

Northern Ireland's census has, since partition in 1921, been the subject of considerable political interest, stemming from the use of religion data from the 1911 census in the determination of the polity's borders.²³ The process of census-taking was relatively uncontroversial for the following half-century but with the onset of the Troubles, it became the target of mobilization against the state. In 1971, numerous priests, teachers, politicians and other public figures declined to complete their census forms in protest against the unequal treatment of Catholics by the judicial system.²⁴ In 1981, a more sustained republican boycott took place in the context of the hunger strike at HM Prison Maze/Long Kesh. Some campaigners called for a complete boycott as a form of civil disobedience, while others urged non-completion of the religion question.²⁵ Senior members of the republican movement also suggested that the census might be a vehicle for intelligence gathering on the part of the British state, and should thus be boycotted on those grounds.²⁶ While the overall rate of under-enumeration was not thought to be especially large in either 1971 or 1981, many refused to answer the religion question; the proportion of the population for whom religious affiliation was missing was 9.4% in 1971 and 18.5% in 1981,²⁷ leading Anderson and Shuttleworth to remark that the religion data for 1981 "is virtually unusable."²⁸

While religion questions have been included on every census in what became Northern Ireland since 1861 (with the exception of the 1966 exercise, which fell outside the regular decennial pattern), the last time a question about Irish had been asked prior

to 1991 was in 1911.²⁹ Its omission after this date needs to be seen in the context of official attitudes toward the language post-partition. As McMonagle and McDermott note, “[t]he Free State established Irish as the first official language of the nation, while Irish became *lingua non grata* in Northern Ireland.”³⁰ The lack of a language question does not appear to have been the subject of debate for much of the twentieth century; neither did it figure amongst the prominently cited reasons for the 1971 and 1981 boycotts, although at an anti-census demonstration in Derry in 1981, a speaker from the local H-Block/Armagh Action Committee did claim that “because the census form does not ask us whether we speak Irish, it insults our culture, and it appears that the Irish language is unconstitutional.”³¹

During the 1980s, republicans started to regard Irish as an important symbolic element in their ‘armed struggle.’³² Prisoners in Long Kesh had taught themselves the language and subsequently played a part in its broader revival in Northern Ireland.³³ In the decade between the 1981 and 1991 censuses, a number of policy developments had also slowly started to confer limited official recognition. For example, Mac Giolla Chríost notes that in 1987, the government issued its first significant publication on the language and when a statutory curriculum was introduced in 1989, Irish was incorporated as an optional language that schools could offer.³⁴ A law banning Irish-language street signs, adopted in the 1940s, was repealed in 1995, but already by the 1980s a number of organizations had started installing them.³⁵ Attitudes to the language’s use in broadcasting also started to change, exemplified by the production of Irish-language content for BBC radio starting in 1981 and television in 1991.³⁶

The census language question decision

Policy changes might have signaled a slowly changing attitude to the Irish language in government, but the impetus for adding the question to the 1991 census did not come from the Census Office or indeed any part of the British state; neither did it result from lobbying by language activists. Rather, it was the Irish government that suggested the question, using its consultative role granted by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, signed in November 1985. A proposal was made by the Irish government at the second meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, held in January 1986, to include a question on Irish language proficiency in Northern Ireland’s 1991 census, amongst a series of four recommendations relating to the language made in a paper, intended to advance the cultural rights of Irish nationalists as envisaged by the Agreement.³⁷ According to the British side, the Irish government was “concerned that organisations such as Sinn Féin, which vigorously promote its use, are exploiting the emotions which the language arouses,” and viewed greater official recognition of the language as having the potential to undermine this ‘exploitation.’³⁸

The draft of a note prepared for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Tom King, making recommendations for how the British side should respond, conceded that, “[g]iven the Government’s limited knowledge of the number of Irish speakers, it is difficult to argue against [the census] suggestion on broad political grounds.” It also noted, however, that the Northern Ireland Department of Education was of the belief that changes in interest in learning Irish “require a more sensitive monitor than the

decennial Census.” The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) was reported as wanting to keep the census as short as possible for cost and efficiency reasons, and as being concerned about the impact of an Irish language question on the overall response rate. The DFP had recommended that a better way to collect the data was through the Continuous Household Survey (CHS), suggesting that a question could be added from January 1987.³⁹ When the Intergovernmental Conference returned to the issue in June 1986, the British side confirmed that “a question about knowledge of the language would be included in the 1987 Continuous Household Survey and consideration would be given to including a question in the 1991 Census.”⁴⁰

A series of questions was duly added to the education section of the CHS and asked of all participants aged 16 to 69. Rather than solely Irish, the instrument was designed to assess respondents’ knowledge of all nine official European Community languages. It did this through asking about several aspects of linguistic knowledge: familiarity with the language; interest in further knowledge; opinion on the language’s importance; formal/informal study of the language; formal educational qualifications in the language; self-assessed understanding, speaking, reading and writing ability; and use of the language at home. Knowledge and use at home was also recorded from parents of three- to 15-year-olds. The results were first reported in a paper published by the DFP’s Policy Planning and Research Unit (PPRU) in August 1988, showing that 11% of 16- to 69-year-olds (but 26% of Catholics) had some knowledge of Irish. For those reporting some knowledge of the language, a composite measure combining understanding, speaking, reading and writing ability showed 34% had elementary ability and 5% full ability (with a large proportion reporting no or unknown ability).⁴¹

Planning for the 1991 census had started before the PPRU paper was available, however. As early as March 1986, the Registrar General, Robert McMurray, had written to Northern Ireland permanent secretaries to seek their views on topics for potential inclusion.⁴² In response to a request for advice on McMurray’s letter, an official explained the PPRU’s opposition to inclusion of an Irish language question in the census, highlighting the need to prioritize questions more important from a planning perspective, the difficulty of framing a language question, and its likely political sensitivity.⁴³ Public bodies were also consulted, and reportedly did not raise the possibility of the addition of a question on Irish.⁴⁴ The one part of government that appeared more keen was the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), where an internal call for comments on McMurray’s request solicited some support for the idea.⁴⁵

In June 1987, Maurice Hayes, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), sought the agreement of his minister and the Secretary of State for a census to go ahead in 1991,⁴⁶ and this was confirmed to the House of Commons by King in November 1987.⁴⁷ With the census now confirmed for 1991, planning activity stepped up. In May 1988, Alan Elliott, Hayes’s successor at the DHSS, wrote to his fellow permanent secretaries to report on the outcome of the Census Committee’s discussions, which had considered the responses to McMurray’s request. Elliott noted that it was the Committee’s view that a question on Irish should not be included. Reporting that the consensus amongst departments following the issue being raised at the Intergovernmental Conference was against using the census to gauge knowledge of the language, he wrote: “It seems that on the evidence of the recent Continuous Household

Survey the case now is no stronger than before and I would find it hard to argue with the Committee view.” Elliott recognized that “this is a matter of some delicacy” and sought views both on the recommendation and how to present it to ministers.⁴⁸ The responses received were generally, though not uniformly, supportive of excluding the question.⁴⁹ However, the NIO favored its inclusion. In a memo submitted to the Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) at the start of June, Elliott summarized the situation as follows:

NI Departments have strongly endorsed the view of the Census Committee that a question on the use of the Irish language should be excluded. NIO, on the other hand, do not find the case against such a question entirely persuasive, and suggest that the evidence points fairly heavily in favour of its inclusion. If the arguments are still considered to remain strong, however, NIO accepts that we may have a good defence in the data available from the Continuous Household Survey, which should and can be published in advance of the Census announcement.⁵⁰

Opinion was starting to shift in favor of including the question. Ahead of the PCC meeting, for instance, Tony McCusker of the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU) wrote to Kenneth Bloomfield, head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, to express his view that while there were sensitivities and “professional reservations” involved, the census should include an Irish language question.⁵¹ After the PCC had met on 8 June, Elliott wrote to ministers about the proposed content of the census: “It is now for decision whether Northern Ireland should have an Irish language question.”⁵² Elliott noted that this was “[t]he most sensitive issue to be resolved” and that “[u]nless handled with great care, it could create a major row and put at risk the entire Census operation.” His submission noted that the case for including the question was weak from “the administrative and professional standpoint,” and that no department or public body had expressed a need for it, but that the question could be symbolically important to nationalists. Arguing that both inclusion and exclusion carried risks, Elliott asserted that it was “important to get it right first time to avoid provoking a political chain reaction which might ultimately lead to abandonment of the Census plans.” He also relayed NIO advice, which noted that “now that the issue has been raised in public, and given that there will be a language question in Scotland and Wales, it is almost impossible not to have one in Northern Ireland without seeming deliberately insensitive to Irish culture.” Elliott concluded:

Our general advice is that on balance the inclusion of a language question is to be preferred, provided it does not prejudice the possibility of a successful Census. The key issue for Ministers therefore is their assessment of the downside risks of including the question, and whether these are outweighed by the risks the other way if it is not included.

Tom King’s private secretary subsequently wrote that King “believes that a voluntary question on Irish in the 1991 census is fine and that its omission, when Welsh and Gaelic are in the other census’ [*sic*] would be very strange.”⁵³ Responding, McMurray pointed out that the question could only be included on a *compulsory* basis, with a £400 fine for non-completion, unless legislation amending the Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 was passed to allow for its inclusion as a voluntary question, and that “to legislate for that specific purpose would highlight the question even more, and could be prejudicial to a successful Census.”⁵⁴ Bloomfield subsequently wrote to King’s private secretary

This question is for all persons aged 3 or over (born before 22 April 1988)	
14 Irish language	<div>Can speak Irish <input type="checkbox"/> 1</div> <div>Can read Irish <input type="checkbox"/> 2</div> <div>Can write Irish <input type="checkbox"/> 3</div> <div>Do not know Irish <input type="checkbox"/> 0</div>
Can you speak, read or write Irish? Please tick the appropriate box(es).	

Figure 1. Irish language question, 1991 Northern Ireland census.

in early July 1988, arguing that there was a need for a ministerial meeting to discuss the matter in the light of McMurray's advice, concern about the inclusion of the question from junior minister Brian Mawhinney, and the forthcoming publication of the PPRU occasional paper reporting the language results from the 1987 CHS.⁵⁵ By this point, a final draft of the PPRU paper was available, and officials were keen to publish it before the publication of the White Paper covering plans for the census in Great Britain, which was due on 19 July, believing that it would "prepare the ground for the announcement of the inclusion of the question and indicate the extent of interest in Irish, particularly within the minority population, which can be further explored through a Census question."⁵⁶

In the end, the publication of the PPRU paper was pushed back to 9 August 1988, with a press release about the census following on 18 August.⁵⁷ Ironically, given concerns about the possible public reaction to the inclusion of the Irish language question, the announcement of the census plans received scant media attention. A subsequent submission to ministers by Elliott noted that the only exception was an *Irish News* article two days after the announcement,⁵⁸ reporting the news matter-of-factly and very briefly.⁵⁹ That a decision had been made to include the question was confirmed by Under-Secretary of State Richard Needham in a written answer to a parliamentary question in February 1989,⁶⁰ and in May 1989, a paper outlining developments since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement also noted its inclusion.⁶¹

With the question now confirmed and announced, it was deemed important to test its public acceptability and identify whether it would have an impact on the overall success of the census.⁶² When the census test was undertaken on 4 June 1989, the Irish language question was reportedly "badly answered." According to Elliott, writing to ministers in December, "the question was one to which a substantial number of respondents (apparently from both sides of the community, although more notably in Unionist areas) expressed objection." However, the question did not have the effect of prompting refusal to participate in the test.⁶³ In response to Elliott's report, junior minister Lord Skelmersdale's private secretary noted that Skelmersdale "wishes to register his concern about the Irish language question," that "whilst he recognises the symbolic importance of the question to the Roman Catholic community, (and the Irish) he believes that it will do no more than annoy the Protestants" and that he would prefer to re-open the matter if the government had not already committed to the question's inclusion.⁶⁴

It was after much debate, then, that the Census Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1990 were made on 29 June 1990, setting out the questionnaire to be used, including question 14 on the Irish language (Figure 1).

Another significant task ahead of enumeration was publicizing the census. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, William Thornton, stressed the importance of this in August 1989, writing that “[a]lmost every week in the course of our work we are reminded of the problem of non-enumeration in the 1981 Census.” Thornton suggested that to maximize enumeration, “careful consideration should be given to either overt or covert approaches being made to the political parties and to other groups who can influence the behaviour of large numbers of the public.”⁶⁵ The Registrar General responded by giving assurances that a publicity strategy would be developed during 1990.⁶⁶ The strategy was subsequently fleshed out, with both overt and covert elements, as Jeremy Harbison, of the DHSS, suggested in October 1990: “The first would be the normal overt publicity that surrounds the run-up to any census. The second would be a more covert approach which might involve enlisting the help of key persons and organisations in the community in getting the Census message across.”⁶⁷ In February 1991, this exercise was put into action, with letters being sent by the Registrar General to key figures, including council chief executives, church leaders, newspaper editors and MPs from the “constitutional parties” (i.e., excluding Sinn Féin).⁶⁸ The decision to exclude Sinn Féin was the subject of some debate amongst officials, but the approach was judged to meet the objectives of drawing attention to the importance of the census while maintaining “consistency of approach to Sinn Féin,”⁶⁹ following issuance of a revised ‘access to government’ circular in late 1990 specifying that the party’s MPs should not routinely receive departmental publications or documents.⁷⁰ The letters highlighted the value of the census for planning of public services and allocation of resources, and stressed the confidentiality of responses. Publicity materials were also displayed in public places such as libraries, and a media campaign included newspaper, television, radio and billboard adverts.⁷¹

The question of demand

A key challenge with all censuses is balancing the breadth of data collected and the length of the form to be completed. Early in the planning process, the Registrar General, in writing to permanent secretaries to seek their views, highlighted that while it was not yet known how many questions could be included, the decision “must of course have regard to cost and the need to avoid swamping the public with too many questions.”⁷² Echoing advice from the PPRU, the DFP Permanent Secretary’s response highlighted the relevance of this to the possibility of a language question:

given that only a limited number of questions can be asked in the Census, priority must be given to questions which can provide information necessary or useful in the planning of services. Furthermore, the questions asked should apply to a reasonably large fraction of the population. An Irish language question would not provide planning information and would apply to only 1-2% of the population.⁷³

Alan Elliott’s submission to ministers of June 1988 expanded on this theme, noting that “there are no communities in Northern Ireland using Irish in every-day life” and that the CHS results “suggest that only about 4 per cent of the population have any fluency in the language, and 10.9 per cent regard it as desirable to increase their knowledge.” He also wrote: “There has been little express demand locally for an Irish

language question, apart from a request by Councillor Eddie McGrady MP, made on behalf of Glór na nGael ('Voice of the Irish') who wanted questions on Irish and other lesser used Celtic languages included." Elliott did, however, note that "this may fairly be seen as representing a general nationalist wish for the inclusion of a question on the Irish language."⁷⁴ CCRU's Tony McCusker, responding to a draft of Elliott's submission, argued that it "may be the case" that there was little express local demand, "but the lobby for greater recognition of the Irish language has been general but nevertheless sustained."⁷⁵

The NIO was again somewhat of an outlier here. In March 1986, official Peter Bell had written that "clearly, the numbers of native Irish speakers must be limited, a significant number must be [*sic*] now have achieved some degree of fluency... I am thinking not so much of the enthusiasm for the language in HMP Maze, as the Shaws Road Gaeltacht, and such manifestations as Bunscoil Ghaeltacht [*sic*]." While Bell noted that "the subject is in some circles an emotive one," he argued that this "might be said to make it all the more desirable that we had all the hard facts to hand."⁷⁶

Beyond the issue of whether there was a preexisting demand or need, an additional concern was that if asked, the question might generate its own demands. One of the reasons for Brian Mawhinney's reservations, for example, concerned expectations that might follow from the results. Noting that "some 40% of the responses to the Consultative Document [on education reform] specifically referred to the teaching of Irish and its place in the curriculum," Mawhinney argued that "departure from previous practice, which the inclusion of a question on the Irish language would represent, could, therefore, be interpreted variously and could raise expectations which, in the event, we may not be able to fulfil."⁷⁷ Elliott, meanwhile, had argued that while inclusion could help promote nationalist co-operation with the census, "Sinn Féin might choose to exploit [the question] by encouraging people to stretch their answers to maximise the figures," and that should such "inflated figures about knowledge of the language... result, Ministers would come under increased pressure to take more measures in respect of the Irish language."⁷⁸

Once inclusion was agreed, officials were keen to manage these expectations. A draft question-and-answer document intended to accompany the August 1988 census press release focuses heavily on the Irish language question. It explained that the information was necessary to "provide a firmer basis for the development of policy in the future towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland," but the answer to a question about whether the data would be used to plan teaching of Irish was simply: "No."⁷⁹ The Department of Education Permanent Secretary, John Parkes, responded to this draft by suggesting that "I do not think the answer 'no' is very plausible. I suggest 'it will be a relevant factor.'"⁸⁰

The boycott threat(s)

Beyond issues of demand, one of the main considerations that shaped officials' thinking about the question was a legacy of the 1971 and 1981 census boycotts. These meant that reliable statistics from the census – particularly on religious affiliation – had not been available since 1961, and so officials saw it as especially important to avoid a

repeat in 1991. The potential threat was not only that by failing to include an Irish language question, a further nationalist boycott might be provoked, but also that *inclusion* of such a question might have the potential to provoke a *unionist* boycott – as hinted at by Skelmersdale's concern not to "annoy the Protestants."

Concern about the possibility of a boycott was expressed early in the census's planning. Responding to the Registrar General's call for views on topics for inclusion and arguing against the addition of the question, DFP Permanent Secretary George Quigley argued that "the 1981 census, which contained no sensitive questions, was seriously affected by protest and boycott. It would be unwise to risk similar, or possibly worse, problems with the 1991 Census in order to include a sensitive but inessential question."⁸¹ Later, after the possibility of adding the question had been discussed by the PCC, David Fell, the Department of Economic Development's Permanent Secretary, wrote to Alan Elliott with comments on his draft submission to ministers. Fell noted that "we would be concerned lest any section of the community decided to boycott the religion question simply because of its reaction to the Irish Language issue" and that the information from the religion question was vital for the effective monitoring of employment equality, asking for this to be brought to the attention of ministers.⁸²

Elliott's eventual submission to ministers noted these concerns about a possible boycott:

Clearly, if the question is not to be included, there will have to be a very good reason for not doing so. Otherwise it will appear that the cultural values and aspirations of the minority are being neglected. This in turn could lead to a boycott of the Census by the Nationalist community.

Acknowledging that including the question might encourage nationalist co-operation with the census, Elliott nonetheless argued that there were also risks to inclusion:

But the risk of a boycott is by no means one-sided. There is also a real risk that inclusion would trigger strong reaction in the Unionist camp, who would represent this as further evidence of the Anglo-Irish process at work, and the loyalist extremes could call for non-co-operation in the Census.

Elliott went on to recall the 1981 boycott and the problems that it posed for the accuracy of the results, and consequently for government planning. He argued that "[i]t would compound the problem if abstention by either side on the Irish language issue led in turn to boycott of the religion question, in view of its central importance to monitoring equality of employment opportunity." The seriousness with which the possibility of a boycott was treated is clear from Elliott's conclusion that getting the decision wrong might ultimately lead to the abandonment of the whole census operation.⁸³ More convinced supporters of including the question also acknowledged the possibility of a unionist boycott. For instance, Tony McCusker's communication to Kenneth Bloomfield for consideration by the PCC noted the prospect of a unionist boycott, though in less apocalyptic terms than Elliott: "The reaction of the Unionist population is important and there will undoubtedly be those who will see an Anglo-Irish element"; though he also noted that he "would not however over-estimate the potential for a Unionist boycott on such a narrow area."⁸⁴

Fear of a unionist boycott of the census should be seen in the context of broader unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which had manifested in large public

protests starting in late 1985 and the establishment of the loyalist paramilitary organization Ulster Resistance in 1986,⁸⁵ hence Elliott and McCusker's comments about the Anglo-Irish aspect. It is notable how the draft question-and-answer document accompanying the press release addresses the issue of the Irish government's involvement. The document includes the question "Have the Irish, through the Inter Governmental Conference, asked for the inclusion of the question?," to which the answer proposed is:

The Inter Governmental Conference has discussed the position of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. At the Conference meeting on 17 June 1986 the British side indicated a number of specific areas for possible future development, including ascertaining more precisely the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland.⁸⁶

In presenting the process this way, the document avoided confirming that it was indeed the Irish government that had initially suggested the census question, in its paper of January 1986 – presumably with the intention of diffusing potential unionist objections to this kin state role.

As noted earlier, the question was included in the June 1989 census test, and was reportedly poorly answered, with a significant number of participants, particularly in unionist areas, objecting. Elliott argued that this was indicative of "antipathy which, although it did not extend in the circumstances of the Census test to a refusal to participate further, could be exploited in the event of a concerted campaign against the Census for other reasons."⁸⁷

The risk of provoking a boycott through drawing political attention to the census also informed decisions about the covert publicity campaign. Part of the rationale for excluding Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin councilors from the list of figures to be written to by the Registrar General, for example, was that "this could merely serve to provoke the Unionists and give opportunity for Sinn Féin to exploit the position." Explaining the decision to the Secretary of State, Under-Secretary of State Jeremy Hanley wrote that "[t]here is bound to be sensitivity with the Unionists over the Irish question but the Registrar General writing to Sinn Féin Councillors or Mr Adams would merely fan the fires."⁸⁸ Indeed, at one stage, officials considered not involving any politicians, fearful that it "could prove to be more damaging than helpful."⁸⁹

The Wales and Scotland comparison

As highlighted by the discussion of the NIO's position above, the fact that questions about Welsh and Scottish Gaelic were included in the censuses of Wales and Scotland posed significant problems for those arguing against the addition of a question on Irish in Northern Ireland. A question about Gaelic had been asked in Scotland since 1881, and in Wales a question about whether people spoke Welsh, English or both was added in 1891 (becoming a question solely about Welsh in 1991).⁹⁰ While not mentioning these precedents in relation to the census, the Irish government's paper to the Intergovernmental Conference had made more general reference to policy toward the use of Welsh, referring to the Welsh Language Act 1967 as the "appropriate legal model."⁹¹ A letter from the Central Secretariat to the DFP on 15 January 1986 noted that while the initial reaction was that the question was not acceptable, the NIO "have now told us that they understand there has been a precedent for a question on language in a

previous Census – in Wales and possibly in Scotland. This might make our position more difficult to defend and we should re-examine our advice.”⁹² NIO official Peter Bell’s advice to a colleague in March 1986 was that “you may wish to consider – if only to reject – the merits of including a question, along the lines of those in Scotland and Wales, on the knowledge of Gaelic in Northern Ireland.”⁹³ Another NIO official wrote that “I have found it hard totally to reject the Irish request that we include a question to find out how many people profess to speak Irish. I sympathize with DFP’s objections, but on general political grounds, with the examples of Scotland and Wales to argue against us, I believe that there is a case for accepting this, perhaps after further consideration.”⁹⁴ Later in the census planning process, Tony McCusker of the CCRU, in arguing that the question should be considered, wrote that “[c]omparison with Scotland and Wales is inevitable.”⁹⁵

The British government, including officials in Belfast, were nonetheless keen to counter the argument that the recognition of Irish in Northern Ireland was analogous to the situation of Welsh and Scottish Gaelic in Wales and Scotland respectively. A note prepared for Tom King, responding to the Irish government’s proposals, argued that whereas Welsh was a first language for many in Wales, in Northern Ireland there were no native Irish speakers. In relation to the conduct of official business in Welsh on demand, it noted that such “arrangements flow from the widespread use of Welsh as a language of daily life. This is not the case with Irish in Northern Ireland. We therefore believe that it would not be appropriate to grant Irish the parity of esteem which Welsh enjoys.”⁹⁶ This type of argument was echoed specifically in relation to the census. Unlike Alan Elliott’s final submission to ministers, recommending the inclusion of an Irish language question on balance, an earlier draft advised against inclusion of the question and noted in relation to the comparison with Wales and Scotland that:

it must be borne in mind that the main purpose of the Census is to collect information on which to base the provision of essential services. In both Wales and Scotland there are individuals (mostly children) who speak no English, living in communities which conduct every-day life in Welsh and Gaelic respectively, and use these languages as the medium of instruction in schools from primary level up. Thus it is important to know the size of these communities for the planning of education and other services. [...] In Northern Ireland there are no communities using Irish in every-day life, so there is not the same administrative need for the information.⁹⁷

Elliott’s final submission to ministers was less strident on this point, stating that “the fact that Wales and Scotland have traditionally included a language question in their Census and will do so in 1991 can be used as a precedent here, although circumstances are clearly different in those countries.” As noted earlier, this final version of the submission concluded by relaying the NIO’s advice that the Welsh and Scottish precedents made it very difficult to defend the exclusion of a language question in Northern Ireland.⁹⁸

If the precedent was unwelcome when it was proposed not to include the question, it became an asset that could be used to explain why it had been included, once that decision had been made. As Elliott’s submission noted, the Welsh and Scottish precedent could now be used to defend the decision from any (presumably unionist) objections: “Inclusion... would be defended on the basis of precedent in Wales and Scotland and in recognition of the fact that there are two traditions in Northern Ireland which

This question is for all persons aged 3 or over (born before 22nd April 1988)

W **Welsh language**

Do you speak, read or write Welsh?

Please tick the appropriate box(es).

Speaks Welsh ☐ 1

Reads Welsh ☐ 2

Writes Welsh ☐ 4

Do not speak, read or write Welsh ☐ 0

This question is for all persons aged 3 or over (born before 22nd April 1988)

G **Scottish Gaelic**

Can you speak, read or write Scottish Gaelic?

Please tick the appropriate box(es).

Can speak Gaelic ☐ 1

Can read Gaelic ☐ 2

Can write Gaelic ☐ 4

Do not know Gaelic ☐ 0

Figure 2. Welsh and Scottish language questions, 1991 censuses.

require a pluralist approach.”⁹⁹ The subsequent public presentation of the plan to include the question duly referred to this precedent. For example, when Richard Needham confirmed its inclusion in his parliamentary written answer of February 1989, he did so by stating: “The Government propose to include in the 1991 census of Northern Ireland a question of knowledge of Irish language in parallel with the language questions to be included in the censuses for Wales and Scotland.”¹⁰⁰ The question-and-answer document accompanying the August 1988 press release also noted that the question would “bring Northern Ireland into line with Wales and Scotland, who will also have language questions.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, the eventual design of the question asked matched that used in Wales and Scotland (Figure 2).

Outcomes and consequences

Ultimately, the census was not the subject of boycott calls.¹⁰² According to Bowcott, Sinn Féin’s position on the census was reversed, as they pursued electoral politics and became interested in an accurate record of the growing Catholic population.¹⁰³ The republican leadership therefore urged Catholics to co-operate with the census.¹⁰⁴ Calls for co-operation also came from broader nationalism, with Social Democratic and Labour Party leader John Hume urging “maximum response,” arguing that “[i]f we are under-represented in the census, we will be under-represented in budget allocations.” Hume acknowledged political and privacy concerns about previous censuses but stated that “I would hope that in present circumstances people can find those reservations to be allayed.”¹⁰⁵ Doherty and Poole note that not only was there no campaign against the census, but that as decisions about funding allocations were increasingly being based on enumerated populations, it was in the interest of nationalists and unionists alike to avoid under-counting.¹⁰⁶ Changing nationalist attitudes toward the census were in part a result of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1976, which sought to eliminate sectarian discrimination in employment practices and which is dependent on the availability of local-level data on the religious background composition of the population. Indeed, even amidst the 1981 census boycott, the nationalist *Irish News* had argued: “It is one thing to talk about discrimination. It is another thing to prove it. The Catholic population can aid the work of justice by filling in the answer to Question No. 10.”¹⁰⁷ The addition of the Irish language question in 1991 contributed to this increasing awareness of the census’s importance, with the *Belfast Telegraph* reasoning that the lack

7 Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish?

✔ all the boxes that apply.

☐ Understand spoken Irish

☐ Speak Irish

☐ Read Irish

☐ Write Irish

☐ None of the above

Figure 3. Irish language question, 2001 Northern Ireland census.

of resistance seen in previous exercises might have been partly due to its inclusion.¹⁰⁸ Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams specifically called on people to answer the new question and not to under-estimate their ability to speak Irish, arguing that funding would be linked to the census results.¹⁰⁹

A report on the Irish language results of the census was published in 1993. It showed that, of the total population aged three and over, 87.9% did not have knowledge of Irish, with 2.6% not answering and 9.5% registering either speaking, reading or writing ability (or a combination thereof). Amongst Catholics, 22.1% stated that they had some ability in the language, 75.1% stated that they did not, and 2.8% did not answer.¹¹⁰

Subsequent censuses have continued to ask about the Irish language. In 2001, the question was modified slightly (Figure 3) and then in 2011, it was replaced with three linked questions, following the introduction of language questions in the census in England, and with the question modified to also ask about Ulster-Scots for the first time (Figure 4). Language questions have also frequently been asked in the CHS since they were first added in 1987.

Results from the census and CHS are frequently cited in coverage of language rights debates,¹¹¹ and have been used both by supporters and by opponents of an Irish Language Act. For example, at the launch of the DUP's 2017 election campaign, then party leader Arlene Foster argued: "If we have an Irish language act, maybe we should have a Polish language act as well because there are more people in Northern Ireland who speak Polish, compared to Irish."¹¹² The director of Irish-language organization Pobal, Janet Muller, responded to Foster's comments by stating: "The 2011 Census shows 10.65 per cent of the population of the north has knowledge of Irish. It is time that our language rights were recognized and protected from this kind of sectarian politicking."¹¹³ Sinn Féin's Carál Ní Chuilín argued in 2016 in her role as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that "given the latest census and previous censuses, there is documented evidence that there are more people who have Irish as their first language than before. More people are learning the language and have a working knowledge of it. Indeed, they have an entitlement to access goods and services through the medium of Irish."¹¹⁴ The availability of statistics facilitated by the addition of the question to the 1991 census is thus crucial to claims-making in relation to language rights.

19

What is your main language?

☐ English ➔ Go to 21

☐ Other, write in (including British/Irish Sign Languages)

20

How well can you speak English?

Very well

Well

Not well

Not at all

☐

☐

☐

☐

21

Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish or Ulster-Scots?

➔ Tick all that apply.

No ability

Understand

Speak

Read

Write

Irish

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Ulster-Scots

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Figure 4. Language questions, 2011 Northern Ireland census.

Conclusion

Studies of the inclusion of language questions or categories on national censuses reveal that such decisions can be driven by top-down bureaucratic or political interests, but also through bottom-up activism and the interplay between state and society. In the case of Northern Ireland, while the decision to stop enquiring about Irish language use in the census after 1911 was part of a more general post-partition disregard for the language, this article has demonstrated that the question’s re-introduction in 1991 was prompted not by the interests of the British state or by lobbying of the state by local language activists, but rather came about through the Irish government acting as a kin state to advance the cultural interests of the nationalist minority in the North, using the consultative role granted to it by the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement.¹¹⁵ This kin state role in the design of the census is a distinctive feature of the case.

While officials were initially skeptical about including the question in the census, adding language questions to a regular survey as an alternative, their view that there was little local demand for the data and that it was likely to be of little administrative value was counterbalanced by arguments that there were precedents for the inclusion of the question in Wales and Scotland and that, should it not be added, there was a risk of a nationalist census boycott. While there was never unanimity amongst high-ranking officials in the Northern Ireland civil service or within the Northern Ireland Office, it was the latter that pushed hardest for adding the question, to which local officials acquiesced.

The inclusion of the Irish language question likely contributed to the avoidance of a nationalist boycott of the census for the first time since 1961 – although nationalist attitudes toward the census were already becoming more positive in light of fair employment legislation and the accompanying need for monitoring data. The reasons for the

lack of the feared unionist boycott in response to the question's inclusion are less clear. That the inclusion of the question attracted less publicity than was anticipated may simply have been a matter of luck, or – as at least one official had argued – the unionist boycott threat was perhaps never as great as others had feared. The stress that was placed on how the question brought Northern Ireland into line with Wales and Scotland may also have placated those who might otherwise have boycotted the census due to its inclusion. The precedent, which officials had seen as a problem when they intended to exclude the question, became somewhat of an asset once they had changed course. It likely also helped that the role played by the Irish government did not come to widespread public attention.

While the utility of the Irish language results of the 1991 and subsequent censuses have been questioned – because they rely on self-assessment and because of their dichotomous nature¹¹⁶ – their impact on debates about the status of the language in Northern Ireland should not be underestimated. Deliberations about the census question were connected to other developments in the late 1980s, such as inclusion of Irish in the school curriculum. From the perspective of current debates, the eventual inclusion of the question provided data on knowledge of the language, which has subsequently come to play an important role in the arguments deployed both for and against the adoption of an Irish Language Act – a key point of contention in contemporary Northern Irish politics.

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