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Northern Ireland: The Peace Process, Ongoing Challenges, and U.S. Interests

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Northern Ireland: The Peace Process, Ongoing Challenges, and U.S. Interests

Between 1969 and 1999, roughly 3,500 people died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland, which is one of four component “nations” of the United Kingdom (UK). Often referred to as “the Troubles,” the conflict has its origins in the 1921 division of Ireland. At its core, the conflict has reflected a struggle between the different national, cultural, and religious identities of Northern Ireland’s two dominant communities: *unionists*, or Protestants who largely define themselves as British and support Northern Ireland’s continued incorporation in the UK, and *nationalists*, or Catholics who consider themselves Irish and may favor a united Ireland.

Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have actively supported the Northern Ireland peace process. U.S. development aid provided through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) has sought to encourage economic development and reconciliation. Congressional hearings have focused on the peace process, human rights, and addressing Northern Ireland’s legacy of violence (often termed *dealing with the past*). Some Members have expressed interest in how *Brexit*—the UK’s withdrawal as a member of the European Union (EU) in January 2020—is affecting Northern Ireland.

The Peace Agreement: Progress to Date and Ongoing Challenges

In 1998, the UK and Irish governments and key Northern Ireland political parties reached a negotiated political settlement. The resulting Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, recognized that a change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional status as part of the UK can come about only with the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland (as well as with the consent of a majority in Ireland). The agreement called for devolved government—the transfer of specified powers from London to Belfast—with a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in which unionist and nationalist parties would share power. It also contained provisions on decommissioning (disarmament) of paramilitary weapons, policing, human rights, UK security normalization (demilitarization), and the status of prisoners.

Despite a much-improved security situation since 1998, implementing the peace agreement proved challenging. In 2007, the pro-British Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein, the nationalist political party traditionally associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), reached a landmark power-sharing deal. Tensions and distrust persisted, however, and Brexit and other contentious issues have hindered the functioning of Northern Ireland’s government. Assembly elections took place in May 2022, but the DUP blocked the work of the Assembly and prevented the formation of a new Executive to protest the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland, which the DUP and other unionists viewed as dividing Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK and threatening the UK’s constitutional integrity. In January 2024, the DUP accepted a package of measures proposed by the UK government to address Brexit-related concerns and ended its boycott on Northern Ireland’s power-sharing institutions, paving the way for the devolved government to be reestablished in February 2024. Other issues facing Northern Ireland in its search for peace and reconciliation include reducing sectarian divisions, dealing with the past, addressing lingering concerns about paramilitary and dissident activity, and promoting further economic development.

Brexit and Northern Ireland

Since 1998, as security checkpoints were dismantled in accordance with the peace agreement and because both the UK and Ireland belonged to the EU single market and customs union, the land border on the island of Ireland effectively disappeared, helping to promote peace and a dynamic cross-border economy. To retain this open border while respecting the rules of the EU single market and customs union, the UK and the EU agreed to post-Brexit trade and customs arrangements for Northern Ireland (initially contained in a Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to the UK’s withdrawal agreement with the EU). Implementation of the post-Brexit arrangements—which began in January 2021—led to some trade disruptions between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and exacerbated political and societal tensions in Northern Ireland. The subsequent 2023 Windsor Framework agreed between the UK and the EU and the aforementioned 2024 UK-DUP agreement sought to address DUP concerns about the post-Brexit arrangements and reduce tensions. Brexit also has renewed debate about Northern Ireland’s constitutional status and has prompted calls from Sinn Fein and others for a *border poll*, or referendum, on whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK or join Ireland.

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Overview

Between 1969 and 1999, roughly 3,500 people died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom (UK). The conflict, often referred to as “the Troubles,” has its modern origins in the 1921 division of Ireland (see map in **Figure 1**).¹ At its core, the conflict has reflected a struggle between the different national, cultural, and religious identities of Northern Ireland’s two dominant communities: *unionists*, or Protestants who largely define themselves as British and support Northern Ireland’s continued incorporation in the UK, and *nationalists*, or Catholics who consider themselves Irish and may favor a united Ireland. In the past, more militant unionists (*loyalists*) and more militant nationalists (*republicans*) were willing to use force to achieve their goals.² Results from the 2021 census indicate that for the first time in Northern Ireland’s history, more people in Northern Ireland are from a Catholic background (45.7% of the population) than from a Protestant or other Christian background (43.5% of the population).³

The Troubles were sparked in 1968, when a civil rights movement was launched in Northern Ireland mostly by Catholics, who had long faced discrimination in areas such as electoral rights, housing, and employment. This civil rights movement was met with violence by some unionists, loyalists, and the police, which in turn prompted armed action by nationalists and republicans. Increasing chaos and escalating violence led the UK government to deploy the British Army on the streets of Northern Ireland in 1969 and to impose direct rule from London in 1972 (between 1921 and 1972, Northern Ireland had its own regional government).

For years, the UK and Irish governments sought to facilitate a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. Multiparty talks began in June 1996, led by former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, who was serving as U.S. President Bill Clinton’s special adviser on Ireland. The UK and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland political parties participating in the peace talks announced an agreement on April 10, 1998. This accord became known as the Good Friday Agreement (for the day on which it was concluded); it is also known as the Belfast Agreement.⁴

Despite the significant decrease in the levels of violence since the Good Friday Agreement, implementation of the peace accord proved challenging. Tensions and distrust persist among Northern Ireland’s political parties and between the unionist and nationalist communities more broadly. Northern Ireland continues to grapple with a number of issues in its search for peace and reconciliation. Sectarian differences flare periodically, and addressing Northern Ireland’s legacy of violence (often termed *dealing with the past*) is particularly controversial. The UK’s

¹ In 1921, the mostly Catholic, southern part of Ireland won independence from the United Kingdom (UK), resulting in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 within the British Commonwealth. The Irish government formally declared Ireland a republic in 1948 and severed its remaining constitutional links with the UK. The Republic of Ireland, with a population of roughly 5.2 million, consists of 26 counties and encompasses about five-sixths of the island of Ireland; Northern Ireland, with approximately 1.9 million people, comprises six counties and encompasses the remaining one-sixth of the island.

² Many unionists and loyalists refer to the six counties that today make up Northern Ireland as *Ulster*. Technically and historically, Ulster also includes the three northernmost counties of the Republic of Ireland.

³ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Census 2021, “Main Statistics for Northern Ireland: Religion,” Statistical Bulletin, September 22, 2022, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-religion.pdf>.

⁴ The text of the Good Friday Agreement (or Belfast Agreement) may be found at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm>. The unionist/Protestant community tends to use the term Belfast Agreement, viewing the name Good Friday Agreement as biased in favor of the nationalist/Catholic community. For the purposes of this report, the peace accord is referred to as the Good Friday Agreement, because this is the name more widely used and recognized in the United States.

withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2020—or *Brexit*—has added to divisions within Northern Ireland, renewed questions about Northern Ireland’s constitutional status as part of the UK, and contributed to political instability in the power-sharing institutions. In January 2024, Northern Ireland’s leading unionist party accepted new measures proposed by the UK government to address certain Brexit-related concerns, thereby enabling Northern Ireland’s devolved government to be reestablished in February 2024 after a two-year suspension.

Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have supported the Northern Ireland peace process and have encouraged full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, as well as subsequent accords and initiatives. The United States has provided aid through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which was created in 1986 to encourage economic development and foster reconciliation. Some Members of Congress have been particularly interested in police reforms and human rights in Northern Ireland. Some Members of Congress also have demonstrated an interest in Brexit’s implications for Northern Ireland.

Figure 1. Map of Northern Ireland (UK) and the Republic of Ireland



Source: Graphic created by CRS using data from Esri (2017).

The 1998 Peace Agreement

Key Elements

The Good Friday Agreement is a multilayered and interlocking document, consisting of a political settlement reached by Northern Ireland’s political parties and an international treaty between the UK and Irish governments. At the core of the Good Friday Agreement is the *consent principle*—that is, a change in Northern Ireland’s status can come about only with the consent of the majority

of Northern Ireland's people, as well as with the consent of a majority in Ireland. Although the agreement acknowledged that a substantial section of Northern Ireland's population and a majority on the island desired a united Ireland, it recognized that the majority of people in Northern Ireland wished to remain part of the UK. If the preference of this majority were to change, the agreement asserted that the UK and Irish governments would have a binding obligation to bring about the wish of the people; thus, the agreement included provisions for future polls to be held in Northern Ireland on its constitutional status, should events warrant.

The Good Friday Agreement set out a framework for devolved government—the transfer of specified powers over local governance from London to Belfast—and called for establishing a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in which unionist and nationalist parties would share power (known as *Strand One*). The Good Friday Agreement also contained provisions on several issues viewed as central to the peace process: decommissioning (disarmament) of paramilitary weapons, policing, human rights, UK security normalization (demilitarization), and the status of prisoners. Negotiations on many of these areas had been extremely contentious, and the final agreed text thus reflected some degree of “constructive ambiguity.”

In addition, the Good Friday Agreement created new “North-South” and “East-West” institutions (*Strand Two* and *Strand Three*, respectively). Among the key institutions called for in these two strands, a North-South Ministerial Council was established to allow leaders in the northern and southern parts of the island of Ireland to consult and cooperate on cross-border issues. A British-Irish Council also was formed to discuss matters of regional interest; the council comprises representatives of the two governments and the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man.

Implementation

Voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland approved the Good Friday Agreement in separate referendums on May 22, 1998, but implementing the agreement was difficult. For years, decommissioning and police reforms were key sticking points that contributed to instability in Northern Ireland's devolved government. Ongoing sectarian strife and sporadic violence from dissident republican and loyalist groups that refused to accept the peace process also fed mistrust between the unionist and nationalist communities and their respective political parties.

Democratic Power-Sharing Institutions

As noted above, the Good Friday Agreement mandated power-sharing in the devolved government between unionists and nationalists and called for establishing a new Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. To ensure neither unionists nor nationalists could dominate the Assembly (of 108 members at the time), the agreement required that “key decisions” receive cross-community support (i.e., from a majority of both unionist and nationalist Assembly members). The Executive would be composed of a first minister, deputy first minister, and other ministers with departmental responsibilities (e.g., health, education, jobs); positions would be allocated to political parties according to party strength in the Assembly.

The first elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly took place on June 25, 1998. The devolution of power from London to Belfast, however, was delayed by unionist concerns about the status of weapons decommissioning. Following 18 months of further negotiations, authority over local affairs was transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in December 1999. Over the next few years, the issue of decommissioning—especially by the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—contributed to the suspension of the devolved government and the reinstatement of direct rule from London several times between 2000 and 2002. (See “Decommissioning,” below.)

In 2007, after a nearly five-year suspension, Northern Ireland’s devolved government was restored following a landmark deal between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—which strongly supports Northern Ireland’s continued integration as part of the UK—and Sinn Fein, the staunchly nationalist political party traditionally associated with the IRA. Regularly scheduled Assembly elections in 2011 and 2016 produced successive power-sharing governments, also led by the DUP and Sinn Fein. At the same time, various incidents—including protests in 2012 and 2013 over the use of flags and emblems and the 2015 arrest of a Sinn Fein leader in connection with the murder of a former IRA member—periodically threatened the devolved government’s stability. Brexit and other contentious issues led to the collapse of the power-sharing institutions between 2017 and 2020, and again between 2022 and 2024 (see “Political Developments”).

Decommissioning

For years, decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was a prominent challenge in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The text of the agreement states, “those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means, and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office.” Unionists were adamant that the IRA must fully decommission its weapons. The IRA had been observing a cease-fire since 1997, but it viewed decommissioning as tantamount to surrender and had long resisted such calls.

Progress toward full IRA decommissioning was slow and incremental. A key milestone came in July 2005, when the IRA declared an end to its armed campaign and instructed all members to pursue objectives through “exclusively peaceful means.”⁵ In September 2005, Northern Ireland’s Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) announced that the IRA had put all of its arms “beyond use,” asserting that the IRA weaponry dismantled or made inoperable matched estimates provided by the security forces.⁶ The IICD also confirmed decommissioning by other republican groups and loyalist organizations. The IICD concluded its work in 2011.

Policing

Although recognized as a central element in achieving a comprehensive peace in Northern Ireland, new policing structures and arrangements were a frequent point of contention between unionists and nationalists. In 2001, a new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was established to replace the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), Northern Ireland’s former, 92% Protestant police force. Catholics viewed the RUC as an enforcer of Protestant domination, and human rights organizations accused the RUC of brutality and collusion with loyalist paramilitary groups. Defenders of the RUC pointed to its tradition of loyalty and discipline and its record in fighting terrorism. In accordance with policing recommendations made by an independent commission (known as the Patten Commission), increasing the proportion of Catholic officers (from 8% to 30% in 10 years) was a key goal for the new PSNI. To help fulfill this goal, the PSNI introduced a 50-50 Catholic/Protestant recruitment process.⁷

For several years, Sinn Fein refused to participate in the Policing Board, a democratic oversight body established as part of the police reforms. Many viewed Sinn Fein’s stance as discouraging Catholics from joining the PSNI and preventing the nationalist community from fully accepting the new PSNI. In 2007, however, Sinn Fein members voted to support the police and join the Policing Board. Sinn Fein’s decision was seen as historic, given the IRA’s traditional view of the

⁵ “IRA Statement in Full,” BBC News, July 25, 2005.

⁶ Mark Davenport, “IRA Arms: What Next for NI Politics?,” BBC News, September 26, 2005.

⁷ See *A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland*, Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, September 1999, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/police/patten/patten99.pdf>.

police as a legitimate target. In 2010, the DUP and Sinn Fein reached an accord (the Hillsborough Agreement) to devolve policing and justice powers from London to Belfast. The 50-50 recruitment process for Catholic and Protestant PSNI officers concluded in 2011.

According to the most recent data available, Catholic officers currently make up around 32% of the PSNI's nearly 6,300 officers.⁸ Concerns persist that not enough Catholics are seeking to join the PSNI (due to both lingering suspicions about the police within the Catholic/nationalist community and ongoing fears that Catholic police recruits may be targeted by dissident republicans opposed to the peace process). PSNI officials have warned that current overall staffing levels are insufficient. In September 2024, the PSNI outlined a plan to increase the size of the force to 7,000 officers by 2028, although budget constraints reportedly have impacted implementation. Sinn Fein also has called for a return of the 50-50 recruitment process, but the DUP has expressed opposition to a practice that it views as discriminatory.⁹

Security Normalization

The Good Friday Agreement called for “as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland,” including the removal of security installations. In February 2007, the last of more than 100 armored watchtowers in Northern Ireland was dismantled. In July 2007, the British Army ended its 38-year-long military operation in Northern Ireland. Although a regular garrison of 5,000 British troops remains based in Northern Ireland, British forces no longer have a role in policing and may be deployed worldwide.

Rights, Safeguards, and Equality of Opportunity

In accordance with the Good Friday Agreement's provisions related to human rights and equality, the UK government incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, an international treaty of the Council of Europe¹⁰) into Northern Ireland law and established a Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Some nationalists have continued to press for more progress and have argued that Northern Ireland needs its own Bill of Rights. Consideration for a Bill of Rights was provided for in the Good Friday Agreement, but the issue has long been controversial. Consensus on the way forward—between unionists and nationalists, as well as with the UK government—remains elusive.

The Good Friday Agreement also calls for tolerance of linguistic diversity in Northern Ireland and support for the Irish language (Gaelic). Giving Gaelic the same official status as English and calls for a stand-alone Irish Language Act in Northern Ireland, however, were sensitive issues for many unionists. A 2020 deal to restore the power-sharing institutions included a compromise to recognize Gaelic as an official language in Northern Ireland and promote its use while also protecting the Ulster-Scots language (a regional language similar to English that many unionists consider important to their heritage). In October 2022, the UK Parliament approved legislation enacting the language and cultural measures agreed in 2020 into law.¹¹

⁸ Police Service of Northern Ireland, see *Strength of Police Service Statistics* and *Workforce Composition Statistics*, both updated regularly, <https://www.psnipolice.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/our-publication-scheme/who-we-are-and-what-we-do>.

⁹ Julian O'Neill, “PSNI Numbers at Watershed Moment—Chief Constable,” BBC News, September 17, 2024; Daniel Hennessy, “PSNI Chief Warns of ‘Dangerously Low’ Numbers in Force,” *Irish Times*, December 1, 2025; Jayne McCormack, “Sinn Fein Calls for Return to 50-50 Police Recruitment,” BBC News, February 23, 2026.

¹⁰ The UK is a party to the ECHR as a member of the Council of Europe, a leading European human rights body that the UK helped found in 1949. The Council of Europe is an entirely separate organization from the EU.

¹¹ The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 received royal assent in December 2022.

Political Developments

Many analysts view implementation of the main aspects of the Good Friday Agreement (and subsequent agreements) as having been completed. At the same time, tensions and distrust have persisted between the unionist and nationalist communities and their respective political parties. Since 2007, Assembly elections have resulted in successive power-sharing governments led by the DUP and Sinn Fein (respectively, the largest unionist and nationalist parties in Northern Ireland since 2003). Brexit and other contentious issues since 2016 have affected the stability of Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions, which collapsed between 2017 and 2020, and again between 2022 and 2024 (also see, "Implications of Brexit," below).

The May 2022 Assembly Election

In February 2022, then-First Minister Paul Givan of the DUP resigned to protest the post-Brexit trade and customs arrangements for Northern Ireland and the slow progress in resolving implementation difficulties. Contained in a protocol to the UK's withdrawal agreement with the EU (formally approved by the UK and EU in January 2020), the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland were designed to maintain an open border on the island of Ireland and to help preserve the peace process while respecting the rules of the EU single market and customs union. Under terms set out in the protocol, Northern Ireland remained legally in the UK customs territory but practically aligned with EU single market rules for goods. Although the DUP backed Brexit (it was the only major Northern Ireland political party to do so), the DUP and other unionists viewed the terms in the protocol as dividing Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK (i.e., Great Britain) and threatening the UK's constitutional integrity. Implementation of the protocol—which began in January 2021—also led to some trade disruptions between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Givan's resignation as First Minister forced then-Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, of Sinn Fein, to step down. Northern Ireland's first minister and deputy first minister positions are considered a joint office; if one resigns, the other also ceases to hold office. As a result, the Northern Ireland Executive was unable to meet or make decisions (the Northern Ireland Assembly was able to continue working on legislation already in progress).¹²

Northern Ireland's regularly scheduled Assembly election was held on May 5, 2022. For the first time in Northern Ireland's history, Sinn Fein won the largest number of seats in the 90-member Assembly and surpassed the DUP as the largest party in the Assembly (see **Table 1**).¹³ Decreased support for the DUP appeared to be driven by dissatisfaction with the party's leadership on Brexit and internal party divisions. Sinn Fein strongly supports a united Ireland but centered its election campaign on everyday concerns, such as the rising costs of living and health care. The smaller, cross-community Alliance Party made significant gains, attributed to voter frustration with Northern Ireland's identity politics and frequent instability in the power-sharing institutions.¹⁴ Voter turnout was 63%. (Also see text box, "Main Political Parties in Northern Ireland," below.)

¹² Jayne McCormack, "Givan Resignation Triggers Fresh Political Crisis in NI," BBC News, February 3, 2022.

¹³ The Good Friday Agreement established a 108-member Assembly, but the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement reduced the size of the Assembly to 90 members (effective after the May 2016 Assembly election), among other initiatives. The Fresh Start Agreement is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-fresh-start-for-northern-ireland>.

¹⁴ Jill Lawless and Peter Morrison, "Sinn Fein Eyes Historic Win in Northern Ireland Election," AP News, May 4, 2022; Mark Landler, "As Britain Turned Away from EU, Northern Ireland Turned to Sinn Fein," *New York Times*, May 7, 2022; Mark Devenport, "How Alliance Number Nerds Turned Single Digits into a Surge," BBC News, May 9, 2022.

Following the May 2022 election, the DUP blocked the work of the Assembly and prevented the formation of a new Executive in an effort to continue to pressure the UK government to address unionist objections to the post-Brexit arrangements in the Northern Ireland protocol. In February 2023, the UK and the EU announced a new agreement—known as the Windsor Framework—that sought to resolve the challenges posed by the Northern Ireland protocol. The DUP, however, asserted that the Windsor Framework did not fully address the party’s concerns about the protocol and that further progress would be necessary before the DUP would agree to reestablish Northern Ireland’s devolved government.

Table I. Northern Ireland 2022 Election Results

Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)

Political Party	# of Seats	+/- Seats
Sinn Fein (SF; hard-line nationalist, left-wing)	27	—
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP; hard-line unionist, conservative)	25	-3
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI; nonsectarian, centrist/liberal)	17	+9
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP; moderate unionist, center-right)	9	-1
Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP; moderate nationalist, center-left)	8	-4
Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV; hard-line unionist, right-wing)	1	—
People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA; nonsectarian, left-wing)	1	—
Independent (unionist)	2	+1

Source: BBC News, “Northern Ireland Assembly Election Results 2022,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/election/2022/northern-ireland/results>.

Main Political Parties in Northern Ireland

Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein has been the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland since 2003. It advocates for a united Ireland. Sinn Fein is an all-island party and has a political presence in Northern Ireland and Ireland (with members in both the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament). Historically, Sinn Fein was the political party associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). A left-wing party, Sinn Fein traditionally has received considerable support from working-class Catholics. Mary Lou McDonald has led Sinn Fein since 2018. Michelle O’Neill has led Sinn Fein in the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2017; she is also the party’s deputy leader.

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The DUP has been the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland since 2003. It enjoys considerable Protestant support and strongly favors union with the United Kingdom (UK). The party initially opposed the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, viewing virtually any compromise with Irish nationalists as a net loss for unionists. Socially conservative, the DUP opposes abortion and same-sex marriage. Gavin Robinson has led the DUP since late March 2024 (he initially served in an interim capacity and was confirmed as party leader in May 2024).

Alliance Party. The Alliance Party is a nonsectarian, cross-community party that is centrist and liberal in political orientation. It argues for reforming the devolved government’s power-sharing rules to promote greater stability and reflect growing support for nonsectarian parties. The Alliance Party has been led by Naomi Long since 2016.

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The UUP is a smaller, center-right Protestant party that supports union with the UK. It was the lead unionist party involved in the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement. Jon Burrows has led the UUP since January 2026.

Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The SDLP is a smaller, center-left Catholic party that supports a united Ireland achieved through peaceful means. It was the lead nationalist party involved in the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement. Claire Hanna has led the SDLP since October 2024.

2024 Reestablishment of the Devolved Government

Following the February 2023 Windsor Framework, the UK government sought to address the DUP's remaining concerns about the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland and facilitate the establishment of a new devolved government. In late January 2024, the DUP accepted a package of measures proposed by the UK government—set out in a new *Safeguarding the Union* command paper—that outlined some operational changes to the Windsor Framework to ease trade further between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and reassure unionists of Northern Ireland's place within the UK.¹⁵ Despite some concerns among several DUP party officials about the command paper and accompanying implementing legislation, the DUP decided to end its boycott of Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions and enter into a new devolved government.¹⁶

Northern Ireland's Assembly and new Executive began work on February 3, 2024. For the first time in Northern Ireland's history, the position of first minister is now held by a Sinn Féin member, Michelle O'Neill. Sinn Féin was entitled to the position of first minister because it won the largest number of Assembly seats in the May 2022 election, although the roles of first minister and deputy minister are equal. DUP Assembly member Emma Little-Pengelly assumed the role of deputy first minister. Both First Minister O'Neill and Deputy First Minister Little-Pengelly pledged to serve "all" people and communities in Northern Ireland.¹⁷

As part of the 2024 deal to restore the devolved government, the UK government agreed to provide a £3.3 billion (about \$4.2 billion) financial package for Northern Ireland to help address budgetary pressures (due in part to the delay in reestablishing the devolved government). Funding priorities included increasing public sector pay amid high inflation and recent large-scale strikes (by health care and transportation workers, teachers, civil servants, and others), improving infrastructure, and enhancing investment. The UK government also recommitted to devolving corporate tax powers to Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions, which would allow Northern Ireland to set a lower corporate tax rate than the UK main rate (of 25%) to compete more effectively with the lower corporate tax rate in the Republic of Ireland.¹⁸

Ongoing Challenges in the Peace Process

Nearly 28 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and a much-improved security situation, the past remains ever-present in Northern Ireland and the search for peace and reconciliation remains challenging. Difficult issues include bridging sectarian divisions and managing key sticking points (such as parading, protests, and the use of flags and emblems), dealing with Northern Ireland's legacy of violence, addressing remaining paramilitary concerns and curbing dissident activity, and furthering economic development and equality.

¹⁵ In the UK, *command papers* are official publications that present major government initiatives to Parliament "by command" of the sovereign. See UK Parliament, "About Command Papers," <https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/publications/government/>.

¹⁶ Shawn Pogatchnik, "DUP Agrees to Drop Boycott of Northern Ireland Power-Sharing," *Politico*, January 30, 2024; Jayne McCormack and Finn Purdy, "Stormont: Assembly to Sit on Saturday as DUP Boycott Ends," BBC News, February 1, 2024.

¹⁷ Brendan Hughes and Matt Fox, "Stormont: Michelle O'Neill Makes History as Nationalist First Minister," BBC News, February 3, 2024; William Booth and Amanda Ferguson, "Northern Ireland Gets Its First Sinn Féin First Minister in Historic Shift," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2024.

¹⁸ Margaret Canning, "Northern Ireland Businesses Welcome Prospect of Corporation Tax Devolution Contained in DUP Deal," *Belfast Telegraph*, January 31, 2024; Northern Ireland Office, "UK Government Confirms £3.3bn Spending Settlement for Restored Northern Ireland Executive," press release, February 13, 2024.

Sectarian Divisions

Northern Ireland remains a largely divided society, with Protestant and Catholic communities existing largely in parallel. Schools and public housing developments in Northern Ireland remain mostly single-identity communities. In March 2022, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed legislation to increase the number of integrated school places and establish targets for the number of children educated in integrated schools.¹⁹ For the 2025-2026 academic year, out of roughly 1,100 nursery, primary, and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, there were 76 formally integrated schools, educating about 8% of pupils.²⁰

In some areas in Northern Ireland, *peace walls* separate Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. Estimates of the number of peace walls vary depending on the definition. Northern Ireland's Departments of Justice and Housing have responsibility for around 60 peace walls; when other types of structures are included—such as fences, gates, and closed roads—the number of physical barriers separating Protestant and Catholic communities is estimated at over 100.²¹ Northern Ireland's Executive has been working to remove the peace walls since 2013. Although some surveys of public attitudes indicate growing support for removing the walls, concerns about safety and security also remain in some communities.²²

Sectarian divisions may be apparent during the annual summer *marching season*, when many unionist cultural and religious organizations hold parades commemorating Protestant history. Although the vast majority of these annual parades are not contentious, some are held through or close to areas populated mainly by Catholics (some of whom perceive such unionist parades as triumphalist and intimidating). During the Troubles, the marching season often provoked fierce violence. Many Protestant organizations view the existing Parades Commission, which arbitrates disputes over parade routes, as largely biased in favor of Catholics and have repeatedly argued for abolishing the commission.²³ Efforts over the years to address the issue of parading and related protests have stalled repeatedly.

In 2016, a Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition was established to assess the use of flags, emblems, and other issues that may spark sectarian tensions and to recommend policies to reduce potential conflicts. After several delays, the commission's report was published in 2021. The report contains over 40 recommendations, but the commission was unable to reach agreement on some key issues, including related to flags and memorials. Critics questioned the report's value given the delays, costs (£800,000, or about \$1.1 million), and lack of an accompanying implementation plan.²⁴

¹⁹ Robbie Meredith, "Integrated Education: Stormont Passes Bill Despite DUP Opposition," BBC News, March 9, 2022; Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, *Achieving Greater Integration in Education and Housing*, March 13, 2025.

²⁰ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, "Annual Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland, 2025/26," February 26, 2026, see in particular Tables 1b and 2a, <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/DEstatistics/annual-enrolments-schools-and-funded-pre-school-education-northern-ireland-202526.html>.

²¹ Rory Carroll, "Belfast's Peace Walls: Potent Symbols of Division Are Dwindling—But Slowly," *Guardian*, April 7, 2023; "What Is a Peace Wall? An Explainer," *Irish News*, July 27, 2023.

²² Julian O'Neill, "NI Troubles: I Would Love to See That Wall Coming Down," BBC News, January 29, 2023; Rebecca Black, "Progress Continues to Be Made in Bid to Transform Northern Ireland's Peace Walls," *Irish News*, December 31, 2023.

²³ The Parades Commission was established in 1998 as an independent body to rule on disputed parades.

²⁴ Jayne McCormack, "Flags Report: Stormont Publishes £800k Report Without Action Plan," BBC News, December 1, 2021; Northern Ireland Executive Office, *Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition – Final Report*, December 1, 2021.

Dealing with the Past

Fully addressing Northern Ireland's legacy of violence and pursuing justice for crimes committed during the Troubles has been difficult and often contentious. Reaching consensus on the best way to deal with the past is challenging in large part because many unionists and nationalists continue to view the Troubles differently and retain competing narratives. Cases of suspected collusion between UK security institutions, Northern Ireland's former police force, and paramilitary organizations active during the Troubles have been particularly difficult to resolve.

The Good Friday Agreement asserted that, "it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation." In 2008, the Northern Ireland Assembly established a Commission for Victims and Survivors to support victims and their families. Several legal processes for examining crimes stemming from the Troubles have existed. These have included investigations into conflict-related deaths by a dedicated PSNI unit; investigations by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) of historical cases involving allegations of police misconduct; fact-finding coroner inquests; and public inquiries, such as the Saville inquiry (concluded in 2010) into the January 1972 Bloody Sunday incident in which the British Army shot 28 people, resulting in 14 deaths.²⁵ In 2016, an independent police team—known as Operation Kenova—was established to investigate a high-profile case of suspected collusion during the Troubles and subsequently expanded to investigate several other such cases; the Kenova team issued its final report in December 2025.²⁶

Some observers have argued these various legal processes represented a piecemeal approach and that progress was slow. As of mid-2022, UK officials reported that over 900 conflict-related cases (involving nearly 1,200 deaths) were awaiting investigation by the PSNI.²⁷ Some experts point out the expense and time involved with some of these processes; for example, the Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday cost £195 million (more than \$300 million) and took 12 years to complete.²⁸ Prosecuting former British soldiers who served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles also has been a controversial issue, and Troubles-era criminal prosecutions have faced legal hurdles as the passage of time may make it more difficult to meet the required evidentiary bar.²⁹

In 2014, the UK and Irish governments convened interparty talks to address a number of political, financial, and sectarian issues in Northern Ireland, including how to deal with the past. The resulting Stormont House Agreement called for establishing several new mechanisms to address "legacy issues."³⁰ Efforts to enact these mechanisms in UK law, however, stalled for years amid successive crises in both the UK and Northern Ireland governments, as well as differences between the UK government and various stakeholders on certain aspects, including related to "national security caveats" pertaining to the disclosure of sensitive or classified information.³¹

²⁵ Thirteen deaths occurred on Bloody Sunday; another person wounded on Bloody Sunday died several months later.

²⁶ *Kenova Final Report*, December 9, 2025, <https://www.psnipolice.uk/about-us/our-publications/operation-kenova-final-report>.

²⁷ Government of the UK, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill Explanatory Notes*, May 17, 2022, p. 6, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0010/en/220010en.pdf>.

²⁸ James Clarke, "Was the Bloody Sunday Report Value for Money?," BBC News, June 14, 2010.

²⁹ Edward Burke, "The Trouble with Northern Ireland Legacy Cases," Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), April 22, 2021; and Claire Mills and David Torrance, *Investigation of Former Armed Forces Personnel Who Served in Northern Ireland*, UK House of Commons Library, May 18, 2022.

³⁰ The 2014 Stormont House Agreement is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stormont-house-agreement>.

³¹ Anne Cadwallader, "Bereaved Families Have a Right to the Truth," *Irish Times*, December 31, 2015; Gareth Gordon, "Troubles Legacy Consultation Launched by Government," BBC News, May 11, 2018.

The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023

In May 2022, the UK government of then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill in the UK Parliament; the bill emphasized information recovery over legal and judicial processes. UK officials argued that the bill would prioritize providing information to victims and families, protect military veterans from prosecution, and encourage wider societal reconciliation.³² Despite considerable opposition to the legislation within and outside of Northern Ireland (discussed below), the UK House of Commons passed the bill in July 2022, by a vote of 282 to 217. The bill was supported mostly by the then-majority Conservative Party. The then-opposition Labour Party and others voted against the bill; no Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland supported it. In January 2023, the UK government of then-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (who had taken over as Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister in October 2022) introduced several amendments to the bill, largely in response to concerns raised by victims and survivors. Following some delays and resistance in the UK House of Lords, the UK Parliament gave final approval to the bill in September 2023. The bill subsequently received royal assent and became UK law.³³

Among other measures, the legislation (commonly referred to as the Legacy Act) established a new Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) charged with reviewing Troubles-related deaths and cases of serious injury and providing information to victims and families. The Legacy Act also established a conditional immunity scheme that would provide immunity from prosecution for Troubles-related offenses for individuals that cooperated with the ICRIR. Furthermore, the act banned criminal investigations into Troubles-related incidents by any UK authority other than the ICRIR, ended most coroner inquests, and prohibited future civil claims for Troubles-related misconduct. The act mandated all Troubles-related investigations to cease, except those in support of prosecutions already underway, by May 1, 2024 (the same day the ICRIR began work).³⁴

Although UK veterans groups and campaigners largely welcomed the Legacy Act, victims groups and human rights advocates were critical and all Northern Ireland political parties opposed it.³⁵ Nationalists contended that ending investigations and most prosecutions would circumvent justice for victims and families and allow the UK government to cover up the truth about the state's actions during the Troubles. Unionists objected to what they viewed as establishing moral equivalency between the actions of soldiers and paramilitaries. The Irish government also expressed concerns about the legislation and “regret” that it departed from the approach previously agreed in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement.³⁶

Legal experts questioned whether certain provisions of the Legacy Act, especially those related to investigations and the immunity scheme, were compatible with UK commitments in the European

³² Government of the UK, “Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to Outline Way Forward to Address the Legacy of the Troubles,” press release, May 17, 2022; UK Parliament, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023*, <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3160>.

³³ Government of the UK, “Government Tables Amendments to NI Troubles Legacy Legislation,” press release, January 17, 2023; “Troubles Legacy Bill Enters Law After Receiving Royal Assent,” BBC News, September 19, 2023.

³⁴ For more information, see Northern Ireland Office, *Explainers Relating to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill*, May 25, 2022; and Joanna Dawson et al., *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill 2022-2023*, UK House of Commons Library, July 14, 2023.

³⁵ See, for example, UK Parliament, Hansard, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill*, volume 717, debated on July 4, 2022, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-07-04/debates/854CCB3A-19C5-4724-9CF2-A2B02E6D9086/NorthernIrelandTroubles\(LegacyAndReconciliation\)Bill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-07-04/debates/854CCB3A-19C5-4724-9CF2-A2B02E6D9086/NorthernIrelandTroubles(LegacyAndReconciliation)Bill).

³⁶ Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, “Ireland Welcomes Decision by Council of Europe on Northern Ireland Legacy Issues,” press release, June 10, 2022.

Convention on Human Rights. Victims groups and families filed several judicial challenges to the act in UK courts and the Irish government filed a case against the act before the ECHR's European Court of Human Rights. In February 2024, the Belfast High Court found that the immunity provisions, among others, in the Legacy Act were in breach of the ECHR. In September 2024, the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal found additional aspects of the Legacy Act to be incompatible with the ECHR, including that the act reportedly gave the UK government too much discretion over the ICRIR's disclosure of sensitive information.³⁷

Efforts to Repeal and Replace the 2023 Legacy Act

In July 2024, a new UK government led by Prime Minister Keir Starmer of the Labour Party took office following parliamentary elections and committed to “repealing and replacing” the Legacy Act.³⁸ Although some veterans' groups opposed repealing the Legacy Act, in December 2024, UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Hilary Benn asserted that the previous government's approach was “wrong” and announced initial steps to repeal certain Legacy Act provisions. Secretary of State Benn further noted that he intended to begin discussions with the Irish government aimed at agreeing on a “way forward” on legacy issues.³⁹

In September 2025, the UK and Irish governments announced a new joint framework on legacy issues, asserting that “Our shared goal is to secure truth, accountability, and, to the extent possible, justice for victims, families and survivors, and for society.”⁴⁰ The UK government reaffirmed its commitment to repeal and replace the Legacy Act and, among other measures, to restructure and rename the ICRIR as the Legacy Commission, capable of carrying out investigations that could lead to prosecutions. The UK and Irish governments also agreed to establish a cross-border Independent Commission on Information Retrieval to receive information on legacy cases (information disclosed to this separate commission would be inadmissible in both criminal and civil proceedings). In tandem with the release of the joint framework, the UK government published a package of protections for veterans who served in Northern Ireland; the UK government asserted that this package aims to ensure veterans “are protected from endless legal challenges” and “terrorist acts are not granted immunity.”⁴¹

In October 2025, the Starmer government introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill 2024-26 to repeal and replace parts of the 2023 Legacy Act.⁴² The new bill and secondary legislation introduced simultaneously would, respectively, implement measures in the UK-Irish joint framework and repeal aspects of the Legacy Act found by UK courts to be incompatible with the ECHR, including the immunity provisions. As of March 2026, the bill is under consideration in

³⁷ Shawn Pogatchnik, “Ireland to Sue UK over Law Blocking Probes into Northern Irish Violence,” *Politico*, December 20, 2023; Megan Specia, “Immunity for Troubles Violence Violates Human Rights, Belfast Court Rules,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2024; Chris Page, “Legacy Act Gives Government Too Much Power, Court Rules,” BBC News, September 20, 2024.

³⁸ Northern Ireland Office, *Statement from the Secretary of State Following the King's Speech*, July 17, 2024.

³⁹ Northern Ireland Office, *Secretary of State Oral Statement on Northern Ireland Legacy*, Oral Statement to Parliament, December 4, 2024.

⁴⁰ UK Government and the Government of Ireland, *The Legacy of the Troubles: A Joint Framework Between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland*, September 19, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-legacy-of-the-troubles-a-joint-framework-between-the-government-of-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-and-the-government-o>.

⁴¹ UK Ministry of Defence, “Six New Protections, Rights, and Safeguards for Northern Ireland Veterans: Legacy Announcement,” September 19, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/six-new-protections-rights-and-safeguards-for-northern-ireland-veterans-legacy-announcement>.

⁴² UK Parliament, *Northern Ireland Troubles Bill*, <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/4022>. Also see Joanna Dawson et al., *Northern Ireland Troubles Bill 2024-26*, UK House of Commons Library, November 5, 2025.

the UK House of Commons and has advanced with the backing of the majority Labour Party. Reactions to the new bill among Northern Ireland parties and stakeholders have been mixed. Nationalists and victims groups have been generally supportive, whereas the DUP, other unionists, and veterans groups have raised a number of concerns, including related to the Irish government's role in formulating and implementing some aspects of the joint framework and whether the protections for veterans announced by the UK government are sufficient. In debates and preliminary votes in the House of Commons to date, the DUP and other unionists have declined to support the bill.⁴³

Remaining Paramilitary Issues and Dissident Activity

Experts contend the major republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations active during the Troubles are now committed to the political process and remain on cease-fire. A 2015 UK government-commissioned review found that all the main paramilitary groups that operated during the Troubles still existed, but the leadership of each group, "to different degrees," was "committed to peaceful means to achieve their political objectives." At the same time, the review concluded that individual members of paramilitary groups continued to represent a threat to national security and public order, including through their involvement in organized crime.⁴⁴

In 2017, a four-member Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) was established to monitor paramilitary activity and report annually on progress toward ending such activity. The UK and Irish governments each named one commissioner to the IRC, and the Northern Ireland Executive named two.⁴⁵ In its eighth annual report, released in December 2025, the IRC observed that violent crime linked to paramilitarism has been declining, but also stated that "intimidation, coercive control, and threats linked to paramilitary groups persist." The IRC further noted that over the last two years, there has been instances of a "link between paramilitarism and racist violence connected to the issue of immigration."⁴⁶ In recent years, IRC commissioners and other observers also have raised concerns about the degree to which divisions over Brexit could enhance paramilitary influence.⁴⁷

The IRC supports addressing paramilitarism with an approach that combines policing and criminal justice responses with measures to tackle the underlying socioeconomic challenges facing communities in which paramilitaries operate. The IRC also has argued for considering direct engagement with paramilitaries to promote voluntary disbandment. Other Northern Ireland

⁴³ See, for example, UK Parliament, Hansard, *Northern Ireland Troubles Bill*, volume 775, debated on November 18, 2025, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-11-18/debates/5E328786-BF54-4072-BA80-FD31AC025AFA/NorthernIrelandTroublesBill>; and Enda McClafferty and Brendan Hughes, "New Legacy Bill Passes Next Stage at Westminster," BBC News, November 18, 2025.

⁴⁴ Government of the UK, *Independent Report: Assessment on Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland*, October 20, 2015. This report focused on the following paramilitary groups: the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF); the Red Hand Commando (RHC); the Ulster Defense Association (UDA, which also conducted attacks during the Troubles under the name of the Ulster Freedom Fighters, or UFF); the South East Antrim (SEA) group of the UDA; Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF); the Irish Republican Army (IRA, also known as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, or PIRA); and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

⁴⁵ The UK government chose former U.S. Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Mitchell Reiss as its representative on the IRC. Reiss served as special envoy in the George W. Bush Administration from 2003 to 2007.

⁴⁶ *Independent Reporting Commission Eighth Report*, December 9, 2025, <https://www.ircommission.org/publications/irc-eighth-report>.

⁴⁷ Shawn Pogatchnik, "Who Are the Northern Ireland Loyalists Threatening to Shun Peace Deal over Brexit Fears?," *Politico*, March 5, 2021; Julian O'Neill, "NI Protocol: Warning Over Loyalist Paramilitaries Gaining Momentum," BBC News, December 12, 2022.

officials have cautioned that engagement could legitimize paramilitaries; they advocate instead for greater investment in policing and community development.⁴⁸

Security assessments indicate that dissident groups not on cease-fire and opposed to the 1998 peace accord continue to pose threats. Dissident republican groups are regarded as posing the greatest terrorist threat in Northern Ireland but do not have the same capacity to mount a sustained terror campaign as the IRA did between the 1970s and the 1990s. Most of the dissident republican groups are small in comparison to the IRA during the height of the Troubles.⁴⁹

Four main dissident republican groups exist currently: the Continuity IRA (CIRA); Óglaigh na hÉireann (ÓNH); Arm na Poblacht (ANP), and the New IRA (reportedly formed in 2012).⁵⁰ These groups have sought to target police officers, prison officers, and other members of the security services in particular. The New IRA has claimed responsibility for some high-profile attacks in recent years, including shooting and critically wounding a senior and prominent PSNI detective, John Caldwell, in Omagh in 2023.⁵¹ The New IRA also was responsible for the 2019 death of journalist Lyra McKee, who was shot while covering riots in Londonderry (also known as Derry).⁵² Although less active generally than the New IRA, in 2023, ANP warned that it would consider the families of PSNI officers to be targets as well.⁵³

Economic Development and Equal Opportunity

Northern Ireland's economy has made considerable advances since the 1990s but also has faced challenges. Between 1997 and 2007, Northern Ireland's economy grew an average of 5.6% annually (marginally above the UK average of 5.4%). Unemployment decreased from over 17% in the 1980s to 4.3% by 2007.⁵⁴ The 2008-2009 global recession led to a prolonged downturn in the region and economic recovery was slow and uneven for years but gradually improved between 2013 and 2019. Like elsewhere in the UK, the COVID-19 pandemic affected Northern Ireland's economy in 2020, but economic activity largely recovered in 2021.⁵⁵

Since mid-2022, higher energy costs and a rise in inflation and interest rates have contributed to some quarterly fluctuations in economic output and an increased cost of living. Northern Ireland's economic output increased by 2.9% between the third quarters of 2024 and 2025; in comparison to pre-pandemic levels in 2019, economic activity in Northern Ireland in the third quarter of 2024

⁴⁸ Julian O'Neill, "Disbandment Talks Could Legitimize Paramilitaries, Warns Long," BBC News, February 27, 2025.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Rory Carroll, "Northern Ireland Republican Dissidents Lurk in the Shadows Hoping to be Noticed," *Guardian*, February 23, 2023.

⁵⁰ ÓNH declared itself on cease-fire in 2018, although a small splinter group formed in opposition to the cease-fire. Also see Zoe Manzi, "Northern Ireland Related Terrorism," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, January 15, 2024.

⁵¹ Julian O'Neill, "Omagh Police Shooting: John Caldwell Attack Causes Shockwaves in PSNI," BBC News, February 25, 2023; Allison Morris, "New IRA Still Main Suspect in DCI Caldwell Shooting, Chief Constable Tells Policing Board," *Belfast Telegraph*, March 2, 2023.

⁵² The New IRA claimed responsibility for McKee's death but reportedly issued an apology; the group asserted that it had intended to shoot a police officer during the riots but had hit McKee by accident. See Ed O'Loughlin, "New IRA Apologizes for Killing of Journalist in Northern Ireland," *New York Times*, April 23, 2019.

⁵³ Seanin Graham, "PSNI Officers Warned of Republican Dissident Threat to Their Families," *Irish Times*, March 7, 2023.

⁵⁴ Orla Ryan, "Northern Ireland's Economic Fears," BBC News, June 22, 2001; Northern Ireland Executive Economic Strategy, *Consultation on Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Prosperity*, January 2011.

⁵⁵ Valentina Romei and Chris Giles, "Northern Ireland Economy Has Outperformed Rest of UK, ONS Figures Show," *Financial Times*, November 29, 2021; John Campbell, "COVID-19: NI Economic Recovery May Be Weaker Than Originally Thought," BBC News, February 28, 2022.

showed stronger growth (12%) than in the UK (5.2%).⁵⁶ Northern Ireland's unemployment rate for October-December 2025 was 2.2%, lower than the UK average unemployment rate of 5.2%.⁵⁷

Some long-standing economic difficulties and disparities persist in Northern Ireland. In 2023, Northern Ireland's gross domestic product per capita (£32,944, or about \$44,440) was below the UK's average (£39,845, or about \$53,750).⁵⁸ As of January 2026, Northern Ireland had the largest annual increase (6%) in median monthly pay within the UK but was the second-lowest-earning region.⁵⁹ Northern Ireland has a persistently higher rate of economic inactivity (26.5% in the fourth quarter of 2025) than the UK overall (20.8% in the same quarter), exacerbated by long-term illness and disability in the aftermath of the pandemic, and a high proportion of working-age individuals with no formal qualifications.⁶⁰ Studies indicate the historically poorest areas in Northern Ireland remain so, and many of these bore the brunt of the Troubles. Although many of the areas considered the most deprived are predominantly Catholic, others are predominantly Protestant. Some experts contend the most economically disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland have benefitted the least from the so-called *peace dividend*.⁶¹

At the same time, Northern Ireland has made strides in promoting equality in its workforce. The gap in workforce participation between Protestants and Catholics has shrunk considerably since 1990 and has converged in the last few years. According to the most recent data available from Northern Ireland's Equality Commission, in 2023, for the second consecutive year, the share of Catholics in Northern Ireland's workforce (50.5%) was larger than the share of Protestants (49.5%); in comparison, in 1990, the share of Protestants in Northern Ireland's workforce was 65%, while the share of Catholics was 35%.⁶²

Implications of Brexit⁶³

In the UK's 2016 public referendum on EU membership, voters in Northern Ireland favored remaining in the EU, 56% to 44% (the UK overall voted in favor of leaving the EU, 52% to 48%). Brexit has posed challenges for Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions and economic interests and exacerbated societal divisions. Brexit also has renewed longer-term questions about Northern Ireland's constitutional status as part of the UK.

Maintaining a post-Brexit open border on the island of Ireland was a key goal, and a major stumbling block, in negotiating the UK's withdrawal agreement with the EU (Ireland remains an

⁵⁶ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index Quarter 3 2025*, January 15, 2026.

⁵⁷ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, February 17, 2026.

⁵⁸ Matthew Ward and Daniel Harari, *Regional and National Economic Indicators*, UK House of Commons Library, February 4, 2026.

⁵⁹ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, February 17, 2026.

⁶⁰ Ulster University, *Economic Inactivity: Who, What, Where, Why?*, January 2024; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, February 17, 2026.

⁶¹ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017*, November 2017; Duncan Morrow, *Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Review*, University of Ulster, 2019, pp. 32-35; Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, *Reconciliation and Deprivation: Twin Challenges for Northern Ireland*, May 2023.

⁶² Data applies to Northern Ireland's "total monitored workforce," as defined in and required by Northern Ireland's fair employment legislation; "total monitored workforce" does not include the self-employed, school teachers, or those in private sector companies with ten or less employees. See Northern Ireland Equality Commission: for 2023 data, *Fair Employment Monitoring Report No. 34*, released June 19, 2025; for 1990 data, *Fair Employment Monitoring Report No. 33*, released July 10, 2024, p. 21.

⁶³ For more background on Brexit, see CRS Report R46730, *Brexit: Overview, Trade, and Northern Ireland*, coordinated by Derek E. Mix.

EU member state). In 2019, post-Brexit trade and customs arrangements for Northern Ireland were set out in a Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to the UK-EU withdrawal agreement.⁶⁴ The protocol's terms were aimed at ensuring an open border on the island of Ireland while also respecting EU single market rules.

The UK withdrew from the EU on January 31, 2020, ending its 47-year membership in the bloc. Following an 11-month transition period (during which the UK continued to participate in the EU's single market and customs union), the post-Brexit arrangements in the Northern Ireland protocol took effect on January 1, 2021. The DUP was the only major Northern Ireland political party to support Brexit but often was at odds with Brexit's implementation by successive UK governments. The subsequent 2023 Windsor Framework agreed between the UK and the EU and a 2024 UK-DUP agreement sought to address DUP concerns about the post-Brexit arrangements and to reduce political and societal tensions in Northern Ireland.

The Irish Border and Post-Brexit Arrangements

At the time of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the EU membership of both the UK and the Republic of Ireland was regarded as essential to underpinning the political settlement by providing a common European identity for unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland. EU law also provided a supporting framework for guaranteeing the human rights, equality, and nondiscrimination provisions of the peace accord. Since 1998, as security checkpoints were dismantled in accordance with the peace agreement and decreasing levels of violence, and because both the UK and Ireland belonged to the EU's single market and customs union, the circuitous 300-mile land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland effectively disappeared. The open border served as an important political and psychological symbol on both sides of the sectarian divide and helped produce a dynamic cross-border economy.

UK, Irish, and EU leaders asserted repeatedly that they did not desire a post-Brexit *hard border* with customs checks and physical infrastructure on the island of Ireland. Security assessments suggested that if border or custom posts were reinstated, violent dissident groups opposed to the peace process would view such infrastructure as targets. Some experts feared that such violence would threaten the region's security and stability and potentially put the peace process at risk.⁶⁵

Many in Northern Ireland and Ireland also were eager to maintain an open border to ensure "frictionless" trade, safeguard the North-South economy, and protect community relations. People in border communities worried that any hardening of the border could affect daily travel across the border to work, shop, or visit family and friends. Studies conducted in 2017-2018 suggested there were upward of 300 public and private border crossing points along the border; during the Troubles, only a fraction of crossing points were open and hour-long delays due to security measures and bureaucratic hurdles were common.⁶⁶

Some Brexit advocates contended that Ireland and the EU were exaggerating the security concerns about the border. Those of this view also noted that, although the Good Friday Agreement commits the UK to normalizing security arrangements (including the removal of

⁶⁴ Government of the UK, *New Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration*, October 19, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-withdrawal-agreement-and-political-declaration>; and Government of the UK, *New Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and Political Declaration*, October 19, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-protocol-on-irelandnorthern-ireland-and-political-declaration>.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Henry McDonald, "Police Chief Says 'Hard Brexit' Irish Border Would Be Paramilitary Target," *Guardian*, February 7, 2018.

⁶⁶ Sarah Lyall, "On Irish Border, Worries That Brexit Will Undo a Hard-Won Peace," *New York Times*, August 5, 2017; Maeve Sheehan, "Irish Army Identifies 300 Border Crossing Points," *Belfast Telegraph*, December 17, 2018.

security installations “consistent with the level of threat”), it does not explicitly require an open border. The Irish government and many officials and stakeholders in Northern Ireland, as well as elsewhere in the UK, argued that an open border had become intrinsic to peace and to ensuring fulfillment of the Good Friday Agreement’s provisions on north-south cooperation on cross-border issues (such as transportation, agriculture, and the environment).⁶⁷

The Northern Ireland Protocol and Implementation Challenges

Under the terms of the protocol agreed by the UK and EU, Northern Ireland would remain legally in the UK customs territory but would maintain regulatory alignment with the EU. The protocol’s provisions eliminated the need for checks on trade in goods at the land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland but essentially created a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (often termed the *Irish Sea border*). Any physical checks necessary to ensure regulatory and customs compliance for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would be conducted at ports or points of entry away from the politically sensitive land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

The DUP and other unionists strongly opposed the post-Brexit arrangements in the protocol, contending they would jeopardize Northern Ireland’s economy, participation in the UK’s internal market, and position as part of the UK. Even before Brexit, demographic trends in Northern Ireland (in which Catholics now outnumber Protestants) and changes in societal attitudes (especially among young people, who may not be as wedded to traditional religious or ethnic identities) were causing some in the unionist community to perceive a loss in unionist traditions and dominance. The initial post-Brexit trade arrangements arguably enhanced a sense of unionist disenfranchisement, partly by raising concerns that Northern Ireland could be drawn closer to the Republic of Ireland’s economic orbit and this could be a precursor to a united Ireland.⁶⁸

After the Northern Ireland protocol took effect on January 1, 2021, implementation and operational challenges soon emerged.⁶⁹ The new customs and regulatory requirements on goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain posed trade and administrative difficulties for some businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland, despite initial grace periods for full implementation of the new rules for agri-food products, medicines, and other items. Problems included shipping delays and product shortages, especially for Northern Ireland supermarkets dependent on suppliers elsewhere in the UK.⁷⁰ Unionist and loyalist unease with the protocol and subsequent implementation challenges may have factored into the violence and rioting that erupted in several cities and towns across Northern Ireland in March and April 2021.⁷¹

⁶⁷ John Campbell, “Brexit: Does the Irish Peace Accord Rule Out a Hard Border?,” BBC News, January 30, 2019; Tom McTague, “Brexit’s Ulster Problem,” *Politico*, June 12, 2019.

⁶⁸ Ceylan Yeginsu, “In Northern Ireland, Brexit Deal Is Seen as Betrayal,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2019; Simon Carswell, “Loyalists on Brexit: A One-Way Route to an Economic United Ireland,” *Irish Times*, January 30, 2020; Rory Carroll, “Northern Ireland Clashes Reflect Loyalists’ Fear of Marginalisation,” *Guardian*, April 5, 2021; Dan Haverty, “How Brexit Lit the Fuse in Northern Ireland,” *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2021.

⁶⁹ Since January 2021, physical checks necessary to ensure EU regulatory and customs compliance have been conducted at ports or points of entry on the northeast coast of Northern Ireland upon arrival from Great Britain.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Shawn Pogatchnik, “Supermarket Pleas Mount as Brexit Leaves Northern Ireland Shelves Bare,” *Politico*, January 13, 2021.

⁷¹ Boredom due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, especially among young people, and frustration among some unionists following a March 2021 decision to not prosecute social distancing violations at a large 2020 funeral for a former high-ranking IRA official, also may have contributed to the rioting. See, Shawn Pogatchnik, “Northern Ireland ‘Playing with Matches’ amid Brexit Trade Deal Tensions,” *Politico*, April 7, 2021; and Stephen Castle, “Northern Ireland Sees Spasm of Violence as Old Tensions Resurface,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2021.

Brexit also eroded trust between the UK and Irish governments. As the guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, cooperation between the UK and Ireland is deemed essential to the continued functioning and implementation of the peace accord.⁷² The UK government and the DUP increasingly argued that the protocol was not sustainable, called for substantial changes to the protocol, and repeatedly threatened to suspend parts of it.⁷³ Sinn Fein, other nationalists, and the Irish government maintained that the protocol was the only viable option to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. The EU rejected UK and DUP calls to fundamentally renegotiate the protocol and asserted that any measures to resolve implementation problems must be found “within the framework” of the protocol.⁷⁴

The 2023 Windsor Framework and the 2024 UK-DUP Deal

The 2023 UK-EU Windsor Framework and the 2024 UK-DUP agreement sought to address implementation challenges and other concerns with Northern Ireland’s post-Brexit arrangements.

- **2023 Windsor Framework.**⁷⁵ Announced in February 2023 by the UK and EU after nearly two years of negotiations, the Windsor Framework left the basic architecture of the protocol in place but sought to reduce customs checks and paperwork for goods from Great Britain remaining in Northern Ireland. The framework includes simpler rules for certain agri-food products entering Northern Ireland and sets out that UK health and safety standards (rather than EU standards) would apply to all retail food and drink intended for end consumption in Northern Ireland (thereby ensuring that Northern Ireland consumers could still buy certain iconic British products, such as fresh sausages). Both the UK and the EU stressed that the Windsor Framework sought to provide solutions to protocol-related issues affecting everyday life for people and businesses in Northern Ireland. According to UK officials, the Windsor Framework narrowed the range of EU laws applicable in Northern Ireland to less than 3% overall, needed to maintain Northern Ireland’s access to the EU single market. Among other measures, the framework also introduced a new mechanism, known as the *Stormont brake*, to allow Northern Ireland legislators to object to the automatic application of changes in EU goods rules in Northern Ireland. UK and EU officials officially approved the Windsor Framework in March 2023 and the new trade rules came into force in October 2023.
- **2024 UK-DUP Deal.** Throughout the rest of 2023, the UK government sought to address the DUP’s remaining concerns about the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland. In late January 2024, the UK government proposed operational changes to the Windsor Framework and other measures in a new *Safeguarding the Union* document (along with two pieces of implementing legislation,

⁷² Pat Leahy, “NI Protocol Tensions Threaten UK-Ireland, UK-EU and UK-US Relations,” *Irish Times*, June 11, 2021.

⁷³ See, for example, Government of the UK, *Northern Ireland Protocol: The Way Forward*, July 21, 2021, and Democratic Unionist Party, *Speech by DUP Leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP*, September 9, 2021.

⁷⁴ European Commission, “Statement by Vice-President Maros Sefcovic Following Today’s Announcement by the UK Government Regarding the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland,” press release, July 21, 2021.

⁷⁵ The Windsor Framework consists of a package of documents, released February 27, 2023, and available from the Government of the UK, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-windsor-framework>. Also see, the European Commission, “Questions and Answers: Political Agreement in Principle on the Windsor Framework, a New Way Forward for the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland,” February 27, 2023.

subsequently debated and approved by the UK parliament).⁷⁶ Key elements in the deal sought to reduce checks and paperwork further on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland; then-DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson reportedly stated that these provisions effectively remove the border in the UK internal market (i.e., the Irish sea border).⁷⁷ Other key provisions sought to reassure unionists of Northern Ireland's place in the UK, to promote trade within the UK, and to provide additional guarantees regarding implementation of the Stormont brake.

UK officials reportedly sought to portray the changes outlined in *Safeguarding the Union* as “significant” but also stressed that they would not alter the “fundamentals” of the Windsor Framework as agreed with the EU.⁷⁸ Some analysts assessed that the changes to the post-Brexit trading rules for Northern Ireland in the UK-DUP deal were relatively minimal and they characterized *Safeguarding the Union* as designed largely to reaffirm Northern Ireland's place in the UK and the UK's internal market.⁷⁹ Some in the DUP argued that the Irish Sea border would still exist, and opposed the DUP's decision to agree to reestablish Northern Ireland's devolved government.⁸⁰ Some nationalists raised concerns that some elements in the UK command paper, such as promoting internal UK trade, could undermine north-south cooperation on the island of Ireland and the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement.⁸¹

In December 2024, in accordance with the terms agreed in the Northern Ireland protocol/Windsor Framework, the Northern Ireland Assembly held a vote on whether to maintain the region's post-Brexit arrangements. Assembly members approved continuing the arrangements by a majority vote of 48 to 36. Sinn Fein, Alliance, and other nationalist members voted in favor; the DUP and other unionists voted against. Given the lack of cross-community support, the post-Brexit arrangements were approved to continue for another four years (if maintaining the arrangements had received cross-community support, they would have been extended for eight years).⁸²

In May 2025, the UK government and the EU announced the outlines of a new, wide-ranging deal aimed at resetting relations post-Brexit and enhancing cooperation on issues ranging from fishing to security.⁸³ As part of this deal, the UK government agreed to align with EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules for agri-food products, thereby aligning SPS rules in Great Britain with those that apply in Northern Ireland under the Windsor Framework. Such alignment would

⁷⁶ Government of the UK, *Safeguarding the Union*, released January 31, 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ba3b7bee7d490013984a59/Command_Paper__1_.pdf. Also see, David Torrance, *Northern Ireland Devolution: Safeguarding the Union*, UK House of Commons Library, April 3, 2024.

⁷⁷ As quoted in, John Campbell, “DUP Deal Aimed at Restoring Power Sharing in Northern Ireland Is Published,” BBC News, January 31, 2024.

⁷⁸ As quoted in, “DUP Says Stormont Deal Has Delivered ‘Fundamental Change’ to UK-EU Trading Rules,” *BreakingNews.ie*, January 31, 2024.

⁷⁹ John Campbell, “DUP Deal: Government Command Paper Bids to Reassure Unionists,” BBC News, February 1, 2024; Peter Foster, “Four Years on and Brexit Still Isn't Done,” *Financial Times*, February 1, 2024; Joël Reland, “The Northern Ireland Deal Offers Meaningful Change—If Westminster Keeps Its Word,” *UK in a Changing Europe*, February 2, 2024.

⁸⁰ See, for example, David Lynch and Nick Lester, “DUP Split over Stormont Deal as Nigel Dodds Says Sea Border Concerns Remain,” *BreakingNews.ie.*, February 1, 2024; Adrian Rutherford, “Three Top DUP Figures Say There Is ‘No Dispute’ That Irish Sea Border Remains,” *Belfast Telegraph*, February 10, 2024.

⁸¹ See, for example, Freya McClements, “UK Government ‘Undermining’ Belfast Agreement with Pro-unionist Stance, SDLP Leader Says,” *Irish Times*, February 12, 2024.

⁸² See Northern Ireland Assembly, *Democratic Consent Resolution*, <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/details.aspx?&ses=0&doc=419985&pn=0&sid=vd>. Also see, “Stormont Votes to Extend Post-Brexit Trading Arrangements,” BBC News, December 10, 2024.

⁸³ European Council, “EU-UK Summit 2025: Outcome Documents,” May 19, 2025.

presumably eliminate the need for physical checks on agri-food products from Great Britain at Northern Ireland ports and further ease trade. UK-EU negotiations to flesh out the SPS agreement are ongoing; UK and EU officials reportedly aim to finalize the necessary legal instruments and implement the agreement by mid-2027.⁸⁴

Economic Concerns

Following the 2016 UK referendum, some experts expressed concern about Brexit's possible economic consequences for Northern Ireland. Some studies indicated that Northern Ireland depended more on the EU market (and especially that of Ireland) for its exports than did the rest of the UK.⁸⁵ According to 2023 data (most recent available), approximately 70% of Northern Ireland's exports (goods and services) went to the EU, including about 54% to Ireland, which remains Northern Ireland's top single export and import partner.⁸⁶

Many officials and analysts in Northern Ireland and Ireland viewed maintaining an open border after Brexit as crucial to protecting the island's cross-border economy, as well as labor markets and industries that operate on an all-island basis. Many manufacturers in Northern Ireland and Ireland depend on integrated supply chains north and south of the border. For example, raw materials that go into making milk, cheese, butter, and alcoholic drinks often cross the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland several times for processing and packaging.⁸⁷

The DUP objected in part to the post-Brexit arrangements because of concerns that these arrangements could negatively impact economic ties between the UK and Northern Ireland. UK and DUP leaders asserted that the rest of the UK was overall more important economically to Northern Ireland than the EU given the value of exports. According to 2023 data (most recent available), sales to other parts of the UK (£17.1 billion) were almost double the value of exports to Ireland (£8.7 billion) and nearly six times the value of exports to the rest of the EU (£2.6 billion).⁸⁸

Supporters of the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland maintain that they offer the region unique economic opportunities, with privileged access to both the UK internal market and the EU single market.⁸⁹ As part of the UK customs union, Northern Ireland also is able to participate in future UK trade deals. Some officials and experts suggested the post-Brexit arrangements may help make Northern Ireland a more attractive destination for foreign direct investment.⁹⁰ In an October 2025 poll by Queen's University Belfast, 46% of respondents viewed

⁸⁴ Stefano Fella et al., *The UK-EU Reset: Next Steps After the May 2025 Summit*, UK House of Commons Library, July 29, 2025, pp. 36-37; John Campbell, "Sea Border for Food and Agricultural Products in Place Until 2027," BBC News, August 27, 2025.

⁸⁵ Report of the UK House of Lords European Union Committee, *Brexit: UK-Irish Relations*, December 2016; Lisa O'Carroll, "Pro-Brexit UK Regions More Dependent on EU for Exports, Study Finds," *Guardian*, July 17, 2022.

⁸⁶ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Economic Trade Statistics 2023*, December 11, 2024, <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/northern-ireland-economic-trade-statistics-2023.html>.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Simon Marks, "Brexit Is (Maybe) the Ruin of Irish Whiskey," *Politico*, March 3, 2017; Colm Kelpie, "Brexit: How Would No-Deal Affect Northern Ireland?," BBC News, September 22, 2019.

⁸⁸ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Economic Trade Statistics 2023*, December 11, 2024.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Andrew McDonald, "Rishi Sunak Gives EU Windsor Framework Deal the Hard Sell in Belfast," *Politico*, February 28, 2023.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, "Minister Pitches the North's Unique Business Proposition to US Business Leaders," press release, March 14, 2024.

the Northern Ireland protocol/Windsor Framework as having a positive impact on Northern Ireland's economy and 61% regarded the post-Brexit arrangements as potentially beneficial.⁹¹

Some Northern Ireland retailers continue to report implementation problems with the post-Brexit arrangements, and some stakeholders point to increased administrative burdens and costs for Northern Ireland businesses and consumers.⁹² An independent review of the Windsor Framework published in September 2025 found that small- and medium-sized companies in Northern Ireland faced “major problems” navigating the post-Brexit rules.⁹³ In November 2025, the UK government announced £16 million (about \$21 million) in new funding to support Northern Ireland businesses in dealing with the new rules. UK officials also express confidence that UK-EU efforts to conclude an SPS agreement for agri-food products will help reduce red tape and lower costs for businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland.⁹⁴

Constitutional Status and Border Poll Prospects

Brexit has revived questions about Northern Ireland's constitutional status. Sinn Fein has argued that “Brexit changes everything” and could generate greater support for a united Ireland.⁹⁵ Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, Sinn Fein has repeatedly called for a *border poll* (a referendum on whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK or join the Republic of Ireland) in the hopes of realizing its long-term goal of Irish unification. As noted previously, the Good Friday Agreement provides for the possibility of a border poll, in line with the consent principle. Any decision to hold a border poll in Northern Ireland on its constitutional status rests with the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who must call one if it “appears likely” that “a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland.”⁹⁶

At present, opinion polls indicate that more people in Northern Ireland continue to support the region's position as part of the UK. A February 2024 poll found 54% in favor of Northern Ireland's continued position within the UK compared with 39% for a united Ireland.⁹⁷ A poll conducted by the *Irish Times* in the second half of 2024 found that 48% of those polled supported Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK versus 34% in favor of a united Ireland (with 14% undecided). In comparison to previous *Irish Times* polling in 2022 and 2023, the 2024 results indicated a slight decrease in support for Northern Ireland's continued position within the UK and a small uptick in support for a united Ireland.⁹⁸

Several factors could influence whether momentum builds for a border poll in the medium to longer term. As seen by Northern Ireland's 2021 census results, demographics are shifting in

⁹¹ David Phinnemore and Katy Hayward, *Testing the Temperature 14: What Do Voters in Northern Ireland Think About the Windsor Framework and UK-EU Relations?*, Queen's University Belfast, October 2025.

⁹² John Campbell, “Small Businesses Being ‘Crucified’ by Sea Border,” BBC News, December 4, 2024; John Campbell, “Supermarkets Still Facing Sea Border Problems,” BBC News, February 22, 2025.

⁹³ Government of the UK, *Independent Review of the Windsor Framework by the Rt Hon Lord Murphy*, September 4, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-windsor-framework-report>.

⁹⁴ Jayne McCormack, “UK Accepts Post-Brexit Trade Arrangements Review for NI,” BBC News, December 16, 2025.

⁹⁵ Sinn Fein Discussion Document, *Towards a United Ireland*, November 2016.

⁹⁶ UK Government, Northern Ireland Act 1998.

⁹⁷ Suzanne Breen, “More People in NI Would Vote to Stay Part of UK If Border Poll Was Called,” *Belfast Telegraph*, February 18, 2024.

⁹⁸ Support for Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK was 50% in 2022 and 51% in 2023; support for Irish unification was 27% in 2022 and 31% in 2023. Pat Leahy, “Support for Irish Unification Growing in Northern Ireland, Poll Finds,” *Irish Times*, February 7, 2025.

Northern Ireland, with those of a Catholic background now outnumbering those of a Protestant background. The post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland could lead to enhanced trade ties with Ireland and greater economic integration (reports indicate increased cross-border trade since 2021).⁹⁹ Despite a decrease in vote share for Sinn Fein in elections in Ireland in 2024, Sinn Fein's electoral successes in Northern Ireland and key party leader Michelle O'Neill's role as First Minister could keep political attention focused on the question of a possible border poll.¹⁰⁰

Societal attitudes in Northern Ireland are changing as well, especially among young people, who may not be as wedded to traditional religious or ethnic identities. Analysts suggest that non-aligned voters who do not identify as unionist or nationalist may be the decisive swing bloc in any future border poll and that such voters are likely to be swayed on the question of Irish unification more by its implications for issues such as the economy, health care, and pensions than by identity politics.¹⁰¹ The aforementioned *Irish Times* poll conducted in 2024 found that roughly 18% of respondents in Northern Ireland from a Catholic background were opposed to Irish unification and 16% were undecided.¹⁰²

Irish unification also would be subject to Ireland's consent and approval. Opinion polls in Ireland consistently show a relatively high level of support for unification (typically over 60%).¹⁰³ Since 2021, the Irish government has sponsored a "Shared Island" initiative to promote cross-border cooperation and foster dialogue and research in support of building consensus on a "shared future."¹⁰⁴ Irish officials have asserted that voters, both north and south, must have a clear idea of what a united Ireland would look like—and how unionists would be accommodated politically—before any border poll is held.¹⁰⁵ In 2025, some Irish officials and other stakeholders called for the Irish government to begin planning for a border poll and/or preparing for a united Ireland (including Ireland's new president, Catherine Connolly, while campaigning in October 2025 for the largely ceremonial position).¹⁰⁶

Some concerns exist in Ireland about unification, including the possibility that it could spark renewed loyalist violence in Northern Ireland and its potential economic costs. The UK provides

⁹⁹ Shawn Pogatchnik, "All-Ireland Trade Booming in Post-Brexit Economy," *Politico*, February 15, 2022; Ryan McAleer, "Trade in 2023: The Year When the Protocol Became the Windsor Framework," *Irish News*, December 27, 2023; John Campbell, "Value of NI Sales and Exports Up, New Figures Suggest," BBC News, December 11, 2024; Ryan McAleer, "Value of Cross-border Trade Reached Record Levels in 2025, Says Irish Statistics Body," *Irish News*, February 17, 2026.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Megan Specia, "Northern Ireland Has a Sinn Fein Leader. It's a Landmark Moment," *New York Times*, February 3, 2024; Padraic Halpin and Amanda Ferguson, "Sinn Fein Struggles Deal Blow to Nationalists' United Ireland Dream," Reuters, November 21, 2024.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Peter Foster and Laura Noonan, "Brexit Ignites the Debate About a United Ireland," *Financial Times*, April 6, 2021; Rory Carroll, "It's Closer Now Than It's Ever Been: Could There Soon Be a United Ireland?," *Guardian*, October 6, 2022; Megan Stack, "Is Ireland Headed for a Merger?," *New York Times*, November 21, 2023.

¹⁰² Pat Leahy, "Support for Irish Unification Growing in Northern Ireland, Poll Finds," *Irish Times*, February 7, 2025.

¹⁰³ In the 2024 *Irish Times* poll, for example, 64% of respondents in Ireland supported unification; 17% were opposed. Pat Leahy, "Support for Irish Unification Growing in Northern Ireland, Poll Finds," *Irish Times*, February 7, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ In April 2025, the Irish government recommitted to the Shared Island initiative, including announcing €1 billion through 2035. See Government of Ireland, *Shared Island Initiative*, <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/campaigns/shared-island/>.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, "Leo Varadkar Says Border Poll Not Appropriate at This Time," BBC News, July 3, 2022; Jude Webber, "Ireland's Reunification Talk Grows Louder," *Financial Times*, October 9, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Ireland's president is the head of state and commander of the armed forces but plays a largely ceremonial role. President Connolly was inaugurated in November 2025, for a seven-year term. See, Mark Hennessy, "Irish Government Must Lead Unification Preparations, Says Varadkar," *Irish Times*, October 8, 2025; Kevin Sharkey, "Presidential Candidate Calls for Irish Unity Preparation," BBC News, October 12, 2025; and "Irish Labour Leader Calls for Border Poll Timeline," BBC News, November 15, 2025.

Northern Ireland annually with a roughly £10 billion (about \$13 billion) budget subsidy to make up the shortfall in the region's tax revenues. Although part of this subsidy helps to fund Northern Ireland's share of the UK's national debt and defense spending—costs that would not be incurred to the same extent by Dublin—Northern Ireland's budget deficit points to concerns about the region's economy and reliance on the public sector. In a 2021 poll, 67% of people surveyed in Ireland would support unification, but 54% reported they would be unwilling to pay higher taxes to fund a united Ireland.¹⁰⁷ In a December 2023 poll conducted in Ireland, 52% of respondents believed that Irish unity would be costly in the short term, even if beneficial in the long term.¹⁰⁸

U.S. Policy and Congressional Interests

Support for the Peace Process

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed the Good Friday Agreement as the best framework for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The Clinton Administration was instrumental in helping the parties forge the agreement, and the George W. Bush Administration strongly backed its full implementation. U.S. officials welcomed the end to the IRA's armed campaign in 2005 and the restoration of the devolved government in 2007. During the Obama Administration, in 2009, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Northern Ireland, addressed the Assembly, and urged Northern Ireland's leaders to reach an agreement on devolving policing and justice powers. In 2010, President Obama welcomed the resulting Hillsborough Agreement.

Like its predecessors, the first Trump Administration offered support and encouragement to Northern Ireland. In 2017, a U.S. State Department spokesperson asserted that the United States remained "ready to support efforts that ensure full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent follow-on cross-party agreements."¹⁰⁹ In 2020, President Trump appointed his former acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland.

President Biden repeatedly asserted a strong and enduring U.S. commitment to the Good Friday Agreement.¹¹⁰ Following the May 2022 Assembly election, the U.S. State Department called on Northern Ireland political leaders to work together to reestablish a functioning power-sharing government.¹¹¹ President Biden visited Northern Ireland in April 2023 to mark the peace accord's 25th anniversary.¹¹² In February 2024, the Biden Administration welcomed the restoration of Northern Ireland's devolved government.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Fionnan Sheahan, "Majority Favour a United Ireland, but Just 22pc Would Pay for It," *Irish Independent*, May 1, 2021; Eoin Burke-Kennedy, "What Would Be the Economic Costs and Benefits of a United Ireland?," *Irish Times*, May 7, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ John Garry et al., "Northern Protestants Pessimistic on Benefits of Irish Unity," *Irish Times*, December 5, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Statement on Northern Ireland Power-Sharing Talks," November 1, 2017.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, the White House, "Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Martin of Ireland Before Virtual Bilateral Meeting," March 17, 2022; and the White House, "Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar of Ireland," March 17, 2023.

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "Northern Ireland Assembly Elections Results," press release, May 7, 2022.

¹¹² The White House, "Remarks by President Biden Marking the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement," April 12, 2023.

¹¹³ The White House, "Statement from President Joe Biden on the Restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly," press release, February 3, 2024.

Many Members of Congress have supported the Northern Ireland peace process over the past three decades. In the 118th Congress, for example, the Senate agreed to S.Res. 157 (by unanimous consent in 2023) reiterating support for the Good Friday Agreement and commemorating its 25th anniversary. During the March 2025 Friends of Ireland luncheon at the U.S. Capitol, Speaker Mike Johnson stated, “we welcome continued efforts to promote and preserve” the Good Friday Agreement.¹¹⁴ Over the years, congressional hearings and resolutions have addressed various aspects of implementing the Good Friday Agreement. A 2022 hearing in the 117th Congress centered on the role of young people in maintaining peace in Northern Ireland.¹¹⁵

Some Members of Congress also have a long-standing interest in policing issues and human rights in Northern Ireland. In March 2022, the House passed H.Res. 888 (117th Congress) commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1972 Bloody Sunday killings and calling for justice for the victims and their families. Two hearings in 2022 discussed accountability and justice for victims of the Troubles.¹¹⁶ In 2023, some Members of Congress sent letters to the UK government expressing concerns about the UK legacy legislation.¹¹⁷ In July 2024, 25 Members sent a letter to new UK Prime Minister Starmer urging his government to swiftly repeal and replace the Legacy Act.¹¹⁸ Some Members continue to follow the status of Troubles-related investigations and incidents of suspected collusion between state security agencies and paramilitary groups, including the 1989 slaying of Belfast attorney Patrick Finucane. In November 2024, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a hearing on the status of the Finucane case and UK government plans to hold a public inquiry.¹¹⁹

In the 117th Congress, some Members urged President Biden to appoint a new special envoy to Northern Ireland in light of heightened Brexit-related tensions and the stalemate in reestablishing Northern Ireland’s devolved government.¹²⁰ In December 2022, the U.S. State Department announced the appointment of former Representative Joe Kennedy III as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs. The Biden Administration tasked the Special Envoy to focus on supporting economic development and growth in Northern Ireland—including through attracting more U.S. investment to Northern Ireland—and strengthening people-to-people ties.¹²¹ In March 2025, some Members of Congress called on President Trump to appoint a new special envoy to Northern Ireland.¹²²

¹¹⁴ Office of Representative Mike Johnson, “Speaker Johnson Hosts Annual Friends of Ireland Luncheon,” press release, March 12, 2025.

¹¹⁵ House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, *The Role of Young People in Fostering Peace in Northern Ireland*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., April 28, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, *Northern Ireland: Accountability at Risk*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., February 15, 2022; and House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, *Truth and Accountability for Victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., July 15, 2022.

¹¹⁷ Office of Rep. Brendan Boyle, “Boyle, Keating, Fitzpatrick Lead Congressional Letter to British Prime Minister Over Northern Ireland Legacy Legislation,” press release, January 20, 2023; Ray O’Hanlon, “Congress Members Protest British Legacy Bill,” *Irish Echo*, August 13, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Office of Rep. Brendan Boyle, “Boyle Leads Bipartisan Letter to New British Prime Minister Calling for Immediate Repeal of Troubles Act,” press release, July 15, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, *Northern Ireland: The Patrick Finucane Case*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., November 19, 2024.

¹²⁰ Suzanne Lynch, “US Politicians Urge Biden to Appoint Northern Ireland Envoy,” *Irish Times*, May 13, 2021; Kerry O’Shea, “Congressional Group Reiterates U.S. Commitment to Northern Ireland,” *IrishCentral.com*, August 5, 2022.

¹²¹ U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, “Announcement of Joe Kennedy III as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs,” press statement, December 19, 2022.

¹²² See, for example, Office of Representative Bill Keating, “Keating Leads 36 Colleagues in Bipartisan Letter Urging (continued...)”

Views on Brexit's Implications for Northern Ireland

As challenges emerged in implementing the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland, the Biden Administration stressed that Brexit must not undermine the Northern Ireland peace process or jeopardize the open border on the island of Ireland. The Biden Administration supported the Northern Ireland protocol as “a way to manage the practical challenges around the EU single market while preventing a return of a hard border” on the island of Ireland and welcomed the subsequent Windsor Framework.¹²³ Some Members of Congress also maintained that Brexit must not impede the peace process.¹²⁴ S.Res. 157 (agreed in the 118th Congress, as noted previously) included an expression of support for the Windsor Framework.

Some in Congress have tied their support for a possible future U.S.-UK free trade agreement to protecting the peace process (negotiations on a post-Brexit U.S.-UK free trade agreement began during the first Trump Administration but did not proceed under the Biden Administration). Both H.Res. 585 (116th Congress, passed in 2019) and S.Res. 117 (117th Congress, passed in 2021) reaffirmed support for the Good Friday Agreement and asserted that any future U.S.-UK trade or other bilateral agreements must consider Brexit's impact on Northern Ireland. S.Res. 134 (117th Congress, passed in 2022) expressed support for concluding U.S. trade agreements with both the UK and the EU and noted that doing so should be “contingent” upon a UK-EU agreement that “fully protects and preserves the Good Friday Agreement.”

International Fund for Ireland

The United States has provided development aid to Northern Ireland primarily through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which was created in 1986. The UK and Irish governments established the IFI based on objectives in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, but the IFI is an independent entity. It supports economic regeneration and social development projects in areas most affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland and in the border areas of the Republic of Ireland; in doing so, the IFI has sought to foster dialogue and reconciliation. According to the U.S. State Department, as of 2022, the United States had contributed more than \$549 million to the IFI since its establishment.¹²⁵ The EU, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have provided funding for the IFI as well. In the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. appropriations for the IFI averaged around \$23 million annually; in the 2000s, U.S. appropriations averaged \$18 million each year.¹²⁶

According to the IFI, the vast majority of projects supported with seed funding have been located in disadvantaged areas that have suffered from high unemployment, a lack of facilities, and little private sector investment. In its first two decades, IFI projects in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties focused on economic and business development and sectors such as

President Trump to Appoint a Special Envoy to Northern Ireland,” March 7, 2025; and Mark Hennessy, “Trump Urged to Appoint NI Special Envoy to Support US Interests After Kennedy Departure,” *Irish Times*, March 10, 2025.

¹²³ The White House, “Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on President Biden's Upcoming Virtual Bilateral with Ireland,” March 17, 2021; Ray O'Hanlon, “Biden, Reps. Welcome Framework Deal,” *Irish Echo*, March 1, 2023.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Office of Representative Nancy Pelosi, “Pelosi Statement on Windsor Framework,” press release, February 27, 2023.

¹²⁵ U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Ireland*, fact sheet, June 2, 2022.

¹²⁶ The Anglo-Irish Agreement Support Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-415) authorizes U.S. contributions to the International Fund for Ireland.

tourism, agriculture, and technology. In 2006, the IFI announced it would begin shifting its focus toward projects aimed at promoting community reconciliation and overcoming past divisions.

Successive U.S. Administrations and some Members of Congress have backed the IFI as a means to promote economic development and encourage divided communities to work together. Support for paramilitary and dissident groups in Northern Ireland traditionally has been strongest in communities with high levels of unemployment and economic deprivation. Many observers have long viewed the creation of jobs and economic opportunity as a key part of resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland and have supported the IFI as part of the peace process. At times, critics have questioned the IFI's effectiveness, viewing certain IFI projects as largely wasteful or as potentially reinforcing sectarianism by requiring project recipients and attendees to identify their religion or community background in an attempt to ensure cross-community participation.¹²⁷

Starting in FY2011, successive Administrations allocated funds from Economic Support Fund (ESF) resources to the IFI (in the absence of a congressional specification) in the form of a grant for IFI activities to support peace and reconciliation programs. The United States provided \$2.5 million per year in ESF to the IFI between FY2011 and FY2014; \$750,000 per year from FY2015 to FY2019; \$2 million for FY2020; \$2.5 million for FY2021; \$3 million for FY2022; and \$4 million for FY2023.¹²⁸ With the Trump Administration's decision to pause and review foreign assistance in January 2025 and reported subsequent cancellation of assistance awards, it is unclear what funds, if any, might be allocated for the IFI in the future. Some Members of Congress reportedly have voiced support for retaining U.S. funding for the IFI.¹²⁹

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¹²⁷ See, for example, Sean Byrne et al., "The Role of the International Fund for Ireland and the European Union Peace II Fund in Reducing Violence and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland," *International Politics*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2010), pp. 229-250.

¹²⁸ As reported for each fiscal year in the U.S. Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs' annual Congressional Budget Justifications.

¹²⁹ Ray O'Hanlon, "Congress Members Write Trump, Rubio Over IFI," *Irish Echo*, September 3, 2025.

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