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My Symbols or Our Symbols? The Effect of Inclusive Narratives on the Acceptability of Out-Group Symbols

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ABSTRACT

There are intense debates worldwide about cultural representations, including statues, flags, symbols, street names and history textbooks. They highlight the need to understand the political implications of how cultural entities are framed. Previous researchers have found that it matters whether

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framing narratives are inclusive or exclusive. Here, we hypothesise that inclusive narratives around the political symbols of ostensible out-groups will increase positive attitudes towards the symbols and increase support for their official adoption. Using data from (pre-registered) experiments in Ireland, North and South, we found asymmetric effects. When inclusively framed, 'British' symbols are more positively viewed by Southerners from the Republic of Ireland and Catholics from Northern Ireland and attract greater support as official features of a potential united Ireland. But no similar effects are observed on the views of Protestants from Northern Ireland about 'Irish' symbols. Antagonistic historical narratives over political symbols certainly matter, but the mutability of attitudes may vary across groups.

INTRODUCTION

Arguments over the causal and interpretive roles of culture, and especially political culture, have persisted since the global expansion of social science in the twentieth century.[1] One potent contemporary manifestation of such arguments is the prevalence of intense debates over cultural representations in politics—for example, over public statues, street names, other forms of memorialisation, and history textbooks in schools. The frequently polarising nature of these debates highlights the need to understand the political implications of the framing of cultural representations. In their examination of framing effects, Nicholas Haas and Emmy Lindstam have built on the

[1] Major contributions in the last century included those of Brian Barry, *Sociologists, economists and democracy* (Chicago, 1978), especially 47–98; Dennis J. Coyle and Richard J. Ellis (eds), *Politics, policy & culture* (Boulder, CO, 1994); Mary Douglas, *Risk and blame: essays in cultural theory* (London, 1992); Harry Eckstein, 'Culture as a foundation concept for the social sciences', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 8 (4) (1996), 471–97; H.D. Forbes, *Ethnic conflict: commerce, culture and the contact hypothesis* (New Haven, CT, 1997); Herbert J. Gans, 'Toward a reconciliation of "assimilation" and "pluralism": the interplay of acculturation and ethnic retention', *International Migration Review* 31 (4) (1997), 875–92; Herbert J. Gans, 'Symbolic ethnicity: the future of ethnic groups and cultures in America', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (1) (1979), 1–20; Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (London, 1973); Ronald Inglehart, 'The renaissance of political culture', *American Political Science Review* 82 (4) (1988), 1203–30; Adam Kuper, *Culture: the anthropologists' account* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); David D. Laitin, *Hegemony and culture: politics and religious change among the Yoruba* (Chicago, 1986); Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba (eds), *Political culture and political development* (Princeton, NJ, 1965); Ann Swidler, 'Culture in action: symbols and strategies', *American Sociological Review* 51 (2) (1986), 273–86; Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural theory* (Boulder, CO, 1990).

idea that historical narratives are central to shaping national belonging.[2] They elaborate the plausible proposition that inclusive rather than exclusive historical narratives enhance the extent to which marginalised groups perceive themselves to belong to the relevant state—and increase their propensity to seek leadership positions. Drawing on experimental data, Haas and Lindstam empirically confirmed their theoretical expectations in the illustrative case of textbooks in India. Influenced by their work, we examine the impact of inclusive rather than exclusive narratives about political symbols.

Contentious political symbols associated with one group are often viewed with hostility by members of rival groups. In-group members are often opposed to the symbols of out-groups being used officially as cultural representations on public occasions or simply in public. It is true, however, that 'reading' symbols may not be straightforward. Symbols ostensibly linked only to one group may have more complex and less divisive meanings, and such symbols may sometimes be portrayed and interpreted as 'shared' or 'inclusive'. Here we explore whether the level of general hostility to out-group symbols, and opposition to their official adoption by the state, may be at least somewhat mutable and potentially determined by different framings.

Our expectation is that out-group members' negative attitudes towards political symbols will be reduced when the symbol in question is framed with a 'shared' or 'inclusive' rather than a 'divisive' or 'exclusive' narrative. Here we investigate two types of attitudes to symbols. One may have either a positive or negative *general view* of the relevant symbol, and separately, one may support or oppose the *use* of the symbol as an official representation of the state. Two straightforward hypotheses are:

> H1 Symbols typically associated with the out-group will be *less negatively viewed* when framed as 'shared', or 'inclusive', symbols.

H2 *The official use* of symbols typically associated with the out-group *will be more accepted* when framed as 'shared', or 'inclusive' symbols.

We further expect that some people may be more sensitive to cultural framing than others, i.e. people with very firm ideological positions, or entrenched or barricaded identities,[3] will likely be more inflexible in their attitudes. So, we propose a third hypothesis:

H3 Symbols typically associated with the out-group will be less negatively viewed, and their official adoption more accepted, when framed inclusively as 'shared symbols' (rather than exclusively as 'divisive' symbols), *and this propensity will be particularly true of people who do not have strong ethno-national beliefs or strong national identity.*

We tested these general hypotheses in the illustrative case of contested political symbols on the island of Ireland. We first describe two ostensibly Irish and three ostensibly British symbols and then highlight how all five of the symbols may credibly also be inclusively framed. We then describe the experimental methods we used to examine empirically the impact of framing effects on general attitudes to the symbols, and views on whether the symbols should be officially adopted in the event of Irish unification. We then present our results and elaborate the implications of our findings for understanding the mutability or inflexibility of public opinion on political symbols on the island of Ireland.

CASE STUDY: THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

According to the Belfast–Good Friday Agreement of 1998, there is a distinct and lawful possibility that the sovereign status of Northern Ireland might change in future.[4] The place and its people might unify with the Republic

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[3] The expression 'barricaded identities' is owed to Ken Jowitt, 'Ethnicity: nice, nasty, and nihilistic', in Daniel Chirot and Martin E.P. Seligman (eds), *Ethnopolitical warfare: causes, consequences, and possible solutions* (Washington, DC, 2001), 27–36.

[4] *Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations* [known as the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement]. *Annex: Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* (Belfast, 1998).

of Ireland after affirmative referendums in the two jurisdictions.[5] Therefore, public views of the potential official adoption of out-group symbols would be salient in the context of such possible referendums. Political symbols on the island tend to be associated with the major cleavage on the core (future) constitutional question. People in Northern Ireland ('the North') who are from a Protestant background tend to identify as British and support the maintenance of the union with Great Britain. People from the Republic of Ireland ('the South') and Catholics from the North tend to identify as Irish, and to support Irish reunification. Using survey and focus group evidence, John Garry and Brendan O'Leary have found that Southerners are particularly hostile to certain possible symbolic changes under the possibility of unification, highlighting one challenge that a united Ireland could face: accommodating political symbols favoured by Northern British and Protestant unionists.[6]

Here we will focus on five political symbols. Southerners and Northern Catholics value the shamrock and the national flag of Ireland, the republican tricolour; the Commonwealth, the poppy and the Red Hand of Ulster are historically symbolically important for Northern Protestants, especially those who strongly identify as British and unionist.[7] All these symbols, or an institution with symbolic salience in the case of the Commonwealth, are ostensibly *either* Irish *or* British. Crucially, however, all can also be accurately characterised as shared or inclusive, as our brief capsule histories will demonstrate below.

Irish symbols (1): the national flag of Ireland

Originally flags were mostly the signals and banners of armies and navies. In modernity they are ubiquitous advertisements of collective identity, especially of national or popular sovereignty. No modern state is flagless. Bunreacht na hÉireann specifies that 'The national flag is the tricolour of

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[5] For discussions see Brendan O'Leary, *Making sense of a united Ireland* (Dublin, 2022); Alan Renwick et al., *Final Report of the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland* (London, 2021).

[6] John Garry and Brendan O'Leary, 'Preparing to maximise losers' consent in contested sovereignty referendums: the potential case of referendums on Irish unification', *Political Studies* 73 (2) (2024), 839–63.

[7] The status of the Red Hand of Ulster as 'British' is palpably more contestable than the Commonwealth or the poppy. The Red Hand is unquestionably a *pre*-British symbol: it predates the formation of Great Britain, and 'the British people', by centuries. But for the purposes of our experiment and this paper we use the expression 'British' to describe it. As we put in our pre-registration, the Red Hand of Ulster (along with the poppy and the Commonwealth) is 'typically associated with British-identifying people of Protestant background in Northern Ireland'.

green, white and orange.'[8] The constitutional status of *an bhratach náisiúnta*, Irish for the national flag, is one indicator of its cultural significance. Its placement precedes the constitutional article defining Irish as the national language.

The Irish national flag has international as well as national origins. In world politics, the use of a tricolour as a symbol of liberty and republicanism dates to the revolt of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century.[9] After the French revolution, the mimetic display of striped tricolours exploded on flags and emblems representing democratic and republican ideals.[10] From the 1790s, revolutionary Irish nationalists, notably in the United Irishmen, Young Ireland and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, were strongly influenced by French republican movements. So, it is no surprise that the official Irish national flag is a republican tricolour, resembling many official republican emblems in Europe and in many other parts of the world.[11]

The Irish Volunteers flew the tricolour in Dublin in the Easter Rising in 1916.[12] It was also flown during the war of independence of 1919–21, in rebel opposition to the Union flag associated with Crown forces. It then became the flag of the Irish Free State. Dead Irish political patriots, volunteers or hunger strikers were buried in coffins draped in the republican tricolour—a tradition that continued in the militant Irish Republican Army's burial of its volunteers who fought British imperialism.[13] The flag is therefore associated with both constitutional and revolutionary Irish nationalism.

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[8] Bunreacht na hÉireann, *Constitution of Ireland, as Amended* (Dublin, 1937), Article 7. The republican flag was used by the Irish Free State from its inception but it was not mentioned in its constitution, though the flag adorned the official printed copy: Saorstát Éireann, *Constitution of the Free State of Ireland* (Dublin, 1922).

[9] See Gabriella Elgenius, 'The origin of European national flags', in Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (eds), *Flag, nation and symbolism in Europe and America* (London, 2007).

[10] The flag was approved by the constituent assembly in 1790. It combined the medieval colours of Paris (red and blue), which had been worn as ribbons in the cockade of the revolutionaries, with the white of the Bourbon dynasty (said to have been added by the Marquis de Lafayette). In 1794 the placements of the red and blue stripes on the flag were reversed. At least two rival interpretations exist, which illustrate how flags may be read as cultural compromises or as unilateral affirmations. The compromise option sees the combination of the royalist white with the republican red as symbolic of national unity. The radical option sees the blue, white and red stripes as respectively representing *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*.

[11] At international forums or sporting events the Irish national flag may be confused with the flag of Côte d'Ivoire, which has the same three colours in vertical stripes. But the green stripe on the Irish flag is on the hoist side (the side closest to the flagpole), while the orange stripe is on the hoist side of the flag of Côte d'Ivoire.

[12] Other flags flown on the GPO and other buildings in Dublin that week included a green flag with a golden harp, a green flag with the words 'Irish Republic' on both sides, with lettering in gold and white, and 'the starry plough' of the socialist Irish Citizen Army.

[13] The most comprehensive treatment of flags in Irish history may be found in G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *A history of Irish flags from earliest times* (Dublin, 1979).

But it is important to recognise that the Irish flag in its original design was intended to be inclusive, and that remains the official position of the Irish state. The description of the official history and protocols attached to the national flag, which may be downloaded from the website of the Department of the Taoiseach, starts with the following sentence:

> The Irish Tricolour is intended to symbolise the inclusion and hoped-for union of the people of different traditions on this island, which is now expressed in the Constitution as the entitlement of every person born in the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish nation (regardless of ethnic origin, religion or political conviction).[14]

In the same vein, the website of a minister in the current government of Ireland describes the tricolour as a 'flag of diversity'.[15]

What is the story here? The flag's design is usually attributed to Thomas Francis Meagher (1823–67), one of the leaders of the Young Ireland rebellion of 1848, and later a brigadier general in the Union army in the US civil war—and the governor of the territory of Montana.[16] Meagher, along with William Smith O'Brien and other radicals in Young Ireland, went to France to seek political support and learn from current French republican practices. They returned with the new tricolour, said to have been made and given to them by French women who favoured the Irish cause. The design of the original is sometimes said to have differed from the current flag (the orange stripe was placed on the hoist side, and the Red Hand of Ulster decorated the white field). Whatever the truth may be, the republican tricolour was first raised by Meagher at the headquarters of the Wolfe Tone Confederate Club in Waterford in March 1848. The following month he declared that 'The white in the centre signifies a lasting truce between Orange and Green and I trust that beneath its folds the hands of Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics may be clasped in generous and heroic brotherhood.'

This gesture is not hard to explain. Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism were strongly associated with 'the wearing of the green'. Ever since the seventeenth-century Catholic forces of Confederate Ireland had

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[14] 'The national flag', available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/adc448-the-national-flag/ (5 August 2025).
[15] Jim O'Callaghan, 'The Irish tricolour – a flag of diversity', available at: https://jimocallaghan.com/the-irish-tricolour-a-flag-of-diversity/ (6 April 2025).
[16] Timothy Egan, *The immortal Irishman: the Irish revolutionary who became an American hero* (Boston, 2016).

been led by Owen Roe O'Neill, a green flag, often with a golden harp, accompanied Irish nationalist movements. Green flags were used by the Irish Volunteers in the 1780s and in the following decade by the United Irishmen. The nineteenth-century Ribbonmen, an agrarian secret society, acquired their name from the green ribbons they put in their buttonholes. It is apt that one of the best popular histories of Irish nationalism is called *The Green Flag*.[17]

The colour of popular Protestant identity in Ireland, by contrast, has been orange at least since 1795, the date of the founding of the Orange Order in Armagh. Its official name is the Loyal Orange Institution. Originally consisting almost entirely of members of the Church of Ireland (Churchmen or Episcopalians), it became a pan-Protestant and supremacist organisation, dedicated to upholding 'the Protestant ascendancy' consolidated by King William III.[18] As its name suggests, the Order memorialised Dutch William of the House of Orange, the leading light of 'the Glorious Revolution' that extirpated the threat of a Catholic restoration in Great Britain and Ireland. It is apt that *The Orange State* is the subtitle of one of the best-known critical popular histories of Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972, when it was under the domination of the exclusively Protestant Ulster Unionist Party.[19]

The ideals of Young Ireland are therefore reflected in the design of the republican tricolour that became the Irish national flag. They wanted to establish peace between the Green and the Orange, to found an independent post-sectarian Irish nation-state in which state and religion would be separated, as in republican France. There is therefore truth in the idea that the tricolour symbolises Irish nationalism *and* its most inclusive dispositions.

[17] Robert Kee, *The green flag* (London, 1976).
[18] Its formation and early evolution are described in Hereward Senior, *Orangeism in Ireland and Britain: 1795–1836* (London, 1966). See also Kevin Whelan, 'The origins of the Orange Order', *Bullán* 2 (2) (1996), 19–24; Kevin Haddick-Flynn, *Orangeism: the making of a tradition* (Dublin, 1999). A later empathetic treatment is Eric P. Kaufmann, *The Orange Order: a contemporary Northern Irish history* (New York, 2007). An apologia for the Orange Order and its cousins may be found in the work of the journalist Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The faithful tribe: an intimate portrait of the loyal institutions* (London, 1999).
[19] Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the orange state* (1st edn, London, 1976). Farrell had been a leading light in the People's Democracy, sometimes called Trotskyist, and when he wrote the book he was a revolutionary socialist sympathetic to Irish republicanism.

Irish symbols (2): the shamrock

On opening an American or English dictionary at the right location, the reader will be told that the shamrock is a clover-like plant with three leaves with rounded edges on each stem, *and* that it is *the* national emblem, or *one of the* national emblems, of Ireland—the harp is the other. The etymological roots of the noun are as Irish as can be: *seamróg.* Perhaps because it is so obviously Irish, the government of Ireland was tardy in international notification of its status as a state emblem. Such emblems are recognised by treaty—in the 1925 Act of the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property. In 1985 the World Intellectual Property Organisation was notified of the official state emblems of Ireland, namely the shamrock and the harp, and various heraldic arms and official escutcheons.[20] An entrepreneur wishing to use a shamrock in a registered trademark must obtain the consent of the Ministry of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.[21]

The shamrock's significance is indelibly associated with Ireland's patron saint, Patrick. This alleged miracle-worker, usually deemed British in origin, has a suitably long entry in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* of 1907.[22] St Patrick's Day, 17 March, is a national and religious festival wherever the Irish are, especially in the diaspora. The use of the shamrock as a badge on his saint's day is documented back to the 1600s. Patrick is often visually displayed crushing snakes and expelling them from the emerald isle while having shamrock on his person. The linkage of the saint to the shamrock, so the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* instructs us, is that Patrick is

> said to have plucked a shamrock from the sward,[23] to explain by its triple leaf and single stem, in some rough way, to the assembled chieftains, the great doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. On that bright Easter Day the triumph of religion at Tara was complete. The Ard-Righ [High-King] granted permission to Patrick to preach the faith throughout the length and breadth of Erin.

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[20] We believe the ambassador charged with this task was Rory Montgomery (personal information).

[21] Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, 'Protection and use of State emblems', available at: https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/innovation-research-development/intellectual-property/trade-marks/state-emblems/ (5 August 2025).

[22] 'St. Patrick', available at: https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=9058 (5 August 2025).

[23] A sward is 'an expanse of short grass', but it could also be an archaic synonym of 'sword'.

One indirect legacy is that Irish ambassadors or taoisigh have sent or presented a bowl of shamrock on St Patrick's Day to every US president since Harry Truman.[24] Many Irish sports teams have the shamrock on their kits, as do Irish soldiers serving on UN peacekeeping missions.

It might seem that the shamrock is therefore an exclusively Irish national symbol, and intensely Catholic to boot. But strong qualifications are in order. Irish Protestants, especially in the episcopalian Church of Ireland, also claim St Patrick as their patron saint.[25] They memorialise Patrick for organising Christianity within Ireland into an episcopalian structure, and for bringing Ireland into western Latin (and later British) civilisation. Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin is part of the Church of Ireland. The flag of Saint Patrick was incorporated in the Union flag (the Union Jack) after the Act of Union. And the symbolism of the shamrock derived from Patrick has been embedded in the uniform of Irish regiments in the British Army for over a century, including both the Irish Guards and the Royal Irish Regiment—into which the Ulster Defence Regiment was incorporated in 1992. This variant of the tradition stems from the Boer Wars, in which regiments recruited from Ireland fought in British imperial forces. The British custom of giving out shamrocks on Saint Patrick's Day began in 1901 with Queen Alexandra, the wife of Edward VII. So, both Saint Patrick, a Briton of pre-Anglo-Saxon vintage, and his accompanying shamrock are part of the heritage of Irish and British Protestants in Ireland, not just of the Catholic Irish.

British symbols (1): the Commonwealth as a symbolic institution

On its official website the Commonwealth presents itself as super-inclusive:

> The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 56 independent and equal countries … home to 2.7 billion people … 33 of our members are small states, including many island nations. Our member governments have agreed to shared goals like

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[24] The plant's symbolic usage in the diaspora is also very old. The *Shamrock* newspaper was launched in New York in 1810, targeted at Catholic Irish readers: William L. Joyce, *Editors and ethnicity: a history of the Irish-American Press, 1848–1883* (New York, 1976), 49–50.

[25] The first and still most impressive modern historical biography of Patrick is by a distinguished classicist who held senior positions in Trinity College Dublin and Cambridge. A free thinker, he was the son of a Church of Ireland rector: John B. Bury, *The life of Saint Patrick and his place in history* (London, 1905).

development, democracy and peace. Our values and principles are expressed in the Commonwealth Charter. The Commonwealth's roots go back to the British Empire. But today any country can join the modern Commonwealth.[26]

The last point is illustrated by the most recent four member states to join the Commonwealth, namely Mozambique, Rwanda, Gabon and Togo. They were not colonised by, or dependencies of, the British Empire.

But the roots of the Commonwealth most certainly lie in the soils of British imperialism. In 1887, in the first of a series of imperial conferences, the governments of some of the British colonies met for the first time in London—they were white, dominated by settlers of British stock, and domestically partially self-governing jurisdictions of the empire. An Imperial Conference of 1907 collectively dubbed them 'dominions', following the stylistic renaming of Canada in 1867. The Crown, as advised by the government of Great Britain, claimed sovereignty over all the dominions, especially in treaty-making, and matters of peace and war. Even the constitutions of the dominions were ratified in the Westminster parliament. The dominions were bound by allegiance to the Crown, and their London-appointed governors-general had powers to halt or veto local legislation. It would be 1926 before these dominions obliged London to agree that they were all equal communities with Great Britain within the British Empire; and in 1931, with the enactment of the Statute of Westminster, the British Government renounced its right to legislate for any of the dominions. By implication, they were now free to determine their respective constitutions, or their foreign policies. The self-governing white components of the British Empire were now styled 'the British Commonwealth of Nations'.

Historically Ireland's relations with Great Britain have been dependent and colonial, including under the Act of Union.[27] In 1921 a Sinn Féin delegation, under the threat of 'terrible and immediate war', was forced to accept the status of a dominion for the future Irish Free State instead of what it had

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26 'The Commonwealth', available at: https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us (5 August 2025).
27 Brendan O'Leary, *A treatise on Northern Ireland, volume 1: Colonialism* (Oxford, 2020), 105–45, 217–369. One historian described the Union until late reforms as 'but a shoddy disguise for colonial occupation'. David Fitzpatrick, 'Ireland since 1870', in Roy F. Foster (ed.), *The Oxford illustrated history of Ireland* (Oxford, 1989), 229.

sought, a fully sovereign and independent republic.[28] The opening articles of the 1921 Treaty read:

> 1. Ireland shall have the same constitutional status in the Community of Nations known as the British Empire as the Dominion of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, the Dominion of New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa with a Parliament having powers to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Ireland and an Executive responsible to that Parliament, and shall be styled and known as the Irish Free State.

> 2. Subject to the provisions hereinafter set out the position of the Irish Free State in relation to the Imperial Parliament and Government and otherwise shall be that of the Dominion of Canada, and the law, practice and constitutional usage governing the relationship of the Crown or the representative of the Crown and of the Imperial Parliament to the Dominion of Canada shall govern their relationship to the Irish Free State.

In several respects, the Irish Free State started life as inferior in legal status to the other dominions regarding some powers over trade, taxation and security—and indeed autonomy from Westminster. Dominion status meant that the Irish Free State would remain a constitutional monarchy. In Article 4 London insisted that an oath of allegiance to the British monarch would have to be taken by Irish deputies—including those who had sworn an oath to uphold the Irish Republic declared in 1916, and redeclared in 1919. The British flatly rejected Sinn Féin's compromise: a republic 'externally associated' with the British Empire.

For a significant portion of the citizens of the Irish Free State, the Treaty was illegitimate from the start. Commonwealth membership was imposed by force. Dominion status was a repudiation of Ireland's right to self-determination.

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[28] For the Irish Free State's relations with the British Commonwealth see David W. Harkness, *The restless dominion: the Irish Free State and the British Commonwealth of Nations 1921–31* (1st edn, Basingstoke, 1969); Deirdre McMahon, *Republicans and Imperialists. Anglo-Irish Relations in the 1930s* (New Haven, CT, 1984); Nicholas Mansergh, *The unresolved question: the Anglo-Irish settlement and its undoing, 1912–72* (New Haven, CT, 1991), especially 281–336; Deirdre McMahon, 'Ireland, the Empire, and the Commonwealth', in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004).

And for an initially larger portion of the electorate of the same Irish Free State, the treaty was indeed an imposed fetter on Irish freedom, but could be exploited as a stepping stone to freedom. The changing powers and status of the respective dominions would accrue to Ireland. A self-governing democratic republic would be won through negotiation and availing of political opportunities.

Reciting these facts is necessary to understand why today's Irish citizens think that their country's past membership of the British Commonwealth of Nations was coerced, not a free choice of its people. It is also why successive Irish governments negotiated away or repudiated the provisions of the 1921 Treaty, availing of intermittent British political weakness. These steps culminated in Ireland, as the Irish Free State renamed itself, making and ratifying its own constitution in 1937. The constitution preserved a role for the Commonwealth, as a possible attraction for British unionists in the event of unification, but that too would be repudiated. In 1949 Ireland seceded from the British Commonwealth and re-declared the Republic, precisely because Commonwealth membership was deemed unavailable to republics. And that is why in Irish public memory full sovereign independence is associated with exit from the Commonwealth.

Remarkably, as the newly minted Republic of Ireland left the Commonwealth the British Government accepted India's independence as a republic and grudgingly accepted two provisos insisted upon by Nehru, India's first postcolonial prime minister: India would remain part of the Commonwealth, but as a republic, not a dominion; and from now on it would be the Commonwealth, not the British Commonwealth. Differently put, India received in its decolonising negotiations what the Sinn Féin delegation had been denied in 1921. So, curiously, all the original reasons for Ireland's objections to Commonwealth membership are now long gone. Thirty-six of the 56 members of the Commonwealth are republics; fifteen are 'Commonwealth realms', in which the British monarch is their symbolic head of state; and five have their own monarchies. The Commonwealth, either collectively or through the British government, exercises no executive, legislative or judicial functions in any of its member states—save a small number of Caribbean democracies that avail of the services of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council to act as their supreme court. The Commonwealth is a soft international organisation, which has resolved that it is no longer obligatory for its head to be the British monarch. Indeed, King Charles III, conceivably, may be

the last of the House of Windsor to be head of the Commonwealth—though that is no certainty.

For many British Protestants in Northern Ireland the Commonwealth, by contrast, is an association of the kin-peoples who colonised the British empire—or who were colonised by that empire but for good reasons stay collectively associated with the metropole because of the English language, English law and other British institutional practices. A distinct pride in the British empire and its legacies is a feature of traditional unionist political culture. For them, the Commonwealth Games showcases this bond of peoples. They regard the Irish withdrawal from the Commonwealth as an unnecessary and self-inflicted wound.[29] In short, the Commonwealth can validly be seen as inclusionary in the present, but imperially imposed and exclusionary in the past.[30]

British symbols (2): the poppy

Poppies have been symbols of peace, sleep and death throughout recorded European history. On tombstones they signal eternal sleep. The red-flowered corn poppy, artificially represented in forms suitable for display in button-holes, is the emblem of remembrance of the war-dead of the armed forces of the British Empire (now Commonwealth forces). It has never been a unifying symbol across the island of Ireland.

In the First World War, the resilience of Flanders poppies, even in the charred 'no man's land' between the rival trenches of the Allies and the Central Powers, was widely noted. In 'The Green Fields of France' (also known as 'No Man's Land'), composed by Eric Bogle in 1975,[31] the narrator at the war grave of a young Irishman, Willie McBride, watches 'the red poppies dance', in contrast to 'the countless white crosses' that 'in mute witness stand'.[32] The songwriter intended a 'subtle reminder' that thousands of Irishmen died

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[29] One of our referees correctly noted that positive dispositions towards the Commonwealth run at about 55 per cent among Northern Protestants in the ARINS survey, and when its British heritage is emphasised some 17 per cent of Protestants are negatively disposed. The Commonwealth is therefore not ubiquitously culturally important for Northern Protestants.

[30] For recent ARINS surveys on opinion on the Commonwealth in both parts of Ireland see John Garry, Brendan O'Leary and Jamie Pow, 'Imperial hangover or club of independent republics? How the Commonwealth is sold impacts Irish responses', *Irish Times*, 19 January 2024; John Garry, Brendan O'Leary, Jamie Pow and Dawn Walsh, 'Southerners and Northern nationalists dislike Commonwealth more than Nato', *Irish Times*, 8 February 2025.

[31] The most famous cover version (in Ireland at least) is sung by the Furey Brothers and Davey Arthur.

[32] The lyrics vary slightly from version to version: those given here correspond to the original.

in the First World War in the service of the British Empire, though Bogle concedes the reference was so subtle that 'most people missed it'.[33] On the internet, discussions may be found of the eponymous McBride's religion, and whether, before he signed up, he had been a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the armed militia that opposed home rule before 1914. These discussions miss the point: 'The Green Fields of France' is an anti-war song.

Similarly, it may be read as a reply to the poem 'In Flanders Fields' by John McRae, written amid the Great War but published in 1919. In these lyrics, 'The poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row.' In the Canadian McRae's poem, however, the dead British imperial soldiers want the living to fight on: 'If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields.' Dancing poppies flourishing in the soil of veterans' remains express the futility of war for Bogle, but for McRae they may become symbols of peaceful sleep only if the living fight on, to honour the dead with victory.

Inspired by 'In Flanders Fields', an American, Moina Michael, campaigned to make the poppy—and an accompanying charitable appeal—the emblem of those who sacrificed their lives in the Great War. Subsequently, the poppy became inseparable from visual commemoration of the war-dead of the British Commonwealth: notably in Canada, which pioneered the form, but also in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and many other Commonwealth countries. In most of these places the poppy is worn in the run-up to Remembrance Day—11 November, the date the armistice drafted by Marshal Foch was signed by diplomats and officers of the second German Reich to end what we now call the First World War.

Since the 1920s most Irish nationalists, North and South, have treated the poppy as an exclusively British symbol. For them, poppy-wearers are held to endorse all of Britain's wars since 1914, including those waged in Ireland in 1919–21, and during 1969–2005—the years the British Army officially calls 'Operation Banner'. British unionists, by contrast, valorise the poppy, and are usually intensely proud of their men and women's participation in British wars. Loyalist militia, including the UDA and the UVF, memorialise their dead volunteers with poppies. For all unionists and loyalists, the IRA bombing at Enniskillen, on Remembrance Sunday, 8 November 1987, which killed eleven civilians preparing for a ceremony at a world war memorial, was

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[33] Ronan McGreevy, 'Green Fields of France "written to tackle anti-Irish prejudice"', *Irish Times*, 18 February 2015.

a malevolent attack on all things British: sometimes it is called 'the Poppy Day massacre'. They generally dismiss the IRA's apology for the bombing as insincere.

The salience of the poppy is recognised in efforts at reconciliation between republicans and loyalists, and between nationalists and unionists. In 2010, the then leader of the moderate nationalist SDLP, Margaret Ritchie, wore a poppy, and in 2017 Leo Varadkar became the first taoiseach to wear a poppy in Dáil Éireann.

The Royal British Legion has trademarked the remembrance poppy since 2000. It tells visitors to its website that the poppy has two aspects: (1) 'Our red poppy is a symbol of both Remembrance and hope for a peaceful future'; and (2) 'Poppies are worn as a show of support for the Armed Forces community.'[34] The first meaning can be inclusively backward- and forward-looking. The second, by contrast, is exclusionary—the purchase and wearing of poppies support British military veterans and their families.

British symbols (3): the Red Hand of Ulster[35]

The last symbol chosen for our experiment on the narrative framing of symbols is the Red Hand of Ulster. This symbol is in the centre of 'the Ulster banner', which became the official flag of the former Northern Ireland parliament (1921–72). It was on the coat of arms of Northern Ireland, and on the flag of the former governor of Northern Ireland. Today it is on the flag of the Northern Ireland football team (six counties, post-partition, as indicated by the six-pointed star in which the Red Hand is embedded). The Red Hand is part of the logo of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. Northern Irish regional versions of UK stamps often include the Red Hand of Ulster, to the south-east of the head of the monarch, though not always with the red colour preserved.[36] The blood-red emphasis on the Red Hand in the flags of the loyalist militia, both the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), and in their supportive murals, ensures that symbol is frequently seen as exclusively loyalist. The Red Hand Commando was the *nom de guerre* of the UVF, under which they carried out assassinations (though

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[34] 'The poppy', available at: https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/remembrance/the-poppy (5 August 2025)

[35] See footnote 7 above.

[36] See, for example, 'Northern Ireland regional stamps', available at: https://www.gbstampsonline.co.uk/nothern-ireland-regional-stamps-81-c.asp (5 August 2025).

remarkably these loyalist assassins had the war-cry of the O'Neills, in Irish, as their motto, namely *Lámh Dhearg Abú!* ('Victory to the Red Hand!').

In fact, the Red Hand is embedded in the heraldic imagery of all sides to the conflict in the North. That is partly because it originated as a pre-British symbol. Its use long precedes the Union of Crowns of 1603, through which James VI of Scotland became the first king of Great Britain. The Red Hand is an excellent example for those interested in exploring or making po-faced accusations of 'cultural appropriation'. The questions include: does the Red Hand stem from ancient Gaelic Ireland, specifically, from the territory of Ulaid in Antrim and north Down? If so, what did it mean? Is it, by contrast, English (or should that be Norman?). It is known to be a production of Walter de Burgh, often called the first Earl of Ulster.[37] In the thirteenth century de Burgh combined the Red Hand with his family's coat of arms to create what became Ulster's coat of arms. In the pompous language of heraldry, this coat is described as 'on a Cross Gules, an inescutcheon Argent, charged with a dexter hand erect aupaumee and couped at the wrist Gules'. That roughly translates as an erect Red Hand displaying the right palm on a silver background, against a shield with a red (Christian) cross against a gold field.

The propagandists of the ancient O'Neill (Uí Néill) dynasty installed, appropriated or reappropriated, depending on your persuasion, the Red Hand in their coat of arms, notably during the fourteenth century.[38] On their coat of arms featuring the Red Hand were the words *Lámh Dhearg Éireann* (the Red Hand of Ireland). In an almost certainly mythical account, a naval competition was held in pre-Christian Ireland, possibly in the Sea of Moyle that separates Antrim from Argyle, to decide the lordship of Ulaid (or of Ireland in some accounts). Hemeron O'Neill, the third son of Milesius,[39] at the head of his rowing clansmen, was behind his leading rival in the race to reach the shore. Recognising that he would lose, he cut off his (left—or was it his right?) hand and tossed it to the shore to win the race and lordship. In some variants, the founding O'Neill won the title because he had visibly displayed his

[37] Ronan Mackey, 'Burgh, Walter de', *Dictionary of Irish biography*, available at: https://www.dib.ie/biography/burgh-walter-de-a1140 (5 August 2025). There were at least two previous earldoms of Ulster—in the hands of John de Courcy and later of Hugh de Lacy.

[38] Benjamin Hazard, 'At Ó Néill's right hand: Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire and the Red Hand of Ulster', *History Ireland* 18 (Jan.–Feb. 2010), available at: https://historyireland.com/at-o-neills-right-hand-flaithri-o-maolchonaire-and-the-red-hand-of-ulster/ (5 August 2025).

[39] In Irish sources (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, or *The Book of Invasions*), three sons of Milesius of Spain took control of Ireland for the Gaels.

willingness to engage in self-sacrifice. It is not narrated how the wound was healed, and the length of the severed arm varies by representation.

There is, however, a very different explanation for the heraldic Red Hand, but it is also pre-British. For some it represents the right hand of God—*dextera Dei*, a symbol that claims the support of God in combat. Using the right hand to represent God the Father ('the first person of the trinity') was widespread in late antiquity and early medieval Christianity.[40] But why a *red* hand? And, clearly, it may matter which of his hands was cut off by Hemeron O'Neill: the left side gives the symbol a pre-Christian lineage; the right side may link it with the *dextera Dei.* In 1900, in a short note written for the Royal Irish Academy on the hand of God on Irish crosses, a Belfast scholar and Gaelic League member was scornful of the O'Neill legend. He observed that 'the right hand of God' as an expression of divine power long precedes Christianity.[41] Later another Gaelic scholar played upon sinister connotations (in Latin *sinistra* is the left side) to imply that the (left-handed) Red Hand on the Ulster Hall is colonial whereas the rightly placed hand of the O'Neills is properly native.[42] The O'Neills, however, have never had it their own way in Ulster history; other families claimed the Red Hand as their own, including the McGuinnesses.

Today the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and other Irish cultural organisations display the Red Hand on the provincial flag of Ulster (nine counties, as before partition). It is the same as the flag and crest of arms of the de Burghs. In a recent rebranding of the Ulster GAA, the new crest has the Red Hand.[43] GAA teams from County Tyrone invariably have the Red Hand of the O'Neills on their jerseys, and it is part of their logo.[44] And three other counties of historic Ulster display the Red Hand on their shields. It sits in the middle of the top row of the shield of Aointroim (Antrim); it is in the top quarter of the Cavan shield; and it is placed on the bottom of the Monaghan shield. So, both major national traditions in Ireland have cultural stakes in the

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[40] See Louisa Twining, *Symbols and emblems of early and mediaeval Christian art* (new edn, London, 1885), especially Chapter 1.

[41] Francis Joseph Bigger, 'The *Dextera Dei* sculptured on the high crosses of Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (9 April 1900), available at: https://archive.org/details/proceedingsofro22roya/page/78/mode/2up (5 August 2025).

[42] Cathal O'Byrne, *As I roved out: a book of the North, being a series of historical sketches of Ulster and old Belfast* (facsimile edn, Belfast, 1982), 340 ff.

[43] 'New identity for Ulster GAA', 20 October 2023, available at: https://ulster.gaa.ie/2023/10/new-identity-for-ulster-gaa/ (5 August 2025).

[44] See, for example, 'Northern Ireland regional stamps'.

'ownership' of the Red Hand, and it can therefore be presented as inclusive. It can be seen as a settler symbol (Norman), or a native symbol (Gaelic), or both; and as pre-Christian and Christian.

METHODS

We conducted a pre-registered (*see anonymised text in online appendix, available at: http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/311*) and ethically approved (by Queen's University Belfast) experiment embedded in representative survey samples of the adult population in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The fieldwork was in-home, face to face, and conducted in the North by Ipsos Northern Ireland and in the South by Ipsos BandA, with slightly over 1,000 respondents in each jurisdiction (funding was by ARINS and the Irish Times). For each one of five distinct experiments, respondents were randomly assigned to either an 'inclusive' or an 'exclusive' narrative condition. All respondents in both surveys were shown, in turn, images of the five political symbols. Alongside each image was a textual description of the image, either an inclusive or exclusive narrative, as shown in Figure 1.

For each experiment, participants were asked to indicate, on a 1–7 scale, how negative (1) or positive (7) they felt about the symbol. Respondents were then asked a question about the potential official adoption, in the context of Irish unification, of each symbol. For the Red Hand, poppy and shamrock, respondents were asked about the possible embossing of the image on one of the euro coins in use in a united Ireland, on a five-point scale (member states of the European common currency, the euro, may issue their own designs on the back of euro coins, but not on the paper currency). For the national flag of Ireland, participants were asked whether to keep it or replace it (on a seven-point scale). And participants were asked whether they favoured or opposed membership of the Commonwealth under unification.

We therefore examine the attitudes of Southerners and Northern Catholics to the 'British' or unionist symbols of the Commonwealth, the Red Hand and the poppy, and the attitudes of Northern Protestants to the 'Irish' symbols of the Irish flag and the shamrock. In line with our pre-registration, we operationalised our moderator variables, to test H3, as follows: strength of attachment to British identity, on a 0–10 scale, minus strength of attachment to Irish identity, on 0–10 scale; strength of support for Irish unity, on a
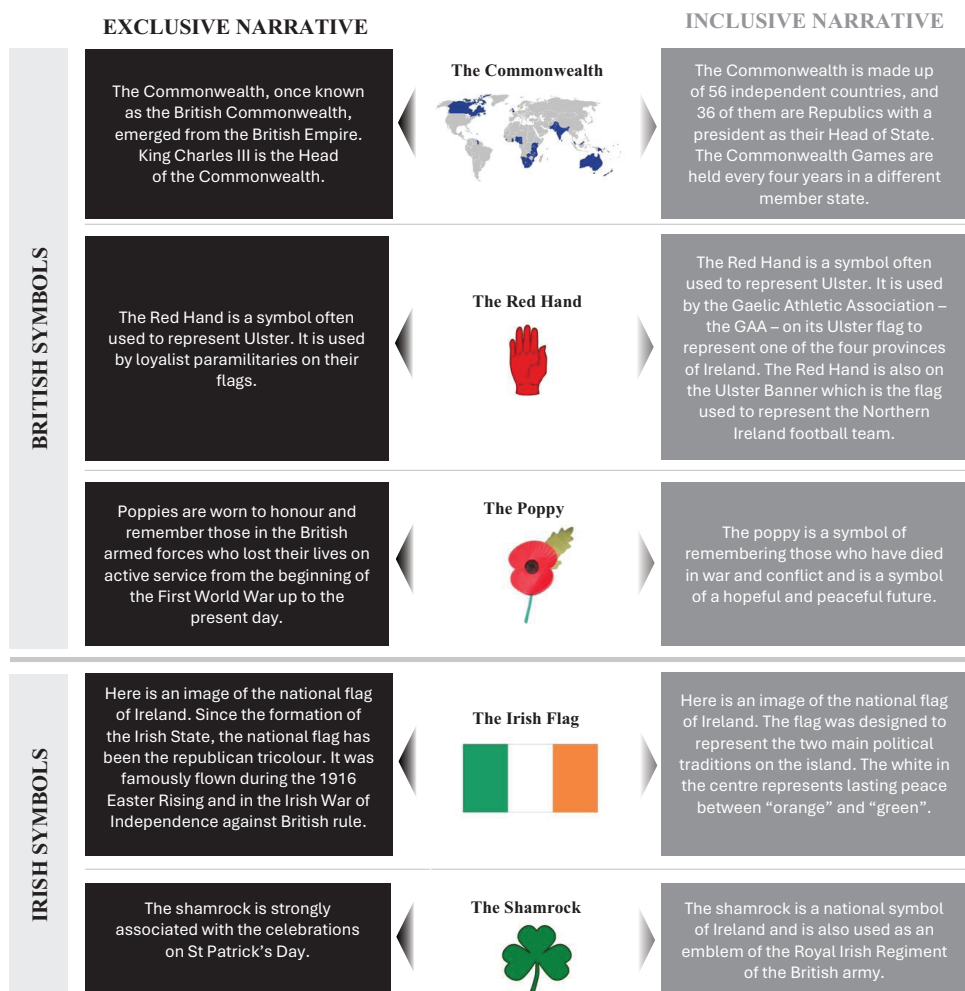
EXCLUSIVE NARRATIVE | **INCLUSIVE NARRATIVE**

BRITISH SYMBOLS

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth, once known as the British Commonwealth, emerged from the British Empire. King Charles III is the Head of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is made up of 56 independent countries, and 36 of them are Republics with a president as their Head of State. The Commonwealth Games are held every four years in a different member state.

The Red Hand

The Red Hand is a symbol often used to represent Ulster. It is used by loyalist paramilitaries on their flags.

The Red Hand is a symbol often used to represent Ulster. It is used by the Gaelic Athletic Association – the GAA – on its Ulster flag to represent one of the four provinces of Ireland. The Red Hand is also on the Ulster Banner which is the flag used to represent the Northern Ireland football team.

The Poppy

Poppies are worn to honour and remember those in the British armed forces who lost their lives on active service from the beginning of the First World War up to the present day.

The poppy is a symbol of remembering those who have died in war and conflict and is a symbol of a hopeful and peaceful future.

IRISH SYMBOLS

The Irish Flag

Here is an image of the national flag of Ireland. Since the formation of the Irish State, the national flag has been the republican tricolour. It was famously flown during the 1916 Easter Rising and in the Irish War of Independence against British rule.

Here is an image of the national flag of Ireland. The flag was designed to represent the two main political traditions on the island. The white in the centre represents lasting peace between "orange" and "green".

The Shamrock

The shamrock is strongly associated with the celebrations on St Patrick's Day.

The shamrock is a national symbol of Ireland and is also used as an emblem of the Royal Irish Regiment of the British army.

Figure 1. Experimental conditions

1–7 scale, minus strength of attachment to Northern Ireland staying in the UK, on a 1–7 scale.

RESULTS

As illustrated in Figure 2—and see Table A1 in the online appendix—Southerners are more favourably disposed to the Commonwealth when it is described inclusively (mean score of 3.44) rather than exclusively (2.96), and
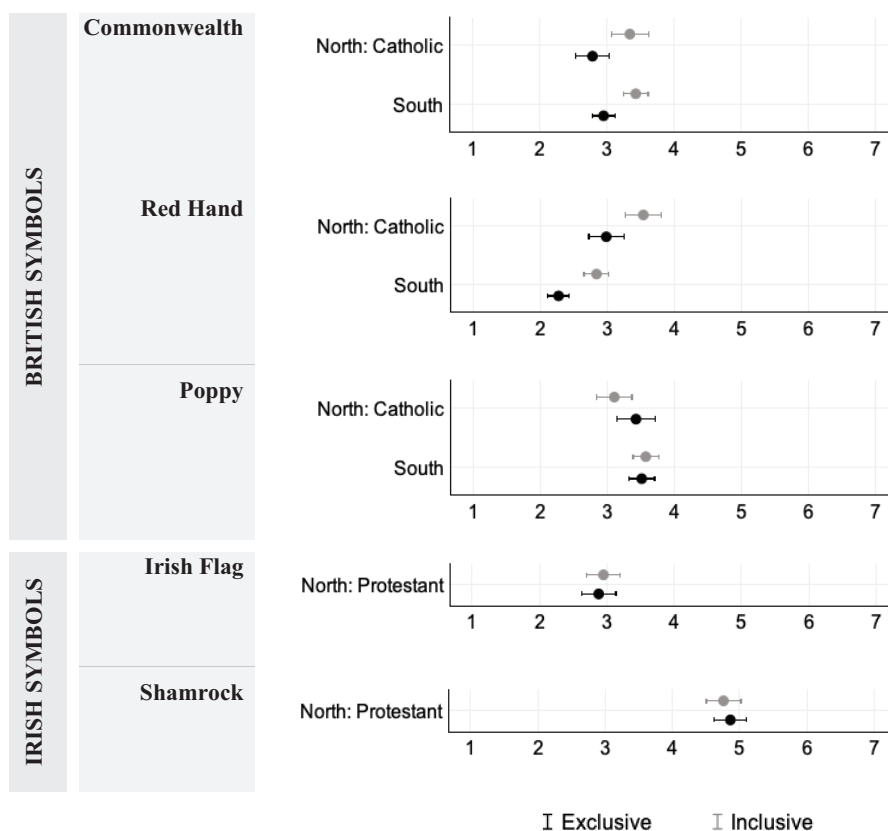
Figure 2. Attitudes to symbols by experimental condition (mean scores: 1–7 negative–positive scale)

the same applies for Northern Catholics (inclusive score of 3.35 and exclusive score of 2.80). In the event of Irish unification, Southerners are statistically significantly more in favour of membership of the Commonwealth under the inclusive (26.1% in favour, 73.9% opposed) than in the exclusive condition (18.5% in favour, 81.5% opposed) (Table 1). Southerners are more positive about the Red Hand in the inclusive (2.85) than in the exclusive condition (2.28), and the same applies for Northern Catholics (3.54 inclusive and 2.99 exclusive) (Figure 2). And Southerners and Northern Catholics are more in favour of the Red Hand being embossed on one of the euro coins under unification under the inclusive rather than the exclusive condition. The mean Southern score is 1.81 in the exclusive condition and 2.11 in the inclusive condition; and the mean score of Northern Catholics is 2.19 in the exclusive and 2.53 in the inclusive condition (Figure 3 and see Table A2). Regarding the

Table 1. Views on Commonwealth membership (%), by experimental condition

Group	Narrative	Support	Oppose	Total	Statistical significance
South	Exclusive	18.5	81.5	100	
	Inclusive	26.1	73.9	100	$p = .008$
North: Catholic	Exclusive	31.7	68.3	100	
	Inclusive	35.4	64.6	100	$p = .439$

poppy, the experimental treatments do not lead to any statistically significant differences for either Southerners or Northern Catholics, on attitudes or on coinage.

When we examine the views of Northern Protestants regarding the ostensible Irish symbols of the national flag of Ireland and the shamrock, we find no statistically significant differences between the inclusive and exclusive conditions, regarding either general attitudes (Figure 2) or official usage under unification (Figures 3 and 4). When we operationalised and tested our moderation hypotheses, we did not find any statistically significant interaction effects (Tables A3 and A4). In other words, an inclusive
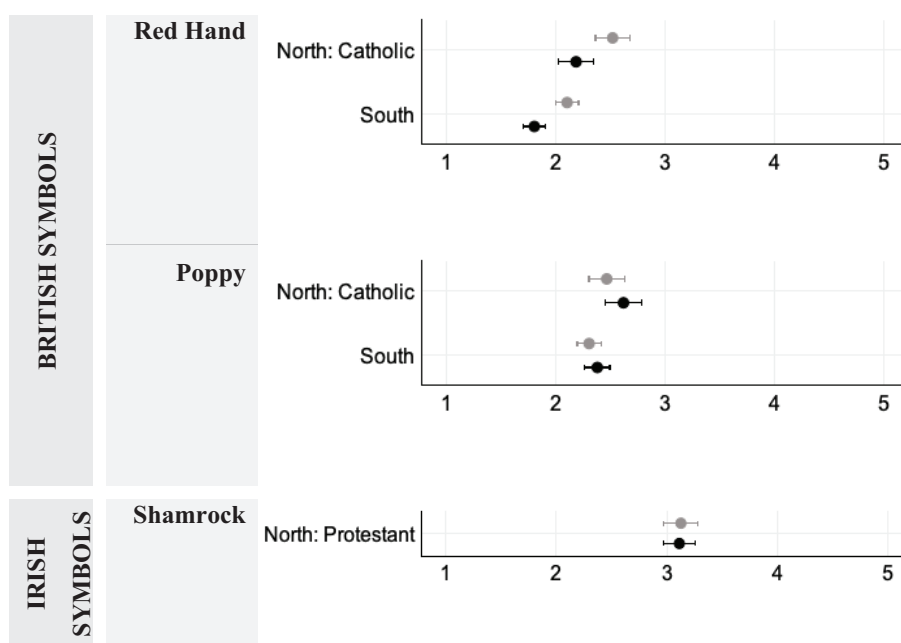

Figure 3. Attitudes towards putting symbols on coins in a united Ireland (mean scores: 1–5 very strongly opposed–very strongly favour scale)
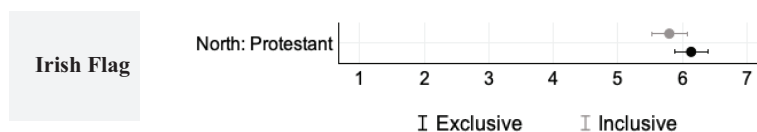
Figure 4. Northern Protestant views on the Irish flag under unification (mean scores: 1–7 keep–replace scale)

framing had no significant effect on Northern Protestants whatever the relative strength of their British identity or the relative strength of their pro-Union position.

DISCUSSION

Cultural conflicts over symbolic representations are potentially deeply polarising. Yet every state has cultural manifestations in the form of flags, images on coins, official textbooks, statues and so on, and governments must make decisions about them—whether to keep the ones they have, change them, multiply them or fuse them. We have demonstrated the possible malleability of views on contentious political symbols, in the context of a state that may face tough decisions about accommodating symbols from two rivalrous traditions in the event of a change in the sovereign status of Northern Ireland and its peoples. Southerners and Northern Catholics are hostile to the 'British' symbols of the Red Hand and the Commonwealth, but their hostility is significantly lower when the symbols are inclusively (rather than exclusively) described, and the acceptability of the use of the symbols in the new dispensation of Irish unification is higher.

Our findings are asymmetric because we did not observe experimental effects on Northern Protestant attitudes towards Irish symbols. Our examination of moderation effects could, in theory, have shed light on the asymmetry, identifying what type of Southerners and Northern Catholics are driving the results. However, the absence of ideological or identity-based moderation effects leads us to speculate that other system-wide factors may be at play. Analogous to Haas and Lindstam's speculative interpretation of why they observed experimental effects for Muslims but not Hindus,[45] perhaps Southerners are open and malleable because they have not considered these 'British' symbols before, either knowledgeably or in any depth, while the

[45] Haas and Lindstam, 'My history or our history?'.

rigidity of Northern Protestant views is driven by long-considered and deep-rooted hostility on symbolic issues, meaning that there was less novelty for these respondents in the experimental treatments. It is also possible that a strategic element is at play in explaining the asymmetric findings: as supporters of the status quo, unionists are more likely to avoid concessions; while as supporter of change, nationalists are strategically more likely to display openly accommodationist traits.

Three principal conclusions may be drawn. First, even in places, such as Ireland (North and South), where political symbols are seemingly clearly *either* British *or* Irish, these symbols may be accurately, plausibly and credibly described, or framed, as shared and inclusive rather than narrow and exclusive. Second, when ostensibly polarising symbols *are* inclusively framed, out-group hostility to them, and their use, is lowered, though in this case only for the two groups on the 'nationalist' side of the argument, Southerners and Northern Catholics. Our third lesson relates to policy relevance. Under conditions of changing sovereignty, such as potential Irish unification, knowledge of the partial malleability or rigidity of public opinion regarding acceptance of out-group symbols may be crucial for those intent on shaping a state that minimises the marginalisation of minority groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS