

Although political progress has been made in Northern Ireland, the polarisation of the communities still firmly exists

The summer marching season has again seen violence in Northern Ireland. [Jon Tonge](#) and [James McAuley](#) have conducted the first-ever membership survey of the Orange Order to garner their views on religion and politics. The results show that its members are steadfast supporters of their faith and their Britishness.



For the third consecutive year, the Orange marching season in Northern Ireland has been marred by serious rioting, mainly at sectarian interfaces in Belfast. There has been much political progress, exemplified by cooperative power-sharing between unionists and nationalists in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Yet two clear problems remain. Dissident republican violence continues sporadically, but a more permanent feature is the continuing communal polarisation. There has been no reintegration of Northern Irish society and the [consociation](#) of political elites at the top is built across an electoral and societal chasm. The mayhem at the peak of the marching season is where the communal faultline is laid bare.



Credit: Connie Maria Westergaard (Creative Commons NC-ND)

'Why can't they just live together?': meaningless questions overlook the lack of consensus over Orange parades. In 2010, we directed the [ESRC Northern Ireland general election survey](#). The survey found that only 0.3 per cent of Catholics believed that the Orange Order should be allowed to march without restriction, whereas almost half of Protestants (the largest single category of response) believed the Order should enjoy unfettered marching rights. 72 per cent of Catholics believed that the Order should not be allowed to march through nationalist areas, compared to only 7.5 per cent of Protestants supporting this prohibition. The Parades Commission, whose legitimacy is still questioned by the Orange Order and whose existence is rejected by 90 per cent of Orangemen, adjudicates in an arena in which there is little agreement.

But why do Orange Order parades 'entering nationalist areas' cause such outrage? The process may consist, as at the major flashpoint of Ardoyne in North Belfast, of a few (almost silent) bands passing some nondescript shops at an interface. But there is widespread antipathy amongst Catholics, which, given the survey results, cannot be written off as simply rejection by a few. What is it about the Protestant Order that causes such Catholic objections? In a [recent article](#) in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, we conducted the first-ever membership survey of the Orange Order, to ascertain Orange views on most things political and religious.



What did this survey tell us? Surprisingly little is known about who joins the Orange Order – and why. Although the Orange Order is regularly accused of sectarianism, the Order's members reject the charge that they belong to an organisation that is 'anti-Roman Catholic' (although 20 per cent agree. A majority of members do however acknowledge that the Order is 'anti-Roman Catholic Church', which, given that the organisation is pledged to oppose the 'false doctrines' and 'idolatry' of Rome, is perhaps unsurprising. The Orange Order's prohibitions on members marrying Roman Catholics or attending Catholic Church services and expulsions for these 'religious offences', whilst not numerically large, remain the most common type of ejection.

Orangemen are God-fearing, religiously practising (most attend church regularly) socially conservative individuals, drawn towards a collective organisation which promotes Scripture as the religious inspiration. Mutual aid and fraternity accompany these religious aspects – a kind of Orange Big Society (or community), one which is still an important part of rural life in Northern Ireland. Much Orange Order activity, indeed many of its parades, is benign and uncontroversial. Nonetheless, critics of the Order perceive its anti-Catholicism to exceed its pro-Protestantism. Catholicism and Irish Nationalism, not always distinguished, are seen as

perpetual threats.

The Orange Order represents an uncompromising wing of unionism, one which holds steadfast to Faith and Crown. Whilst obviously supportive of Northern Ireland's constitutional position of the UK, it fears the hollowing out of the (Protestant) Britishness of the majority tradition in Northern Ireland. A cultural war has (largely) replaced the shooting war, although the latter never really disappeared according to Orange Order members, only 15 per cent believing that the IRA's armed campaign really is over. The regular burning of Orange halls adds to these fears. Thus the Orange Order sees the need to defend the 'traditional' routes of its marches as part of this cultural contestation. In its view, retreat from streets, or restrictions on songs and hymns imposed upon parades, mean defeat in the zero-sum game between Protestant-Unionist-Britishness and supposedly ever-encroaching Catholic-Irish-Nationalism.

A key external message from the Orange Order has been its plea for Unionist unity to defend Protestant-British interests. A majority of Orange Order members support the concept of Unionist unity. This did not stop the brethren deserting the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP, to which the Orange Order was affiliated from 1905 until 2005) in favour of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Two-thirds of Orange Order members support the DUP, perceiving it to be the stouter defender of their religious and political interests. This transfer of support occurred in the years immediately following the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Since then, there has been grumbling within Orange ranks over the DUP's power-sharing deal with Sinn Fein in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, but insufficient complaint to disturb the new political order within unionism. Political socialisation remains important. Those who joined the Orange Order during the era of close UUP-Orange relations, when that axis dominated a one-party devolved state, remain closest to the UUP. Multivariate analysis shows that year of joining and age are the two key variables: over 55s and pre-Troubles Orange Order joiners are most likely to back the UUP.

Orangeism has undergone numerous changes and endured numerical decline in recent decades. The Orange Order was not enjoyed direct political influence since the collapse of Unionist majoritarian government in the early 1970s. Yet it is a mistake to underestimate the Order. Even in reduced circumstances, its membership of 36,000 comfortably exceeds that of all Northern Ireland's political parties combined. The average age of an Orange Order member is no higher than that of members of UK political parties. 50 per cent of Unionist members of the Northern Ireland Assembly belong to the Orange Order. Above all, it is impossible to imagine any other organisation in Northern Ireland (and not many elsewhere in the UK) capable of attracting 200,000 followers onto the streets.

'Orangefest', the controversial new tourism marketing term for the height of the marching season, has attempted to rebrand the Order's celebrations as an unthreatening cultural festival. This marketing device has annoyed two very different types of people. Some particularly religious within the Orange Order fear 'Orangefest' is an attempt to dilute the religious message of the Order; some Nationalists believe the term 'Orangefest' ignores the sectarian connotations underpinning the event. So, no consensus there either then.

The Order's membership is considered in greater detail in a book to be published next month, [Loyal to the Core?](#) Orangeism and Britishness in Northern Ireland. A [fuller version](#) of this piece was published in the August 2011 issue of the [British Journal of Politics and International Relations](#).