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Opposition to Irish travellers' halting sites in the republic of Ireland: Realistic group conflict or symbolic politics?

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Opposition to Irish Travellers' Halting Sites in the Republic of Ireland:

Realistic Group Conflict or Symbolic Politics?

Abstract

Widely reviled by even well-educated citizens of the Republic of Ireland, Travellers rank at the very bottom of today's multiracial Irish society according to most any attitudinal measure. This research note uses multivariate OLS regression of the 2007 Irish National Election Study to test two prominent explanations of such prejudice. Overall, data analysis confirms the theories of realistic group conflict and symbolic politics about equally. In particular, unemployment, occupation, and perceptions of crime support the first interpretation, while results for conservatism and multiculturalism lend credence to the second.

A tribe within a tribe, the travelling people are an alienated minority in Irish society, the victims of greater discrimination than ethnic groups like the Indians or Chinese.

BBC journalist Patrick Loughrey (1988: 144)

Even relative to Muslims and recently arrived non-European immigrants in the Republic of Ireland, Irish Travellers face an alarmingly high degree of public hostility. In fact, Figure 1 indicates that Travellers are the least-liked ethnic group in the country based on a question from the 2001 Irish Political and Social Attitudes Survey about how closely a person would be willing to interact with various categories of residents (options ranged from being willing to 'marry' such people to holding that the group should be 'deport[ed] from Ireland'). As Irish academic Bryan Fanning (2011) notes based on his extensive fieldwork, 'What is unusual about [anti-]Traveller racism is the vehemence of it and the extent to which it is acceptable in Irish society. You don't get sanctioned for extreme anti-Traveller comments in most social settings'. Minister of State for Equality Aodhán Ó Ríordáin (2015) similarly concludes that 'there is no more reviled community in our history, from the settled perspective,' than Travellers. 'You can pretty much say in public discourse, in polite conversation or write in a newspaper anything you want to say about the Travelling community and get away with it'. And such hatred is not simply the 'typical' distain of the middle class for manual labourers; rather, it reminds one more of caste prejudice against Dalits in India (Bob 2007) or the similar ostracism of Burakumin in Japan (Neary 1997).

* * * FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE * * *

According to Travellers themselves, even run-of-the-mill discrimination can cause profound psychological harm, and the fear of discrimination can be just as damaging as actual abuse. Based on a history of racist treatment by settled people, this wariness becomes a constant companion for Travellers. According to Travellers' rights leader Martin Collins (2011), 'You're always expecting it. . . . It shapes and dictates how you're going to relate to people outside your community'. Even if one simply wants to 'go to the pub for a pint, go into the shop for a pint of milk, [or is] trying to access public transport . . . that fear is always there, so living with that fear is quite damaging'.

Given their almost-unique economic marginalization and pariah status in Irish society, Travellers should have become the focus of many scholarly studies documenting their plight and isolating the socio-economic causes of their victimization. Some anthropologists, biologists, historians, literary critics, or activists have published on Traveller-related topics (Traveller Visibility Women's Group, 1996; Crickley, 1997; Murphy, McDonagh, and Sheehan 2000; Coxhead, 2007; Royall, 2010). Unfortunately, however, relatively few empirical social scientists have investigated anti-Traveller racism (Mac Laughlin, 1996; McVeigh and Binchy, 1998; Helleiner, 2000; Fanning, 2009; McDonald, 2009: 173-184; Leahy, 2014; Crowley and Kitchin, 2015), and only Mac Gréil (1977, 1996, 2010; see also 2011) appears to have independently analysed quantitative survey data on mass-level public attitudes toward Travellers. While he examines what are probably the best public-opinion surveys in existence on the subject, Mac Gréil's statistical methods do not usually extend beyond bivariate relationships between attitudes toward Travellers and various potential causes. In his 2010 study, for example, he found that anti-Traveller racism

was higher if, bivariately, a respondent was older, male, rural, well-educated, or middle-class. His limited multiple-regression model of Dubliners' attitudes during the 1970s (Mac Gréil, 1977) did include age, gender, education, and occupation but yielded a statistically significant coefficient only for age (older = *more* hostile to Travellers, or 'Itinerants'). While pioneering and suggestive, then, his results might change after multivariate controls for possibly confounding third factors.

Theories to be tested

Perhaps the most relevant sociological explanations for anti-Traveller attitudes are realistic group conflict (Campbell, 1965; Bobo, 1983; see also Blalock, 1967) and symbolic politics (Sears *et al.,* 1980; Sears, 1993). According to the first explanation, opposition to the goals or presence of ethnic minorities stems from narrow, objective self-interest (e.g., rich people's objections to progressive taxation rates) and/or 'subjectively appreciated threat and challenges to group status' (Bobo, 1983). For public views of Travellers, then, this theory suggests that respondents who might plausibly stand to lose from having halting sites or more Travellers in their neighbourhood (e.g., owner-occupants, the unemployed or working-class), who might be more likely to come into contact with Travellers and hence feel more threatened by them (e.g., people living in rural areas or regions with larger proportions of Travellers), or who might conceivably imagine certain resultant harms to their group interests (e.g., crime victims, those especially afraid of crime, or those perceiving a decline in housing quality) would be more hostile to Travellers.

The competing interpretation of symbolic politics, however, focusses on more abstract, or psychological roots of ethnic views. According to Sears and his colleagues

(1980), 'people acquire stable affective preferences through conditioning in their pre-adult years, with little calculation of the future costs and benefits of these attitudes'. In particular, such 'general predispositions' as partisanship, political 'ideology, nationalism, [and] racial prejudice' primarily shape one's response to 'new policy issues' encountered later in life. Although Sears and his colleagues originally developed this theory to explain white Americans' prejudice against African Americans, later scholars have applied Sears' understanding to views of different ethnic or other minorities (e.g., Crandall, 1994; Sides and Citrin, 2007). In the case at hand, this interpretation would predict more anti-Traveller sentiment among interviewees scoring high on measures of conservatism or low on indicators of multiculturalism. Similarly, one might hypothesize that, all else being equal, affiliates of parties more-or-less on the left of the Irish political spectrum (e.g., Sinn Féin, Labour, and the Greens) would be more sympathetic toward the predominantly working-class Travellers than would partisans of more conservative parties (e.g., Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael).

Lastly, the model controls for two sets of variables that might plausibly influence attitudes toward Travellers but also be correlated with the theory-related regressors above. In particular, religious attendance and identification could sway opinions since the Catholic Church runs a special ministry on behalf of Travellers (Farrell, 2011) and because this traditionally migrant group has historically been especially devout (Ward, 2011). I also control for respondents' use of various media, some of which are known for spreading sensationalised stories about Travellers.

Data and methods

To test these two theories, this research note uses multivariate ordinary least-squares regression to analyse data from the 2007 Irish National Election Study (INES), carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) of Dublin, Ireland.[1] Most respondents from 2007 were interviewed in-person and had previously taken part in a panel study dating from 2002. (After the 2002 Irish general election, the research institute had randomly selected households in the country and then individuals within a particular household to create the first wave of the panel.) Roughly five percent of the original 2002 panel interviewees completed a written, mail-in questionnaire instead in 2007, however, and in this last year of the survey ESRI also recruited 220 entirely new respondents for in-person contacts. In the end, 1,284 individuals answered the question about Irish Travellers in the 2007 wave, yielding a total response rate of about 54 percent.

The dependent variable stems from a seven-point Likert-type scale measuring agreement[2] with the claim that 'people should not have to put up with [Traveller] halting sites in their neighbourhood'. Occupational prestige is based on the respondent's ISCO-88 category (1 = ISCO > 9112; 2 = ISCO < 742 and between 4110 and 8341; 3 = ISCO between 3110 and 3623; 4 = ISCO between 742 and 2461). The income variable is a five-point scale of household income per week in euros. Urbanicity constitutes an eight-point scale ranging from 'open country' to 'Dublin city'. Perceptions of crime and housing came from questions asking about whether crime had increased over the previous five years or whether the 'housing situation' had gotten 'a lot worse' over this same period. Data on the percentage of Travellers in one's Dáil constituency are from the Central Statistics Office (2006). Interviewees indicated their degree of conservatism by placing themselves on a 0-to-10,

left-to-right scale, while multiculturalism is linked to an item on whether 'foreign workers and immigrants living in Ireland should be allowed to preserve their own culture'. Partisanship is derived from a query about which party one would vote for if the election were the following day. Religiosity represents a self-report of how often the respondent attends religious services. The education variable ranges from 'none' to 'university higher degree'. The items for media usage, finally, record how many days per week the respondent surfed the internet, listened to the radio, etc.

<center>* * * TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE * * *</center>

Results

Overall, data analysis tends to confirm both theories about equally (see Table 1). Across all relevant columns of the table, the realistic-group-conflict variables home ownership, apparent housing quality, urbanicity, and the proportion of Travellers living in one's constituency[3] all show no effect, but a higher perceived crime rate does seem to boost opposition to halting sites. In contrast, greater education appears to dampen anti-Traveller feelings, at least after controls for all available variables in the sixth column.

Job-related realistic-group-conflict regressors also achieve significance. Unemployment, especially when the respondent is from the upper reaches of the occupational ladder, has a powerful influence. The unemployment, occupational prestige, and related interaction term in the last column of Table 1 suggest that, all else being equal, an unemployed respondent at the lowest occupational-prestige level would be .895 points, or 14.9 percent, more hostile toward Travellers than would an employed interviewee of the same occupational prestige. Among those at the top of the prestige scale, however, those who had lost their job were as much as 5.507

points, or 91.8 percent, *less* opposed than were their gainfully employed counterparts. Among all employed respondents, meanwhile, a full-range increase in occupational status would boost opposition by .861 points or 14.4 percent, while the equivalent shift for all jobless individuals would amount to a 5.541-point, or 92.4-percent *decrease* in disapproval of halting sites. In other words, the most vehemently anti-Traveller occupational/employment type would be an unemployed manual labourer, while the least hostile would be an upper-class professional who had just been sacked.[4]

Symbolic politics fares at least as well in these data. In particular, the variables conservatism and multiculturalism clearly confirm this second theory in all columns in which they appear; greater conservatism fuels strong opposition to Travellers' political goals (full-range shift upward associated with a 2.4-point, or 40.0-percent, increase in opposition according to last column), while tolerance for diverse cultures goes hand-in-hand with slightly more enthusiasm for halting sites (complete change towards most pro-multicultural views corresponds to .156-point, or 2.6-percent, decline in hostility).

The results for the various partisanship regressors, supposedly also indicators of symbolic politics, are more puzzling. Overall, these regression estimates certainly do not support the hypothesis that affiliates of left-of-centre parties are more pro-Traveller. Table 1 shows that the coefficients for the more conservative Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael failed to achieve statistical significance, but so too did the estimates for the more left-wing Labour and Greens. The only partisan variables that seem to have any effect are those for the left-of-centre, Republican-oriented Sinn Féin (b = .955, p < .05, in column 6) and the now-defunct, more libertarian Progressive

Democrats (b = 1.096, p < .05, in same column). For Sinn Féin, the regressor does not reach statistical significance unless one controls for religiosity (cf. columns 3-6). Because Sinn Féin voters seem to be disproportionately unlikely to practice their faith (correlation with religiosity = -1.73, p < .05), they are probably also less apt to receive pro-Traveller messages from their local parish priest or fellow believers (see Farrell 2011). Any findings for the PDs are tentative at best because of the paucity of relevant respondents (n = 25). But examination of the few PD supporters in this 2007 survey reveals that they were universally employed and tended to occupy upper-class professions. As the analysis for occupation and employment status suggested above, this demographic is not likely to support Traveller rights.[5] So the most cautious conclusion is that partisanship generally has no substantive, independent effect on attitudes towards Travellers, probably because few or any parties dare to risk voters' wrath by championing the rights of the unpopular Irish Travellers. Lastly, though this essay does not focus on the different control variables, intriguing statistically significant findings include those for religious attendance (full-range increase linked to an 18.9-percent reduction in opposition in last column of Table 1) and local radio news (similar rise associated with a 1.2-percent boost in anti-Traveller sentiments).[6]

Discussion and conclusion

In the end, settled Irish people's views of Travellers appear to be rooted as much in such symbolic predispositions as conservatism and multiculturalism as in more 'realistic' conflicts over employment and crime. Thus, some possible ways to reduce anti-Traveller racism might include: opposing media bias and providing alternative, positive views of Travellers in newspapers, on the internet, and via broadcast media;

increasing the Traveller component of pro-tolerance education in Ireland's schools; explaining to the settled Irish public the historical causes of Travellers' socio-economic circumstances; and continuing to ally with religious congregations (Farrell, 2011; Ward, 2011) so long as these groups remain generally accepted in Irish society (Maloney, 2014).

Traditionally lacking access to the dominant means of propagating ideas in Irish society, Travellers have until very recently not been able to present their experiences and grievances directly to the broader public and thereby militate for an improvement in their physical conditions. To the extent that Travellers themselves are able to narrate their own stories via activist groups such as Pavee Point (Royall, 2010) and the Irish Traveller Movement, they may eventually be able to shift public opinion away from stereotyped views and more towards a positive, empathetic understanding that might spur better enforcement of current anti-discrimination laws in Ireland and the adoption of more equalitarian policies.

Notes

1   Although the author is grateful for the use of these data, neither the producers nor distributors of this survey are in any way responsible for the interpretations and analyses in this research note.

2   Like all such scales, this variable may suffer from some degree of non-random measurement error caused by acquiescence or related biases. The absolute values of the estimates in Table 1 for education, in particular, are probably too great given that respondents with little schooling are disproportionately likely both to oppose Travellers and to agree to any statement put to them, regardless of content. Since the

2007 survey contains only one, negatively worded question about Travellers, it is impossible to correct for this problem precisely. I did experiment with creating a bias-corrected index of attitudes toward minorities in Ireland, however, by adding the negatively valenced Traveller question to a recoded, positively worded item about the rights of asylum seekers. Rerunning the same regression as in column 6 of Table 1 using this new dependent variable still yielded a statistically significant, negatively signed coefficient for education (-.236, SE = .117) even after such correction for acquiescence bias.

3   To test the Blalock (1967)-inspired hypothesis that respondents with pre-existing hostility toward out-groups are more likely to respond negatively to a higher percentage of Travellers (i.e., perceive a greater threat from the larger "size of the minority group relative to the majority group" as per King and Wheelock, 2007) in their constituencies, I created interaction terms between percent Travellers and both of the first two symbolic-politics variables (conservatism and multiculturalism). Unfortunately for this explanation, neither interaction term achieved statistical significance when entered into the equation in separate regressions, and the proportion of Travellers itself also remained non-significant in both of these two extra runs.

In an additional analysis, I also replicated the regression in column 6 but included dummy variables for the various regions in the Republic of Ireland (i.e., Cork, Galway, Limerick, north, southeast, and north central, with greater Dublin the default category). None of these regional regressors reached statistical significance, however, and the results for the other independent variables stayed substantially the same.

4   The results for this last occupation/employment type are nonetheless fragile since relatively few respondents with high-status occupations reported being out of work. The regression equation seems to base its estimates for unemployed professionals primarily on the extrapolated slope suggested by jobless individuals of lower- and mid-range occupational prestige.

5   Column 6 of Table 1 of course also controls for occupation and employment status, but these items may have been measured imperfectly. If so, some of the remaining effects of job prestige and a stable salary might have also been captured in the item on support for the Progressive Democrats.

6   A parallel regression to that in column 6 likewise included indicator variables for the various newspapers that respondents reported reading. The only statistically significant result was for regularly perusing the Cork-based *Irish Examiner*, which increased hostility by 15.5 percent and also survived controls for region. Unfortunately, the content and possibly demographic analyses needed to isolate the cause of this paper's apparent anti-Traveller influence are beyond the scope of this research note.

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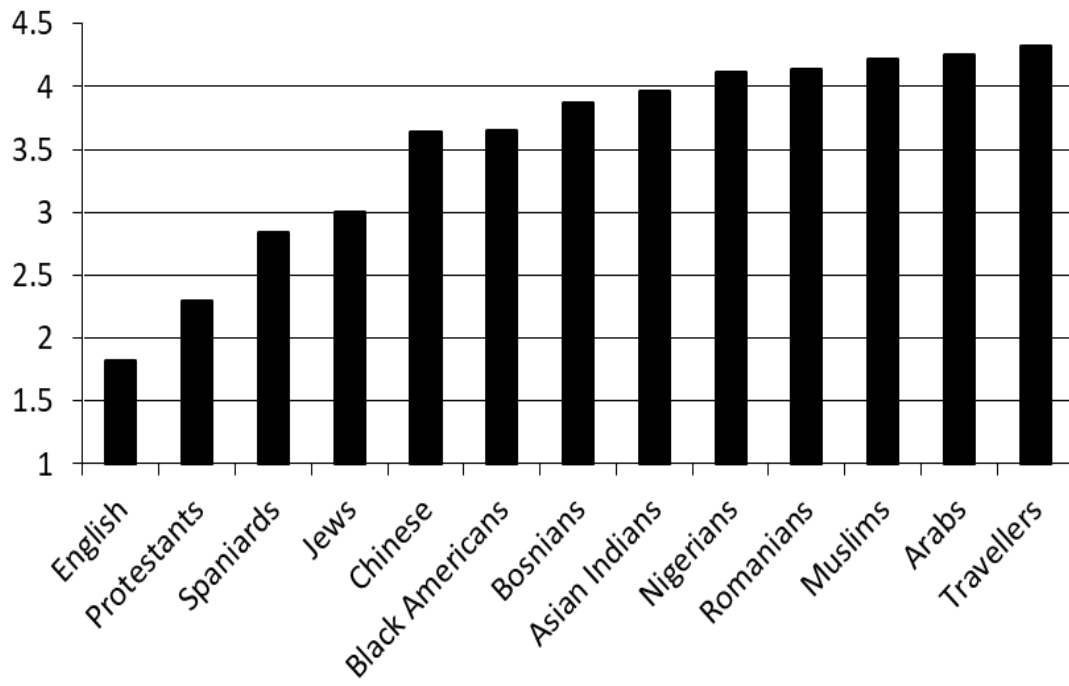
Figure 1: Settled Irish respondents' mean social distance toward Travellers and other groups,
2001 Irish Political and Social Attitudes Survey

Table 1: Determinants of settled Irish respondents' opposition to Traveller halting sites in neighbourhood, 2007 Irish National Election Study

	Coef. (Std. Er.)	Coef. (Std. Er.)	Coef. (Std. Er.)	Coef. (Std. Er.)	Coef. (Std. Er.)	Coef. (Std. Er.)
Realistic group conflict						
Unemployed	3.029 (1.263)*	.035 (.877)	2.267 (1.082)*			.677 (1.067)
Occupational Prestige	.287 (.100)*	.046 (.075)	.264 (.086)*			.065 (.087)
Unemp'ed X Occ. prest.	-2.134 (.639)*	-.491 (.476)	-1.649 (.554)*			-.812 (.562)
Income	-.031 (.084)	.043 (.056)	.010 (.070)			-.050 (.069)
Education	-.168 (.080)*	-.168 (.054)*	-.145 (.067)			-.114 (.063)
Own home	.297 (.229)	.064 (.143)	-.009 (.181)			.062 (.178)
Urbanicity	-.025 (.034)	-.009 (.022)	-.029 (.028)			-.003 (.027)
More perceived crime	.429 (.092)*	.164 (.064)*	.340 (.078)*			.235 (.075)*
Perceived better housing	.026 (.069)	.045 (.050)	.052 (.058)			.013 (.061)
Travellers in constit. (%)	-.010 (.246)	.127 (.160)	.124 (.194)			.158 (.204)
Symbolic politics						
Conservatism	.240 (.040)*			.154 (.029)*	.209 (.035)*	.178 (.036)*
Multiculturalism	-.078 (.031)*			-.095 (.022)*	-.061 (.026)*	-.124 (.026)*
Fianna Fáil	.188 (.223)			.072 (.164)	.201 (.199)	-.145 (.194)
Fine Gael	-.163 (.225)			-.145 (.186)	.013 (.249)	-.166 (.217)
Green				-.062 (.355)	.019 (.417)	

.787 (.391)   .415 (.455)

Labour   -.284 (.265)   -.010 (.336)

.051 (.297)   .373 (.362)

Prog. Dems   .956 (.416)*   1.112 (.465)*

.871 (.457)   1.096 (.496)*

Sinn Féin   .541 (.302)   .816 (.393)*

.456 (.369)   .955 (.452)*

Ind/Oth. Party   .032 (.326)   .378 (.403)   .338 (.380)

.421 (.429)

Controls

Religious attendance   -.146 (.041)*   -.093 (.045)*

-.162 (.053)*

Protestant   -.066 (.360)   .021 (.400)

.529 (.472)

Other religion   .984 (.724)   .733 (.659)

1.153 (.755)

No religion   .204 (.440)   .810 (.452)

.714 (.468)

Woman   .052 (.146)   .016 (.150)

.147 (.175)

Age   .001 (.006)   .006 (.005)

-.003 (.007)

Newspaper use   -.041 (.031)   -.001 (.033)

-.006 (.038)

Local Radio news   .085 (.026)*   .046 (.027)

.070 (.032)*

National Radio news   .014 (.028)   -.039 (.030)

-.006 (.035)

TV news   -.030 (.041)   -.017 (.045)

-.040 (.053)

Internet news   .005 (.031)   -.021 (.034)

-.006 (.040)

Constant   4.251 (.455)*   3.842 (.606)*   4.235 (.232)*   4.018 (.411)*   3.618 (.639)*

2.471 (.812)*

R^2	.038	.114	.079	.114
.138	.243			
N	849	641	810	613
604	457			

* $p \leq .05$

Note: Listwise deletion of data with missing values. Ordinary least-squares regression. Data weighted by demographics to correct for selection bias. Range of non-dummy variables: opposition to halting sites (1-7), occupational prestige (1-4), unemployed X occupational prestige (0-4), income (1-5), urbanicity (1-8), percent Travellers in constituency (.04-1.74), perceived increase in crime (1-5), perceived improvement in housing (1-5), education (1-7), religious attendance (1-8), age (18-94), media use (0-7), conservativism (0-10), and multiculturalism (1-3). Occupational prestige based on ISCO-88 category of self-reported job.