

Social and Political Attitudes in Ireland and Northern Ireland (1998-2023)

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Motivation

- Report forms part of a larger research programme with comparing NI/IE, where focus is largely on ‘objective’ indicators of how jurisdictions are faring e.g., qualifications, earnings, productivity, trade (Devlin, Smyth, Bergin, McGuinness, Lawless etc)
 - However, more **‘subjective indicators’ (e.g., attitudes) can help tap into people’s experiences in life and provide insights into other aspects of society not easily measured**
- NI/IE - Social, historical and geographical similarities BUT political institutions and social, political and economic history very different
- This report explores North-South differences in people’s attitudes towards their society and their experience within it – builds on Fahey et al (2005)

Which Attitudes?

POLITICAL

Satisfaction with democracy

Political Efficacy ('voice counts in politics')

TRUST AND COHESION

Social trust in other people

Trust in institutions – political, judicial, and media

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Next year life will be better/worse

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REDISTRIBUTION/EQUALITY

Should government reduce income inequality/Should incomes be made more equal

Research Questions

1. How do these social and political attitudes differ between NI/IE and how do they change over time?

Time period: 1998-2023 (IE) / 1998-2018*(NI)

2 Are there group differences in these trends within jurisdictions?

- Higher and lower educated
- Older and younger generations (as potential driver of change over time)

3. How do NI & IE attitudes compare to GB and Western Europe?

Note: no analysis of constitutional question or community relations in NI - (see Devine and Robinson, 2019; Hayward and Rosher, 2020, 2021, 2024; Hayward et al., 2023);

no data on religious affiliation in main data source so no analysis by religion

Context: Ireland and Northern Ireland 1998-2023

Ireland

POLITICAL/SOCIAL

- Up until mid-1990s largely White, Catholic, Economic boom had a transformative effect on IE
- Rapid social/cultural change – eg referenda 2015 same sex marriage; 2018 abortion
- Political stability, tho some recent change (2020)

ECONOMIC

- Sustained economic boom until 2007 ‘Celtic Tiger’
2008 Great Recession
 - E.g., one of the deepest and most protracted in Europe; far-reaching austerity measures
- Since 2013 Labour Market Recovery
Some easing of austerity measures

Northern Ireland

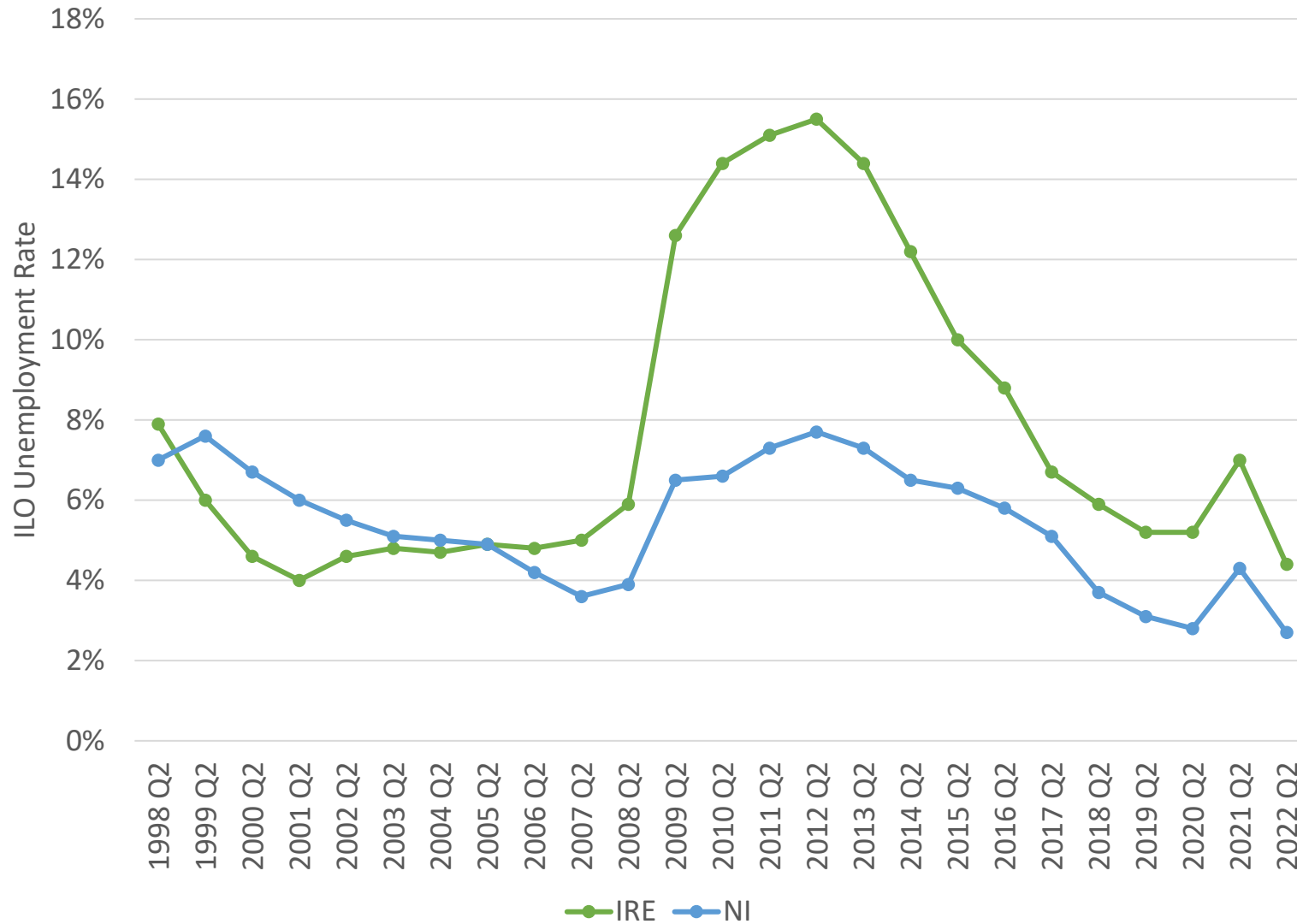
POLITICAL

- Protracted ethnic conflict ‘the Troubles’ – 1969-1994 – deeply divided between nationalist and unionists
- Good Friday Agreement (1998) – ushered in a period of peace/powersharing
- Yet peace ‘messy’ (Coulter et al., 2021) - challenges with powersharing, repeated suspensions of Assembly
- 2016 Brexit referendum greater insecurity in NI around arrangements /NI Protocol etc

ECONOMIC

- 2008 Great Recession and subsequent austerity not as dramatic as IE
- Austerity more protracted – since 2010 cuts in public spending in UK, inc NI – impact of people’s standard of living (Bergin and McGuinness, 2021)

Economic Context: Unemployment rate in IE/NI 1998-2019



Source: IE LFS (CSO); NI LFS (ONS).

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Examples of longer-term societal transformations

- **Religion and secularisation**
 - Religion has had a profound effect on social attitudes in both NI and IE for much of the 20th century (Fahey et al., 2005) BUT
 - Long-term decline in church attendance – esp in last decades – in both NI/IE – and growth of ‘no religion’
- **Rise in educational attainment**
 - Attainment has been rising in IE/NI, and proportion with uni degrees (Smyth et al. 2022)
 - Although a widening of IE/NI gap in educational attainment over time (IE performing better) (Bergin and McGuinness, 2021; Devlin et al. 2023)
- **Immigration and increasing diversity**
 - Rapid economic boom attracted many immigrants for the first time in Ireland’s history, also in NI (though to a lesser extent) (McGinnity et al 2023)
 - Circa 20% born outside IE (2022 Census); in NI, 9% born outside UK (2021 Census)

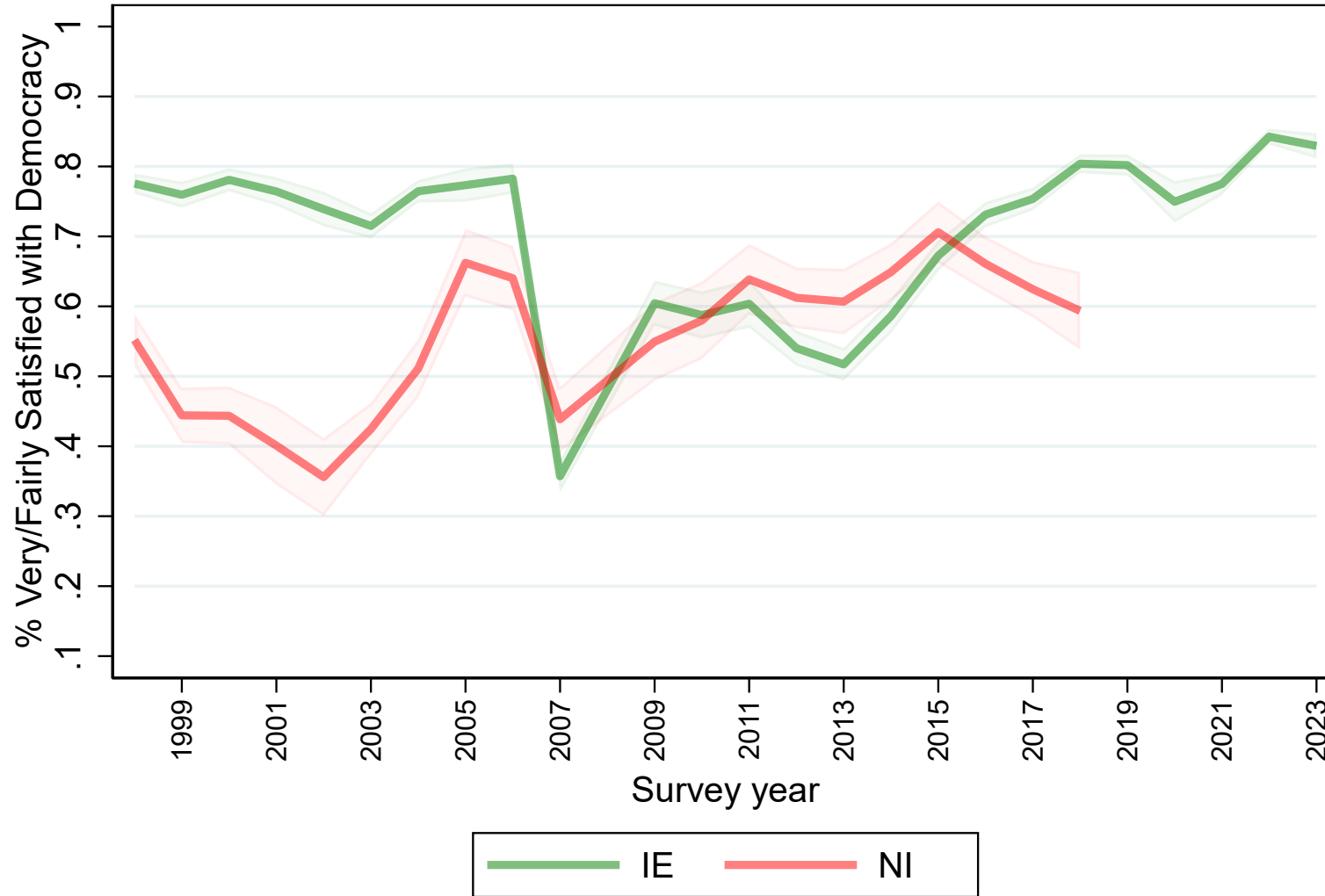
Evidence Base and Analysis Plan

- **Measuring attitudes** is challenging, so we use high-quality, representative survey data which asks people in NI and IE identical, carefully-worded questions (see also Fahey et al 2005)
- **Evidence base**
 - Main source: Eurobarometer (1998-2023) or (1998-2018** for NI)
 - Can directly compare trends *and* levels; EB used separate booster NI sample
 - Secondary sources: European Social Survey (IRE); World Values Survey (NI)
 - Can compare trends *but not* directly compare levels (e.g., slight differences in questions)
- **Analysis** – each attitude will be studied in the same way...
 1. Compare *overall trends* and *levels over time* in IE/NI
 2. Comparisons with GB, EU15
 3. Compare trends across different social groups (Comparing differences in attitudes across generations (as driver of change))

Regression modelling to test whether changes in composition of ‘societies’ can explain changes in outcomes over time e.g., changes in levels of education though **primarily narrative interpretation**

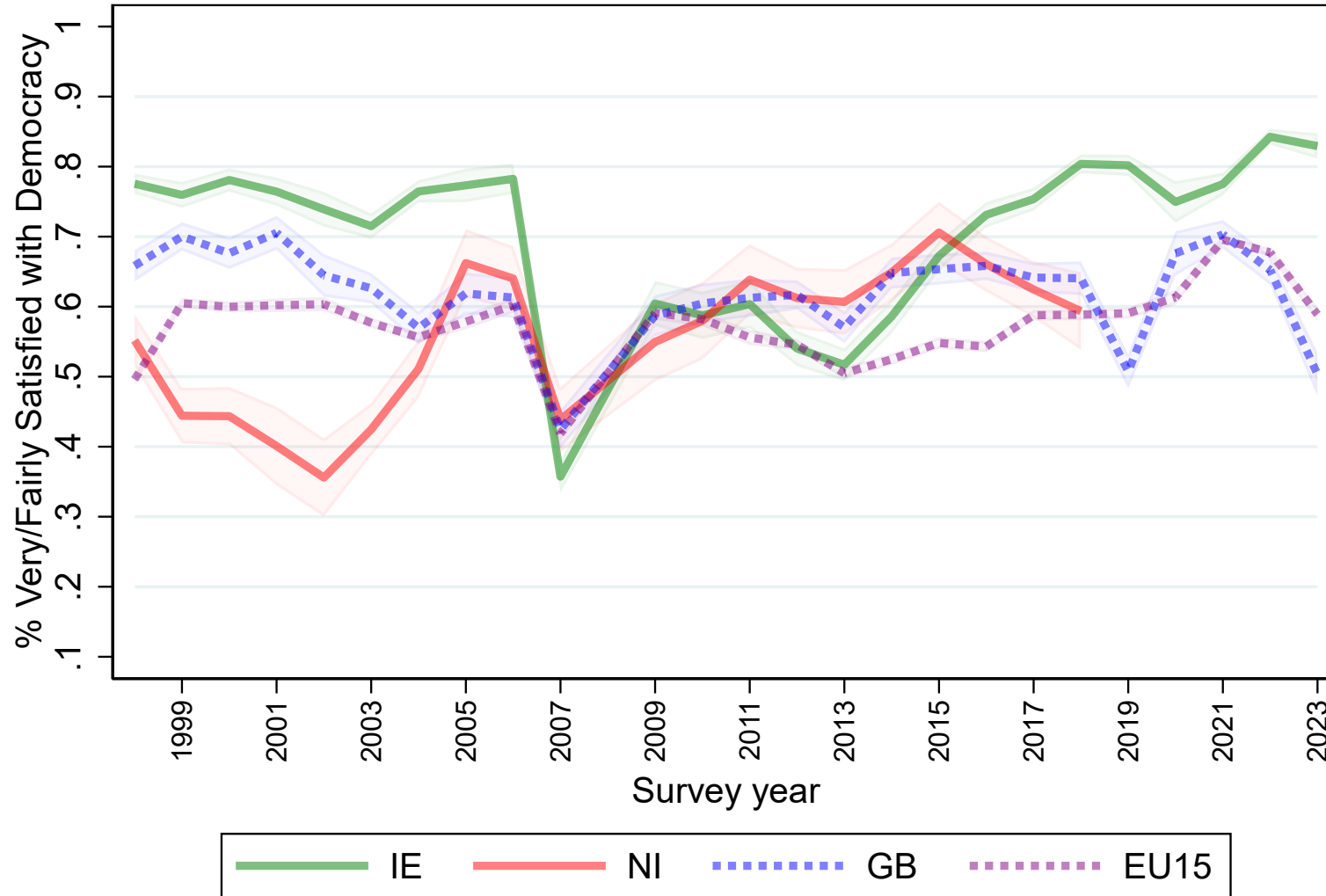
Political attitudes and optimism, North and South

Satisfaction with democracy – IRE/NI



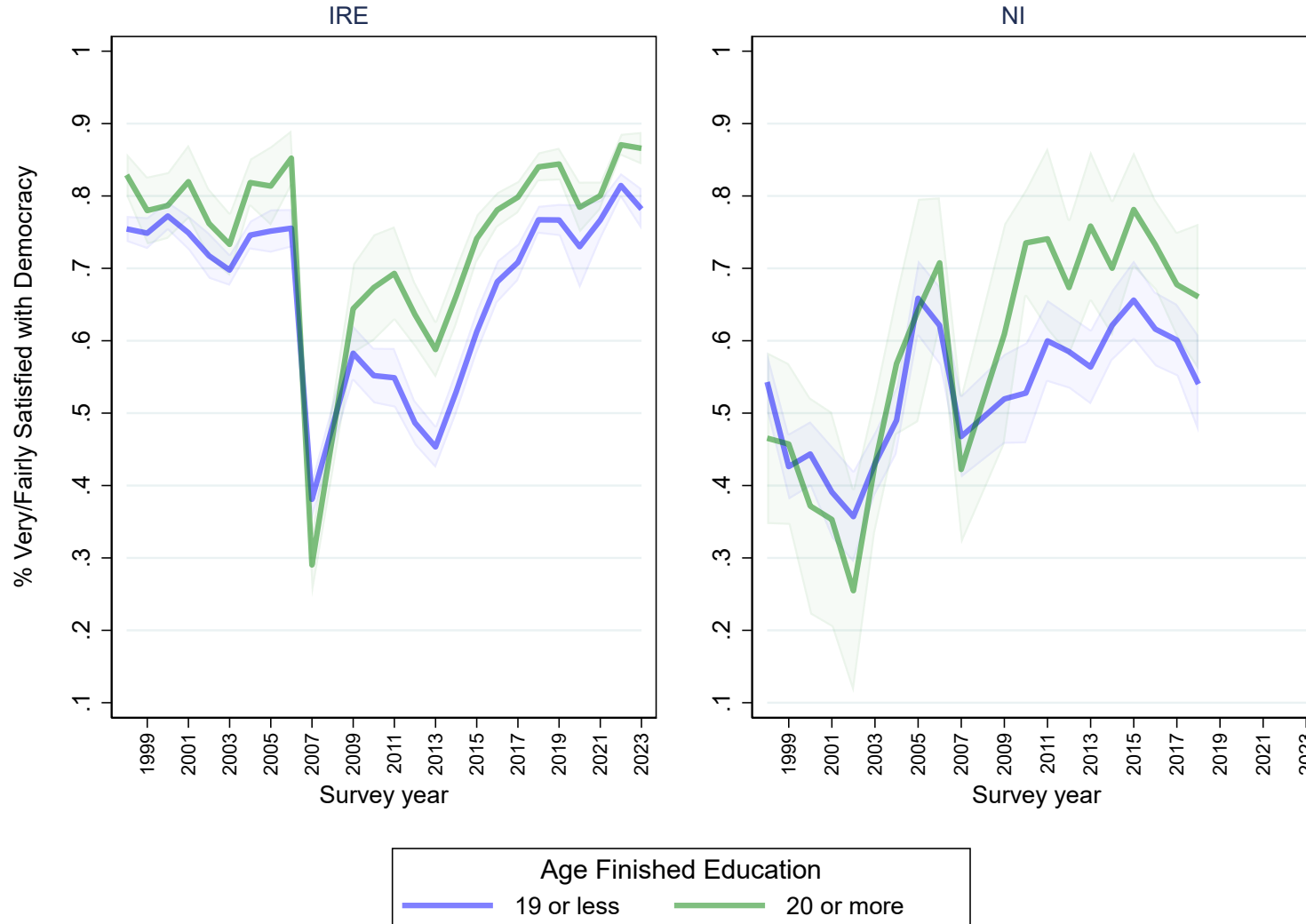
Data source: Eurobarometer

Satisfaction with democracy – IRE, NI, GB, EU15



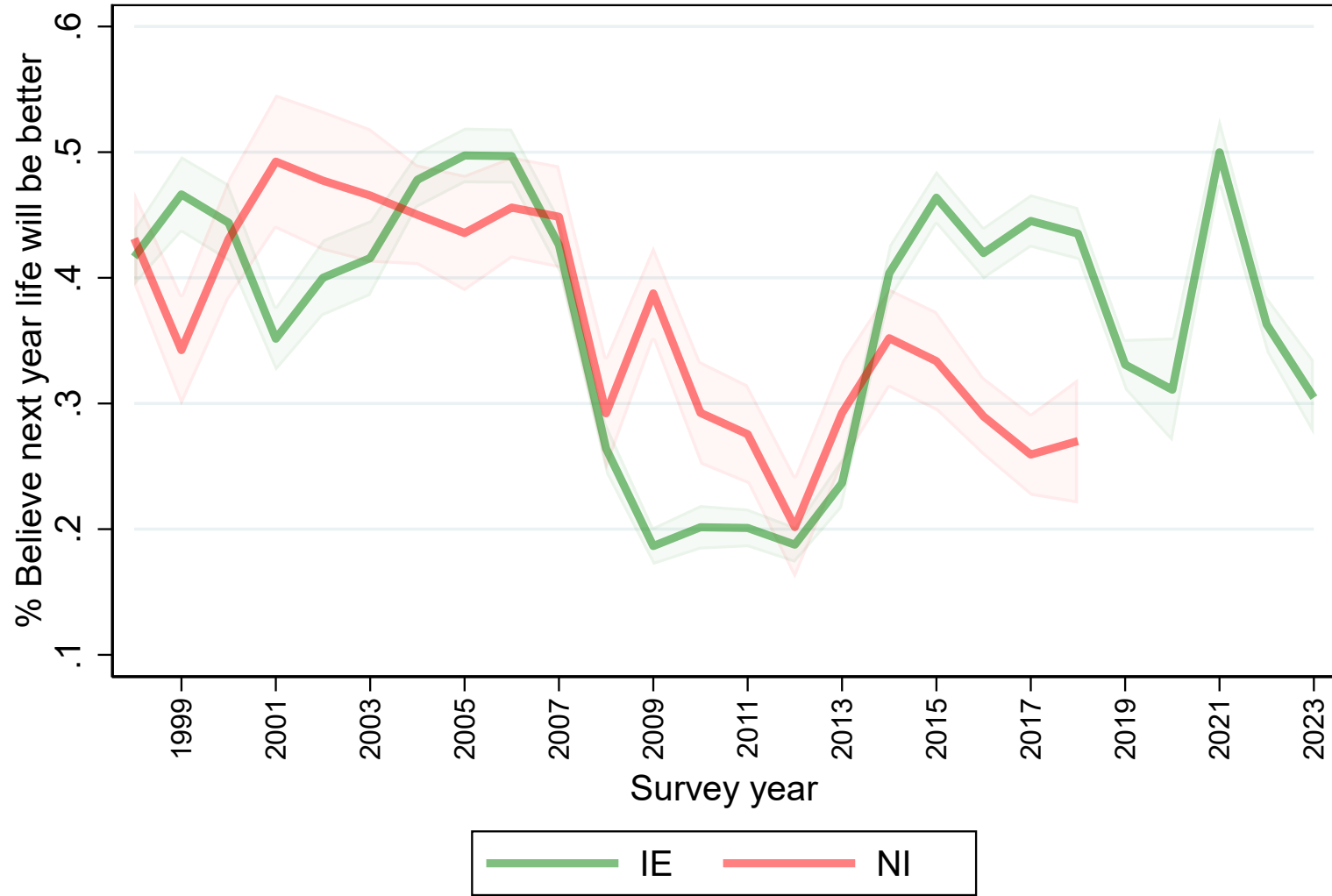
Data source: Eurobarometer

Satisfaction with democracy – by education



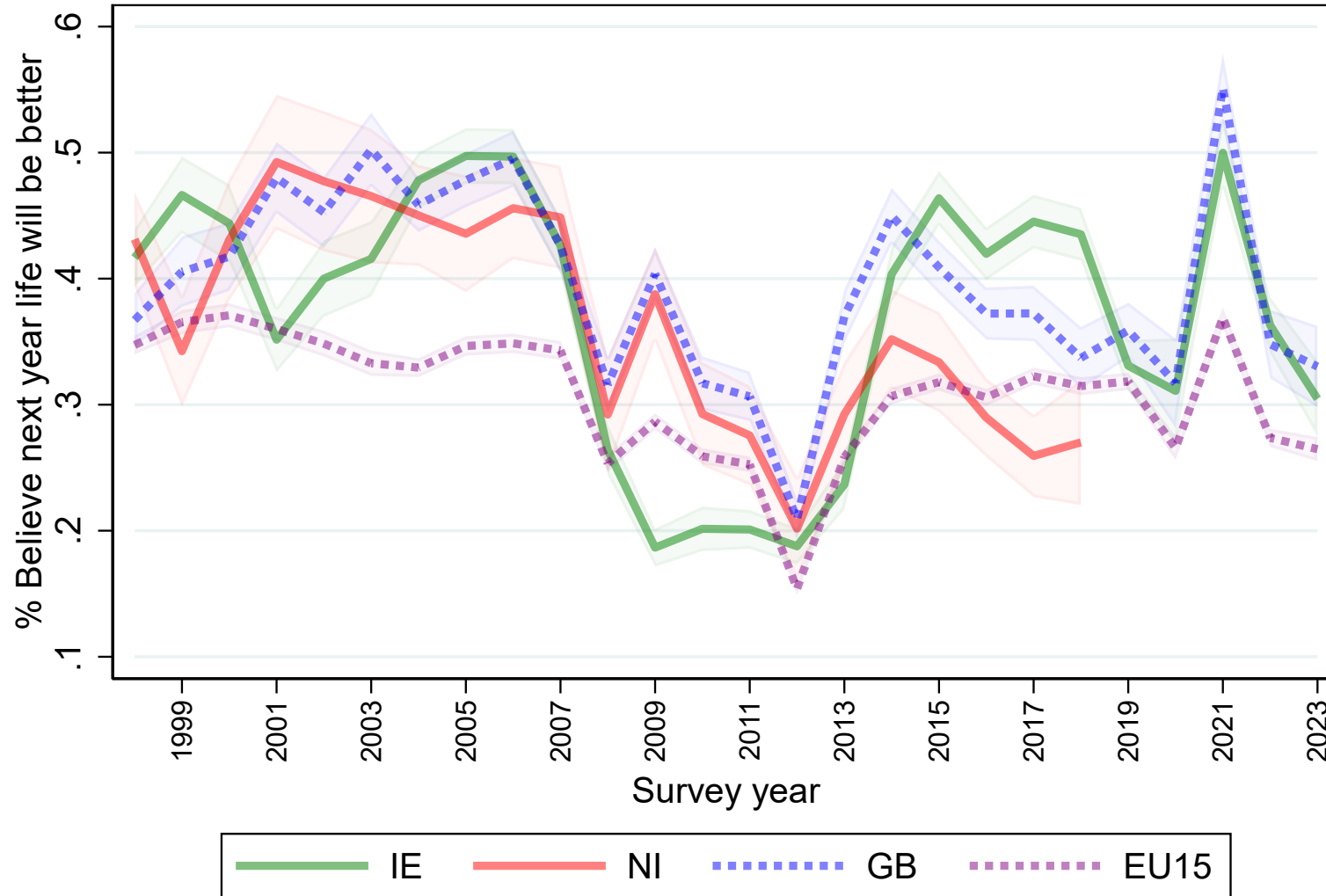
Data source: Eurobarometer

Optimism for next year – IRE/NI



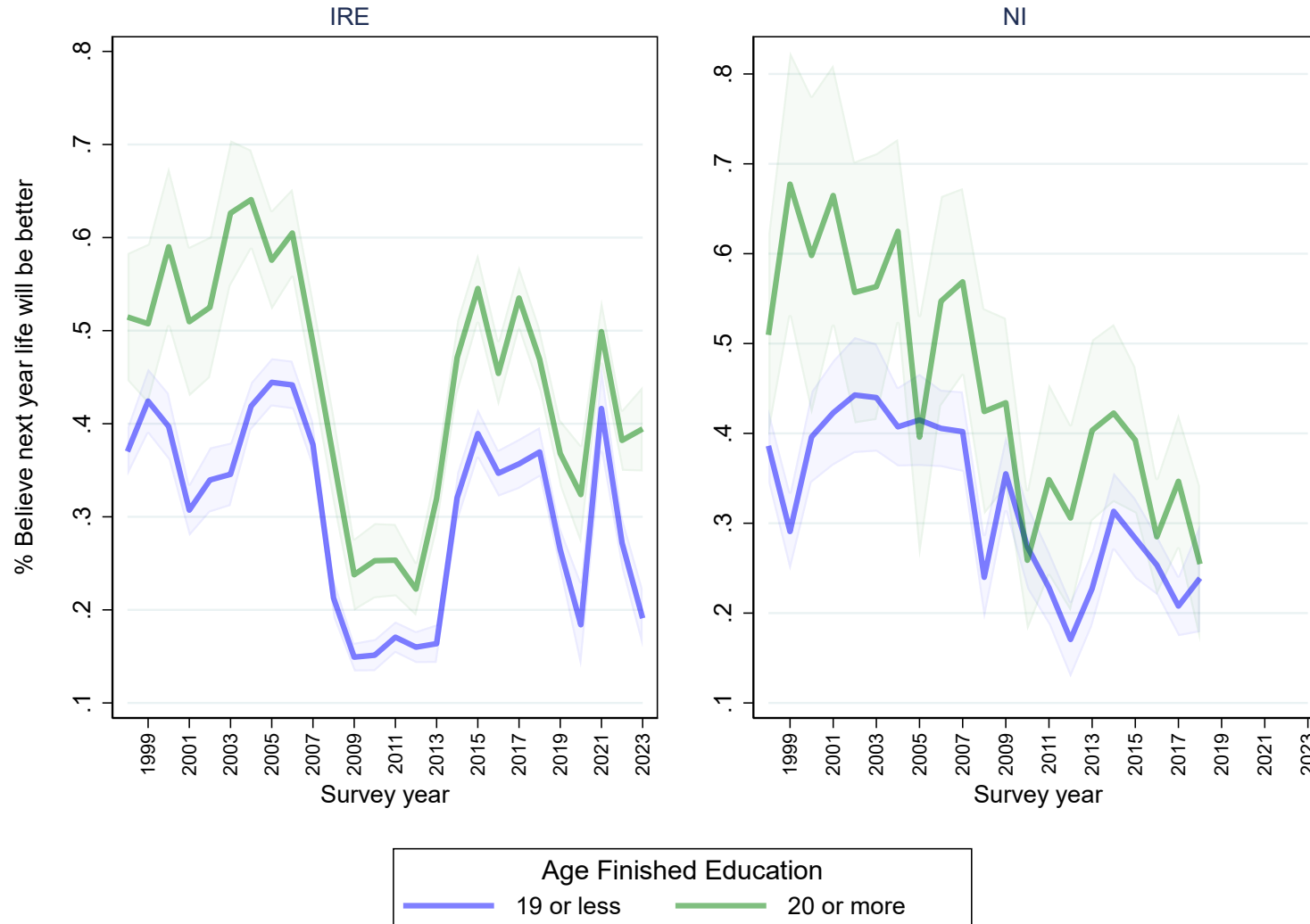
Data source: Eurobarometer

Optimism for next year – IRE, NI, GB, EU15



Data source: Eurobarometer

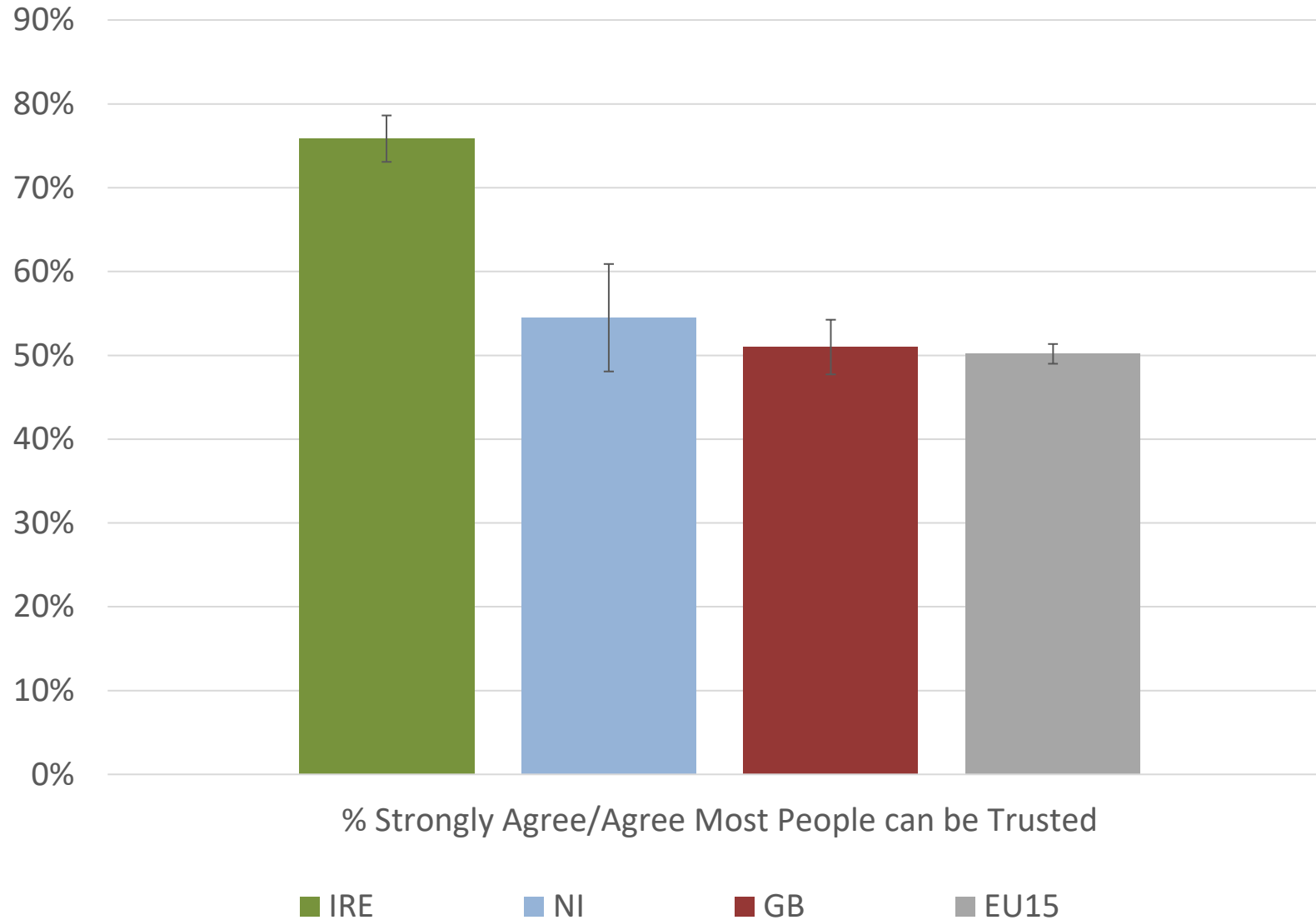
Optimism for next year – by education



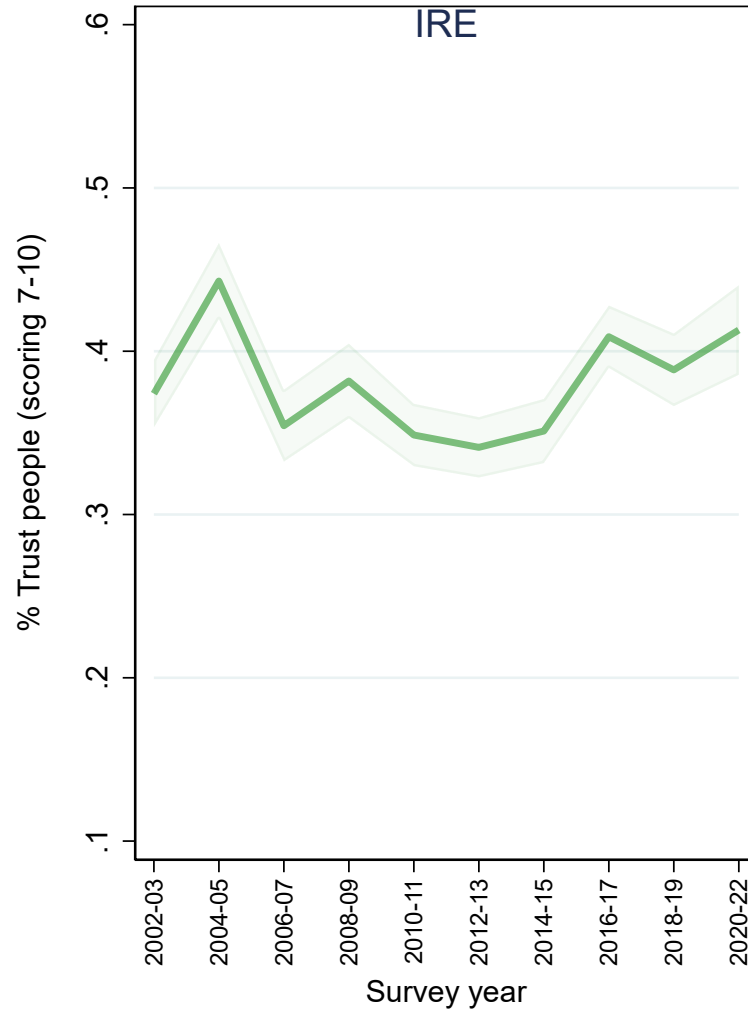
Data source: Eurobarometer

Social and Institutional Trust in Ireland, North & South

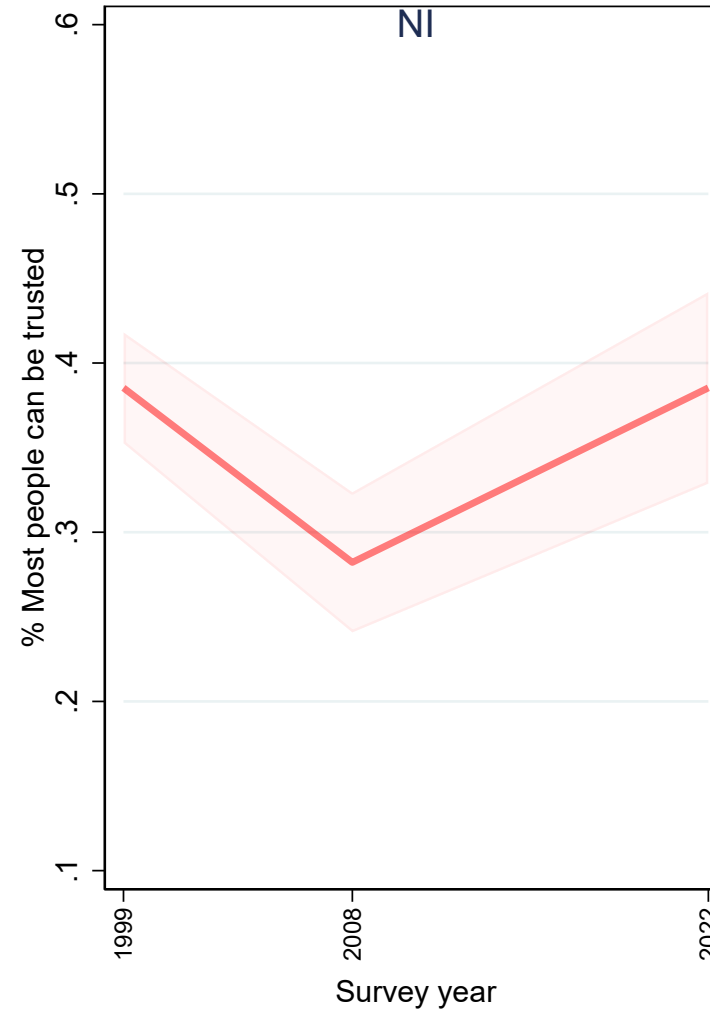
% Agree most people can be trusted – IRE/NI – 2017



Trust in most people – IRE/NI



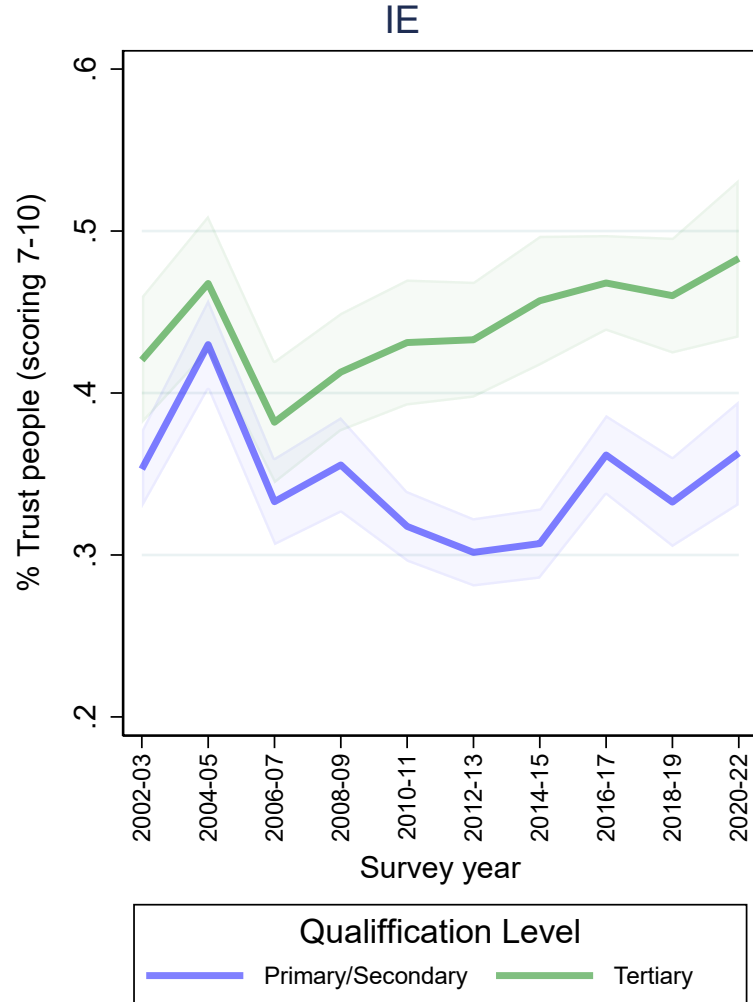
Data source: European Social Survey



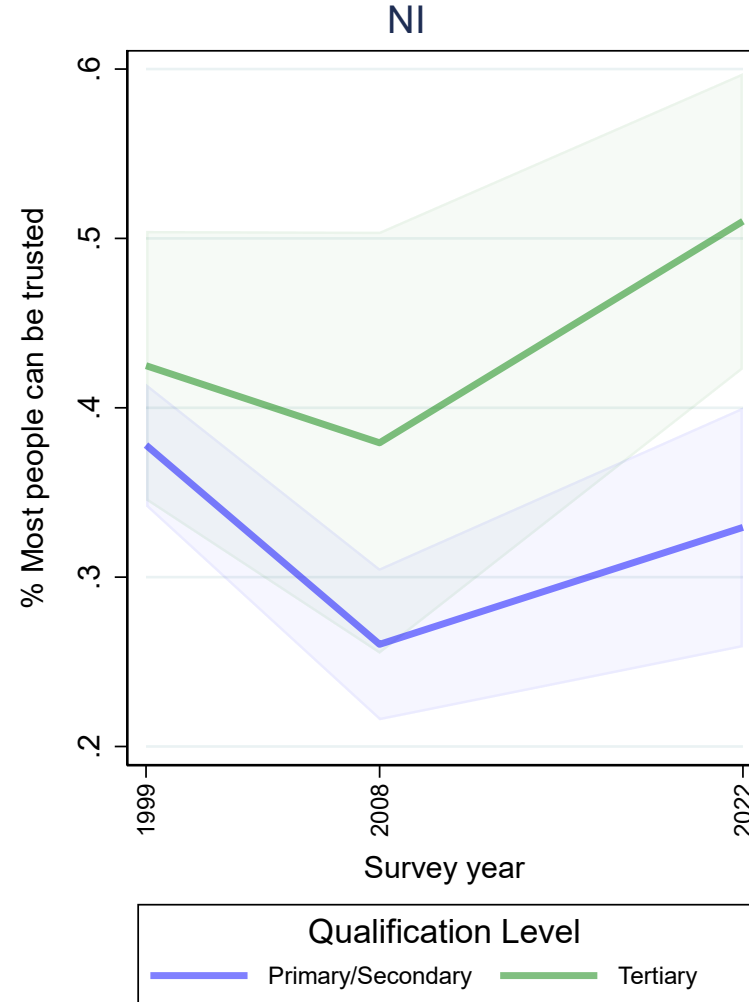
Data source: WVS/EVS

LEVELS OF SOCIAL
 TRUST CANNOT BE
 DIRECTLY COMPARED
 BETWEEN IRE and NI,
 BUT TRENDS IN TRUST
 CAN

Trust in most people – by education



Data source: European Social Survey



Data source: WVS/EVS

LEVELS OF SOCIAL TRUST CANNOT BE DIRECTLY COMPARED BETWEEN IRE and NI, BUT TRENDS IN TRUST CAN

SUMMARY

SUMMARY (1)

- **IRELAND**

- Recession played a major role shaping attitudes – much of 21st century has been one ‘long reset’
- Some groups, especially lower educated groups, hit worse, took longer to recover, and still haven’t recovered (Social Trust), or have only just recovered (Satisfaction with Democracy) to pre-recession levels
 - Led to a widening gap in attitudes between more and less educated groups
- Recent years (2019-2023) seen greater instability in attitudes

- **NORTHERN IRELAND**

- Recession likely played a role (albeit smaller than IRE)
- Greater volatility suggests other factors important e.g., power-sharing, community relations
- Also widening gaps between more and less educated since recession
- Recent decline in attitudes (2016-2018)
- Longer-term positive and negative changes

SUMMARY (2)

- Some evidence of longer-term, generational changes
 - NI: older cohorts generally more positive and gaps have widened with younger cohorts; recent (2016-2018) declines among younger cohorts
 - IRE: smaller generational differences, but recent (2020-2023) widening of differences between cohorts; younger less positive
- On the whole, over study period social and political attitudes more positive in IRE
 - Some of the most positive across Western Europe
- Attitudes in NI generally less positive across Western Europe

LIMITATIONS

- Directly comparable data for NI ended 2018
 - Difficult to say where attitudes have travelled since
 - Some evidence from WVS that situation worsened to 2022
- No direct statistical testing of what driving changes in attitudes
 - Narrative approach based on timing and theoretical links
 - Likely drivers presented not an exhaustive list
- Aim of report not to examine role of religious affiliation or political identity
 - No repeated data on affiliation in EB; less salience in IRE

IMPLICATIONS

- Health of economy and governmental response; Ireland's 'lost decade'
 - Price of Ireland's economic model?
- Role of government: functioning, responsive, representative
 - Particularly sensitive in NI
- Attention needs to be paid to growing divides in societal attitudes between more and less educated groups
- Evidence that youngest cohorts in both jurisdictions may be becoming increasingly pessimistic about their society
- Highlights need for comparative IRE/NI social survey data
 - Large enough sample; comparable, island-relevant, measures; government-financed

Where to read more

Read the full report here:

<https://www.esri.ie/publications/changing-social-and-political-attitudes-in-ireland-and-northern-ireland>

Info on the ESRI/Shared Island research programme:

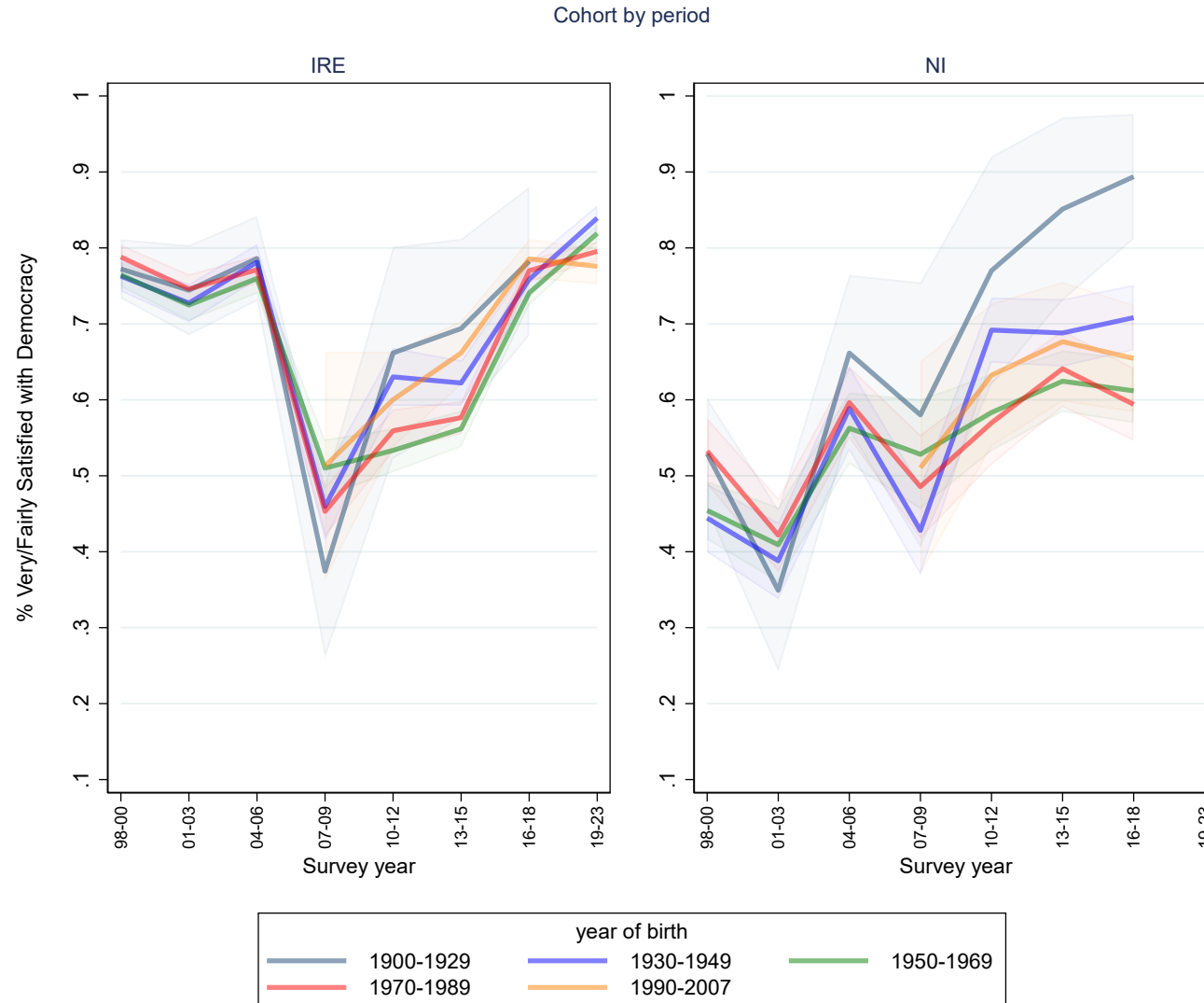
www.esri.ie/current-research/the-economic-and-social-opportunities-from-increased-cooperation-on-the-shared

Coming soon (2024): *Gender and Labour Market inclusion on the island of Ireland*
Attitudes towards immigration and refugees in Ireland: trends and drivers post-Ukrainian arrivals

Thanks for listening.
Any Questions?

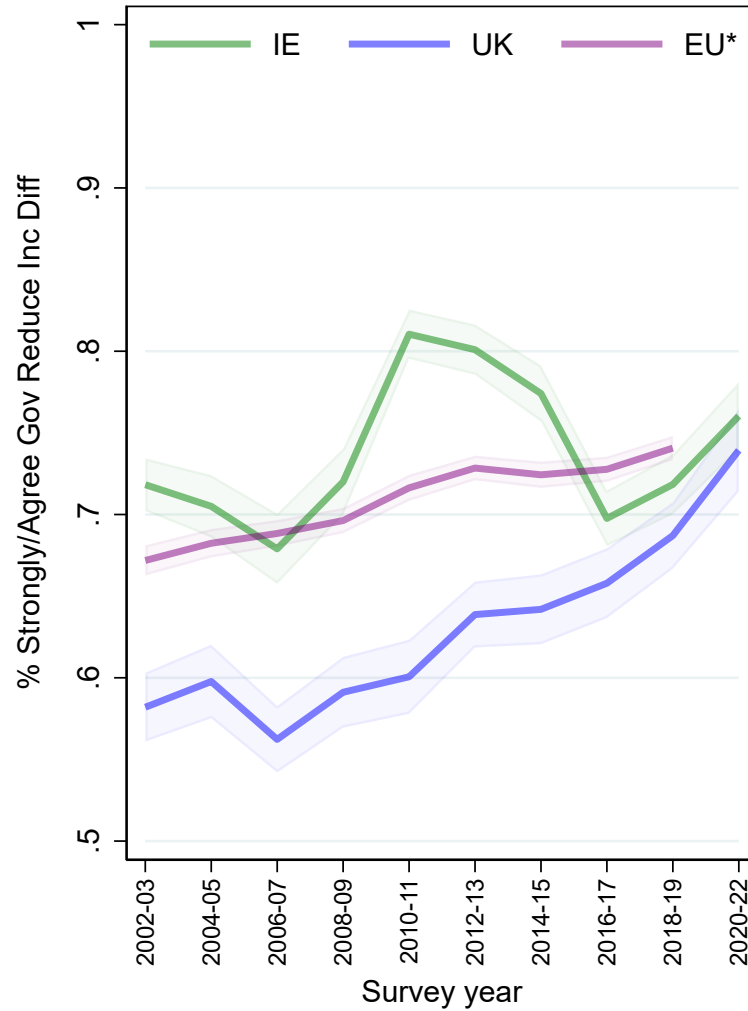
ADDITIONAL SLIDES

Satisfaction with democracy – period by generation

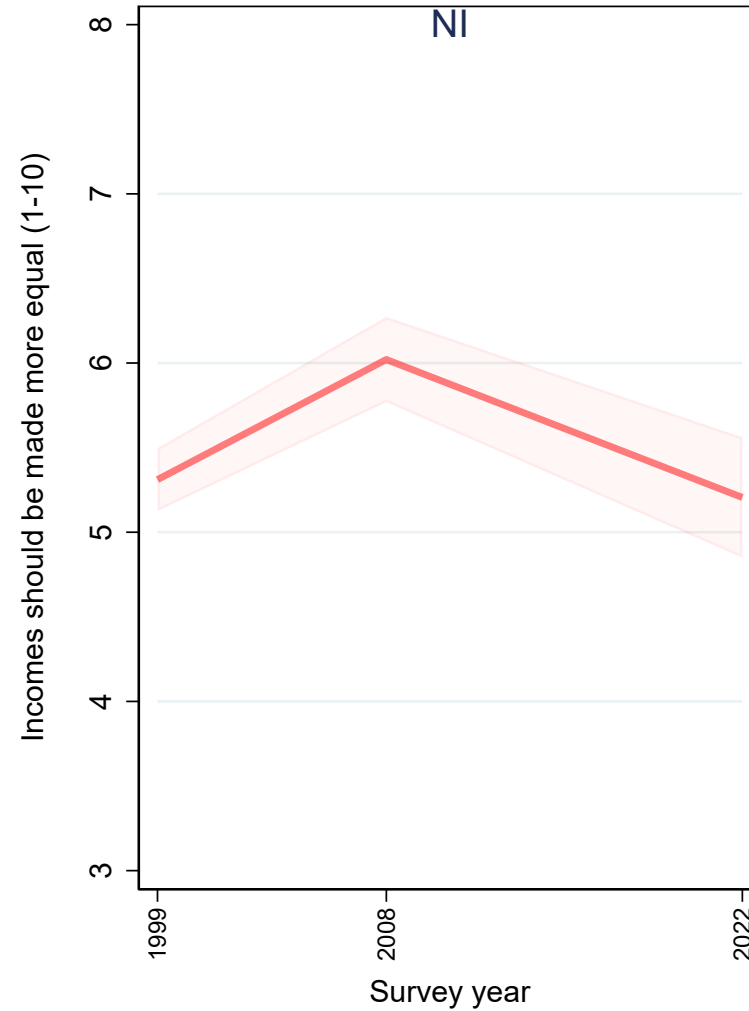


Data source: Eurobarometer

Should Income Differences be Reduced – IRE/NI

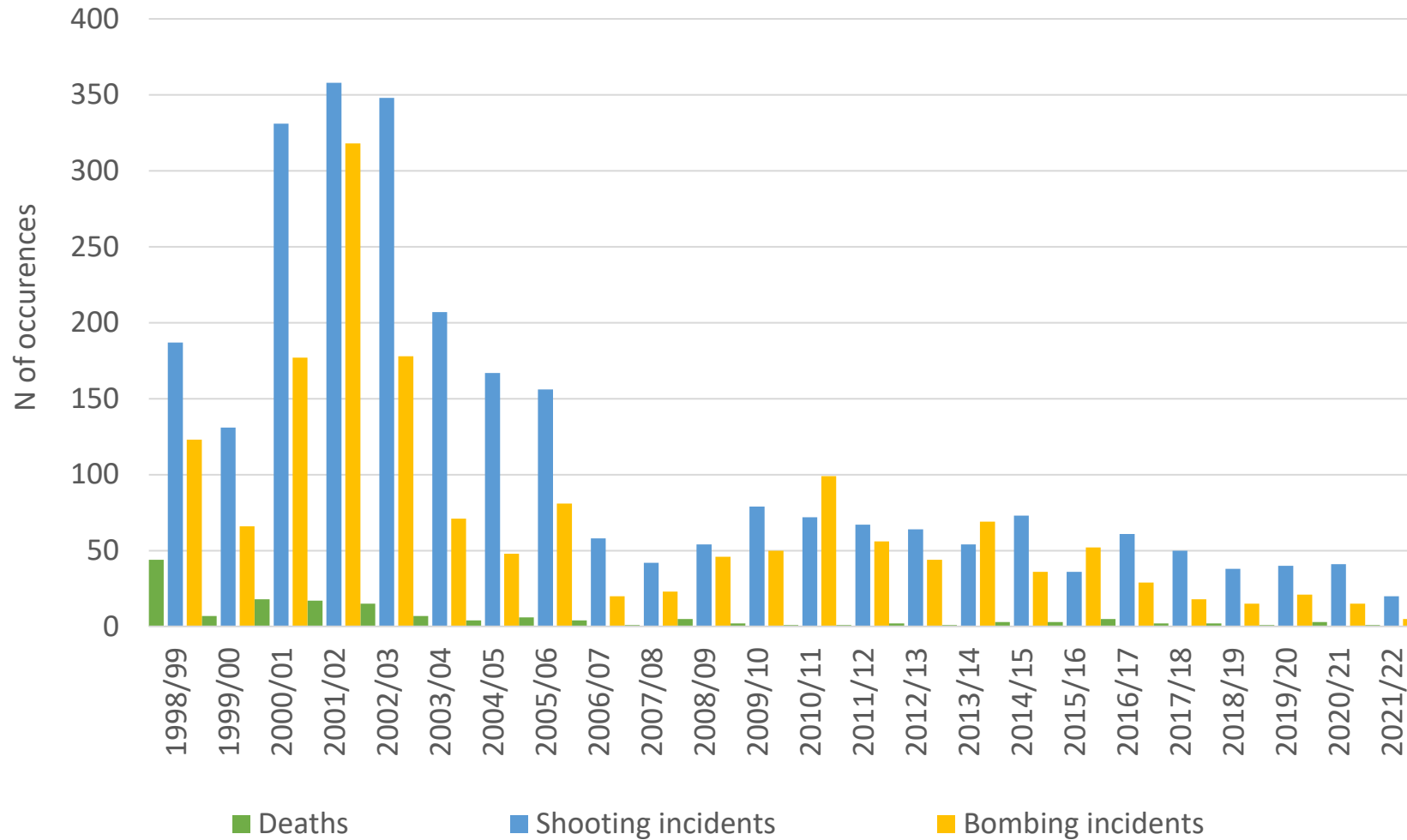


Data source: European Social Survey



Data source: WVS/EVS

TROUBLES-RELATED VIOLENCE; 1998-2022



PERCEPTIONS OF 'COMMUNITY-RELATIONS' IN NI; 1998-2019

