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Shaping sustainable peace: Citizen perspectives on settlement design

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Abstract

The literature on peace settlements elaborates on the conditions that make elites willing to cooperate, but citizens' views are rarely examined. This study develops a testable framework to understand how peace settlement design impacts public opinion in attempts to resolve inter-communal conflicts. The framework provides a citizens' perspective on peace settlement institutions. It argues two types of institutional arrangements are important in shaping citizens' views: those with zero-sum consequences will divide communities, and those with joint benefits will unite them. We use this framework to hypothesize about cross-community differences and overlaps on territorial arrangements, political institutions, economic compensation, and security provisions and human rights protections. Testing this argument with conjoint experiments in Northern Ireland and Cyprus, we find some support for the theory. Territorial issues are the most divisive issues across communities, and some provisions offering joint benefits attracted cross-community support. Surprisingly, power-sharing institutions do not matter. Our findings suggest the public has a different orientation and different priorities than elites are assumed to have. We discuss implications for policy attempts to include citizens' preferences in peace settlement processes.

Keywords

conflict mitigating institutions, peace settlements, citizen preferences, inclusive peace, conjoint experiment

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Introduction

Intercommunal conflicts, understood as disputes involving two or more groups identified by certain markers of community identity, undermine the life and well-being of millions across the globe. A fundamental step towards durable peace is taken when negotiations amongst elites lead to institutionalized peace settlements. The danger of a return to violence is further diminished and the possibility of lasting peace is considerably strengthened if these settlements are regarded as legitimate beyond the elites negotiating them (Dyrstad and Hillesund, 2020; Tellez, 2019b). Yet, we do not know what makes peace settlements legitimate in the eyes of citizens in societies riven by identity conflicts. To address this issue, we focused on the relationship between public opinion, the main issues underpinning peace settlements, and the institutions intended to mitigate conflict. Scholars have recently attempted to understand this relationship, especially in cases where public choices in referendums and elections have been pivotal to the success or failure of a peace settlement (Haass et al., 2022).[1] To shed light on the issue, we looked at two post-conflict societies, Cyprus and Northern Ireland, and asked: What are citizens' priorities in peace settlement design? What elements of peace agreements are easier for citizens from different communities to agree upon?

We examined Cyprus and Northern Ireland using an original framework linking peace settlement institutions and public opinion in conflict settings. This framework develops a citizen's view of Conflict Mitigating Institutions – by which we mean peace settlement provisions intended to resolve conflicts – and the extent to which they might secure cross-community endorsements. The framework draws on the comparative literature on political institutions which highlights the role of institutions in shaping the provision and distribution of resources (not only economic assets, but also political power, government services, private and public goods) between individuals and social groups (Boix, 2003, 15; North, 1990; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005; for an important conflict studies extension of this insight, see Haass and Ottmann, 2021). We argue peace settlements contain two types of institutional provisions to resolve conflicts and impact citizens' day-to-day lives: one type has zero-sum consequences for citizens who belong to different groups, and the other offers joint benefits.[2] We developed expectations about their respective impacts on citizens' evaluations to identify community differences and commonalities on territorial arrangements, political institutions, economic restitutions, security provisions, and human rights protections. We also put forward arguments about their relative importance and then tested these expectations in two conjoint experiments, one in each country. Cyprus and Northern Ireland offered an interesting comparison given their contrasting conflict trajectories, with Cyprus facing stalled reunification efforts and Northern Ireland navigating an external shock (Brexit) to its post-agreement power-sharing arrangements.

Our main findings support the idea that peace settlement provisions with mainly zero-sum consequences are divisive, whereas those that contain joint benefits achieve support across communities. Unsurprisingly, the most important priority for respondents across cases was the location of territorial borders, with significant differences between groups in conflict. This was also the case with disputes on the involvement of international actors in security and human rights protections, most combinations of international actors prove divisive, with a few exceptions. While these findings in themselves may not be surprising, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to document this pattern of preferences when respondents consider various options jointly. Importantly, we detected similar patterns across two cases.

Crucially, our findings challenge some of the assumptions about community preferences. These are assumptions developed primarily by focusing on what is important to elites (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2020; Mattes and Savun, 2009; McGarry and O'Leary, 2006). We find that cross-

community preferences converged rather than diverged on power-sharing provisions. Despite the prominence of these provisions in the literature on peace settlement negotiations, citizens seem to consider them relatively unimportant compared to other issues.

Our findings contribute to academic and policy insights, especially debates on citizen participation and inclusive peace (Cuhadar, 2020; Cuhadar and Paffenholz, 2020; Paffenholz and Zartman, 2019). Linking the design of post-conflict institutions to public opinion deepens the comparative study of post-conflict institutions (Kao and Revkin, 2023; McCulloch and McEvoy, 2018; Wolff, 2011) and of institutional choice more broadly (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Elkins and Sides, 2007; March and Olsen, 1983). The research we present here is policy relevant in two ways. First, better identifying popular preferences in peace settlements will help in the run-up to elections and referendums. Second, documenting citizens' preferences and highlighting their potential differences from elites' preferences has consequences for how we think about inclusive peace practices, whose promotion is a priority for international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

A bottom-up perspective on peace settlement design

The focus of much of the existing scholarship on peace settlement design has been to understand which types of designs induce peaceful outcomes (Cederman et al., 2022; Mattes and Savun, 2009). Scholars seek to specify the conditions under which political elites, from rebel commanders to party leaders and government ministers, are willing to accept proposed settlement solutions. They identify two mechanisms that can lead to peace: power-sharing institutions (Hartzell, 1999; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2020; Mattes and Savun, 2009) and security guarantees (Walter, 1997, 2002). Both speak to elites' need to receive credible commitments to be incentivized to agree to peace (Fearon, 1998). Power-sharing institutions create the incentive for rebels to drop their arms to gain a guaranteed share of legislative representation and/or executive power. Similarly, security guarantees provided by third parties signal that the vulnerability of those who disarm will not be exploited.

Citizens' opinions and preferences have either been assumed to mirror elites' positions or neglected altogether (McGarry and O'Leary, 2007; for exceptions, see Graham et al., 2017; Loizides et al., 2022), even though citizens may be asked to approve, for example, in referendums, the arrangements established by peace settlements, and governments need citizens to comply with peace settlement institutions for peace to be maintained.

We address the question of citizens' preferences for peace settlement designs using a bottom-up perspective, thus contributing to a small but growing literature on the role of citizens in peace processes (Haass et al., 2022; Tellez, 2019a). Our basic argument is that when asked to evaluate multidimensional peace settlement proposals, citizens have a different orientation than political leaders – or at least, a different orientation than leaders are thought to hold.[3] After all, citizens and elites have been found to diverge on various levels. Dellmuth and Colleagues (2022) find a sizable gap between citizens and elites when it comes to legitimacy of international organizations; Page and Barabas (2000) identify differences in foreign policy attitudes and Kertzer (2022), through a systematic analysis of existing work, confirms the existence of such a gap. In the light of this gap, we argue citizens are mostly concerned with the effect of peace settlement institutions on their day-to-day lives, when the conflict is not active. In these conditions, the threat of violence recurrence and security concerns do not cease, but they evolve and coexist with day-to-day material considerations (cf. Tellez, 2019b). This is supported by survey evidence from post-conflict settings showing that civilians consistently prioritize economic reintegration, access to services, education, and livelihood security over broader political or constitutional arrangements (Firchow et al., 2025; Gilligan et al., 2013; Vinck and Pham, 2010a, 2010b, 2015). Ekici et al. (2026) highlight evidence

that citizens may prioritize their household economic well-being over the nationalist or ethnic claims to power made by their states or leaders.

If 'in war the law falls silent' (inter arma enim silent leges), in the aftermath of conflicts, the need for basic societal organization and rule of law is acute. Brinkerhoff (2005) argues that post-conflict states need to fulfil three areas of governance: security, administrative-economic, and political. We argue that citizens value these areas of governance with an eye to service provision, infrastructures, well-being prospects, and stability, making their priorities different from those of elites. As a result, we argue that citizens are mostly concerned with the effect of peace settlement institutions on their day-to-day lives, when the conflict is not active. In addition, citizens have neither the specialized knowledge nor the time for the nuances of post-conflict state-building. This does not mean they have no preferences of their own, but when unmediated by explicit elite endorsements, we argue that these will be related to easily understood impacts on everyday life. Protracted lack of institutions and governance failure exacerbate the need for administrative services, policing, economic growth, and welfare. For instance, Wong (2016) finds that government responsiveness to the population's development needs is more important to citizens than inclusive political institutions (see also Firchow et al., 2025).

To organize our discussion and integrate different elements of peace settlement designs, we use the term Conflict Mitigating Institutions (CMIs) to describe provisions in negotiated arrangements that address core areas of concern to citizens in divided and conflict-prone societies. CMIs attempt to establish functional governance systems where there are none. They include institutional arrangements to pass legislation, resettle displaced persons, demarcate boundaries, and provide minority safeguards. Our definition of CMIs draws on the literature on human needs theory and grievances (Azar, 1990; Burton, 1990; Dyrstad and Hillesund, 2020), viewing the value of institutions in reducing transaction costs, constraining or incentivizing certain behaviours, and legitimizing political outcomes (Cederman et al., 2022; Thelen, 1999). As such, CMIs set the rules on how to govern contested territories, shape political participation, and achieve stable coexistence between communities. While we can think of CMIs as potential solutions to core governance domains such as territory, political system, security, and economy, most importantly for the perspective of the theory presented here, these institutions have distributional consequences for individuals and groups (Haass and Ottmann, 2021). Taken in isolation, some CMI provisions offer something to all groups in conflict, while other provisions provide strong benefits for one group but do not appeal to others. These are not stand-alone provisions, however, making it critical to consider their impact together with other provisions in a peace settlement.

In principle, CMI provisions can be designed to fall broadly into two categories: what we call zero-sum institutional provisions that divide a relatively fixed good between two or more groups. They have a zero-sum quality in the sense that a gain for one side implies a loss for another. Gains and losses are primarily of material resources but can be in perceived (social) status or symbolic cultural issues. An example we discuss below is the decision on border locations, where a fixed pie in terms of territory can be divided up in different ways, but at least in our operationalization a bigger portion for one side means a smaller portion for the other.

In contrast, peace settlement provisions emphasizing joint benefits may offer private or collective goods to all sides in a conflict. They may involve the addition of resources from outside the conflict in terms of aid for reconstruction and development. Alternatively, they may establish governance structures that provide collective benefits for the whole community, such as the provision of the rule of law and justice. An example of joint benefits is the provision for double (British and Irish) citizenship in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Rather than dividing goods, these provisions create new ones that benefit everyone.

We argue that groups formerly in conflict will have different preferences with respect to zero-sum provisions, but their preferences will converge on provisions providing joint benefits. A further critical consideration when thinking about the overall legitimacy of peace settlements is the relative importance of the various provisions. Zero-sum peace settlement solutions may divide communities, but the extent to which this jeopardizes peace settlement legitimacy depends on their hierarchical positioning in the issues under consideration. In what follows, we develop expectations about three interrelated yet distinct elements: first, the hierarchy of relevance of the issues at stake; second, the divergence and convergence of groups' preferences; third, the preferred practical arrangements of different groups on each issue.

How conflict mitigating institution shape citizens' preferences

Our theory applies when prospective or existing peace settlements are evaluated by two or more groups with coherent (ascriptive) identities and competing visions about governance and territorial solutions. Violence has ended, but the mobilization of society during the conflict period makes these identities the main heuristic individuals use to make sense of their choices (see Kao and Revkin, 2023). While we acknowledge there may be subgroup divisions in terms of identity formation, disapproval of violence, or willingness to compromise (see Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Gates, 2002), we treat group identity as the driver of preferences that are ideal for all group members. This is similar to the assumption - widely used in the literature on political parties - that parties are unitary actors (Cox and McCubbins, 1994) with coherent sets of goals and preferences shared by all members despite the well-known existence of factions (Giannetti and Laver, 2001). In short, we assume, for the purpose of theory building, that group preferences can be treated as uniform. Second, we assume groups evaluating post-conflict settlements may differ in numerical size, and this, in combination with their group identity, has consequences for their peace settlement preferences.

Armed with these assumptions, we gauged citizens' peace settlement priorities across four types of peace settlement provisions, zero-sum CMIs (territory and power-sharing provisions) and joint-benefit CMIs (economic and security provisions).

Our first two hypotheses focus on CMIs that we operationalize as zero-sum distributive institutions which divide finite resources between two groups. We expected territorial issues to be the most important and divisive issue. This is because of the implications of borders on citizens' day-to-day lives, which are longer lasting, more consequential, and more difficult to resolve than other CMIs. Changing the location of borders has implications for where and how citizens live, how they reach their workplace, under what educational arrangements their children attend school, whether and how they travel to visit family and friends, how they organise their business and social activities, and more.

In addition, the group identity formation process may be intimately linked with territory, as land can carry symbolic, sacred, and cultural resonance (Ekici et al., 2026; Manekin et al., 2019; Wiegand et al., 2021). National or ethnic identities, their physical survival, and their capacity to protect themselves from conquest or subjugation have all been linked to group control over territory (Toft, 2014). In this sense, territorial issues can be considered to raise existential concerns for citizens, as they provide an answer to a fundamental question: in which country, or part of a country, will I live? Given that territory shapes where and under what authority citizens live, other arrangements – such as power-sharing – that govern the territory become secondary.

When territorial issues are relevant to the resolution of a conflict, the importance and divisiveness of territory should be greater than that of other peace settlement provisions that are either zero-

sum in our operationalization (e.g. political institutions) or more able to provide joint benefits (e.g. economic and security provisions). Territory has a zero-sum character that is difficult to moderate, magnifying its importance to citizens. Land, except in exceptional cases, exists in fixed quantity. When considering its division between two groups, any territorial gain for one group necessarily entails losses for the other. While some peace agreements attempt to finesse this by introducing constructive ambiguity and blurring questions of territorial control, a determination must ultimately be made about which laws apply within which spatially defined unit[4]. A comparison with governmental power-sharing provisions is instructive. Such provisions may entail a relative loss of power for historically dominant groups and a corresponding gain for previously marginalized ones. Nevertheless, dominant groups will still retain some capacity to influence outcomes within the territorial jurisdictions of power-sharing institutions. In contrast, where there are territorial losses, the capacity to influence outcomes in that territory is lost entirely. Other CMIs providing joint benefits neither pose existential threats nor entail losses and should therefore also be considered less important than territory when citizens holistically evaluate peace settlements. These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

H1: Territory related proposals/institutions in peace settlements will be the most important and divisive issue across communities in divided societies.

Our second hypothesis focuses on political power-sharing, which we operationalize here as having zero-sum consequences in which some groups may benefit at the expense of others. Such institutional arrangements force or incentivize, to different degrees, power to be shared in the executive and/or legislature by political parties representing different groups previously in conflict. Members of a minority, we suggest, will want representatives of their group to be included in government to protect their group interests (see for example the arguments about majority/minority differences in power-sharing preferences in Horowitz, 2004; Keil and McCulloch, 2021; McGarry, 2020; McGarry and O'Leary, 2007). While the nuances of parliamentary procedures, law making and executive government are not necessarily clear, or even of interest, representation by in-group members (either co-ethnic, members of the same sect or language group) is a strong cognitive shortcut. Representation on the executive and in the legislature has tangible implications for many aspects of citizens' lives: from the provision of public services to the political direction of the military and security services and the staffing and operation of the wider state bureaucracy. Minorities will prefer solutions giving them representation in government and the capacity to veto majorities. Conversely, members of the majority will feel more secure if they are able to dominate representation in the government and exclude or limit the minority, with whom they have been in conflict, from government participation. Therefore, the introduction of power-sharing institutions is a zero-sum peace settlement provision, as it forces historically dominant majorities to share power with marginalized minorities. This leads us to hypothesize:

H2: Communities will diverge in their preferences for power-sharing arrangements, with demographic majorities less in favour than demographic minorities.

We note this argument is distinct from but compatible with the classic literature on corporate power-sharing which has not clearly distinguished the preferences of leaders from those of followers (Horowitz, 2004; Keil and McCulloch, 2021; McGarry and O'Leary, 2007).

Our next hypotheses centre on CMIs providing solutions that we operationalize as mainly offering joint benefits to communities. The first is economic compensation. The idea that individuals and

groups might be materially compensated for losses experienced during conflict has been extensively explored in the transitional justice literature (for a recent review see Revkin et al., 2023). In some cases, economic provisions have focused on the redistribution of resources. For example, in El Salvador, 10% of agricultural land was allocated to displaced individuals as a form of compensation (Studemeister, 2001). Compensation is shown to have a significant effect on public approval of schemes for transitional justice (Gibson, 2002). Our argument is that citizens – regardless of their group's identity or majority/minority status – will approve of agreements offering financial compensation to all sides. This aid may involve aspects of restorative justice, for example, by compensating internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees or other citizens (e.g. property owners) who have suffered financial losses. Alternatively, such aid can be provided by direct support of local budgets to benefit the whole community through public goods provision. We note it can be challenging for compensation schemes to satisfy all citizens for their losses, and there is a risk that groups will be marginalized, leading to citizen disaffection. Over time the idea of compensation has become institutionalized, with proponents arguing for its ability to support the implementation of peace settlements and incentivize sides to engage in compromise (Matanock, 2020; Matanock and Lichtenheld, 2022). We argue compensation can be expected to be a dimension of a post-conflict peace settlement that all parties can agree upon as they offer material benefits. As far as one party/group is not denied access to these benefits in favour of other parties/groups, the benefits are advantageous for everyone and should encounter cross-communal support. This leads to our third hypothesis:

H3: Increased levels of compensation will have cross-community support.

The second type of CMIs where we explore potential citizens responses to options that mainly provide joint benefits to both communities are those that focuses on security issues. International actors are often involved in security provisions and the enforcement of human rights protections. These arrangements are often implemented at later stages in the peace process after a peace settlement institution has been established. However, we note the design and structure of implementation mechanisms is frequently decided jointly with the other elements of the settlement. From an elite perspective, these provisions are typically considered necessary to reassure political leaders in conflict that new insecurities will not emerge. CMIs of this kind often involve external guarantors, independent commissions, and international or UN-lead courts to address 'fears of the future' and uncertainties as to the (malign) intentions of opposing parties (Walsh and Neudorfer, 2023; Walter, 2002). Providing such credible commitments helps to maintain security and enforce human rights. These types of arrangement establish the role of third parties as providers of public goods such as security, safety, justice, and the rule of law that have the potential to benefit everybody. Gates et al. (2016), for example, argue strong courts and human rights protections can limit the state's powers and stop both state and non-state actors from abusive actions. This, in turn, boosts the public's perceptions of security. Yet for these mechanisms to provide reassurance to citizens, the third parties providing this joint benefit must be perceived as credible or legitimate by all communities (Duursma, 2020; Reid, 2017). These may not be the case for some of the options along this dimension, and we argue that only those where the third parties are seen as neutral will be seen by both communities as potentially providing benefits to everyone. This is because some third parties are aligned, historically, ideologically, or culturally with one group (Duursma, 2020) and therefore partisan rather than impartial. Given time and knowledge limitation we can expect individual citizens when evaluating the third parties providing security provisions to use group affinity heuristics to structure their preferences. Citizens will mostly prefer third parties their group has historically

had the strongest links with and opposed to those potential guarantors which have the strongest links with the groups they are in conflict with. This implies a degree of polarization in citizens' preferences over some the potential options in this dimension. However, as security potentially provides joint benefits to the whole community from which all can benefit, we can expect citizens to still find acceptable third parties who have little historical stake in the conflict. Thus, it is reasonable to expect the composition of external guarantors and courts should be acceptable to citizens across the communal divided when those without historical links to the groups in the conflict or whose net and combined involvement could be understood not favouring any particular side in the conflict are involved. This leads to our fourth hypothesis:

H4: On third-party–led security mechanisms, communities will converge when the composition of guarantors is impartial.

Cases selection and empirical strategy

To test our hypotheses, we collected data in two study locations (Cyprus and Northern Ireland) using surveys embedding conjoint experiments. Most survey-experimental work in peace and conflict studies focuses on one location and emphasizes strong internal validity. One of our objectives was to evaluate our argument beyond the confines of one location and enhance the external validity of our findings. However, there will always be strengths and weaknesses in any case selection choice, with implications for the interpretation of the findings, as we detail below.

Our theory applies to the universe of post-conflict countries where identity groups have been in conflict, territorial issues are relevant, and violence has ended. Our two cases are well-known in the conflict literature and fall within the scope of the theory.[5] Both cases entail intercommunally divided societies with a history of violent conflict. They both have majority and minority ascriptive defined groups of different sizes:[6] Greek Cypriot and smaller Turkish Cypriot communities in Cyprus, and historically larger Unionist and smaller Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland. As modern industrialized societies, they have high literacy rates, and democratic rules are mostly observed. In both cases, violence has ended, and citizens have been involved in evaluating potential peace settlements. In Cyprus, citizens were given the opportunity to consider the Annan peace settlement in a 2004 referendum, but they rejected it. In Northern Ireland, voters approved the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in a referendum in 1998. Finally, in both cases, attempts to establish or reform governance institutions have explored a range of power-sharing and political arrangements. These include discussions of arrangements that capture our hypotheses: territorial arrangements, forms of power-sharing, financial compensation, and security provisions. The latter involve both third-party military guarantors (in Cyprus) and international legal guarantors in the form of the involvement of international courts (in both cases). Large-scale fighting has not been present for years in either location, so we did not include issues such as disarmament or demobilization. The lack of recent active conflicts in both contexts has implications for the design and its generalisability, which we discuss in the conclusions.

There is one important difference between the two cases: they are at different points in the peace process. Despite a long-standing ceasefire and numerous attempts to identify a satisfactory peace settlement, including failed referendums, Cyprus has yet to adopt a settlement. In contrast, Northern Ireland has had a peace settlement in place for 25 years. Yet the institutions originating from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement have experienced periods of crisis: Brexit acted as an external shock to the peace process and raised issues that were previously settled.

This pattern of similarities and differences has consequences for the external validity of our findings. Cyprus is best seen as representing the pre-agreement population of post-conflict states, while

Table 1. Peace settlement dimensions in northern Ireland and Cyprus.

	Dimensions	Type of CMI	Cyprus	Northern Ireland
H1: Territorial Divisions	Borders and land compromises	Distributive	Territorial readjustments	Location of the customs border after Brexit
H2: Political Representation	Power-sharing institutions	Distributive	Rules to ensure political equality across new federal institutions	Rules for composition of the executive and legislature
H3: Economic Compensations	Restitutions	Joint benefits	Compensations for users and owners of properties	Public spending after Brexit
H4: *Third-party–led* Security Mechanisms	External guarantors and courts	Distributive and joint benefits	Implementation monitoring mechanism (courts and security)	Courts to govern human rights protections

Northern Ireland represents the post-agreement population. We refrain from applying findings from the pre-agreement case beyond the pre-agreement population, nor do we directly translate them to the post-agreement group, and vice versa. Having said that, similar findings from the two cases have stronger external validity, as they belong to the same general population of post-conflict societies, albeit in two distinct subgroups.

We collected data on public opinions using surveys with embedded conjoint experiments. In conjoint analysis, respondents rank or rate two or more hypothetical choices with multiple attributes; the objective is to estimate the influence of each attribute on respondents' choices or ratings (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Crucially for our purposes, in conjoint analysis, the values of attributes are randomized across respondents, enabling strong causal inferences to be drawn.

Our respondents were asked to holistically consider peace settlements featuring various CMI options. The use of a conjoint experiment allowed us to identify cross-community preferences by highlighting areas where conflicting communities converged and diverged. Most conjoint experiments focus on the aggregate level of consensus across different attributes; however, in studies of divided societies, they can reveal where communities stand on each dimension of a possible settlement and help determine which solutions are more likely to be accepted. We could assess the importance of different peace settlement elements of interest (territorial arrangements, power-sharing, economic compensation, and security provisions) to majority and minority communities and determine which design combinations generated public endorsement.

Hypotheses operationalization

Table 1 gives an overview of how we operationalized our hypotheses, including the domain to which they pertain, the type of CMIs operationalized, and the specifics of each case. The various dimensions we used are available in the public domain and were widely known at the time of the survey experiment. In Cyprus, our research team had regular contacts with key stakeholders working on a peace settlement, as well as communication with governmental and civil society groups advising the process. The conjoint design benefited from the UN itself summarizing the process in a brief document that reflected specific convergences across peace settlement dimensions.[7]

Previous UN plan and Security Council resolutions have also addressed these dimensions and options, including the territorial aspects.[8]

One of our dimensions with a distributive character concerned territorial issues. In Cyprus, we focused on long-standing disputes about which areas of the island would come under the jurisdiction of Turkish Cypriots and which would be Greek Cypriot regions in the context of a bizonal bicommunal federation created in a peace settlement (Hadjipavlou, 2007). The map submitted during the Annan Plan negotiations in 2004 was expected to be followed closely (see Appendix Figure 13A), but sides were given the opportunity to confidentially submit their own maps, with one caveat: the area of the future Turkish Cypriot constituent state must be no less than 28.2% and no more than 29.2% of the entire territory of the island.[9] We used these options in the conjoint survey. In Northern Ireland, we focused on the location of a new customs border for the region after Brexit; even after the Windsor Framework (2023),[10] this issue remains contested. While the United Kingdom was in the European Union, there was no sharply demarcated border between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland. A heavily militarized border was removed when violence dropped following the peace process. EU integration also meant there were no border checks, and people and goods flowed freely between the Republic and Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and the UK. Brexit created uncertainty about the borders – would hard borders return, and if so, what would be the consequences for everyday life? Should a new customs border be in the Irish Sea or on the island of Ireland at the land border between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland?[11] New border arrangements had the potential to bring in more extensive checks on people and goods moving between locations.[12] Ultimately, the border issue had the potential to torpedo post-Good Friday institutional arrangements supporting the peace process.

To capture our hypothesis about political representation (a distributive dimension), we asked questions about power-sharing in legislative and executive arrangements, including different ways of representing minorities and majorities. Several variations of these arrangements feature in the introduction of new governance arrangements in Cyprus as part of proposed peace settlements and in debates about governance in Northern Ireland. Since the devolved institutions were established in Northern Ireland in 1999, they have broken down several times (2002-2007; 2017-2020; 2022-2024).[13] We included these alternative arrangements in our experimental design to assess the extent to which they would be supported by members of the public and across communities.

We operationalized our economic compensation hypothesis in different ways in the two case studies to reflect the way the issue has been considered in each country. In both contexts, we argued economic compensation would provide joint benefits for the whole community. For Cyprus, we considered compensations for users and owners of properties. The population transfers that followed the conflict resulted in the loss of access to properties and the reuse of these properties by displaced populations. The resolution of compensation claims related to these issues has been a consistent theme in discussions of peace settlement options (Demetriou, 2018). In Northern Ireland, at the time of our survey, discussions of compensation focused on increasing public spending to offset the additional costs of managing new post-Brexit trading arrangements. Endemically underfunded, public services in Northern Ireland have been under stress, and additional resources could help the stability of the peace process.

Finally, regarding security provisions, in both cases we examined preferences for the involvement of external actors in human rights-protecting judicial structures – selecting combinations unlikely to be perceived as favouring any party to the conflict. In Cyprus, we also asked which external powers should oversee implementation, offering a range of combinations that were either

distributive or jointly beneficial. We argue that solutions of a jointly beneficial nature are more likely to succeed where international actors – such as the UN – are seen as impartial and that proposals involving such actors are therefore more likely to attract cross-community support.

Study one: peace settlement adoption in Cyprus

In Cyprus (Study 1), we used a representative sample of participants from both communities and collected data via face-to-face surveys in 2019. To survey the Greek Cypriot community, the University Centre for Field Studies of the University of Cyprus gathered a representative sample of 817 Greek Cypriot respondents (age 18+ with voting rights) using multistage stratified random sampling. For the Turkish Cypriot community, LIPA Consultants Ltd followed the same methodology and collected a representative sample of 804 Turkish Cypriots (age 18+ with voting rights). Respondents viewed pairs of potential settlements containing CMI provisions along key dimensions: territorial arrangements, power-sharing, economic compensations, and security guarantees from external actors. They read an introduction to these paired choices explaining the experiment in a way appropriate to its context. Each dimension had four or five values proposing alternative solutions (i.e. CMIs) selected on the basis of past UN or international mediation precedents. Further survey details, including the introductory screen page and a table with the list of attributes, can be found in the Appendix. Overall, respondents saw five pairs of package settlements set against each other in separate screens and were asked to make a choice between the two options in each pair, for a total of 10 potential agreements evaluated by each individual. We also collected data on respondents' demographic attributes, including community identification, income, age, gender, level of education, employment status, religion, and some social and political attitudes.

Analysis and results

Our main quantity of interest was the Marginal Means (MM) of each attribute, as defined by Leeper et al. (2020). Assuming no carry-over and ordering effects, we estimated the following linear regressions for each of the six, respectively, five attributes in each conjoint task set:

$$Yijk = \alpha + Tijk\beta + Xi\gamma + \varepsilon i \tag{1}$$

where $Yijk$ is the outcome of the forced choice or rating tasks; i is the index of participants; j is the index of profiles shown for a given respondent for a given task; k denotes the task number; T is a vector of dummy variables representing one of $n - 1$ values of the attribute. Each dummy variable takes the value 1 if profile ijk contains that value. β are used to predict the expected outcome as the different attribute levels; ϵi standard errors i are clustered on the respondent-level. To calculate the MM, we compute the predicted values for each attribute level and average across the predictions, as follows:

$$MM = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} \widehat{Y_{ijk}} \text{ given } T_{ijk} = 1, \; X_i \text{ at reference levels} \tag{2}$$

Marginal means are the average predicted outcomes for specific attribute levels, independent of other features (Leeper et al., 2020). Unlike estimates that rely on a reference category, marginal means offer a straightforward measure of how individual attribute levels influence overall preferences. Beginning with an equal 50–50 probability across the two options, marginal mean values above 0.5 indicate that respondents are more likely to select peace settlements containing that

element; values below 0.5 indicate a lower likelihood of selection. Below we present figures with estimated marginal means by community, and differences between communities, enabling comparisons of preference hierarchies and the extent of convergence or divergence across groups.[14] The left and middle panels show each community's average probability of selecting a peace settlement containing each feature, where values above 0.5 indicate greater likelihood of selection, and values below 0.5 indicate lower likelihood. The dashed vertical reference line at 0.5 represents equal probability of selection. The right panel shows the difference in marginal means across communities, revealing where communities converge or diverge in their preferences. Values near zero show convergence and confidence intervals crossing the zero line point at differences that are not statistically significant, suggesting substantive agreement between communities on those features. Positive values indicate Turkish Cypriots prefer that option more than Greek Cypriots, while negative values indicate Greek Cypriots prefer it more. The magnitude of the difference reflects the degree of polarization: larger absolute values indicate greater divergence between communities. To account for multiple comparisons, we applied the Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) correction procedure (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995; Liu and Shiraito, 2023) to control the false discovery rate (FDR) at 0.05. The BH procedure adjusts p-values to account for the increased risk of false positives when conducting multiple statistical tests (for details, see Tables A10 and A11). Figure 1 presents our main results for Cyprus.

When considering the implications of the results for H_1 (endorsing territorial compromises is difficult, given the importance of territory to citizens), we observe that Greek and Turkish Cypriots diverge most dramatically on territorial preferences. The possibility of Morphou remaining under Turkish Cypriot control rather than moving to Greek Cypriot control was amongst the most favoured by Turkish Cypriots (marginal mean of about 0.58, CI: 0.56–0.61) and least favoured by Greek Cypriots (about 0.38, CI: 0.36–0.41). This created the largest divergence between communities across all peace settlement dimensions of 0.2 (CI: 0.17–0.23). The finite nature of territory, as expected, polarized the preferences of the two communities. Territory is also the most important issue to respondents, as the point estimates are larger than for any other dimension, thus confirming H1.

When looking at community preferences for political institutions CMIs (H2), the results indicate that the test failed to reject the null hypothesis. There is no clear difference between minority and majority on the structure of power-sharing executive institutions. Differences between communities on executive arrangements are negligible, ranging from just 0.002 to 0.044 across all five power-sharing options. Moreover, confidence intervals for most coefficients crossed zero, indicating no statistically significant differences between Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Surprisingly, some of the options provided a distribution of power that would be more advantageous for the demographic majority (Greek Cypriots), yet they did not value them over arrangements that entailed greater concessions to the Turkish minority. In outlining the theoretical expectations on power-sharing, we stressed how citizens may lack the time and knowledge to judge nuances. Institutional architecture seems to be something that the public either finds too complex or far removed from more immediate needs. The cross-community convergence here could be important to policy makers suggesting that if elites can agree on these issues, public opinion is not a constraint on a solution.

There is a relatively high degree of cross-community consensus that more economic restitution in the form of compensation for lost properties is preferable, thus supporting H3, and economic compensation seemed very likely to shape respondents' choice of a particular peace settlement. The highest support is observed for the highest compensation package, with Greek Cypriots showing a marginal mean of 0.58 (CI: 0.56–0.60) and Turkish Cypriots 0.54 (CI: 0.51–0.56). Differences between communities on economic restitution were minimal across all compensation levels ranging

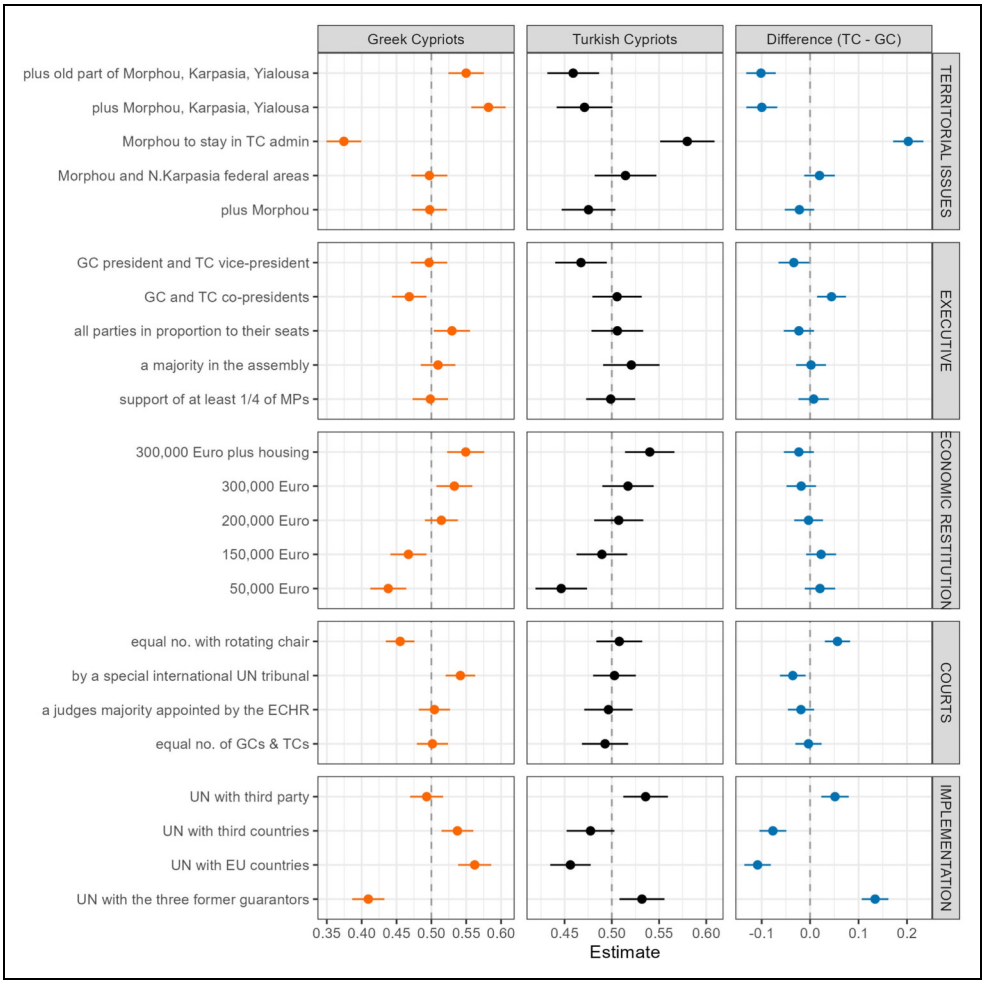


Figure 1. Cyprus citizens' preferences for peace settlement institutions by community marginal means.

from −0.02 to 0.02, with all confidence intervals crossing zero. This demonstrates that provisions with joint benefits can achieve cross-community endorsement even in deeply divided societies.

Finally, there is some support for our hypothesis on security: citizens generally supported security-implementing mechanisms, which did not favour one community over the other composition (H4), but the results were nuanced. We operationalized this by examining two dimensions: court structures to adjudicate human rights and implementation/guarantor mechanisms to monitor peace settlements compliance. For courts, differences between communities were relatively modest, ranging from −0.03 to 0.06. Greek Cypriots show the strongest support for a special UN-organized court to adjudicate human rights (marginal mean 0.56 CI: 0.52–0.58) while Turkish Cypriots would prefer equal number of judges with rotating chairs. Yet, there is room for convergence on the other options on the table, on which no statistically significant difference across communities is detected.

Considerable disagreement exists when it comes to preferences for third-party–led security monitoring mechanisms. The possibilities included international neutral actors (UN, NATO, Canada,

Japan, and Australia), EU member states (Ireland, France, and Germany), and former guarantors (UK, Turkey, and Greece). While we expected the two communities would converge on the solution with neutral actors, Turkish Cypriots rejected the participation of third countries altogether, particularly if they were EU members. Greek Cypriots supported the involvement of international actors and found any combination preferable to the former guarantors. We did not observe the expected convergence across communities; all four implementation options showed statistically significant differences, demonstrating that either no configuration of international actors was perceived as favouring one or other communities simultaneously, or the absence or presence of links between of guarantors and the communities in conflict is not what drives cross-community consensus. We discuss this point further in the conclusion below.

As explained above, we applied the Benjamini–Hochberg procedure to correct for the possibility of false positives. We do so separately within each hypothesis group. For H1 (5 territorial tests) and H2 (5 executive tests), which predict divergence, the correction controls for false-positive claims of differences. For H3 (5 compensation tests) and H4 (8 security tests), which predict convergence, significant differences that survive correction would constitute evidence against our hypotheses. The Appendix includes equivalent AMCE estimates and robustness checks (survey weights, sociodemographic controls, and subsets of data), reinforcing these findings.

Study two: peace settlement adaptation in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland (Study 2), we used Lucid Talk's online platform to collect a sample of 738 respondents (age 18+)[15] drawn from the Unionist and Nationalist communities, as well as citizens who did not identify with either. This non-aligned community has grown considerably, and the non-sectarian Alliance Party is now the third largest in the region – securing 13% of the vote in the May 2022 Assembly election. This significant component of the population has received little scholarly attention but should not be ignored in the development of inclusive peace settlements (Tonge et al., 2024). As our hypotheses do not address the position of citizens who are not aligned in main paper, we report their position (which largely mirrors the nationalist community), in the appendix. Data collection took place in Spring 2019.

As in the Cyprus study, respondents were presented with five conjoint pairs. Further survey details, including the introductory screen page, a full table of attributes and an example conjoint pair, are in the Appendix. Our analysis of the results followed the same procedure as in Study 1. Again, we present our results estimating marginal means. The right-hand side of the panel presents community differences, with positive values suggesting more support from Unionists, and negative values more support from Nationalists. MM analysis – including those who identify as Neither, AMCE analysis and Benjamini–Hochberg correction tests – are largely consistent with what is reported here. They are available in the Appendix. Figure 2 depicts results for the Northern Irish case. Consistent with H1 and in line with our findings in Cyprus, on territorial issues, the preferences of Unionists and Nationalists diverged dramatically. In addition, attributes of the border arrangements in Northern Ireland were a strong predictor of respondents' choice of a package. Unionist respondents favoured the option in which the customs border was organized on a North-South basis (marginal mean 0.58, CI: 0.53–0.62). Nationalists strongly favoured the border organized on an East-West basis (marginal mean 0.63, CI 0.59–0.67). The between-community difference for the East/West option was −0.20 (CI: −0.26, −0.15), representing one of the largest divergences observed across all settlement provisions. Similarly, the North/South option showed a difference of 0.21 (CI: 0.15, 0.27). The issue was highly divisive and stood out as the only dimension on which we observed a clear divergence across groups.

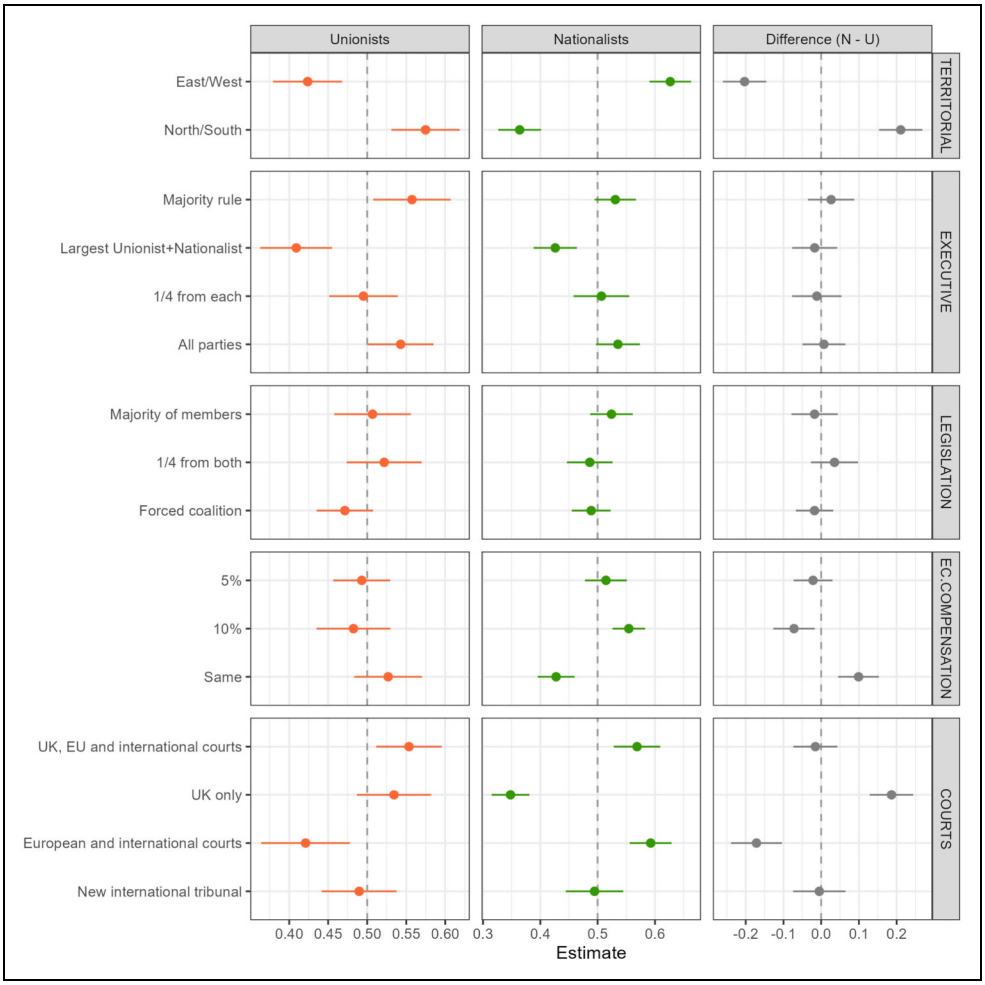


Figure 2. Northern Ireland citizens' preferences for post-Brexit peace settlement institutions by community marginal means.

With respect to H2 on differences in preferences for political CMIs, we found – as we found in Cyprus – a relatively high degree of community consensus on the choice of power-sharing institutions. These findings countered the expectations of the hypothesis and demonstrated an unexpectedly high level of cross-community convergence. Contrary to expectations, differences between communities were minimal and statistically indistinguishable from zero across all legislative and executive power-sharing configurations, and these CMIs made only a small difference to respondents' choice of a settlement. In Northern Ireland, both communities were significantly opposed to the idea of Unionist and Nationalist parties sharing power without other parties being represented in the Executive. While the opposition to such measure could be interpreted as the Unionist majority's unwillingness to agree on a 50–50 distribution, it could also be attributed to the experience of power-sharing that led to the suspension of the devolved institutions between 2022 and 2024. This dysfunctional government was dominated by the two largest parties, the Democratic Unionist Party

(DUP) (the largest Unionist party) and Sinn Féin (the largest Nationalist party). An important consideration for further research would be the preferences of individuals who do not identify with either community; they may be influenced by performance considerations and not wish to be politically dominated by a single party. Crucially, on legislative and the executive power-sharing the third panel clearly shows that there are no significant differences between the preferences of the two communities. This is in line with what was found in Cyprus. Power-sharing arrangements are not what is likely to sink a settlement, at least not if citizens have a say.

In contrast to the expectation set by H3, we found divergences on economic restitution. Unionists preferred spending levels matching the rest of the UK (0.53, CI: 0.48–0.57), while Nationalists favoured a 10% increase (0.55, CI: 0.53–0.58). The community differences were statistically significant, with the exception of the 5% increase, which is the level where compromise could be reached. Finally, Unionists had a clear preference for UK involvement in human rights protection, and Nationalists preferred peace settlement options that excluded UK courts, but there was cross-communal support for options entailing international, European, and UK courts in which all the relevant third parties were included, thus confirming H4. Communities' preferences are overlapping – panel three in Figure 2 – when guarantors are either international or include an international element and both UK and EU.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has provided a testable theoretical framework to identify which CMIs attract citizen support when embedded in peace settlements. Some provisions we tested have zero-sum implications – taking from one community to give to others – while other provisions provide joint benefits for all parties.

We argued zero-sum provisions embedded in CMIs would divide communities, and we used territorial provisions and political institutions (i.e. power-sharing) as examples of these mechanisms. We found large differences between identity groups in their evaluation of the territorial dimension of peace settlements (H1). As expected, this was the most important issue dividing the communities across studies. Crucially, however, there was both cross-community consensus and considerable indifference about power-sharing institutions. Citizens did not seem to consider this a priority, and we did not see the expected divergence between minority and majority communities (H2). We observed this pattern in both cases, suggesting that while power-sharing political institutions may be important to elites and mediators, they may be less important to securing peace settlement legitimacy amongst the public. Such indifference to power-sharing models is in line with Gates et al. (2016) argument that human rights and legal protections are more important to ordinary citizens than legislative executive power-sharing. If human rights are protected on a day-to-day level, then who is governing is less important from an individual security perspective. A significant policy implication is that, given public indifference to power-sharing, it may be an easier dimension for elites to reach compromises unconstrained by citizen opinion.[16] Elites will have more flexibility to reach an agreement as the public is not preoccupied with the institutional details of these arrangements.

We argued economic compensation and restitutions (H3) and security measures with impartial composition (H4), as jointly beneficial CMIs, would win cross-community support. While our findings for economic compensation were consistent with this expectation in Cyprus, in Northern Ireland, Unionists did not fit the expected pattern, although Nationalists clearly favoured public spending. However, there was a design difference in the question in the two surveys, and the implications would be interesting to explore further. A natural step would be to explore more systematically how differences in the identity of the recipients of compensation (such as former victims, or

the whole community) affect support for peace settlement schemes. Future research also could explore what difference compensation involving an exchange in resources between previously conflictual communities might make compared to third-party financial support.

There was an unexpected divergence between Turkish and Greek Cypriots on the CMIs with security guarantors (H4). We expected convergence where security guarantors *could be* perceived across communities as not favouring any particular group. Instead, we found that having 'the UN together with third countries' acting as guarantors was a solution met with scepticism by Turkish Cypriots. A possibility is that Turkish Cypriots may have associated the UN with Western powers, thus undermining its perceived credibility and leading to their indifference or opposition to its involvement. We observed the expected convergence on courts for most options in both countries, although this was a relatively low-priority issue in Cyprus. In Northern Ireland, we encountered the expected cross-community convergence when the composition of courts included the UK, the EU, and international courts, suggesting these particular jointly beneficial CMIs attract cross-community support. However, Unionists showed a clear preference for UK involvement in courts, while Nationalists favoured peace settlement options excluding UK courts. Similarly, in Cyprus, identity considerations seemed to drive perceptions of credible third parties. These findings suggest opportunities for research on perceptions of the credibility and legitimacy of third-party assistance and how these perceptions shape public support for peace settlements.

Our study had some limitations. The research was not longitudinal, and we could not detect the stability of public preferences. We covered two cases where violence may loom large, but security has not been a concern in recent years. In places where violence is dominant, we might find a different hierarchy of preferences, but we would also need to revise the expectations. When physical violence is in play, CMIs to address disarmament and demobilization become pivotal to judging any potential settlement. Finally, we interpret our findings with caution, aware that more cases are needed.

Overall, our study makes a strong case for the importance of considering public opinions on the institutional solutions that are integrated into peace settlements. Our findings support the claim that the public has a different orientation and different priorities than those the elites are commonly assumed to have. At the very least, our results suggest the need for caution and scrutiny of claims that these positions are identical, as the consequences are policy-relevant. Ignoring issues important to citizens could lead to electoral or social movement mobilizations, intra-group conflict, and instability. In addition, some agreements may be difficult to reach because the leaders misunderstand the priorities and degree of polarization that certain issues raise for their constituents specifically and for society more generally. The approach we have outlined opens a way to address these issues and where appropriate to develop peace settlement solutions with a better and more nuanced understanding of citizen views.

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Ethical approval

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Competing interests declaration

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data and replications materials will be published in a public repository upon publication.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. For recent advances in the field, see Tellez (2019a, 2019b) on Colombia; Leshem and Halperin (2020) on Israel/Palestine; Garry et al. (2022) on Northern Ireland, and Dyrstad and Hillesund's (2020) comparative work as well as a special section in *Journal of Conflict Resolution* edited by Haass, Hartzell, and Ottman (2022); other work has focused on datasets that investigate a multiplicity of factors influencing peace, mediations, and ceasefires but do not incorporate public opinion; see Klosek et al. (2021) on frozen conflicts; Duursma and Gamez (2022) on mediations in Africa; Wiegand et al. (2021) on territorial disputes.
2. In our terminology zero-sum institutions divide a relatively fixed good between two or more groups. Institutions that provide joint benefits provide private or collective goods to all sides in a conflict.
3. Elite peace settlement preferences are rarely surveyed directly; elites have incentives to disclose their preferences strategically. Most theories of how peace settlement shape peace outcomes make assumptions about elite preferences and tests of these theories do not empirically investigate these assumptions.
4. Territorial power-sharing practices attempt to reduce the salience of territorial conflict by enabling ethnic groups in defined localities to exercise some degree of autonomy within states (Woolf, 2009). Yet as Walsh (2019) clarifies in her analysis of the role of constitutional courts in dispute adjudication within such arrangements, there is always a determination of which law applies in a particular locality (see too Popelier, 2017).
5. For background information, see O'Leary (2022), Ker-Lindsay (2011), and Sambanis (1999).
6. In Northern Ireland, demographic change means the two communities are on the edge of equality.
7. https://cyprus-mail.com/2022/07/31/missing-minutes-of-crans-montana-meeting-published/
8. Unite Cyprus Now, an organization we cooperated with, published the framework, including the proposed implementation mechanisms.
9. https://unitecyprusnow.org/cyprob/historical-documents/120-guterres-framework
10. The Windsor Framework was announced on February 27, 2023 by UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen after 2 years of negotiations on readapting the Northern Ireland Protocol.

11. While the 2019 Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol determined the border would be located in the Irish Sea, the matter remains highly contentious within political Unionism.
12. There was extensive and high-profile political and social debate about the practical consequences of re-bordering processes, including possible attacks on new border posts and stations depending on their location. After the 2022 elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the largest party representing the Unionist community, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), refused to re-enter power sharing arrangements until a new position on the border was agreed-upon.
13. In the wake of the May 2022 Assembly Election, the DUP refused to nominate a new Speaker of the Assembly; this meant the d'Hondt process could not be triggered to appoint a new Executive. The Assembly was suspended.
14. Tables with the regression results supporting these figures are presented in the Appendix. We tested our assumption of group differences in responses to the conjoint analysis. An omnibus F test on the existence of significant differences between groups is reported in the Appendix (Tables A6 and A7). This compares our models to models where all interactions are allowed. The results for both Cyprus and Northern Ireland showed significant group differences.
15. The response rate for the web sample was 0.264, as per AAPOR guidelines.
16. We thank one of the anonymous referees for this point.

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