Title: Partition and Social Cohesion in Ireland: A Look at the Post Office

"*...the Department [Post Office] in all its operations is more closely connected with the interests, accommodations, and personal feelings of every class of his Majesty's subjects, than any other branch of the state…*"[1]

This paper examines how the withdrawal of local state infrastructure affected community social capital in the aftermath of Irish Partition (1921–22). We look at post offices, which historically acted not only as hubs of communication but also as everyday points of contact between citizens, their local communities, and the state. They provided telephone, telegraph, and pension services, and as a result postal workers accumulated a wealth of local knowledge over sometimes significant swathes of land, playing a critical role in transferring information among and between communities (Cooke 1935; Reynolds 1983; Ferguson 2016). In this way, post offices functioned as central nodes in local social networks through the routine interactions of the postal workers attached to them, with the potential to accelerate information diffusion (Conley and Udry 2010; Banerjee et al. 2013; Dahl et al. 2014; Beaman et al. 2021; Banerjee et al. 2024). Throughout the paper, we use "post office" as shorthand for the locally embedded postal workers associated with that office.

The Irish War of Independence (1919–21) resulted in the partition of the island into two self-governing polities and the imposition of an international border, as laid out in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Under Article XII of the Treaty, the location of this new border would be decided by a boundary commission "...in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions…".[2] However, despite witness testimony arguing for changes according to local unionist or nationalist concentrations, the commission appointed to the task ultimately chose to leave the border along existing county boundaries (Lynch 2019; Moore 2019; 2025). As such, short-term political convenience was privileged over local social and economic ties.

This new international border provided a shock at the local level, bifurcating existing municipal boundaries such as postal routes (Dulin 1992). Consequently, in the aftermath of Partition several border townlands[3] suddenly found themselves no longer served by their longstanding post offices. Many of these communities, cut off from their broader social networks, experienced a decline in community identity and cohesion that persists even to this day (Nash et al. 2013; Leary 2016). The effects may extend beyond identity, as denser social networks — i.e., higher social capital — are associated with higher economic development (Montolio and Tur-Prats 2018). Accordingly, we use border townlands' sudden loss of post offices as a natural experiment to study the role of high-centrality individuals in community cohesion and social capital. While our historical sources record changes at the level of post offices and routes, our analysis interprets these changes as the loss of locally embedded postal workers who occupied central positions in community social networks.

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[1] United Kingdom, *Papers Relating to the Post-Office*, Cmd. 48, vol. 49, 19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers (1834), 497.

[2] Great Britain and Ireland. *Final Text of the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland as Signed*, London, 6 December 1921. Documents on Irish Foreign Policy (Royal Irish Academy). https://www.difp.ie/volume-1/1921/anglo-irish-treaty/214/#section-documentpage (accessed January 22, 2026).

[3] Townlands are the smallest, traditional administrative land division in Ireland, typically 100–500 acres (40–202 ha) (Duffy 2009).

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Near the border, it was plausibly random, with respect to pre-Partition social and economic conditions, whether or not a townland would continue to be served by its original post office following Partition, as postal routes were not designed to pay heed to county boundaries. As such, we propose a difference-in-differences analysis, comparing townlands that retained their original post office (and associated postmaster) following Partition in 1921, to those that experienced a change. We will restrict our sample to communities that lie along the border, in order to control for exposure to security, violence, and customs disruptions associated with the new boundary. In particular, our identifying assumption is that the treatment communities (townlands that lost their post office) would have had outcome trends parallel to those of the control communities (those that kept their post office) if they had not been split off from their post office by the border. We utilize archival administrative records held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland[4] on proposed and realized postal route changes, corroborated by contemporary newspaper articles, to identify which border townlands experienced changes in their postmaster.

We will focus on impacts on short- and long-term proxies of social capital and measures of economic activity — such as employment rates, emigration rates, and memberships in community organizations (Guiso et al. 2004; Buonanno et al. 2009; Hellerstein et al. 2011; Munshi 2014). We will use individual-level data in the 1901, 1911, and soon-to-be-released 1926 Census of the Irish Free State to identify immediate impacts on outcomes like employment. To capture short-run disruptions to local social ties, we draw on the Military Service Pensions Collection, which records verified participation in revolutionary activity (1916–1923) and pension claims evaluated through locally sourced testimony. Because these claims relied on community-level corroboration, they allow us to proxy immediate changes in local trust, reputational networks, and civic engagement following Partition (Dolan and Crowe 2023). In the longer-term, we will use aggregated Census data on population and other demographics (1926-2022) to study, for example, emigration following economic shocks, as an indicator of community attachment. Additionally, we will use detailed local data on organisations such as Chambers of Commerce (Bennett 2011) — which includes dates of operation, geographical coverage, and membership from 1790 to 2005 — and Orange Order Lodge membership (Kaufmann 2002) — which will give another view of community attachment and possible demographic shifts. Together, these sources provide a window into the evolution of local economic networks and community attachment in post-Partition Ireland, tracing how early disruptions to social ties shaped divergent long-run trajectories of growth and demographic change.

This study aims to contribute to multiple literatures. First, it will provide historical evidence on the role of network centrality in information diffusion and community cohesion (Banerjee et al. 2013). Second, it will contribute to the economic history of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland during this time by highlighting the role of local state infrastructure such as the post office in sustaining social cohesion during political transitions. Third, it will connect to the broader literature on social capital and economic development, demonstrating whether and how disruptions to central nodes of social networks can have lasting economic, civic, and cultural consequences (Knack and Keefer 1997; Guiso et al. 2004; Montolio and Tur-Prats 2018). Finally, it will offer an alternative view of the social consequences of Irish Partition beyond politics and violence.

[4] PRONI COM/21 – “Post Office affairs 'PO' Files”.

Title: Partition and Social Cohesion in Ireland: A Look at the Post Office

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Title: Partition and Social Cohesion in Ireland: A Look at the Post Office

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