



Political Attitudes in Northern Ireland in a Period of Transition

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Changed conditions for polling

The 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey was conducted towards the end of a year of extraordinary upheaval. Across the world, all manner of social and human experience was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – births and deaths, home and work, private enterprise and public services. The health crisis began just six weeks into the ‘transition period’ from the UK’s exit from the European Union (EU) to the implementation of a future UK-EU deal – the very existence of which was in doubt right up to Christmas Eve. It is difficult to imagine more broad-ranging and incalculable social and political disruption.

New mode of interviewing

Public opinion polling can be particularly interesting at times of change. In this case, between October and December 2020, the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic meant the very means by which NILT was conducted had to be adjusted. In contrast to most polling in Northern Ireland, the NILT survey is usually conducted through face-to-face interviews. In 2020, health safety restrictions meant that such interviews were not possible. Of the 1,292 responses, 95 per cent were completed using an online questionnaire, with 5 per cent by telephone or using Microsoft Teams online interviewing.

We acknowledge that the mode of interview may have had an effect on the results. This is particularly significant for a time-series survey such as NILT, the value of which lies in being able to see changes in trends over time. Nevertheless, it seems overall that the

patterns are broadly in line with those of previous years. If there is one noticeable difference from past surveys, it is that there has been a reduction in the number of ‘don’t know’ answers given.

Political context

As noted above, the political environment was also in a process of change. The UK (including Northern Ireland) left the European Union on 31 January 2020. Negotiations on the future UK-EU relationship began that Spring.

For Northern Ireland, there was another set of UK-EU discussions that were important. The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland that had been agreed in the Withdrawal Agreement was only becoming known at the time of the 2019 NILT survey. The 2020 survey was conducted in the context of more certainty about the Irish border post-Brexit, although there were still many ‘unknowns’ as to what the future UK-EU relationship would be and what the Protocol might mean in practice.

Another significant difference between the 2020 NILT and the previous three surveys (2017-19) is that the NI Assembly and Executive were up and running again, following the New Decade, New Approach agreement of January 2020.

Political makeup of this sample

The NI Life and Times survey is taken from a randomised sample of the adult population. As a result, as in wider society, our sample includes people who are genuinely not all that interested in politics or feel unrepresented by mainstream political party positions. Almost two-thirds of our sample say that they do not

consider themselves a supporter of any party. When asked a slightly different question, i.e. which parties they voted for in the last election, we see that the NILT sample does not happen to accurately reflect the breakdown of party support. In 2020, as with 2019, Alliance Party voters are overrepresented and Sinn Féin (SF) voters are underrepresented. This should be borne in mind, particularly with respect to questions on which we would expect SF and Alliance party supporters to differ.

Constitutional positions

Figure 1 indicates that a clear majority of our respondents believe that the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland. However, in 2020 there was a significant rise in those saying that they think it needs reforming (up by ten points from 2019 to 45%). There has also been an increase in those expressing opposition to the Agreement (up by 6 percentage points) to 15 per cent. This could well be an effect of the decline in ‘don’t know’ responses since 2019.

Compared to the previous year’s results, we have seen a 4 percentage point increase in those saying that the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for Irish unification (26%). There was also an increase in those saying that they would vote in favour of Irish unification (30%) if a referendum were to be held tomorrow. The differential between the two shows that there can be different logics behind voting intentions in a binary (Yes/No) poll as compared to long-term constitutional policy preference.

53 per cent of NILT respondents would vote against Irish unification if there were a referendum tomorrow, with 17 per cent undecided. This finding on the level of support for the UK union is quite consistent with other recent polls in Northern Ireland. Looking ahead, 34 per cent believe that a united Ireland is to some degree likely within the next 20 years, compared to 40 per cent who do not.

In 2020, we were able to compare views about the prospects for a united Ireland in 20 years' time with views on the prospects for the continued unity of the United Kingdom – see Figure 2. Considerations of what may happen with Scotland come into play here, as well as those of Irish unification. As such, it is interesting that more people think it likely that the UK will exist (41%) in two decades' time than think there will be a united Ireland by then (34%). The difference seems to lie in the fact that Irish unification is thought to be very unlikely by twice as many of those who think the same of the prospects for the break-up of the UK.

Brexit

Impact on views on Irish unification

No doubt connected to people's views of the future of Northern Ireland is the matter of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In 2020 (post-Withdrawal Agreement), there was a 19 point increase in the proportion of respondents saying that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely, compared to 2019. This rise appears to have come from a diminishing number of those saying that Brexit made no difference, or that they simply didn't know.

Interestingly, the decline in the proportion saying that Brexit makes no difference (or that they didn't know) is reflected in the results for the question as to whether Brexit makes a united Ireland more desirable (see Figure 3). There was a rise of 10 points from 2019 in the proportion saying that Brexit made them more in favour of a united Ireland (up from 25% to 35%).

Views on the UK-EU relationship

In results consistent with previous years and close to the referendum result, 55 per cent identify as, or lean towards,

Figure 1: Views on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (%)

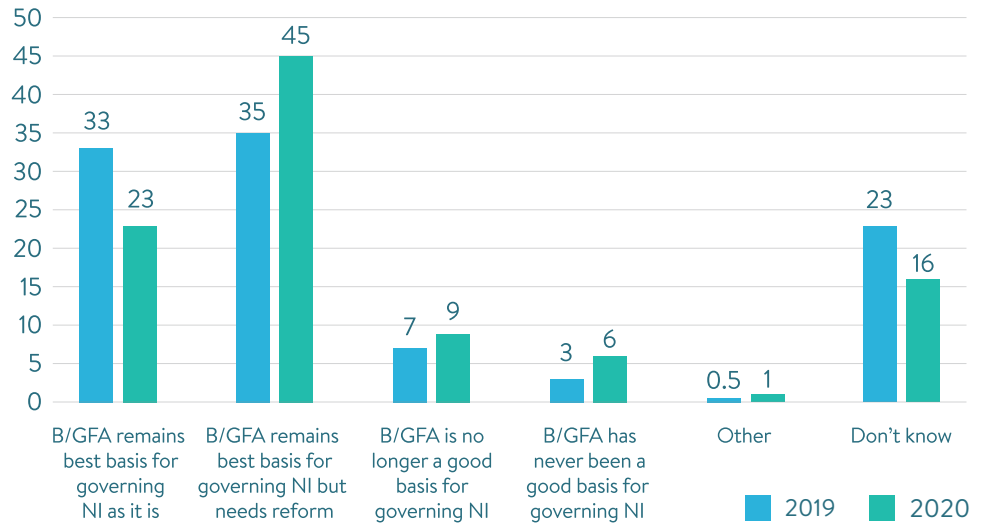


Figure 2: Will UK and a united Ireland exist in 20 years' time? (%)

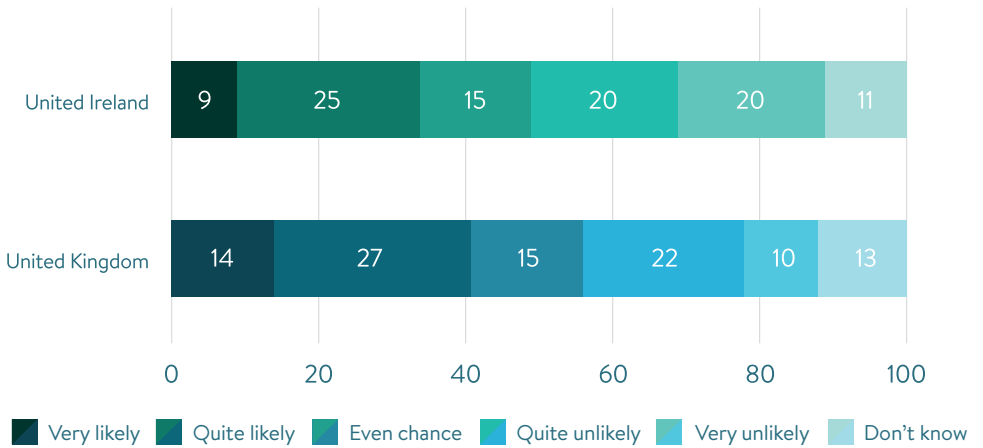
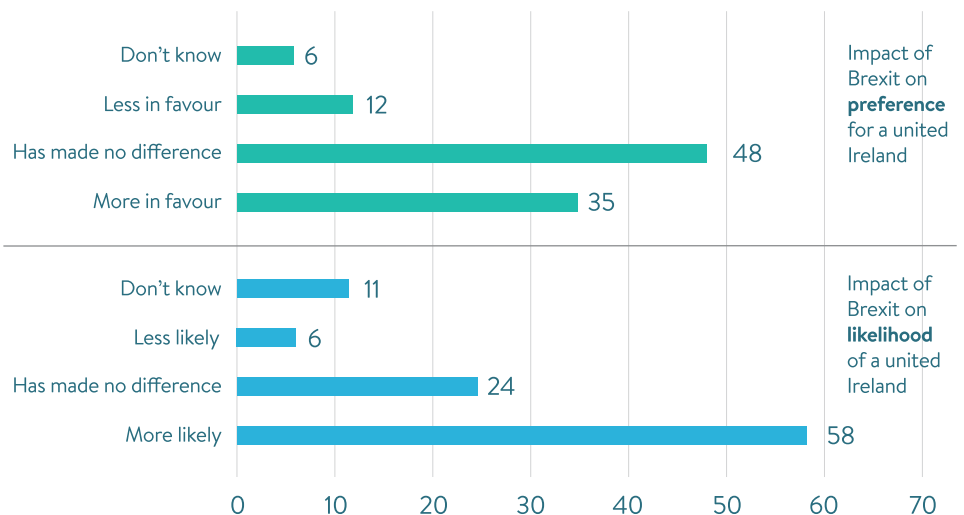


Figure 3: Impact of Brexit on views of the likelihood and favourability of a united Ireland (%)



‘remain’. This identity (and the ‘leave’ identity) is still more strongly-held (83%) than unionist/nationalist identities (61%), but not as intensely so as in 2019.

The majority (74%) of respondents believed that the UK should be seeking a closer future relationship with the EU (up 13 points on 2019). Only 4 per cent of respondents (down from 11% in 2019) said that they would rather the UK have a remote relationship with the EU post-Brexit. In principle, Northern Ireland respondents did not want a distant relationship with the EU, for any part of the UK.

In 2020, awareness of the Protocol is evenly split (47% claim some knowledge, against 50% who do not). There is a similar split between those who think it is on balance a bad thing (18%) or a good thing (16%), with the predominant response being to view it as ‘a mixed bag’ (46%). However, 1 in 5 respondents admitted to not knowing enough about the Protocol in 2020 to have an opinion about it at all (the same proportion, indeed, who said they had never heard of it).

The UK Union

In 2019, we asked a number of questions as to what would increase the likelihood of people voting in favour of Irish unification. In 2020, we asked a different set of questions to get a sense of what people in Northern Ireland value in the UK Union. The question was: ‘Regardless of your preference as to Northern Ireland’s future constitutional status, to what extent do you value these aspects of Northern Ireland’s current status...?’

As seen in Figure 4, the overwhelming majority of respondents value the NHS (97%) and the economy/subvention as being part of the UK (89%). Respondents also valued having devolved powers for Northern Ireland, as well as being part of the UK. There was also value placed on the post-primary education system in Northern Ireland, as well as having full access to the BBC, although one quarter of respondents did not value these at all. The only proposition that was not valued to some extent by the majority was being outside the EU, which was seen as a positive by 29 per cent of our respondents.

Figure 4: What do people value about NI’s current status in the UK? (%)

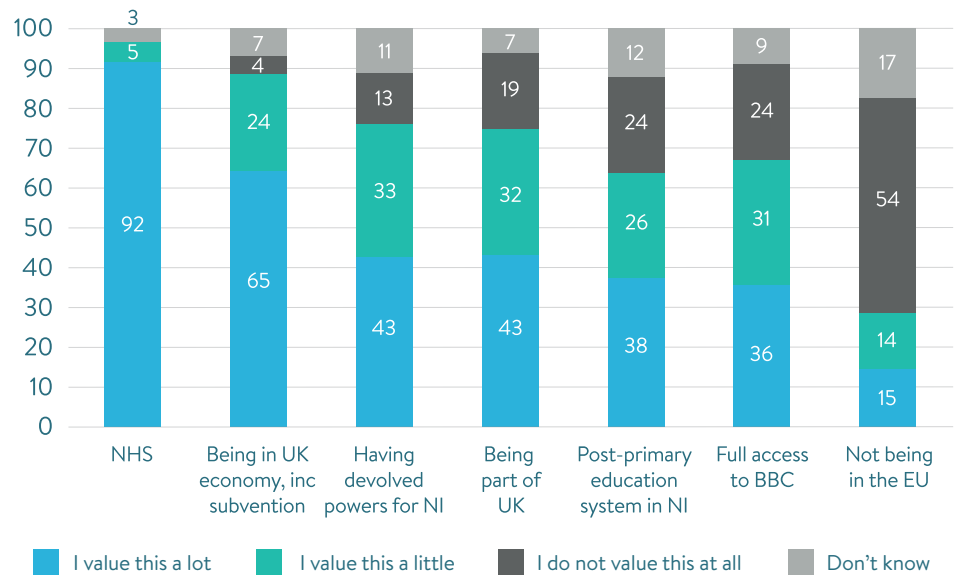
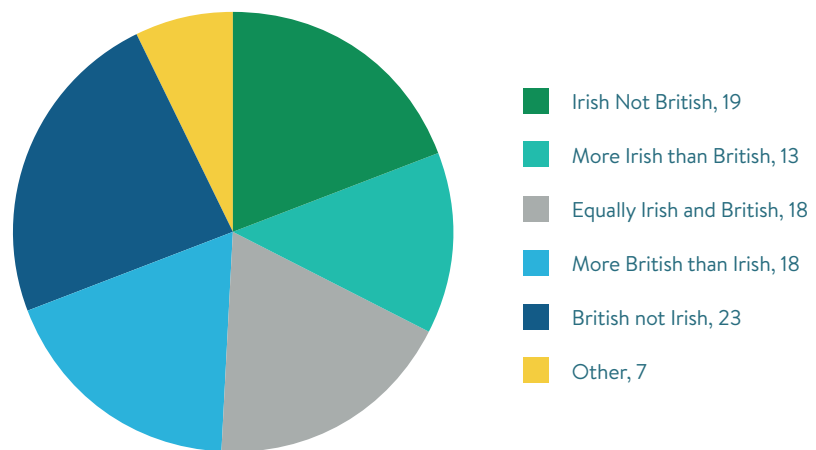


Figure 5: National identities: British, Irish or both (%)



Identity

The identity attracting the largest proportion of respondents is ‘British not Irish’, but this has dropped by 10 points compared to 2019. Figure 5 shows that there is a fairly even pattern of distribution between the options and an increase in the proportion saying they are ‘equally British and Irish’ (up by 5 points to 18%). Notably, this question about identity is not equivalent to asking about citizenship status or passports held.

There are small shifts in unionist/nationalist/neither identities on last year, but only +/- 3 percentage points with ‘Neither’ remaining the largest identity group at 42 per cent. This may reflect the under-representation of SF voters and over-representation of Alliance voters

within the sample that was highlighted earlier. This would suggest that the actual distribution would potentially have a similar pattern (‘Neithers’ largest, followed by unionists, then nationalist, then others), but potentially with a greater proportion of nationalist and a smaller proportion of ‘Neither’ respondents than in this sample.

In this survey, we asked respondents how they would have identified against these categories five years ago, and from this we can glean that the overall trend is away from both unionist and nationalist and towards Neither.

We also asked about a European identity. The majority of respondents (52%) think of themselves as European to at least some extent, with 42 per cent never thinking of themselves as European.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the data provide an important record of public opinion, political attitudes and identity in a time of flux. The change in mode of interviewing compared to previous NILT surveys does

not appear to have had a significant impact. Instead, broad trends that we have seen over NILT surveys for several years now appear to be being maintained. Where these may lead, and what political

changes they may result in, depends entirely on the political environment and social conditions to come. And these look set to remain less predictable than public opinion in the short to medium term.

Key points:

- The majority of respondents (68%) think that the 1998 Agreement remains the best basis for governing NI, although now the plurality believe that it needs reform. Only 15% say that the 1998 Agreement is not the best basis for governing NI.
- Those who are Neither unionist nor nationalist constitute the largest proportion of respondents (42%), and this includes people from who would have considered themselves unionist or nationalist five years ago.
- A sizable minority of respondents (41%) think that the United Kingdom will exist in 20 years' time, but this is more than those who think that there will be a united Ireland by then (34%).
- There has been a 20 point increase in the proportion of respondents saying that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely (58%) and a 10 point increase in those saying that Brexit makes them more in favour of a united Ireland (35%), compared to 2019.
- Only 4% of respondents wanted the UK to have a distant relationship with the EU post-Brexit.
- The plurality of respondents view the Protocol as 'a mixed bag', with a nearly-equal proportion seeing it as a good thing and a bad thing.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

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