

Bordering on a Poll? Attitudes in Northern Ireland on the Constitutional Question

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There is continuous speculation on the long-term future of Northern Ireland and the timing of a potential referendum on a united Ireland – a so-called ‘border poll’. Schedule 1 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) states that if, at any time, it appears likely to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that a majority of those voting in a referendum on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland ‘would express a wish’ that it ‘should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland’, such a referendum should be called.¹ Even aside from the unusual and consequential nature of this requirement in the Act, the way it is phrased implies that the *anticipation* of a particular result is to prompt the order for a referendum.

Such anticipation should necessarily be based on fairly solid grounds. However, what those grounds may be remain infamously undetermined. As a Minister for State in the Northern Ireland Office recently discovered (Belfast Telegraph, 2025), it cannot be assumed that public opinion polls will play a critical part in informing such a decision. Nevertheless, public attitudes regarding the constitutional question will continue to be watched with interest in Northern Ireland. This is not only because of the potential border poll but because the

democratic system in the region is predicated – for better or worse – on the conceit that this particular issue is the most crucial of all political concerns here.

Since 1998, the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey has included questions intended to give an indication of where public attitudes lie on the subject of Northern Ireland’s future. These freely available data are a great resource for anyone interested in exploring this important issue, particularly as they provide opportunities for analysis over time. In this Research Update, we offer analysis of some of these questions. In doing so, we acknowledge that NILT is but one of several sources of data on public opinion in the region, and that it is primarily designed as a social attitudes survey rather than one dedicated to political matters. Our sample reflects the fact that some 40 per cent of the electorate typically choose not to vote; therefore, it captures the politically non-plussed as well as the more politically-engaged citizens. This may also help explain why supporters of the largest political parties are under-represented in our sample; in particular, the portion of respondents who ‘feel closest to’ the DUP dropped to 11 per cent in this year’s survey (down from 15% in 2023). Alliance is being reported as the highest

supported party (at 23%) and Sinn Féin is the party that 19 per cent of respondents ‘feel closest to’ (the same as 2023). The results are presented here with a margin of error of +/- 2.8 per cent. In 2024, 1199 adults took part.

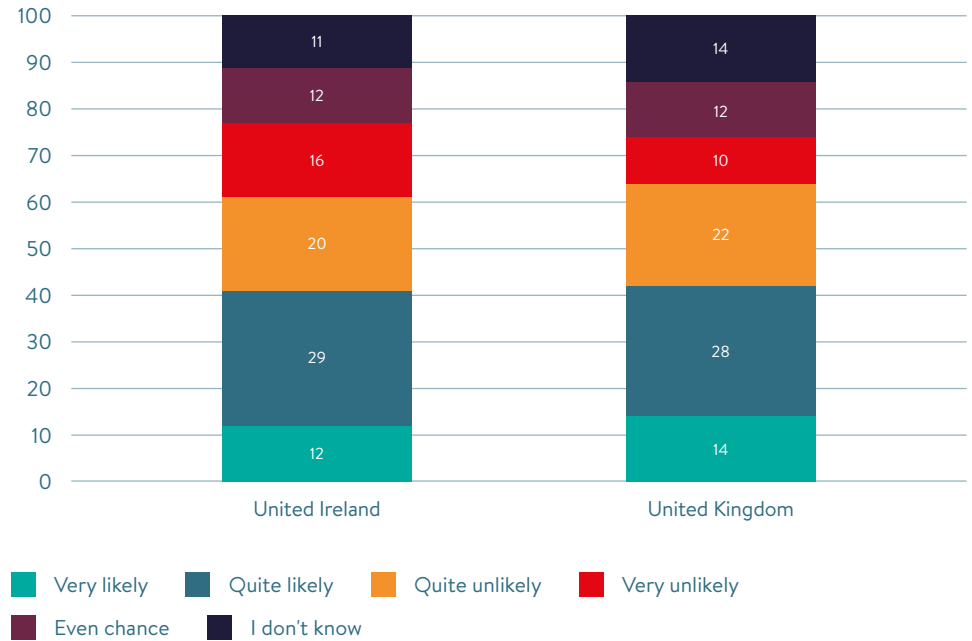
Uncertain expectations

There are various ways of testing constitutional preference in Northern Ireland, and five questions within the NILT survey cover this matter from slightly different angles. Let’s begin here with people’s sense of the likelihood of constitutional change. Since 1998, NILT has asked whether a united Ireland is likely to exist in twenty years’ time. Back then, 42 per cent said it was very or quite likely and 42 per cent said it was very or quite unlikely. In 2024, 41 per cent said it was very or quite likely, and 36 per cent said it was very or quite unlikely. On the face of it, then, the change has come in a rather modest way; that is, through more people answering ‘don’t know’ or else hedging their bets with an ‘even chance’ answer.

¹ The direct quotations here are taken from Schedule 1 of the Northern Ireland (1998) Act. See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/schedule/1>

This matter becomes more interesting, however, when we compare these results to expectations regarding the future of the United Kingdom (UK). In 2021, the UK's future seemed so uncertain that it was deemed less likely to exist (37%) than a united Ireland (45%) by 2041. However, the intense flux associated with the aftermath of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), the protests at the Northern Ireland Protocol (and 'Irish Sea Border'), and Boris Johnson's government has settled, and in 2024, the differences in levels of expectation are remarkably minimal (Figure 1). This indicates that the public in Northern Ireland are equally unsure as to whether the United Kingdom or a united Ireland will exist midway through the twenty-first century. More people consider Irish unity very unlikely (16%) than the Union's continuation being so (10%), but that is perhaps because the status quo is typically easier to imagine than change.

Figure 1: At any time in the next 20 years, is it likely that there will be a united Ireland? / Do you think the United Kingdom will still exist in 20 years? (% , 2024)



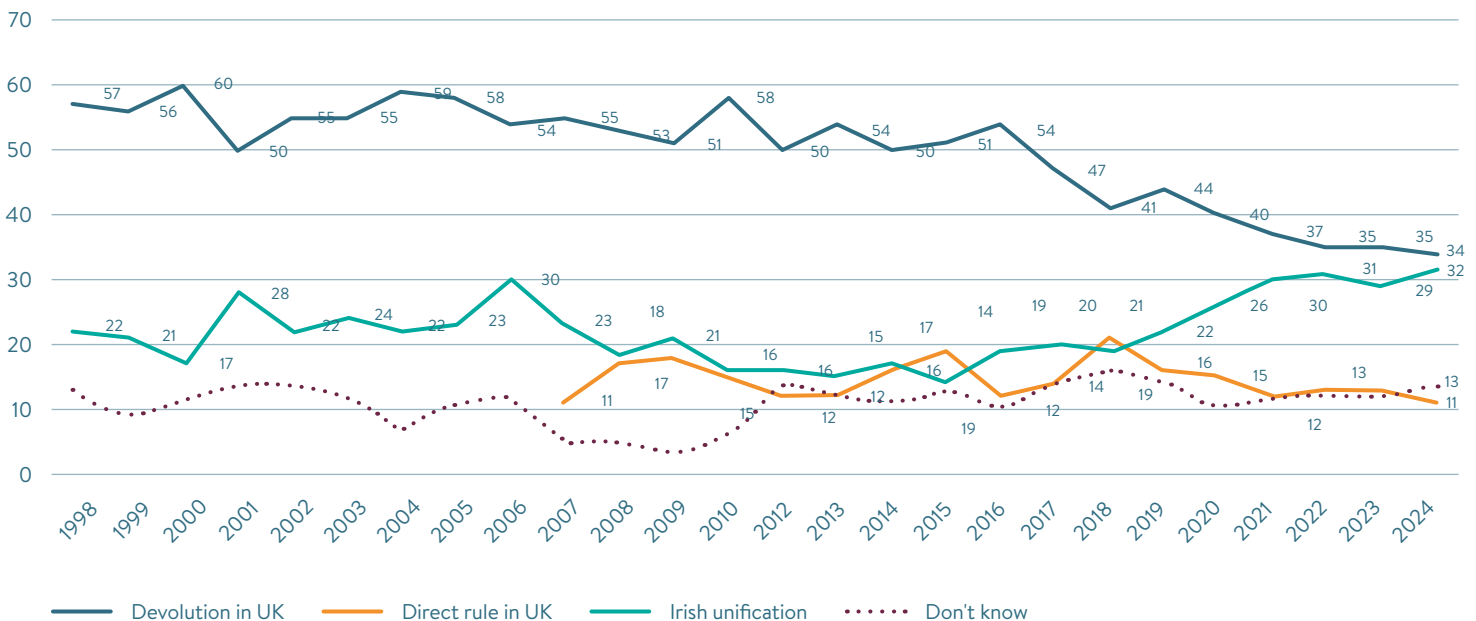
Long-term preference

A second way of assessing attitudes towards constitutional change considers people's preferences for the 'long-term policy for Northern Ireland' (Figure 2). Time series data from NILT since 1998 shows how this has changed quite significantly since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This question was changed in 2007 to include an option for Direct Rule from the UK

(even though this would require major legislative change), but it was the years after 2018 that appear to have shown the most notable adjustment in opinion. Essentially, support for devolution in the UK has declined at a similar rate to the increase in support for Irish unification. To some degree, it is not surprising to see some wariness about devolution given that the Assembly and Executive

were not fully functioning for around five of the seven years between 2017-2024. Overall, in 2024, 45 per cent of respondents want the long-term policy for Northern Ireland to be in the United Kingdom (either with devolution or direct rule) compared to 32 per cent wanting the region to be part of a united Ireland.

Figure 2: What do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be? (% , 1998-2024)



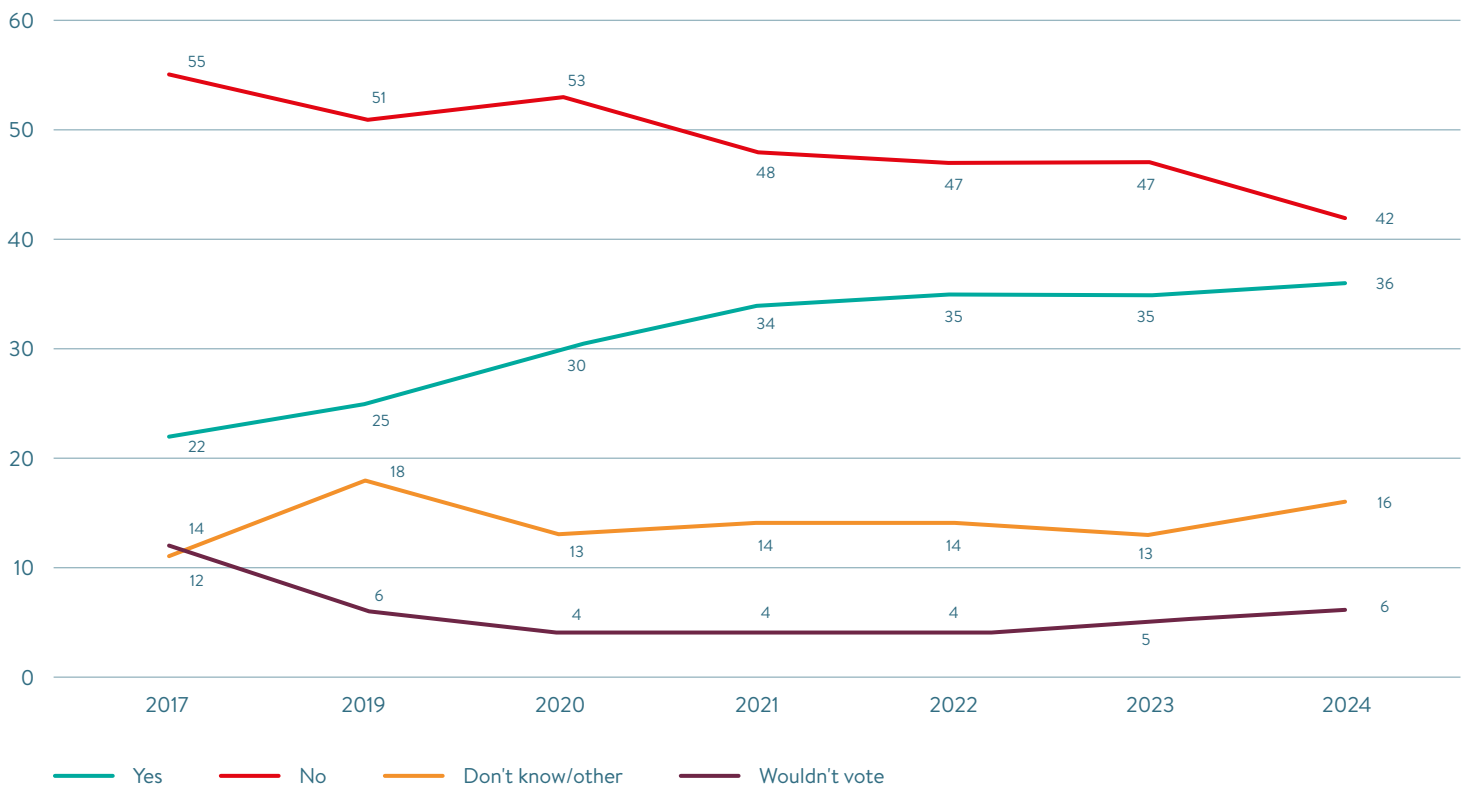
Voting intention

Another way of testing opinion on the constitutional future for Northern Ireland is to ask respondents how they would vote in a referendum. This could perhaps be seen as the most direct measure on which a Secretary of State could base their anticipation of the result (as mentioned earlier in the Update). The fact that these results differ so much from answers to other questions in the same NILT survey, however, acts as an immediate caution against drawing strong conclusions from this alone. A question on voting choice if a referendum were held tomorrow

was asked first in 2002, but not again for another 15 years. In 2002, 27 per cent said they would vote ‘yes’ to unify with the Republic of Ireland, and 54 per cent said they would vote ‘no’. In 2017, the responses were similar: 55 per cent said ‘no’ and 22 per cent said ‘yes’, with a fairly high proportion of respondents saying ‘don’t know’ (18%). However, when the question was next asked, in 2019, change was already afoot: 51 per cent said ‘no’ and 25 per cent said ‘yes’ (Figure 3). By 2021, it was 48 per cent ‘no’ to 34 per cent ‘yes’. The 2024 survey

indicates a further shift, with support for staying in the UK down to 42 per cent and support for Irish unity up to 36 per cent. A change in the views of 3 per cent of respondents from ‘no’ to ‘yes’ (thus making both 39%) could present cause for consideration by the Secretary of State. To put this in perspective, findings from other questions help to provide the necessarily broader picture.

Figure 3: If there was a referendum tomorrow, would you vote ‘yes’ to unify with the Republic or ‘no’? (% , 2017-2024)



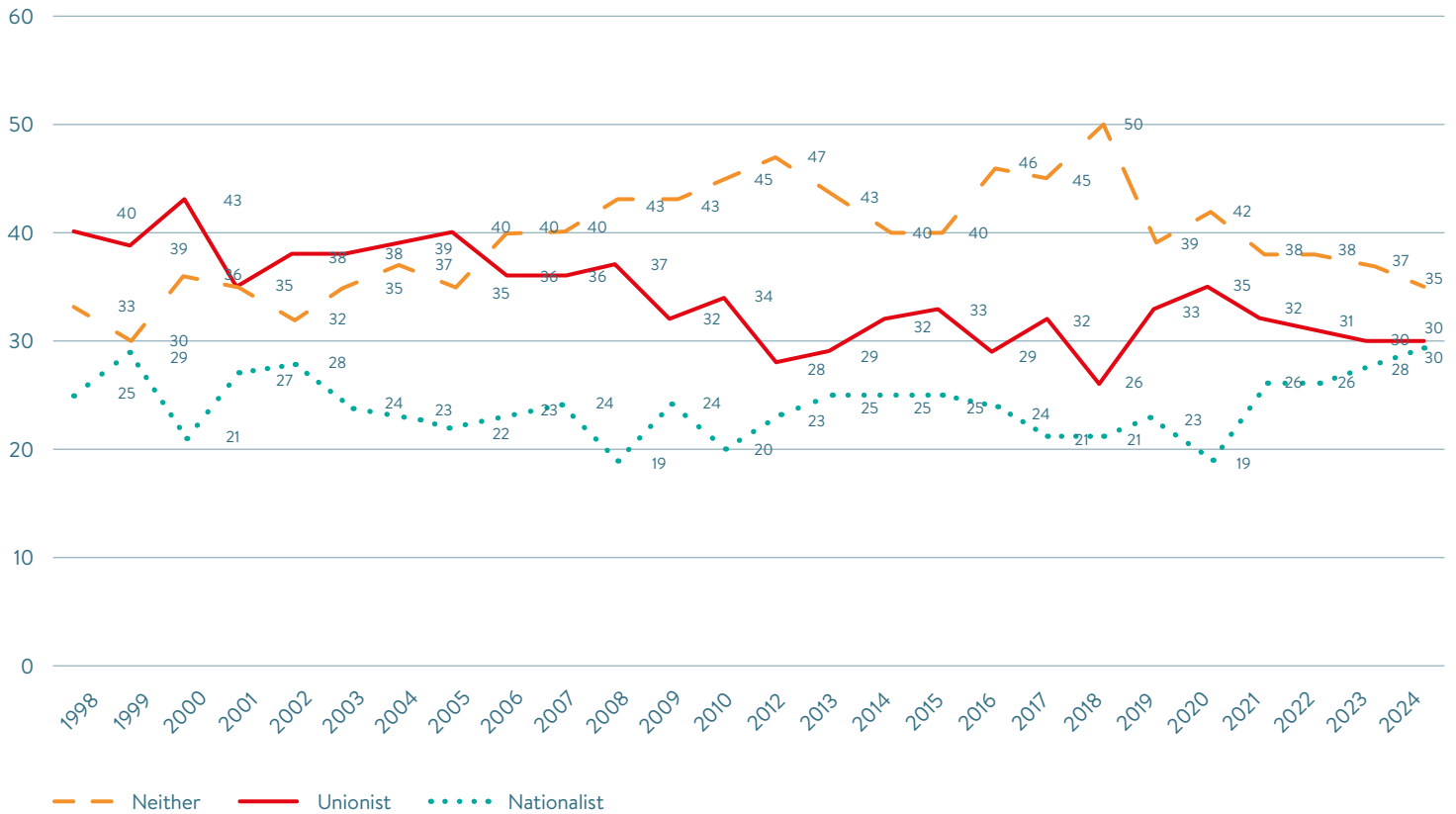
The unionism of non-unionists

From the questions considered so far, we see unionist sentiment at 42 to 45 per cent of the cohort of respondents, and nationalist sentiment between 32 and 36 per cent. But this is not how all people identify themselves. Since 2006, the largest portion of NILT survey respondents have described themselves as ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’. This reached a peak of 50 per cent in 2018 but has declined since. In 2024, 35 per cent

of respondents said they are ‘neither’ and 30 per cent described themselves as unionist (despite, as noted above, at least 42% having unionist preferences) – notably the same proportion as those self-describing as nationalist (30%) (Figure 4). Indeed, the steady increase in the proportion of respondents describing themselves as nationalist – up from 19 per cent in 2020 to 30 per cent in 2024 – is striking. Unionist identification is not

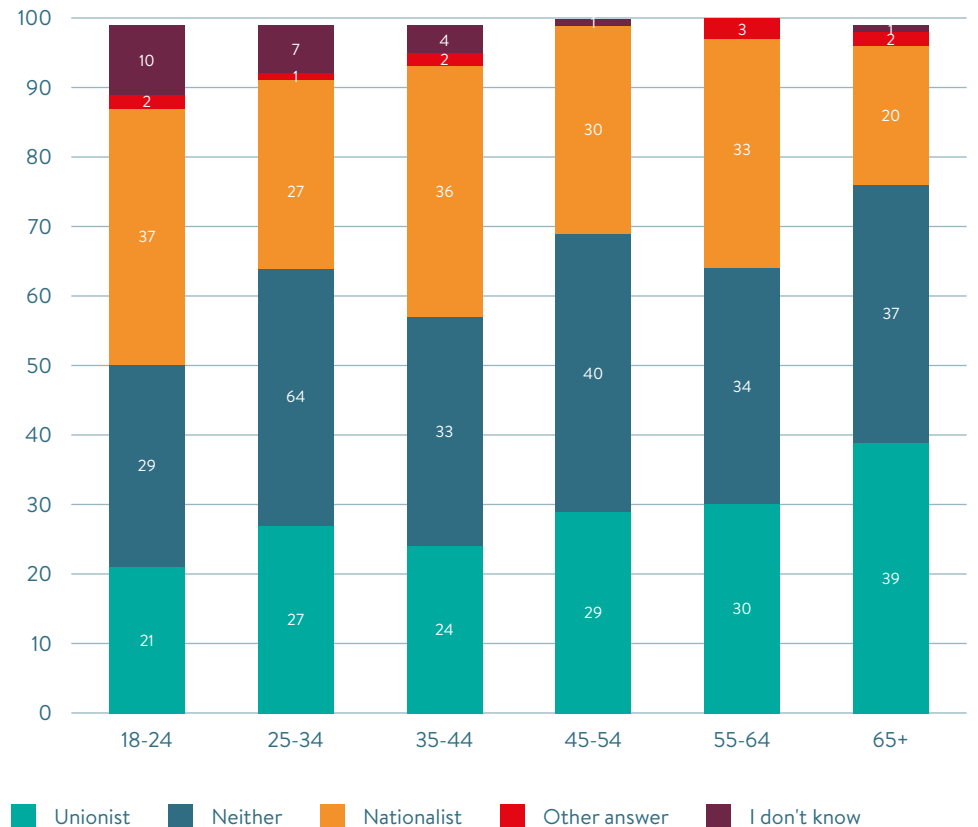
at its lowest ebb (it was 26% in 2018, for example); but whereas the decline in the proportion of unionists was previously due to an increase in ‘neithers’, in more recent years, it appears to be related to an increase in those identifying as nationalist.

Figure 4: Would you describe yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither? (% , 1998-2024)



It is reasonable to expect this trend to continue when we look at the age breakdown in answers to this question (Figure 5). With the exception of those aged 65 years or over (in which unionists are the largest proportion [39%] and nationalists the smallest [20%]), self-described nationalists outnumber self-described unionists in almost every age group. This is strikingly so among the 18-24 year olds, among whom 37 per cent self-describe as nationalist compared to 21 per cent describing themselves as unionist and 29 per cent as neither. Answers to this question reflect associations (or disassociations) with cultural as well as political identity and constitutional preference. Therefore, and as noted in comparison with the other questions covered in this Update, they cannot be said to determine how people would cast their vote in a referendum. That said, the youngest age group (18-24 years) are also the most nationalist in sentiment, with 48 per cent saying they would vote for Irish unity if a referendum were held tomorrow (31% would vote to stay in the UK). That breakdown is almost a mirror opposite to the oldest age group's views, with 49 per cent saying they would vote to stay in the UK and 26 per cent saying they would vote for

Figure 5: Would you describe yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither? (% , 2024, by age group)



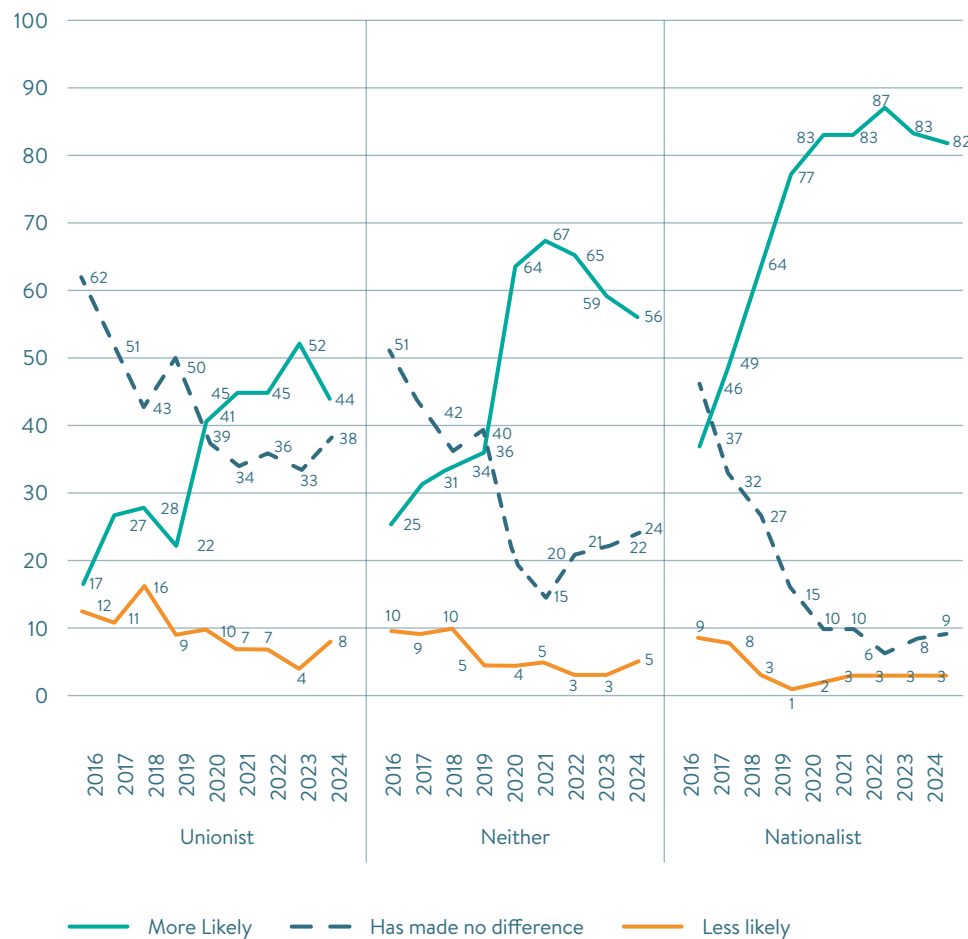
The Brexit effect

The differences between the answers to these questions underscore the fact that expectations and preferences regarding the constitutional question can fluctuate according to context. In the case of Northern Ireland, there are a number of conditions that predictably have some effect on people’s opinions on the matter, including the functioning of the 1998 Agreement institutions, the economic fortunes of the Republic of Ireland, and the political cohesion of the United Kingdom. NILT time series data also shows that there are some conditions

that would not have been predicted but can have a major impact. The results over the past decade signal something of the fallout of another referendum (on the UK’s membership of the EU). Since 2016, NILT has asked questions on whether Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely and more desirable. As noted in NILT Research Update 155 (Hayward and Rosher, 2024) expectations of Irish unification increased dramatically after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU and the unique post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland came into effect. In

2024, however, the proportion of those thinking Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely declined slightly, from 62 to 59 per cent. Looking in more detail at this (Figure 6), we see this is common across the political spectrum, even though it is the assessment of most people by far, including among unionists. At the same time, 35 per cent of respondents said Brexit makes them more in favour of Irish unification with 46 per cent saying it makes no difference to their views (compared to 35% and 45% respectively in 2023).

Figure 6: Does Brexit make a united Ireland more likely? (% , 2016-2024, by identity)



Conclusion

NILT data relating to the constitutional question helps us appreciate the difficulty faced by future Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland in calling a referendum based on its anticipated outcome. Summary analysis of just five questions in this Research Update has revealed some fascinating trends and contradictions. Brexit has shown that unexpected events can impact on the perceived likelihood of constitutional change, and attitudes towards it. The past ten years of NILT survey data have thus revealed new trends in opinion. But fluctuations on almost every marker over the decade would lead us to be cautious about making grandiose claims. Indeed, time series analysis would indicate that, while support for Irish unification and nationalist identification appears to be growing, both have been higher at times in the past. What is perhaps the most significant trend that might affect the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is the steady decline in support for devolution. What happens on the hill of Stormont remains all-important for the future of the UK and Ireland.

Key Points:

- Those who self-describe as ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’, are still the predominant identity group at 35 per cent, with both unionist and nationalist at 30 per cent each. This represents the highest proportion of nationalists in NILT survey results since 1998.
- Views on what the constitutional situation will be in two decades’ time are evenly split: 41% of respondents think there will be a united Ireland in 20 years while 42% think there will still be a United Kingdom in 2044.
- Attitudes towards the long-term policy for Northern Ireland is close: 34% would prefer continued devolution, whilst 32% prefer reunification.
- 36% say they would vote for reunification in the event a border poll were held tomorrow, while 42% say they would vote for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK.
- Those at opposite ends of the age spectrum are also at opposite ends of the spectrum on the constitutional question, with young adults (18-24) being predominantly nationalist and older adults (65+) predominantly unionist in identity and political sentiment.
- Most respondents think Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely (59%) and a significant proportion think it makes it more desirable (35%).

References

Belfast Telegraph (2025) *DUP slams ‘disgraceful’ comments by NIO Minister who hinted Irish unity referendum decision would be ‘based on opinion polls’*. Belfast Telegraph, 22 April 2025 <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/dup-slams-disgraceful-comments-by-nio-minister-who-hinted-irish-unity-referendum-decision-would-be-based-on-opinion-polls/a377188323.html> [Accessed August 2025]

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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. In 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part.

NILT is a joint project of Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, 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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