

Political Attitudes in Northern Ireland after Brexit and under the Protocol

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Political context

Challenges with, and political tensions around, the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland plagued political relationships throughout 2021. This formed the context for the social and political atmosphere in the region at the time the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey was carried out (October-December 2021). The following analysis provides an overview of some of the key statistics from questions investigating political attitudes in Northern Ireland (NI), including the 1998 Agreement, the constitutional future, Brexit, and the Protocol, with an eye to comparison with previous years.

The survey

The 2021 NILT survey was conducted using the same Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method as used in 2020. Since the differences between 2020 and 2021 results are the first under this specific methodology, any changes across the period should not be considered to be mode-dependent.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is taken from a randomised sample of the adult population. As a result, and reflecting the picture in wider society, the 1,397 respondents include people who are genuinely not interested in politics, or feel unrepresented by mainstream political party positions. As in 2020, nearly two-thirds of respondents in 2021 said that they do

not think of themselves as supporters of any particular party. When asked about the parties they voted for in the last election, we see that, similarly to 2020, NILT 2021 respondents do not accurately reflect the breakdown of party support. Specifically, Alliance Party (APNI) voters are overrepresented, while Sinn Féin (SF) and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) voters are under-represented. This has been factored into the analysis.

Constitutional positions

A clear majority of respondents (65 per cent) expressed support for the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, believing it remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland. Compared to the previous year, the proportion of those who believe the Agreement needs revision has reduced by 5 percentage points. 1 in 5 responded with 'Don't know' to this question.

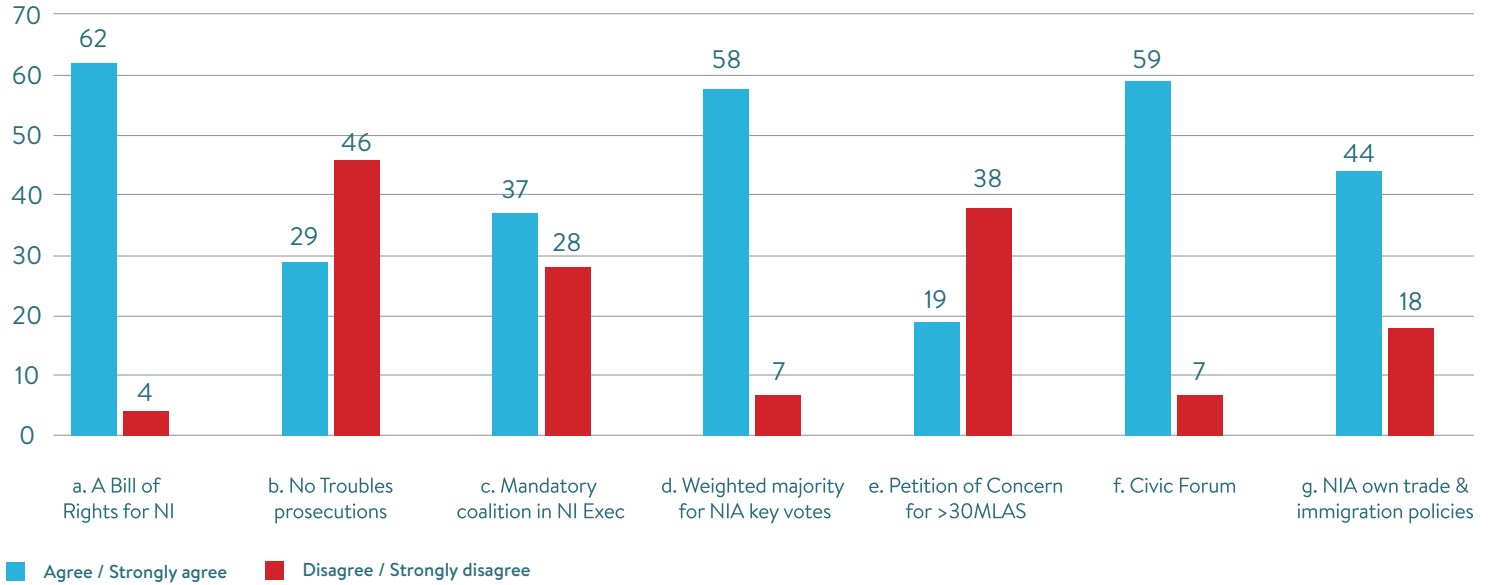
A series of questions regarding some of the unresolved or contested issues broadly relating to the 1998 Agreement were also asked. Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there should be a Civic Forum for consultation by the NI Executive on social, economic or cultural issues (59%); key votes in the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) should be passed by weighted majority, regardless of affiliation (58%); and progress should be made on a Bill of Rights for Northern

Ireland (62%). Additionally, 44 per cent of respondents declared themselves in favour of extending local devolutionary powers, to include, for example, the policy areas of trade and immigration.

Opinions vary on the mechanisms which are seen as a 'check' on the dominance of a majority. For example, there was little support for the current arrangements as exist for the use of the petition of concern (i.e. with 30 MLAs from two or more political parties being able to block legislation in the Assembly). 38 per cent of respondents object to the current rules for petition of concern, and only 19 per cent support the current arrangements (21% of unionists, 15% of nationalists, 20% 'neithers'). There is a significant split, however, in opinions on whether the Executive should include both the largest nationalist and unionist parties, with nationalists expressing the most support (52%), unionists holding middling support for the mandatory coalition (39%) and those who are 'neither' the least (29%).

The proposition which most respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed with (46%) was the ending of all investigations into Troubles-related crimes. There is a clear communal difference in the responses to this question, with 41 per cent of unionists expressing agreement for such a proposition, compared to 20 per cent of nationalists and 27 per cent of 'neithers'.

Figure 1: Unresolved/contested issues relating to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement



Irish unification

A plurality of respondents (49%) continue to believe that the long-term policy should be for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK (Figure 2). It is notable, however, that this is 6 percentage points lower than last year’s results, with support ebbing away equally from the options of being part of the UK with devolved government, and with direct rule. At the same time, support for a united Ireland as a long-term policy has increased by 4 percentage points. This is also the increase in the proportion of those who state that, if a referendum were held tomorrow, they would vote for a united Ireland; their number now stands at 34 per cent (Figure 3). Those who say they would vote for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK stand at 48 per cent, down 5 percentage points from 2020.

Casting an eye back to 2019, we observe that in the responses to both the questions of long-term policy, and of voting for Irish unification, there is a trend towards closing the gap between the two main constitutional preferences of being part of the UK or of a united Ireland.

In 2020 we noted that more people thought it likely that the UK will exist (41%) in two decades’ time than thought there would be a united Ireland by then (34%). This year we can report that the

Figure 2: What should the long-term policy for Northern Ireland be? (%)

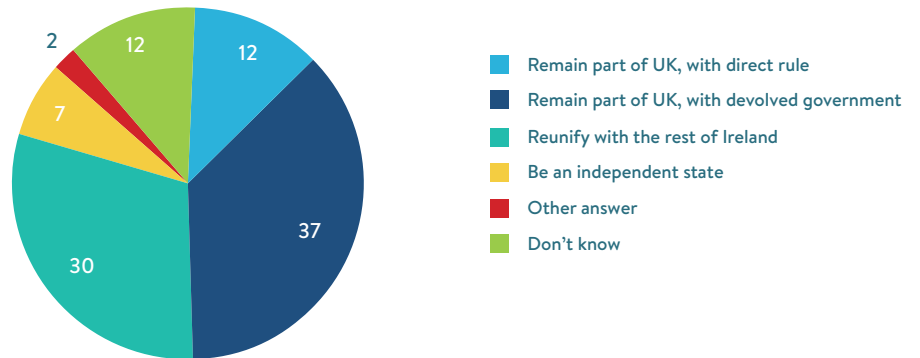
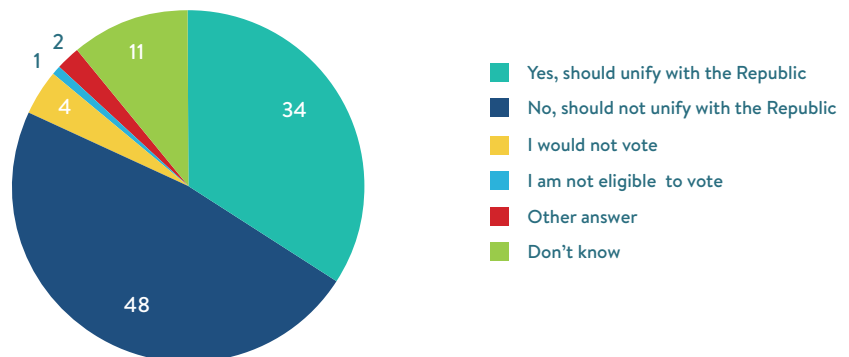


Figure 3: If there was a referendum tomorrow, how would you vote? (%)



proportion of respondents expressing belief in the existence of the UK and of a united Ireland in twenty years’ time is practically equal, and now stands at around 38 per cent each. Also almost

identical is the proportion of those believing that each is unlikely to exist in twenty years’ time (33% for the UK and 34% for a united Ireland).

Identity

In 2021, just over one quarter of respondents (26%) identified as 'Irish not British' - an increase of 7 percentage points from the 2020 survey. This can now be described as the predominant identity, with 21 per cent identifying as 'British not Irish', and 16 per cent describing themselves as 'Equally British and Irish'. The responses to this question are not to be confused with citizenship status or passports held.

Small shifts in unionist, nationalist and neither identities are also evident. At 37 per cent, 'neither' unionist nor

nationalist remains the largest group, although this has declined from a peak of 50 per cent in 2018, and from 42 per cent last year. There has also been a drop in the reporting of unionist identities, from 35 to 32 per cent, and an increase in nationalist identities from 19 to 26 per cent. We note that the under-representation of DUP supporters in this year's sample may be influencing this result, but there is under-representation of Sinn Féin supporters too.

Relatedly, a look at the strength of the respective unionist or nationalist

positions reveals an interesting aspect of changes in these identities. There has been a significant strengthening of both nationalist and unionist identities since 2016, albeit less dramatically for the latter. This direction of travel continued in 2021. At 69 per cent there are now slightly more very or fairly strong nationalists than there are very or fairly strong unionists (63%). In both groups the 'very strong' category has increased, although more so for nationalists (by 5 percentage points and now sitting at 23%) than for unionists (by 2 percentage points and now sitting at 20%).

Brexit and Irish unification

The belief that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely has steadily risen since 2016 and there is a communal difference when it comes to how people assess the impact of Brexit on Irish unity (Figure 4). In 2021, 63 per cent expressed the belief that the likelihood of Irish unification has increased as a result of Brexit - an increase of 5 percentage points on last year. This rise appears to be the result of the diminishing belief that Brexit has made no difference, with only 1 in 5 respondents now thinking that. Interestingly, the opinion of unionist, nationalist and 'neithers' on this question, although very different, seem to have broadly evolved in parallel. A plurality of unionists (45%), a majority of 'neithers' (67%) and a majority of nationalists (83%) think Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely. Since 2019 there has been a significant increase in the proportion of respondents among all groups who feel that Brexit has increased the likelihood of Irish unity.

Similarly, since 2016 there has been a steady rise in the proportion of respondents stating that Brexit means that they are now more in favour of a united Ireland, with 37 per cent now holding this opinion. Figure 5 shows that this is accompanied by a decline in those selecting 'has made no difference' to their views, now 41 per cent - a decrease of 7 percentage points from 2020. As with results on the likelihood of a united Ireland after Brexit, unionist, nationalist and 'neither' opinion on being in favour of such a constitutional outcome has broadly evolved in a similar direction, albeit to different degrees. In 2021, 73

Figure 4: Has Brexit made a united Ireland more likely? (%)

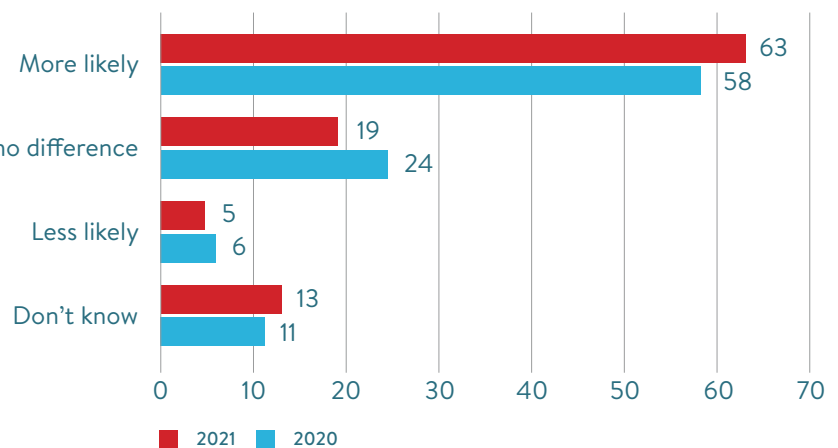
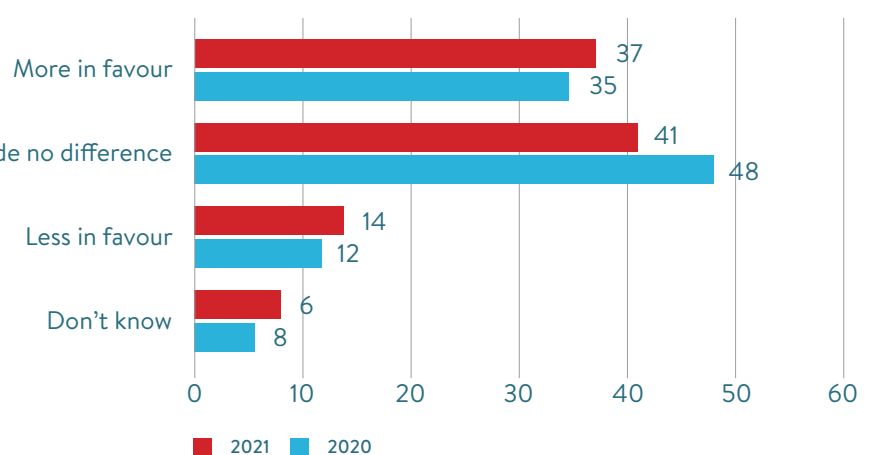


Figure 5: Has Brexit made you more in favour of a united Ireland? (%)



per cent of nationalists say that Brexit has made them more in favour of a united Ireland, an increase of 39 percentage points from 2016; for those identifying as 'neither' the proportion is 38 per cent - an increase from 2016 of 22 percentage

points. Trends in unionist opinion, however, differ; there has been a rise of those stating they are now less in favour of a united Ireland as a result of Brexit which is now 32 per cent - an increase of 20 percentage points on 2016.

UK-EU relationship

Consistent with the results from previous years, and having slightly risen, 56 per cent of respondents say that they identify with the ‘Remainer’ position vis-à-vis membership of the European Union (EU). At the same time, a decline of 7 percentage points in the ‘Leaver’ position can be observed (now at 20%), with the bulk of this decrease seemingly contributing towards a rise in the ‘Don’t know’ position, which stands at 14 per cent. Interestingly, a look at communal

differences with respect to ‘Remainer’/ ‘Leaver’ positions suggests that the rise in the ‘Remainer’ position this year comes from unionists (29% in 2020; 35% in 2021) – the only group amongst whom such a rise can be observed. Only among unionists too is the ‘Leaver’ position seen to decline (from 55% in 2020 to 44% in 2021). Notable also is the strength with which the ‘Remainer’/‘Leaver’ positions continue to be held, the proportion of those identifying as ‘very strong’

‘Remainer’ or ‘Leaver’ (49%) having risen by 5 percentage points this year.

In 2020 the majority of respondents (74%) believed that the UK should be seeking a closer future relationship with the EU - a figure that had increased by 13 percentage points on 2019. In 2021 the relevant figure was 71 per cent, representing a small decrease.

Views on the Protocol

While in 2020, awareness of the Protocol was evenly split, the 2021 results show, perhaps unsurprisingly, that awareness has markedly increased, with nearly 65 per cent claiming reasonable knowledge of it, against 29 per cent who say they have no knowledge of it.

At the same time, opinions on the Protocol show evidence of polarisation (Figure 6), albeit with a significant shift towards support for the Protocol compared to 2020. 33 per cent now say it is on balance a ‘good thing’ for Northern Ireland (more than double the figure of 16% in 2020); 21 per cent characterise it as a ‘bad thing’ (up slightly from 18% in 2020), and 33 per cent see

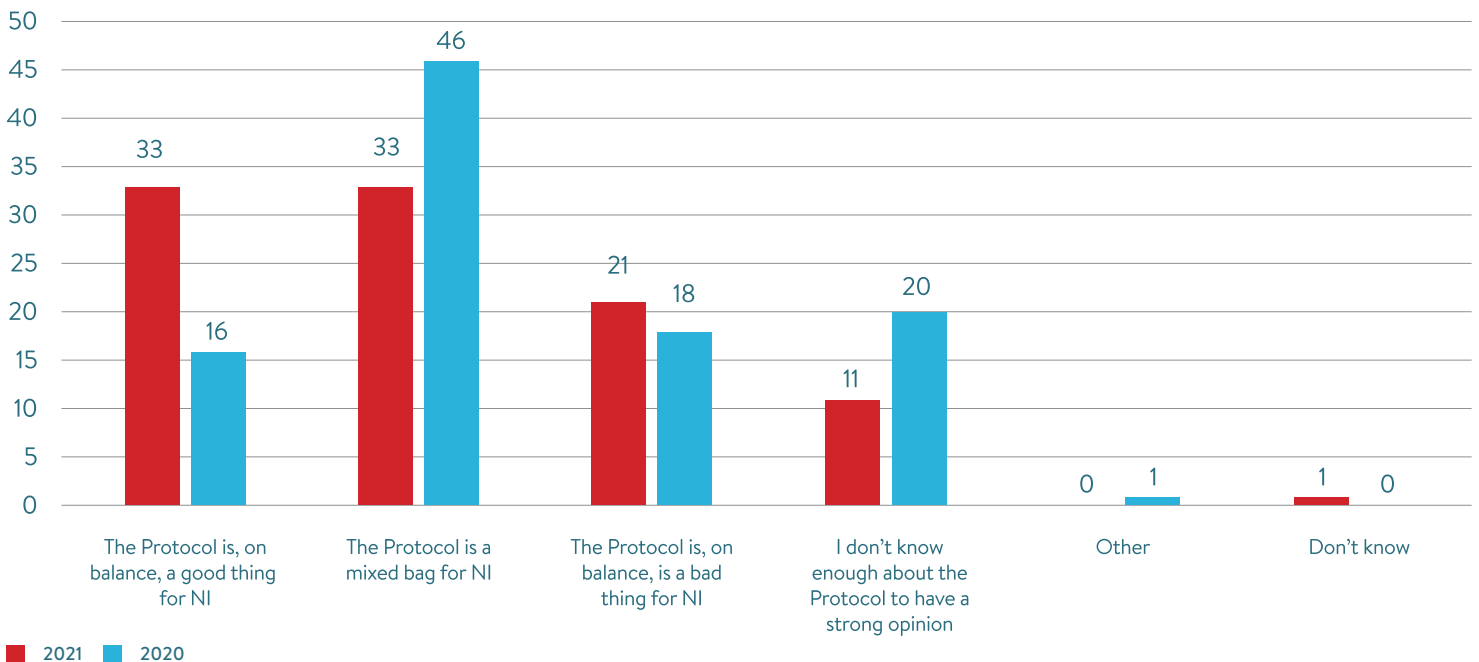
the Protocol as ‘a mixed bag’ (down from 46% in 2020). There has also been a drop (from 20% down to 11%) in the proportion saying they do not know enough about the Protocol to have an opinion of it.

There are differences between unionists, nationalists and ‘neithers’ in opinions on the Protocol. The general trend has been a move away from thinking that the Protocol is ‘a mixed bag’ to having stronger views on it. The proportion of unionists thinking that the Protocol is on balance good for NI has not changed since 2020 (6%), but the proportion thinking that it is on balance bad for NI has risen to 44 per cent in 2021 (up from 31% in 2020). However, this is only a little

more than the 40 per cent of unionists who consider the Protocol to be ‘a mixed bag’ (down from 45% in 2020).

The proportion of nationalists thinking that the Protocol is on balance good has more than doubled to 69 per cent in 2021 (34% in 2020); only 19 per cent think it ‘a mixed bag’ and just 4 per cent think it on balance a bad thing for NI. Among ‘neithers’, 29 per cent think the Protocol to be on balance good (14% in 2020), 14 per cent think it on balance bad (12% in 2020), and 41 per cent think it a mixed bag (down from 50% in 2020).

Figure 6: Which of these statements matches your view on the Protocol? (%)



Conclusion

In conclusion, broad trends seen in NILT surveys for several years appear to be maintained. There has been an increase in nationalist identities in Northern Ireland, both in volume and in strength, and this seems to feed into changes in attitudes toward a united Ireland which are increasing. As is by now a fairly established trend, Brexit is perceived by most to have made a united Ireland more likely, including by the plurality of unionists.

While the predominant response remains that Brexit has made no difference to the desirability of a united Ireland, a greater proportion of respondents are becoming more in favour of it. Despite the political contention over the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland that endured through most of 2021, public opinion on the Protocol has moved to be more in favour of it. As this political contention has come to affect

the functioning of the NI Assembly and Executive in 2022, it is important to note that support for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement remains clear, with a majority wanting to see further progress on its implementation in the form of a Bill of Rights and the re-establishing of a Civic Forum.

Key Points:

- The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is seen as the best basis for governing NI, either as it stands or with revisions (65%), with only 6 per cent wanting to see it gone altogether.
- 'Irish not British' is now the dominant identity (26%), compared to 21 per cent 'British not Irish'.
- 'Neither unionist nor nationalist' remains the largest self-described political identity at 37% (42% in 2020). There has been a drop in the reporting of unionist identities (from 35% in 2020 to 32% in 2021), and an increase in nationalist identities (from 19% in 2020 to 26% in 2021).
- There has been a strengthening of both nationalist and unionist identities: 69% of nationalists now identify as 'very' or 'fairly strongly' so, while the same is true of 63% of unionists.
- Nearly one half of respondents (49%) believe that the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be to remain part of the UK, although this has fallen since 2020.
- One third (34%) state they would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow.
- 63% of respondents believe that a united Ireland is more likely after Brexit.
- 37% of respondents feel that Brexit has made them more in favour of a united Ireland.
- Awareness of, and support for, the Protocol has increased markedly since 2020. 65% claim knowledge of it and the proportion who think that it is 'on balance a good thing' has more than doubled to 33%. 33% think it a 'mixed bag' while 21% think it 'on balance a bad thing'.
- There are clear differences between unionists, nationalist and 'neithers' in their opinions on the Protocol. The plurality of unionists think it on balance bad for NI (44%) although 40 per cent think it 'a mixed bag'. The plurality of 'neithers' think the Protocol is 'a mixed bag' (41%). The clear majority of nationalists think that the Protocol is on balance good (69%).

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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 2021, 1,397 people aged 18 years or over took part. 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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