



Political Attitudes in Northern Ireland 25 Years after the Agreement

Katy Hayward and Ben Rosher

Political context

The political context in which the data collection for the 2022 *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey took place (Autumn 2022) was all-too-familiar. Northern Ireland was once again without a fully functioning Assembly and Executive as one of the two largest parties exercised their de facto veto as a form of protest. The election on 5 May 2022 had seen Sinn Féin returned as the largest party in the Assembly (27 seats), with the DUP second largest (25 seats), meaning that for the first time the First Minister post was to be filled by a nationalist MLA.

However, neither the First Minister nor the Speaker of the new Assembly were able to take their place, as the DUP refused to contribute to the cross-community vote required. Without a Speaker, the Assembly could not convene, and during the fieldwork for the NILT survey (Sept-Nov 2022), Northern Ireland transitioned from a caretaker executive (under the *Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern Act (NI), 2022*) to 'government by civil service'. At the

end of October 2022, as the temporary solution of the caretaker Executive expired, the Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris, passed emergency legislation postponing the calling of an election (which the Act had required).

The DUP remained unmoved. Its demand was that its concerns over the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (part of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement) be resolved. For this it set seven tests. Addressing these through revision to the Protocol was an objective of the UK-EU negotiations over the Protocol that were ongoing at the time of the survey. Those negotiations concluded with the Windsor Framework on 27 February 2023. However, at the time of the NILT survey UK-EU relations were still tense, albeit on a better footing under new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

And so, twenty-five years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the political context is one of stasis and no small frustration. But is this reflected in the political attitudes of the people in Northern Ireland? The following analysis provides an overview of some key

statistics from questions asked in NILT 2022 which investigate political attitudes in Northern Ireland (NI), including the 1998 Agreement, the constitutional future, trust in political actors, and community identities.

The survey

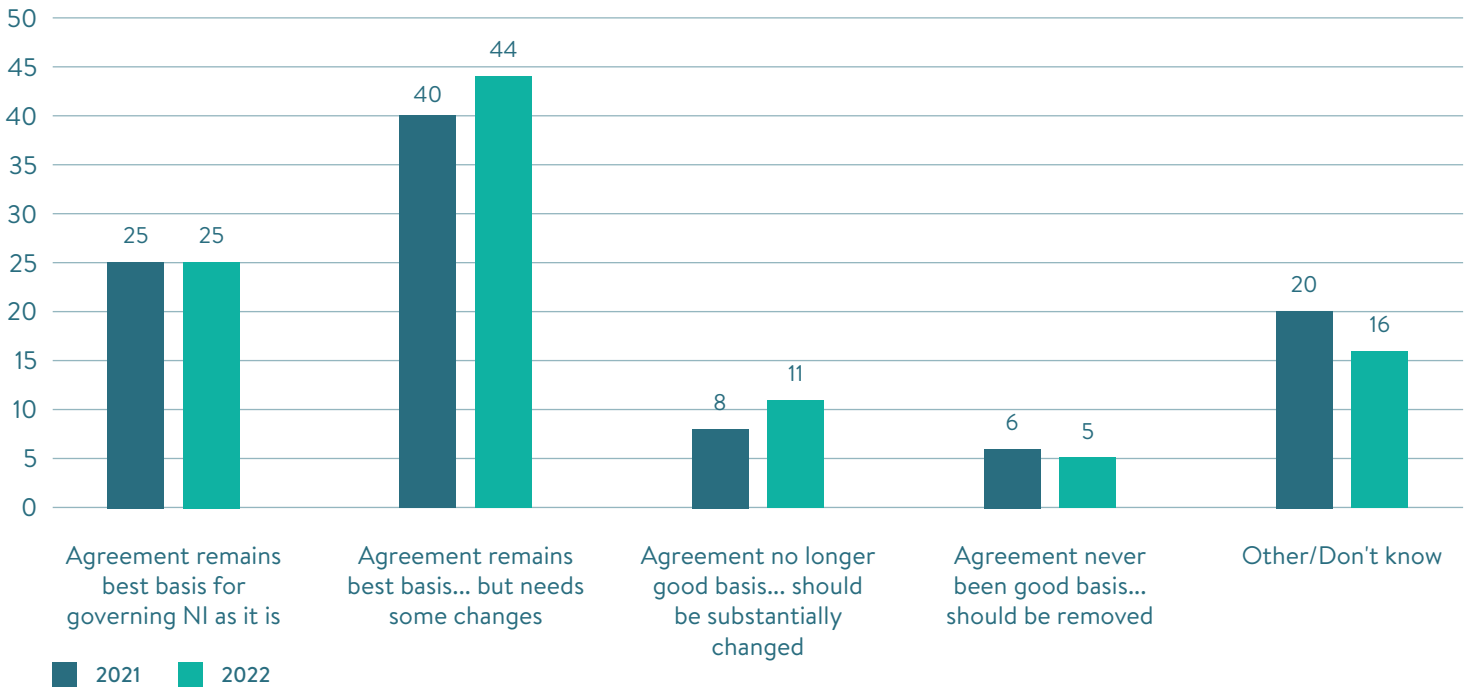
The 2022 NILT survey was conducted using the same Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method as used in 2020 and 2021. NILT is a social attitudes survey using a randomised sample of the adult population in NI. As a result, and reflecting the picture in wider society, the 1,405 respondents in 2022 include people who are generally uninterested in politics or feel unrepresented by mainstream political party positions. Six out of ten respondents do not think of themselves as supporters of any particular party, although one in two say they feel a little closer to one party than others. As with previous NILT surveys, Alliance Party voters appear to be over-represented, while Sinn Féin and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) voters are under-represented.

Opinion on the 1998 Agreement

A clear majority of respondents (69%) expressed support for the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, believing it remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland. While only 5 per cent

think that the 1998 Agreement should be removed altogether, 55 per cent believe it should be reformed in some way (Figure 1).

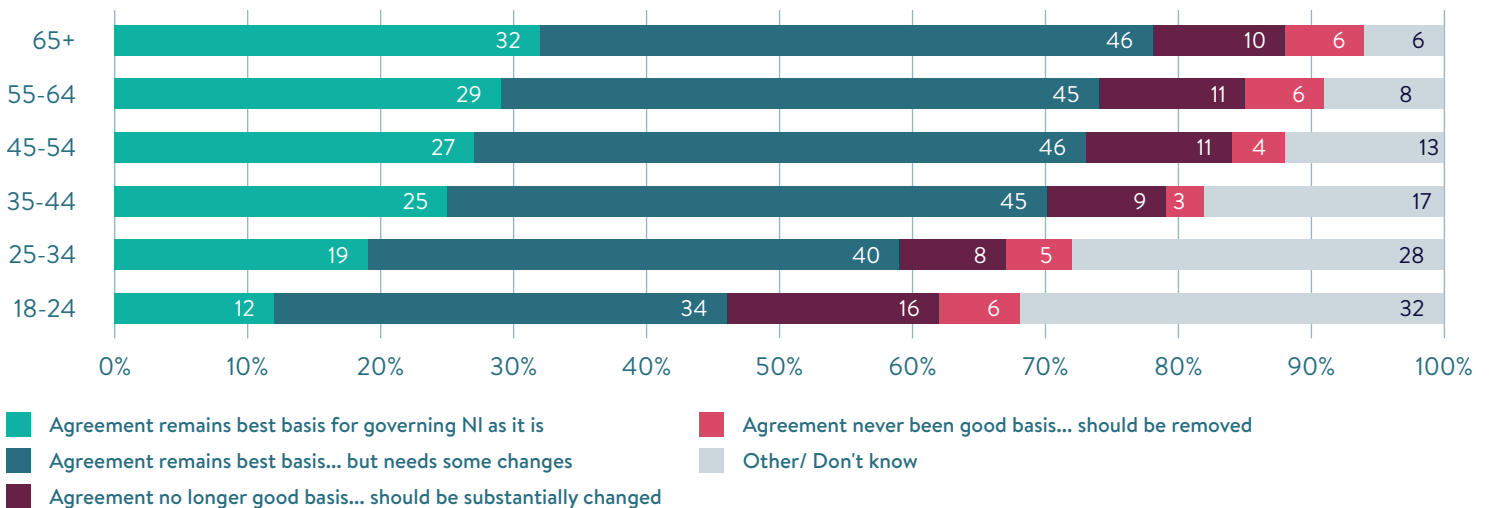
Figure 1: Opinions on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (%) – 2021 NILT and 2022 NILT



Young people are more likely to have no opinion on the Agreement and to be less sure that the Agreement constitutes the best foundation for the governance of Northern Ireland (Figure 2). While men

and women are broadly supportive of the Agreement, the 'don't know' response is twice as common among women (20%) than men (10%).

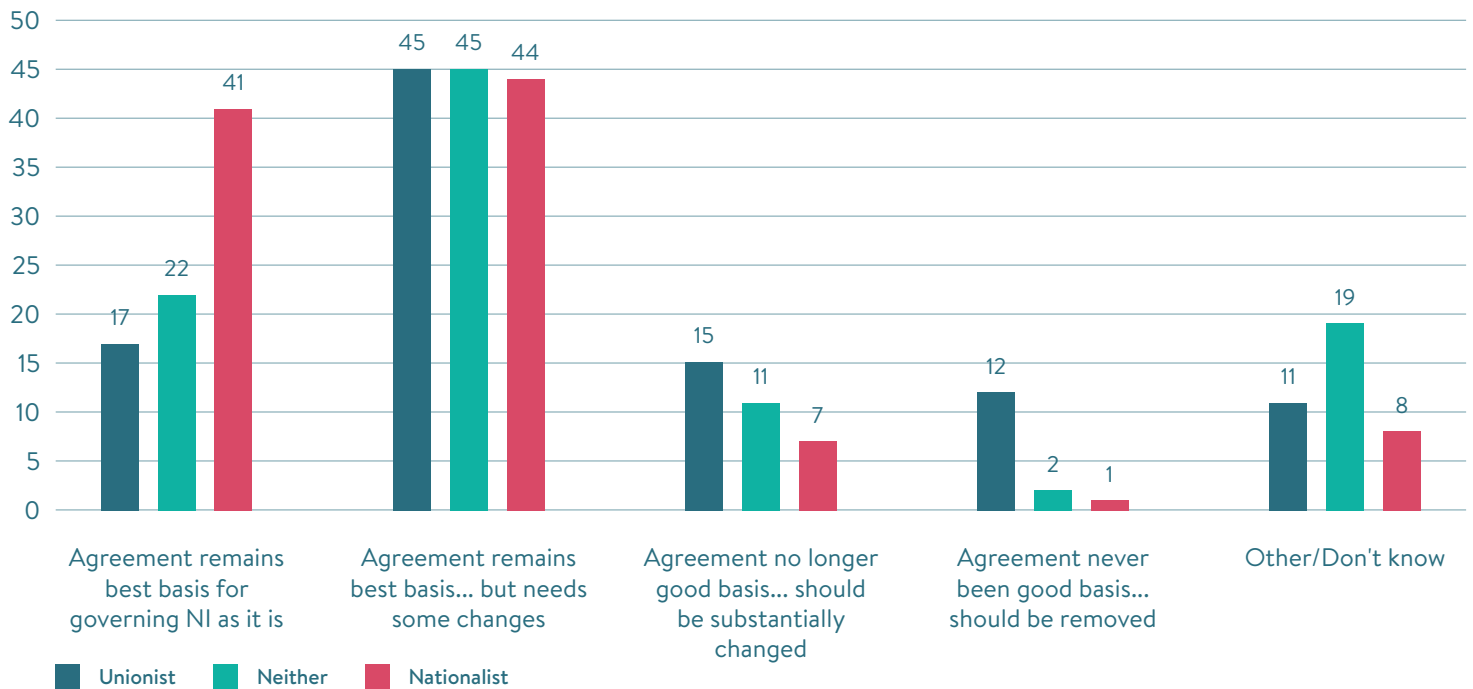
Figure 2: Opinions on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (%) (by age)



Community identity is also a significant variable. An almost identical proportion (45%) of the three main communal blocs feel that the Agreement remains the best basis for governing NI, albeit in need of reform. However, 27 per cent

of unionists believe the Agreement is no longer/has never been a good basis for governing NI (compared to 13% of those saying they are 'neither unionist nor nationalist' and 8% of nationalists) (Figure 3).

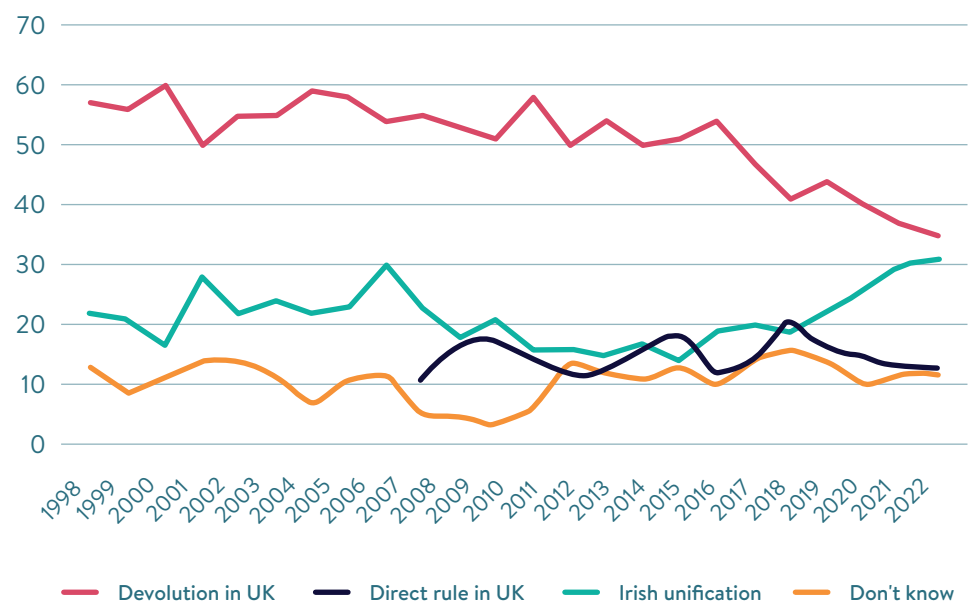
Figure 3: Opinions on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (%) (by community identity)



Constitutional preference

A plurality of respondents (48%) continue to believe that the long-term policy should be for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK – the same as the previous year’s survey. Support for a united Ireland as a long-term policy has also not significantly changed (31%). Time series data on this question shows that support for devolution within the UK has fallen quite dramatically in recent years (from 54% in 2016 to 35% in 2022). Support for direct rule has remained on average 14 per cent during that time (12% in 2016 and 12% in 2022). However, there has been a significant and steady rise in support for Irish unity: from 14 per cent in 2015 to 31 per cent in 2022 (Figure 4). The NI Assembly has been functioning for just four of those six intervening years.

Figure 4: What should the long-term policy for Northern Ireland be? 1998-2022 (%)



A different way of looking at constitutional preference is through responses to the question on voting intentions ‘if there was a referendum on Irish unification tomorrow’. In 2022, 47 per cent of respondents say they would vote for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK (down 6 percentage points from 2020), with 35 per cent saying they would vote for a united Ireland.

Brexit has contributed to shifting political sands in Northern Ireland since 2016. In 2022, as in 2021, 63 per cent of respondents say that Brexit has increased the likelihood of Irish unification. A plurality of unionists (45%), a majority of ‘neithers’ (64%) and a majority of nationalists (87%) think Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely. With one exception, there has been no significant movement in the year on opinions on whether Brexit makes a united Ireland more desirable. An increase from 38 to 43 per cent of ‘neithers’ stating that Brexit makes them more in favour of Irish unification means a slim plurality of this group are now of that view. Perhaps unsurprisingly, while views on the Protocol have barely changed since the 2021 survey, a lower proportion of respondents (6% compared to 10%) say they have never heard of it.

Against this background, what are people’s long-term expectations for Ireland and the UK? In 2020 more people thought it likely that the UK will exist (41%) in two decades’ time than a united Ireland (34%). In the 2021 survey, an equal proportion of respondents (38%) believed the UK and a united Ireland would exist in 20 years. The 2022 survey reveals that more respondents expect there to be a united Ireland than a United Kingdom in twenty years’ time; 45 per cent think a united Ireland very or quite likely compared to 38 per cent thinking it very or quite likely that the United Kingdom will exist in 2042 (Figure 5).

Trust

One of the most important elements in a democratic system is trust in political actors. The 2022 NILT survey asked a new set of questions to explore this trust in Northern Ireland (Figure 6). Results show that the least amount of trust lies with the NI Executive (17%), followed by the UK Government (21%); 28 per cent of respondents express trust in the Irish Government. The highest levels of trust are in the European Union (37%) and the NI Civil Service (41%). During

the two months in which the survey was conducted, the caretaker Executive had to step down, with civil servants being given responsibility for ‘keeping the lights on’ in the day-to-day governance of Northern Ireland. The levels of trust in the EU are notable given that the EU was the subject of many heated political debates and mentioned almost daily in news reports at the time yet was almost never represented directly in such debates or reports in Northern Ireland.

Breaking trust down by community identity, unionists (38%) have more trust in the British government than nationalists (4%) or ‘neithers’ (17%) have. Nationalists (41%) and ‘neithers’ (28%) trust the Irish government more than unionists (14%) do. The same pattern is true of the EU, which is trusted by 60% of nationalists and 41% of ‘neithers’, but only 15% of unionists. Trust in the NI Executive is low across community identities, but there is broadly high trust in the NI Civil Service across the spectrum.

Figure 5: Will a united Ireland/United Kingdom exist in twenty years? (%)

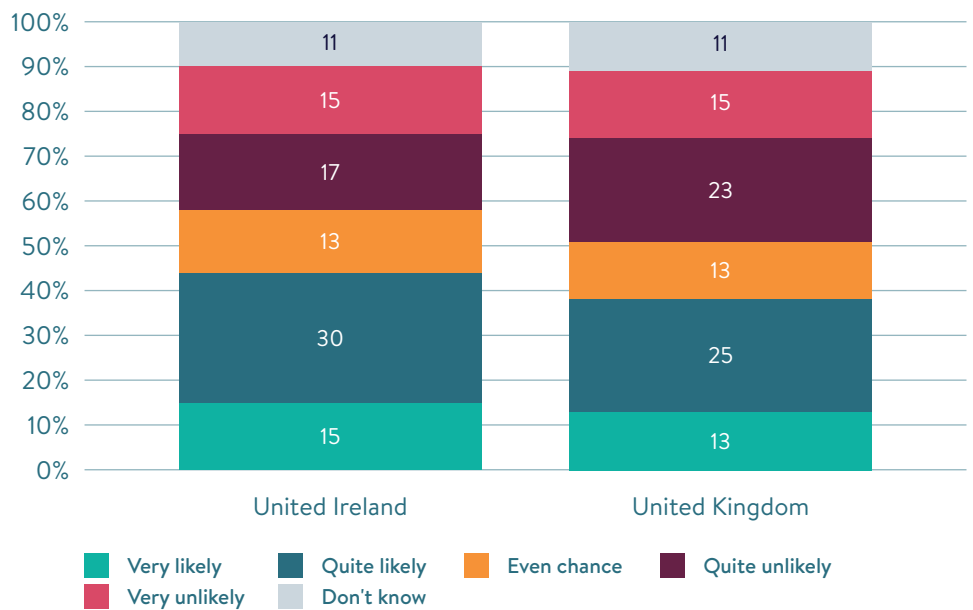
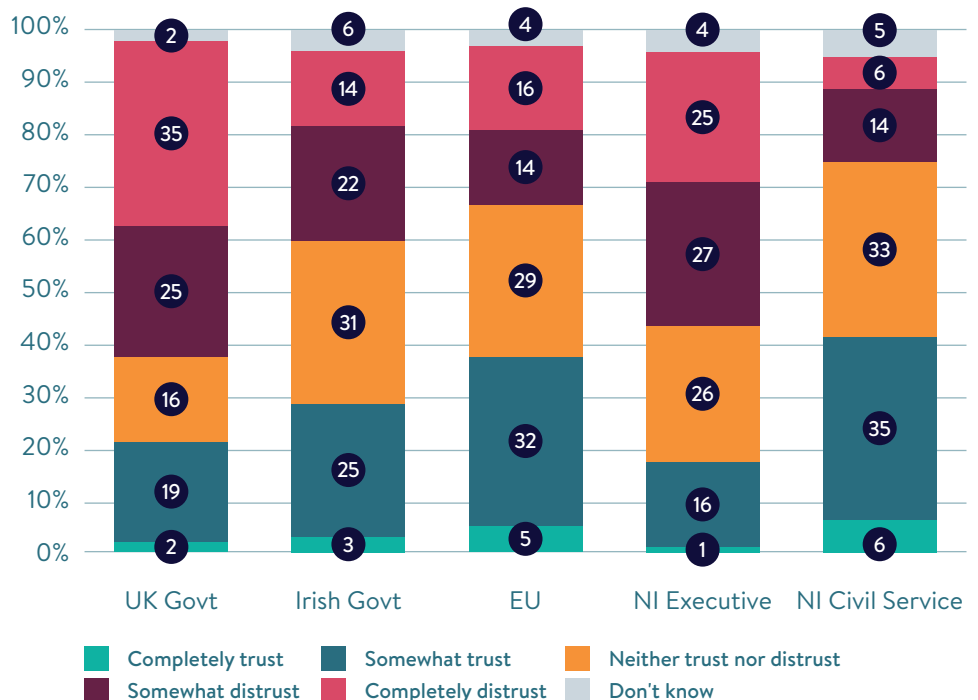


Figure 6: Levels of trust in those with governance responsibilities (%)



A force as powerful as that of trust in democratic politics is that of distrust. So perhaps just as significant is the fact that 60 per cent of respondents distrust the UK Government – a figure much higher than for the other actors. Only 18 per cent of respondents withhold an opinion on trusting the UK Government, i.e. selecting ‘neither trust nor distrust’ or ‘don’t know’. While 52 per cent of respondents distrust the NI Executive, 30 per cent say they are of no opinion. Levels of distrust are lower for the Irish Government (36%), EU (30%), and NI Civil Service (20%), but in these cases, there is also a high proportion of respondents (34-38%) not giving an opinion.

In terms of community identity, levels of distrust in the UK Government are highest among nationalists (86%); distrust in the Irish Government and the EU is highest among unionists (both c.55%); and distrust in the NI Executive is highest among ‘neithers’ (60%).

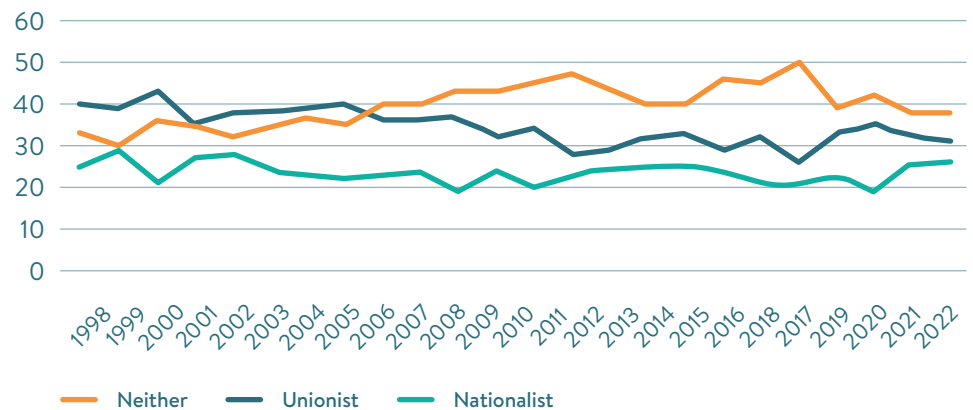
Identity

For fifteen years in the NILT surveys, ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’ has been the identity held by the plurality of respondents. This reached 50% in 2018 but since then there are indications of the three blocs becoming more equal. In NILT 2022, the breakdown of self-described community identities is unionist (31%), nationalist (26%) and ‘neither’ (38%) (Figure 7).

The trend of an intensification of nationalist and unionist identities since

2016 has continued. 27 per cent and 26 per cent of those holding a unionist and nationalist identity respectively say these identities are ‘very strong’ (compared to 17% and 18% respectively in 2018). The biggest change since 2016 has been the strengthening of nationalist identities. In 2016, 65 per cent of unionists held their identity strongly, compared to 56 per cent of nationalists; in 2022, the figure is 69 per cent of unionists and 67 per cent of nationalists.

Figure 7: Unionist, nationalist and ‘neither’ identities since 1998 (%)



Key Points:

- There is broad support for the 1998 Agreement, with 69 per cent saying it remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland. However, 55 per cent believe it needs at least some reform to work effectively for Northern Ireland.
- Younger people are the least confident about the 1998 Agreement, with 30% of under-35s answering ‘don’t know’ when asked their opinion on it.
- Although most respondents think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be to be in the UK under a devolved settlement (35%), support for this has fallen dramatically since 2016, while there has been a steady rise in support for Irish unification (now 31%).
- More people think it likely a united Ireland will exist in 20 years (45%) than believe the United Kingdom will do so (38%).
- A majority (63%) believe that Brexit has made a united Ireland more likely (including a plurality of unionists), though only 38% say it has made a united Ireland more desirable, with a plurality (42%) still saying it has made no difference to their views.
- Trust in political actors is generally low and there are high levels of distrust. The NI Civil Service is most trusted (41%), followed by the EU (37%). 21% of respondents trust and 60% distrust the UK government. 17% trust and 52% distrust the NI Executive. Respondents are more ambivalent about the Irish Government, with the predominant response being ‘neither trust nor distrust’/‘don’t know’ (37%)
- The relative size of the groups identifying as nationalist (26%), unionist (31%) or ‘neither’ (38%) has become closer, but there has been a particular strengthening of nationalist identities since 2016.

Please note that the NILT2022 survey data will not be publicly available until 1 June 2023.

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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 2022, 1,405 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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