

Does Northern Ireland lean Left or Right?

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For good reasons, the questions asked in the *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey to measure political attitudes tend to concentrate on the themes and identities that define the party political system here, namely unionism and nationalism. However, this approach makes it difficult to compare political attitudes in the region with other places, including Ireland and Great Britain. In the 2023 NILT survey, two new sets of questions were asked to help locate public opinion in Northern Ireland on a Left/Right spectrum.

The Left/Right spectrum is a common means of measuring political attitudes which, in essence, are about the exercise of power and the public good. Put simply,

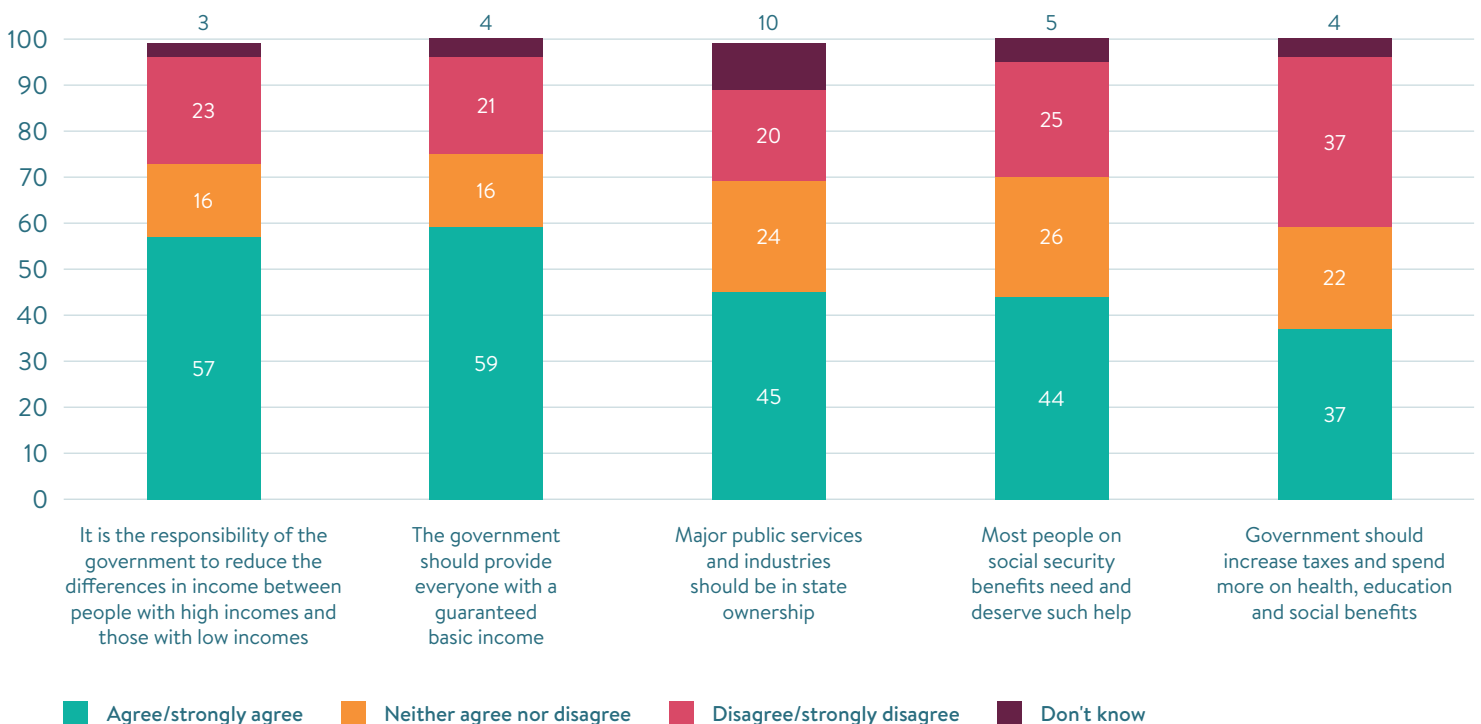
those on the Left tend to want the Government to implement redistributive economic policies and liberal-progressive (i.e. non-traditional) social policies, such as same-sex marriage and abortion rights. Those on the Right tend to want lower taxation, socially conservative policies, and stricter controls on immigration. In this Research Update, we examine the findings from the 2023 NILT survey, focusing on these Left/Right questions under three broad themes: economic policies, social matters, and immigration.

Economic policy

The first set of questions focused on economic policy, such as the role of government in reducing income

differentials, taxation and benefits. As detailed in Figure 1, a majority of NILT respondents think that Government has a responsibility to address income inequality (57%) and a similar proportion would like to see a universal basic income provided (59%). A plurality of people are supportive of the nationalisation of major public services and industries (45%), while 44 per cent think that most people on social security benefits deserve such assistance. On 'tax and spend', however, respondents are evenly split: 37 per cent support increased taxes and greater public spending on health, education and social benefits, with a similar proportion (37%) against it.

Figure 1: Left/Right opinions on economic policy (%)



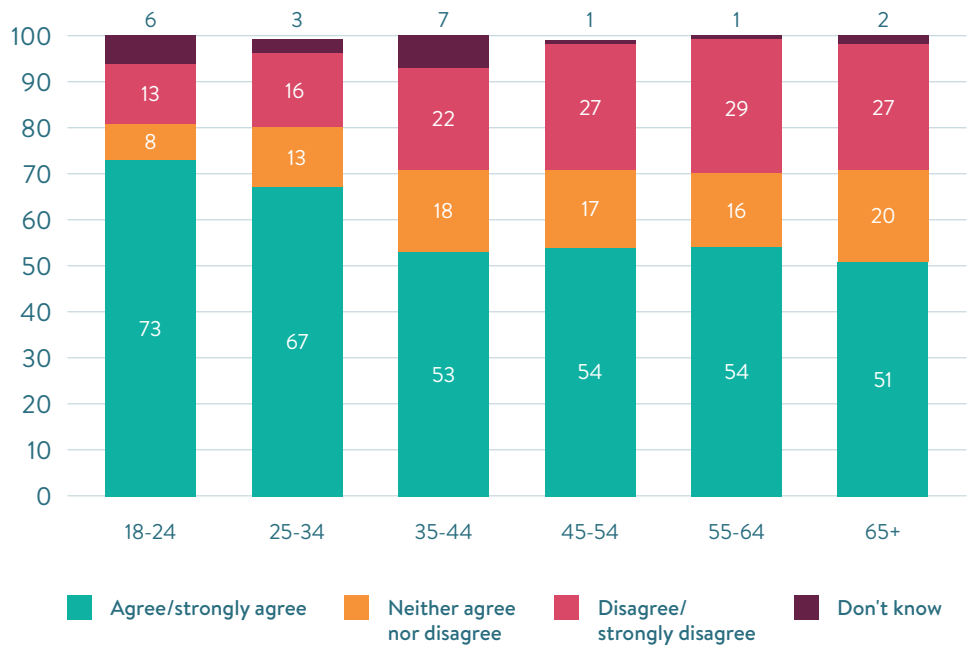
When analysed in more detail, it becomes clear that respondents identifying as Nationalist are much more likely to be on the Left of the spectrum (on every question) than those identifying as Unionist or Neither Unionist nor Nationalist ('Neither'). For example, 73 per cent of those identifying as Nationalist felt that Government has the responsibility to reduce income differentials, compared with 62 per cent of those saying that they are Neither, and 40 per cent of those saying they are Unionist.

There are significant, but inconsistent, gender differences across these questions. For example, male respondents were more in favour of 'tax and spend' than females (45% and 29% respectively). Similarly, males were more likely than females to think that people on benefits deserve such help (48% and 39% respectively), and to support state ownership of public services and industries (50% and 41% respectively). Conversely, females were slightly more in favour than males of a universal basic income (62% and 56% respectively) and on reducing income inequality (60% and 55% respectively).

As detailed in Figure 2, respondents under 35 years of age were much more Left-leaning in relation to reducing income inequality than other NILT participants. Respondents aged 18-24

years were also much more supportive of universal basic income than other age groups (22% compared with 57% across other age groups).

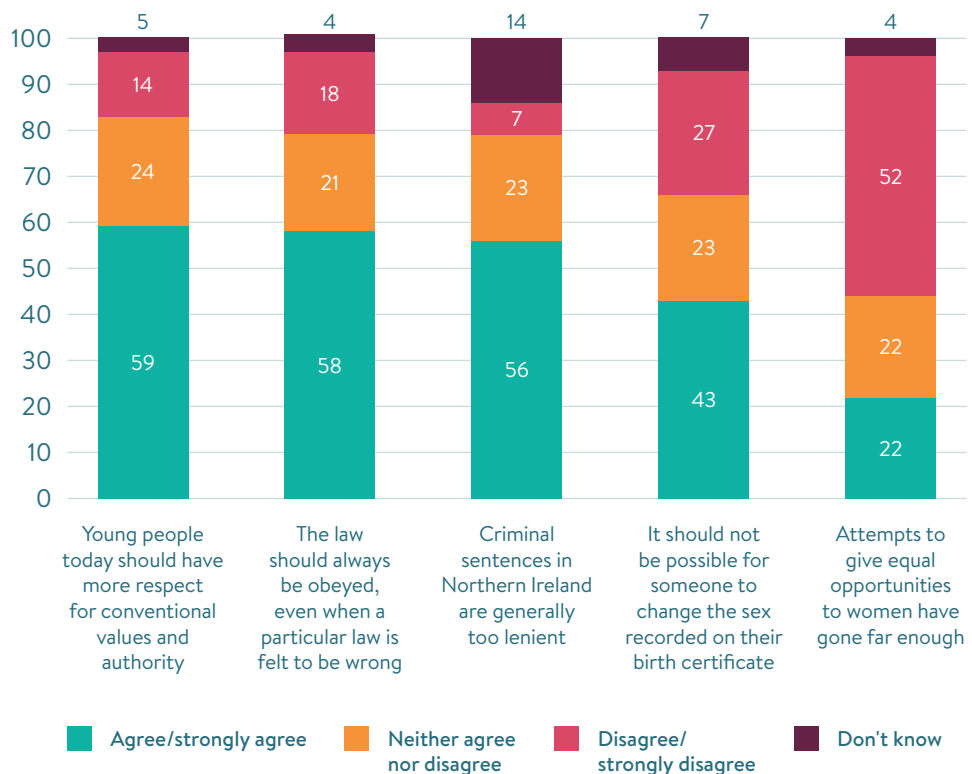
Figure 2: The Government should reduce income inequality, by age group (%)



Social matters

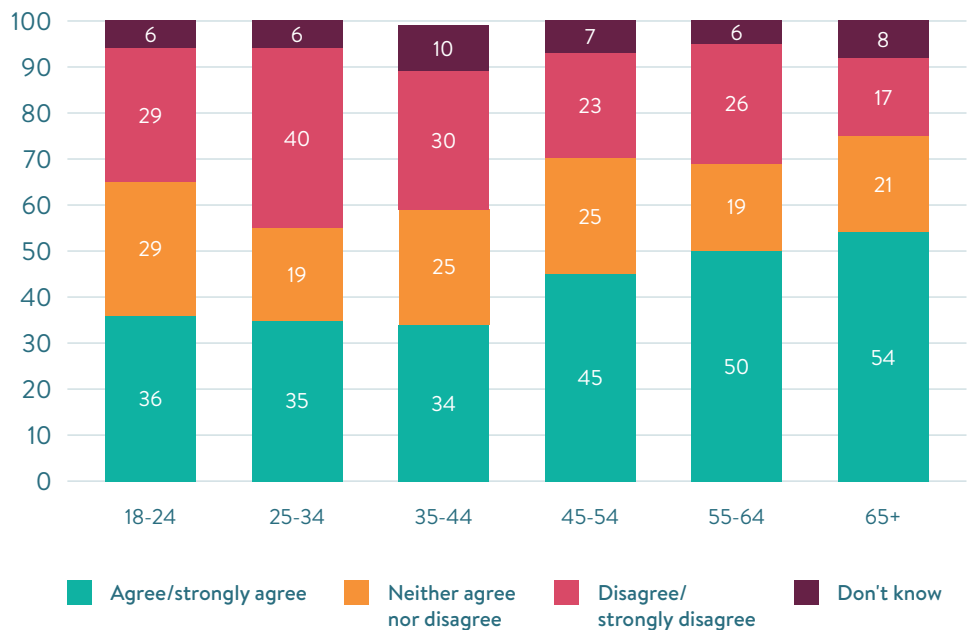
The second set of questions asked on the Left/Right spectrum relate to social matters. This could also be termed a 'Libertarian/Authoritarian' spectrum because these issues largely centre on the relationship between personal freedom and obedience to the legal authority. The responses show a more Right-wing inclination in this regard (Figure 3). A majority of respondents thought that young people should have more respect for conventional values and authority (59%), that the law should always be obeyed even if it is felt to be wrong (58%), and that criminal sentences are too lenient (56%). The plurality agreed it should not be possible to change the sex recorded on a birth certificate (43%), compared with 27 per cent who disagree. The one outlier is in relation to gender equality, where only a minority of respondents thought that attempts to give equal opportunities to women have gone far enough (22%) whereas over one half (52%) disagreed.

Figure 3: Left/Right opinions on social matters (%)



Perhaps unsurprisingly, male respondents were significantly more Right-leaning than females on the progress of gender equality, with 30 per cent of males feeling that efforts to give equality to women have gone far enough, compared with 15 per cent of females. A similar trend is evident in respect of whether the sex on a birth certificate can be changed: 49 per cent of males opposed this view, compared with 37 per cent of females. While age is not a significant variable on views on gender equality, it is notable that respondents aged under 25 years old were most likely to say that it has gone far enough (28%) with those aged 45-54 and over 65 years most likely to feel that there is still some way to go (58%). However, there is a stronger relationship between age and whether people should not be able to change the sex recorded on their birth certificate, with those aged over 45 years of age being more likely than younger respondents to take that stance (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: It should not be possible for someone to change the sex recorded on their birth certificate, by age group (%)



On the Libertarian/Authoritarian spectrum, Unionist respondents are consistently more on the Right than respondents who identify as either Nationalist or Neither. This is particularly pronounced on the question of whether young people should have more respect for conventional values and authority, with three quarters of Unionist respondents agreeing (74%) compared with 56 per cent of Neithers and 49 per cent of Nationalists.

Immigration

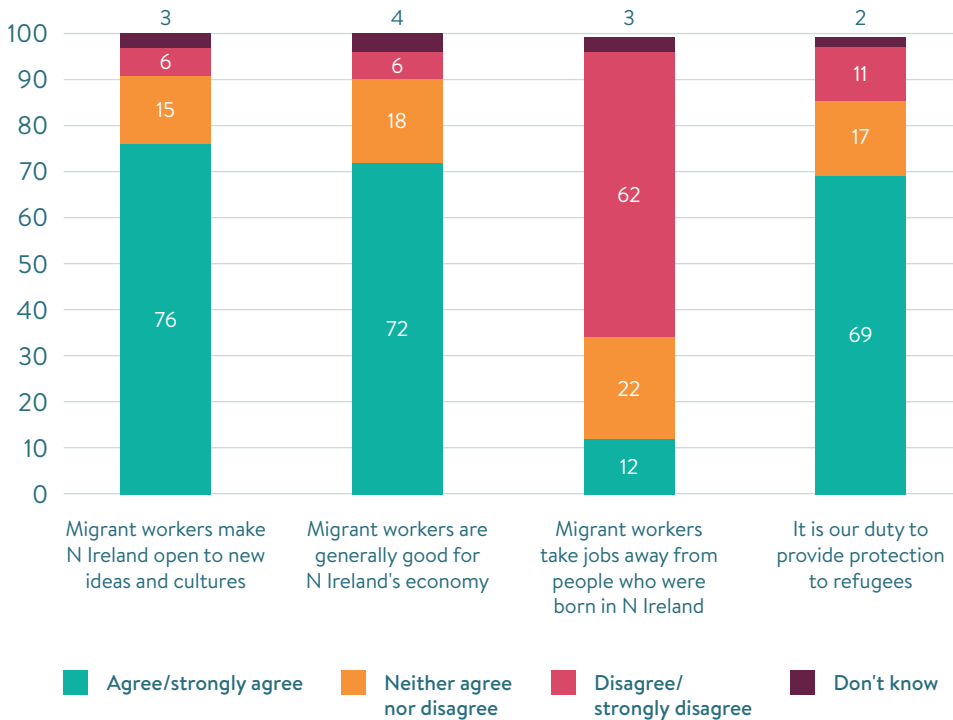
NILT has measured public opinion in Northern Ireland on immigration and ethnic diversity since 2005. It is worth looking at the data for 2023 as part of our consideration of Northern Ireland

on a broadly Left/Right spectrum. These findings show public opinion as being considerably more on the Left (Inclusivist) than the Right (Exclusivist) end of the spectrum. In respect of immigration, only a relatively small percentage of respondents have 'Exclusivist' views (7-15%), with Unionists being somewhat more likely than Nationalists or Neithers to hold such views.

Three-quarters of respondents (76%) thought that migrant workers make Northern Ireland more open to new ideas and cultures, and a large majority thought that they are good for the economy (72%). A majority disagreed that migrants take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland

(62%), and two-thirds believed that we have a duty to protect refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country (69%). It is notable how opinions have changed over time. When first asked in 2006, 53 per cent of respondents said that migrant workers were good for the economy and 48 per cent felt that migrant workers take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland. These are quite different from the most recent figures: 72 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. In 2006, 18 per cent disagreed that migrant workers make Northern Ireland more open to new ideas and cultures – the latest figure is seven per cent.

Figure 5: Opinions on immigration (%)



Conclusion

Broadly speaking, findings from 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey show that the public in Northern Ireland lean towards the Left on economic policy and towards the Right on social matters – with the exception of immigration where public attitudes are predominantly inclusivist. For some of these indicators, there are differences according to age, and between Unionists, Nationalists and Neithers. Placing public opinion in Northern Ireland on the Left/Right spectrum reveals some commonalities and nuances that would otherwise be hidden, not least by a party political system in which views on economic and social matters are deemed subordinate to constitutional preferences and identities.

Key Points:

- NILT respondents hold views that are generally considered as Left-leaning with respect to economic policies and Right-leaning with respect to social matters, with the notable exception of immigration.
- A clear majority of respondents had Inclusivist views when it comes to immigration. 68% stated that we have a duty to protect refugees and 72% said that migrant workers are good for the economy. Three quarters felt that migrant workers make Northern Ireland more open to new ideas and cultures.
- On economic policy, there was majority support (58%) for a universal basic income, and the view that the Government is responsible for reducing income inequality between high and low earners (57%).
- Younger people were particularly supportive of government intervention to reduce income inequality.
- The issue of 'tax and spend' was more contested, with respondents evenly split as to whether taxes should be increased to offer improved public services.
- On social matters, the majority believed that the law should always be obeyed even when thought to be wrong (58%), that criminal sentences in Northern Ireland are generally too lenient (56%), and that young people should have more respect for authority (59%).
- Over the past two decades, the Northern Ireland public has become much more accepting of immigrants. In 2006, 48 per cent of NILT respondents thought that migrant workers take jobs from locals – this was 12 per cent in 2023.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is an annual social attitudes survey of the adult population in Northern Ireland using a Systematic Random Sample design. In 2023, 1,200 people aged 18 years or over participated. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. The 2023 NILT survey was conducted using a Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method. The results are published at a 95 per cent confidence level and with a margin of error of +/- 2.8 per cent. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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