



## Political identities and aspirations in Northern Ireland

Katy Hayward and Ben Rosher

The winter of 2023 will be remembered as fairly grim in terms of social and economic conditions in Northern Ireland (NI), including the continued suspension of the Assembly and Executive due to the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) veto. Thus, the political context in which the data collection for the 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey took place (September 2023-January 2024) was one of familiar limbo. The United Kingdom (UK) Government and the DUP remained 'in the final stages' of talks over Northern Ireland's post-Brexit arrangements – talks which did not conclude until the Safeguarding the Union deal of 31 January 2024. This meant that the fieldwork for this survey was conducted against a background of non-functioning devolved institutions, as well as the implementation of severe budget cuts in public services, and an escalating series of strikes in the public sector. These circumstances should be borne in mind in considering the NILT 2023 findings. Nevertheless, a time series social attitudes survey like NILT can usefully highlight continuity and change over time, regardless of seasonal circumstances.

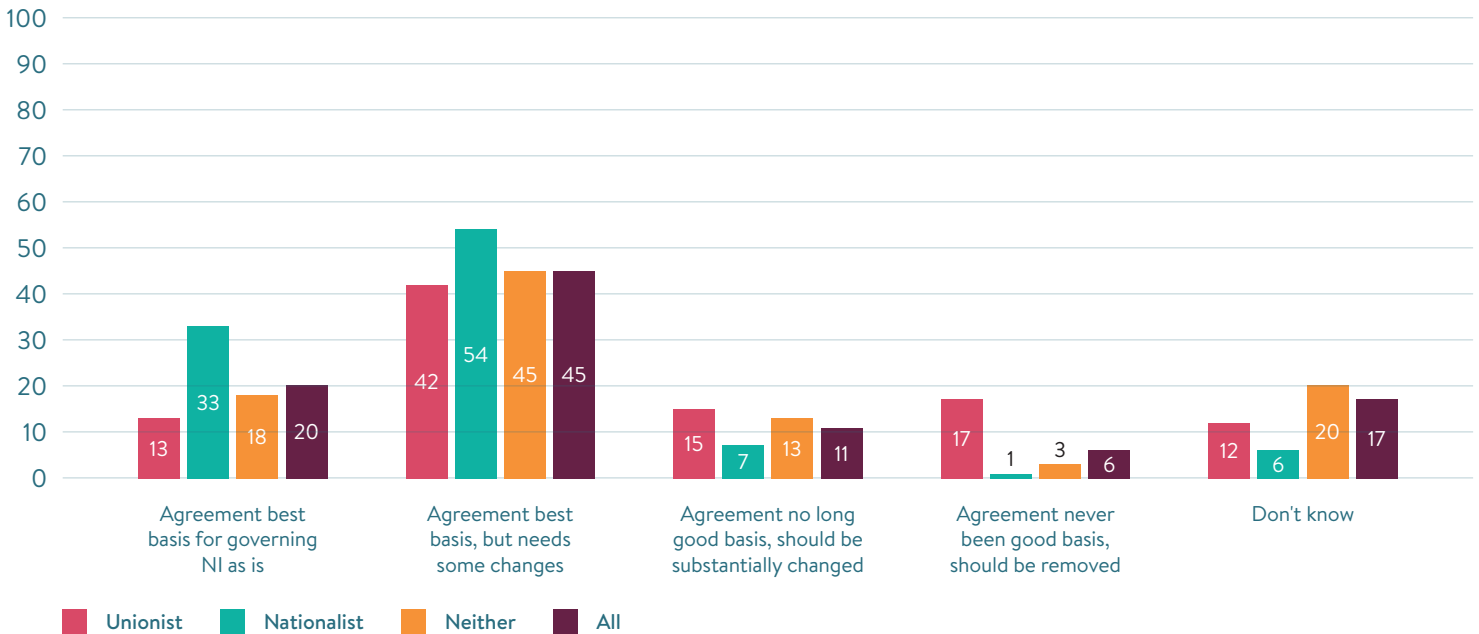
This Research Update explores the political identities and aspirations of respondents to the 2023 survey. NILT is an annual social attitudes survey of a representative sample of the adult population in Northern Ireland. This means that, reflecting the picture in wider society, the 1,200 respondents include people who are very politically engaged. However, the sample also includes people who are generally uninterested in politics or feel unrepresented by mainstream political party positions.

### 1998 Agreement

In comparison to the previous year, the 2023 NILT survey showed a very slight drop in support for the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (65% down from 69%). Taken in the context of a year without functioning devolved institutions, such a relatively small drop could be seen as a positive. There was also no notable change in the proportion thinking that the Agreement should be reformed in some way (54% in 2022, 56% in 2023) or who think it should be removed altogether (5% in 2022, 6% in 2023). While the latter figure from 2023 is low, it is double that reported in 2019.

In comparison with the findings from 2022, the 2023 figures show a decline of five percentage points in those saying that the 1998 Agreement as it is remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland (25% and 20% respectively). Notably, when first asked in 2019, one third of respondents felt this to be the case. This downward shift between 2022 and 2023 has mainly come in terms of the views of Nationalists with an increase in the proportion of this group saying that the Agreement needs reform (54% in 2023, up from 44%) and a decline in the proportion thinking that it is fine as is (33% in 2023, down from 41%). There has also been a rise in the proportion of Unionists saying the Agreement is no longer/has never been a good basis for governing Northern Ireland (32%, up from 27% in 2022).

Figure 1: Opinions on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (by political community) (%)



Overall, 17 percent of respondents said ‘don’t know’ in response being asked their opinion about the 1998 Agreement. Respondents aged under 25 years were the age group most likely to say this, compared with only six per cent of those aged over 65 years. It is the 25-34 year old group that had the lowest confidence in the Agreement, with only 53 per cent of them saying it remains the best basis for governing NI. In terms of gender, women have less confidence than men in the Agreement (58% say it is the best basis for governing NI, compared to 71% of men), but this is heavily impacted by the very high ‘don’t know’ response from women: 26 per cent (up from 20% in 2022), compared with eight per cent of men.

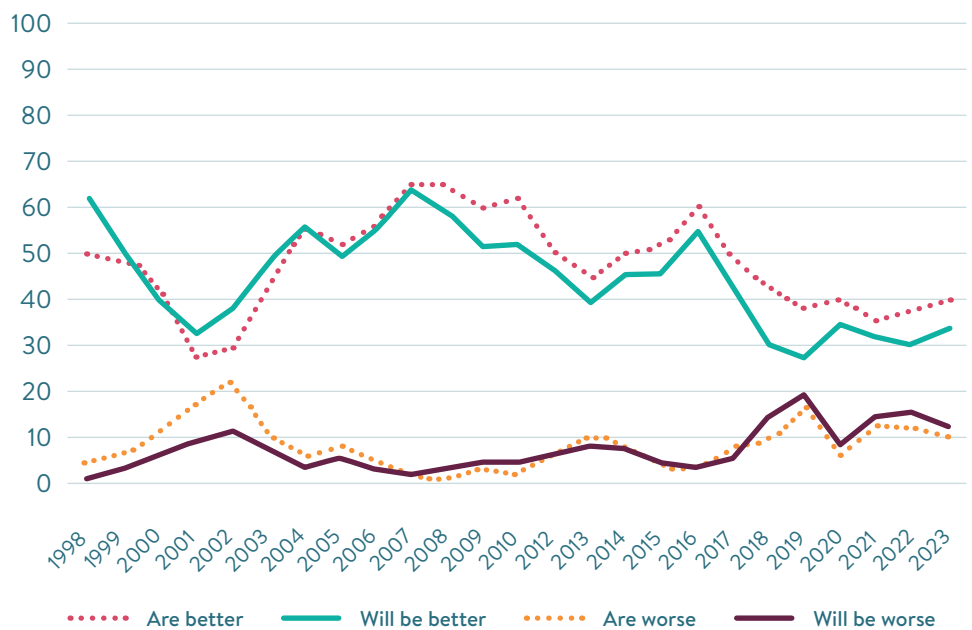
### Relations between communities

As highlighted earlier, a key benefit of a long-running survey such as NILT is the ability to track whether, or how, attitudes change over the years. This is evident in Figure 2, which shows that perceptions of the current and future relationships between the two main communities have changed considerably over the last 25 years. Despite the lack of fully-functioning Agreement institutions for five out of the seven years prior to the 2023 survey, there was a small but steady increase in the proportion of respondents

believing that relationships between Protestants and Catholics were better than five years previously (rising to 40% in 2023), and that these relationships would get better in the next five years (34% in 2023). It is impossible not to recognise, however, how far these figures have fallen from the most recent high in 2016 (59% and 55%), let alone the ultimate high point of 2007. In that year, during which the institutions were restored to

see First Minister Ian Paisley and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness into office, two thirds of respondents felt that community relations were better than five years previously (65%), and a similar proportion felt that they would be better in the future (64%). This reflects, perhaps, the sense that community relations have been under pressure since the Brexit referendum in 2016, in part because of the political fallout from that.

Figure 2: Relations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland - better/worse than 5 years ago; and better/worse in 5 years’ time (%)



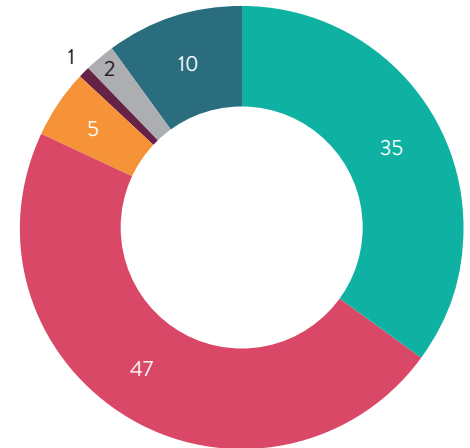
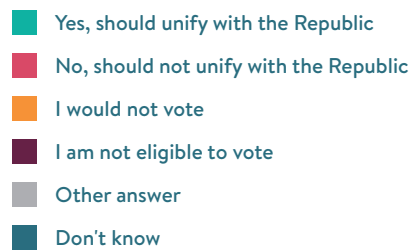
## Constitutional preference

On the ‘national question’, a plurality of respondents in NILT 2023 (48%) continue to believe that the long-term policy should be for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK – the same figure as in 2022. Support for a united Ireland as a long-term policy has dropped by two percentage points (to 29%) since then. However, as is usually the case, a larger proportion of respondents said they would vote in favour of unification if there were a referendum tomorrow (35%), whereas 47 per cent of respondents said they would vote for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK. However, nearly one fifth of respondents said that they are not eligible to vote, would not vote, did not know how they would vote or gave another answer. If these respondents are excluded, then 43 per cent would vote for unification, and 57 per cent would vote against it.

Notably, following a surge in expectations of Irish unification in 2022, 2023 saw a return to 2021 conditions in terms of views on the prospects for a united Ireland and United Kingdom. The proportion of respondents believing that the United Kingdom would still exist in twenty

years’ time did not change from 2022 (38%). This is similar to the proportion of respondents in 2023 who believed that there would be a united Ireland by 2043 (40%), representing a drop of four percentage points since 2022.

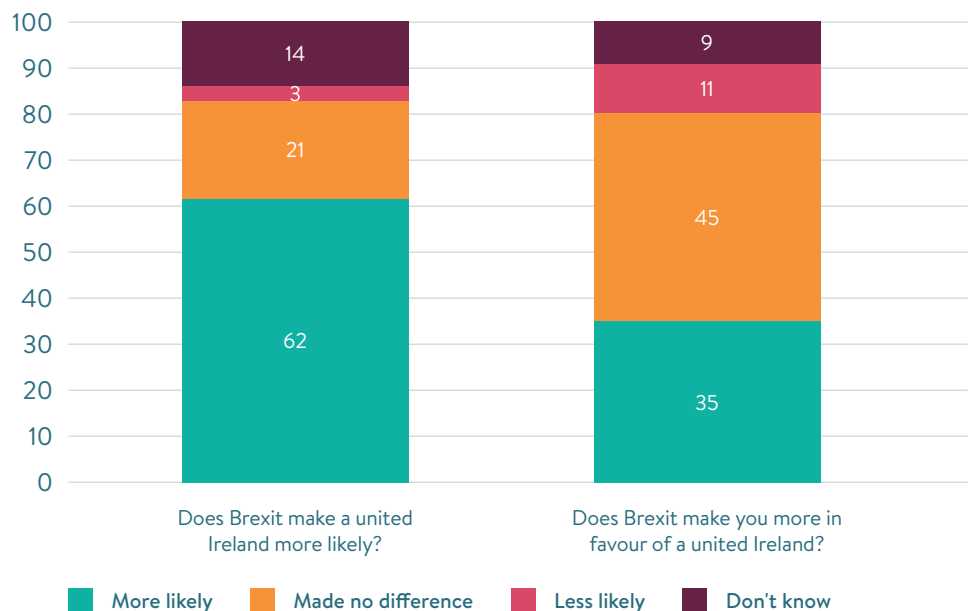
**Figure 3: If there was a referendum on Irish unification tomorrow, how would you vote? (%)**



## Brexit and unification

Brexit remains an important context and driver in expectations and opinions regarding Irish unification. For the third year running, around six in ten respondents (62% in 2023) said that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely (Figure 4). There was a slight drop between 2022 and 2023 among respondents who said that they were neither Unionist nor Nationalist (‘Neithers’) from 64 per cent to 59 per cent, and among Nationalists (86% to 83%) saying so. Notably, there has been a rise in the proportion of Unionists thinking this to be the case (45% to 52%). This perhaps helps explain strong Unionist support for the DUP boycott of Stormont. Nevertheless, Unionist fears may be based on an exaggerated impression of momentum towards unification. The plurality (45%) said that Brexit made no difference to their views on Irish unification, although 35 per cent said it has made them more in favour. Between 2022 and 2023, there was a drop in the proportion of Nationalists (73% down to 69%) and Neithers (43% down to 33%) saying Brexit makes them more in favour of unification, but a slight rise in Unionists thinking this (6% up to 10%).

**Figure 4: Impact of Brexit on Irish unification (%)**



## Political identities

Since 2006, ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’ has been the identity held by the plurality of NILT respondents. This reached 50 per cent in 2018 but since then there are indications of the three blocs becoming more equal. In NILT 2023, the breakdown of self-described community identities was Unionist (30%), Nationalist (28%) and Neither (37%) (Figure 5).

One aspect of political identity that has changed the most dramatically over the past 25 years has been that of Europeanness. The 2023 survey repeated a question first posed in 2002: ‘do you think of yourself as European?’ (Figure 6). The impact of Northern Ireland leaving the European Union has, it seems, spurred an enormous increase in people’s sense of Europeanness. In 2002, only seven per cent said they always thought of themselves as European compared with two thirds (67%) who never did; in 2023, almost a third (31%) always thought of themselves in that way, compared with 37% who never did.

Related, perhaps, to the findings above, there are notable differences between community affiliations. Three quarters of Nationalists (75%) and over one half (52%) of Neithers said that they always or sometimes think of themselves as European, compared with 35 per cent of Unionists thinking of themselves that way. And whereas six in ten Unionists said that they never think of themselves as European (59%), the figure is 36 per cent of Neithers and 18 per cent for Nationalists.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2023 NILT survey reveals nuanced shifts in political attitudes and identities within Northern Ireland. While outright support for the 1998 Agreement has slightly decreased, a substantial majority still view it as the best framework for governance, though many call for reform. Factors of age and gender indicate varied levels of engagement, with younger people and women more likely to express uncertainty about the Agreement.

Figure 5: ‘Do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?’ (%)

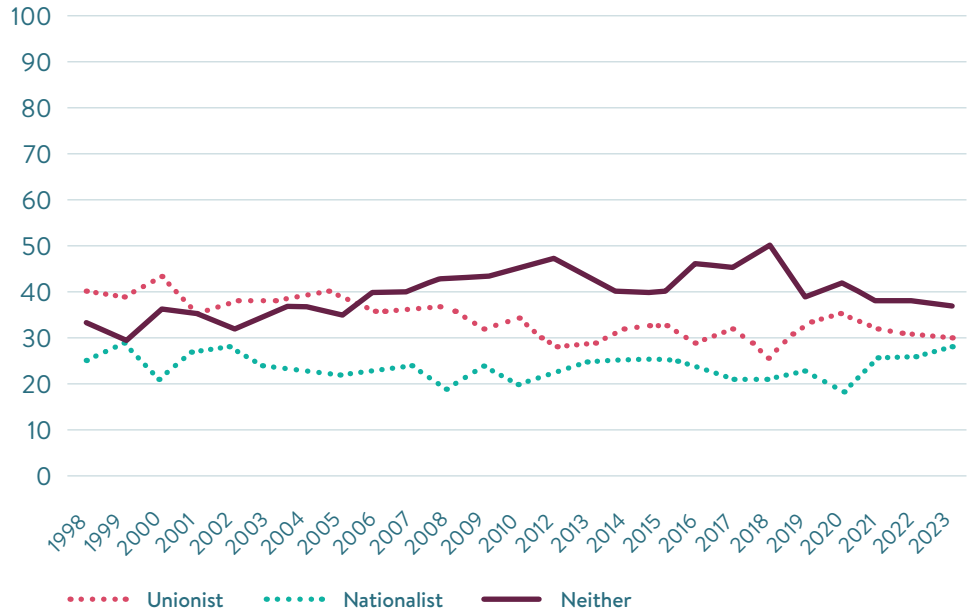
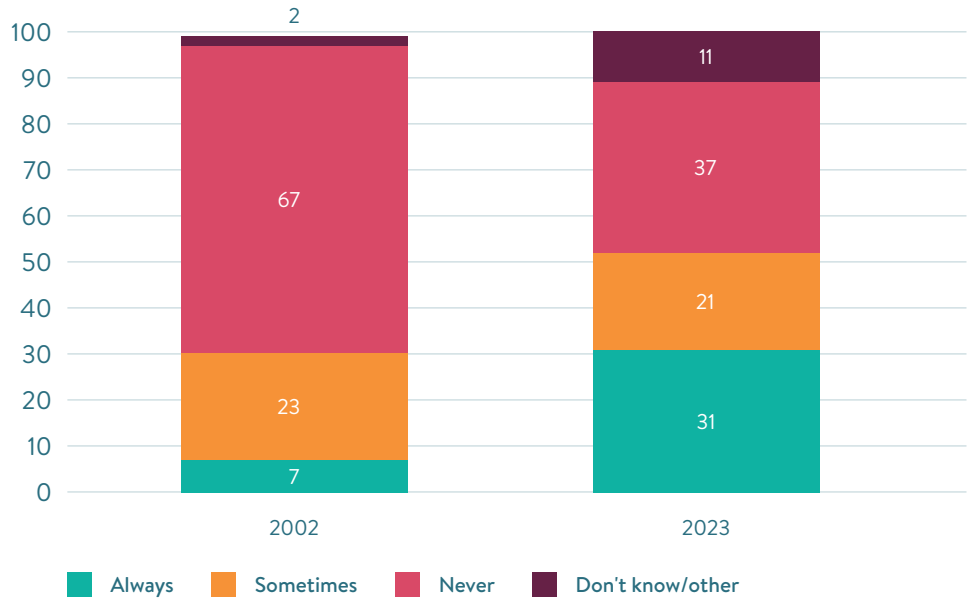


Figure 6: Do you think of yourself as European? (%)



The political identity landscape has seen little change, with a relatively equal distribution among Unionists, Nationalists, and Neithers. In contrast, European identity is much stronger in Northern Ireland now, post-Brexit, than it was two decades ago.

The 2023 survey also shows stability in constitutional preferences over the past three years, despite the lack of functioning devolved institutions and the ongoing impact of Brexit, which continues to influence opinions related to the constitutional question.

The belief that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely is pervasive across political communities, with notable recent increases in this sentiment among Unionists.

In sum, the survey shows that, while there is notable stability in some political attitudes and identities, there has also been some significant change in areas that we might not have anticipated. Overall, it demonstrates the lasting and unpredictable impact of significant political events such as Brexit.

## Key Points:

- Outright support for the 1998 Agreement as it is (i.e. without reform) dropped by 5 points since 2022 to 20%.
- However, two thirds of respondents still think the Agreement is the best way to govern Northern Ireland.
- A quarter of those under 45 (24-30%) and of women (26%) say that they ‘don’t know’ when asked their opinion on the 1998 Agreement as the basis for governing Northern Ireland.
- There was an increase in Nationalist support for reform of the Agreement (54%, up by 9 points on 2022) and an increase in Unionists saying they no longer support the Agreement as the basis for governing Northern Ireland (up from 27% to 32%).
- Opinions on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland have not shifted in any significant way for the past three years.
- A clear majority (62%) think that Brexit has made a united Ireland more likely, and a third (32%) say Brexit makes them more in favour of Irish unification.
- The most significant shifts in views regarding the impact of Brexit on Irish unification between the 2022 and 2023 surveys have come among self-identified Unionists, with a rise in the proportion of Unionists saying Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely (52%) and in saying Brexit makes them more in favour of Irish unification (10%).
- The relative parity of the three identity ‘blocs’ of Nationalist (28%), Unionist (30%) and Neither (37%) has remained quite stable since 2019.
- European identity has become much stronger in Northern Ireland post-Brexit. Twenty years ago, two thirds (67%) of respondents said they never felt European; in 2023, over half (52%) say they always or sometimes feel European.

## Authors

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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 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. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt). The 2023 NILT survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing. The results are published at a 95 per cent confidence level and with a margin of error of +/- 2.8 per cent.



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