Research Update

What *the NI Life & Times Survey* can tell us about Northern Ireland's political future

Katy Hayward & Ben Rosher

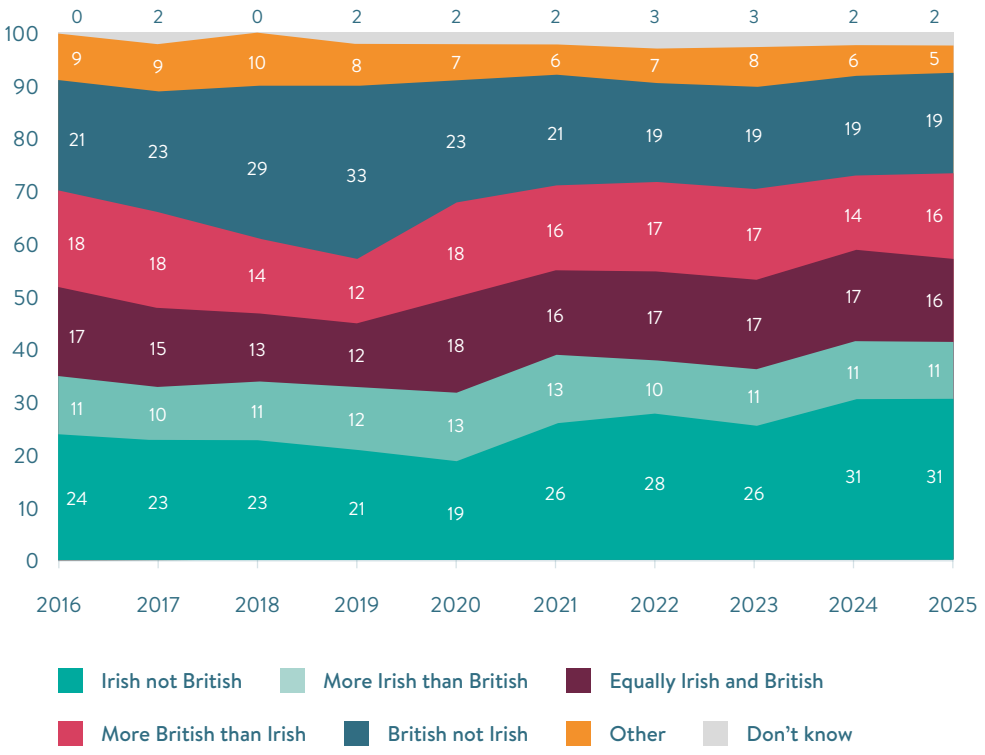
As an annual survey of social attitudes, the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey* offers the means of identifying trends and changes in public opinion in Northern Ireland. This is of particular interest for a region whose constitutional status is subject to change, depending on the wishes of the majority. Views regarding a potential border poll are thus repeatedly sought via the Political Attitudes section of NILT. But the prospects for a 'border poll', and Northern Ireland's political future more generally, depend a lot more than on the proportion of respondents saying they would vote for Irish unification. In this Research Update on the 2025 NILT results, we consider political attitudes in Northern Ireland that have ramifications for its future before and beyond the 'constitutional question'.

National identity

A first point to make is that – despite the familiar sense of déjà vu in Stormont debates or on radio talk shows – political identities and attitudes in Northern Ireland do change. This is true even of national identities, which are often thought of as forms of identification that are held for a lifetime. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement affirmation that people born in Northern Ireland had the right to be 'Irish or British, or both' underscored the fact that national identities mean more than citizenship of a particular state. Not only can people feel more or less affiliation with a state over time, the state itself can change in ways that make identification with it more or less attractive.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed on 14 September 2026 (Cardiff Agreement, 2026) between the leaders of Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and Sinn Féin – all of whom were holding positions of First Minister in their respective governments – was an indication that popular identification with the United Kingdom itself has declined in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There can be little doubt that this is a post-Brexit phenomenon. In Northern Ireland, there has been a notable change in national identification in the decade since the 2016 referendum. Those identifying as more or entirely British rather than Irish has not dramatically declined (39% in 2016; 35% in 2026) but there has a significant rise in strongly Irish identities. In 2016, 24 per cent identified as 'Irish not British'; in 2025, this had risen to 31 per cent, whereas 19 per cent identified as 'British not Irish' (see Figure 1). Perhaps contrary to expectations at the time of the Agreement, there has been no expansion in the proportion identifying as equally British and Irish.

Figure 1: Do you consider yourself British, Irish or both? (%, NILT 2016-2025)



Generational differences in this data are particularly striking. In 2025, 43 per cent of 18–24 year olds identified as 'Irish not British' compared with 25 per cent of those aged 65 or over. Younger people are less likely than older people to identify as more or entirely British: 3 in 10 of those aged under 45, compared with 4 in 10 of those aged 45 years or over. Around 4 in 10 under 45s identify as entirely Irish. This suggests something of a generational shift in national identity towards a more exclusive Irish identity, but this has not been accompanied by a dramatic decline in British identification.

Constitutional preference

As noted in our previous *Research Update* (Hayward and Rosher, 2025), support for Irish unification has risen in the past decade. Comparing NILT results on a hypothetical border poll in 2025 to 2017, support for remaining in the UK is down from 55 per cent to 45 per cent, with those opting for a united Ireland up from 22 per cent to 36 per cent. Support for Irish unity has stabilised after large increases since 2020, while support for remaining in the UK remains higher but substantially lower than a decade ago. As such, the gap in constitutional preference remains, but it is far smaller than it was prior to the Brexit referendum.

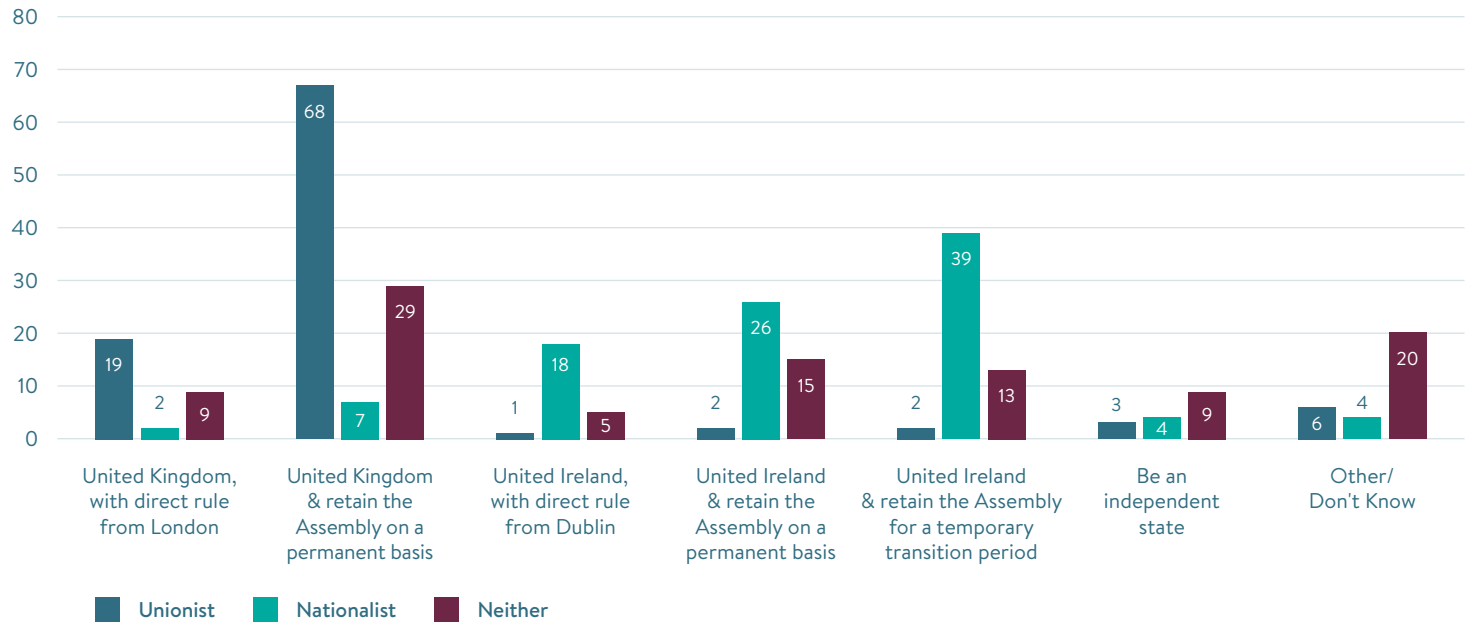
Indeed, since 2016, NILT has asked whether Brexit makes a united Ireland more or less likely. The proportion in 2025 saying Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely has fallen from the highs reached in the years after the UK left the EU: from 62 per cent in 2023 to 55 per cent in 2025. Among unionists – most of whom voted Leave – 52 per cent in 2023 thought that Brexit had made a united Ireland more likely; this fell to 37 per cent in 2025.

We can only speculate on what has caused this change, but we know that the unique post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland (i.e. the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland) were the focus of vehement unionist protests in 2021-23, based on concern for the implications for UK union. The Windsor Framework to soften the impact of the Protocol was agreed in 2023, followed by the *Safeguarding the Union* deal between the then-UK Government and DUP, which saw the party lift its veto on the functioning of the Assembly and Executive. What we can say from this is that public views on the likelihood of Irish unification were more intense when UK-EU (and, with them, British-Irish) relations were fraught and the devolved institutions were not functioning.

The functioning of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive turns out to be important in other ways too. The 2025 survey asked a new question on constitutional preferences, exploring support for different options for Northern Ireland. From this we find that 44 per cent would support staying in the UK (10% direct rule, 34% with the NI Assembly) and 39 per cent would support Irish unification (8% direct rule from Dublin, 17% with the NI Assembly for a temporary transition period, 14% with the NI Assembly permanently in place). This means that almost half of respondents (48%) would like a constitutional future in which the Assembly is permanently retained, and almost two thirds (65%) would like it to be there on at least a temporary basis. This is a clear indication that, in public opinion, functioning, devolved institutions are key to the future of Northern Ireland, regardless of constitutional status.

Looking more closely, we see that a clear majority of unionists, nationalists and 'neithers' would like to retain the NI Assembly on at least a temporary basis (Figure 2). We note that there is support for every option from 'neithers', which indicates that as a group they really are non-aligned on the constitutional question. As a general rule, people appear significantly more comfortable with constitutional change when accompanied by continued local self-government. This is particularly notable among nationalists, among whom the most popular option (39%) is a united Ireland with a transition period in which the Assembly continues to function. Thus, even those who do not think Northern Ireland should exist at all see the devolved institutions as serving an important purpose.

Figure 2: Preference for long-term policy for Northern Ireland (%, NILT 2025)

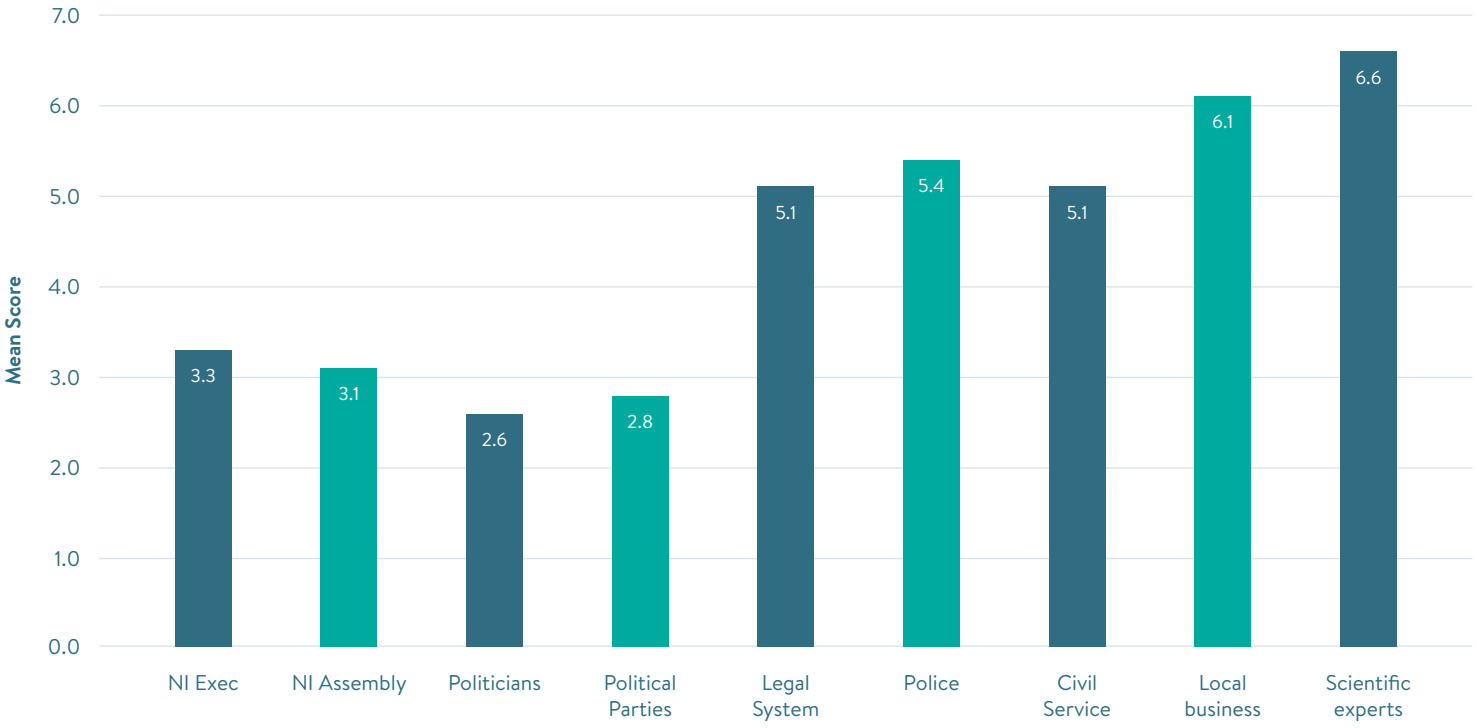


Trust

Given that the NI Assembly features in the political future of the region as most people would envisage it, levels of trust in the institution today are particularly important. NILT respondents were asked how much trust they have in a range of political and social institutions and actors, using a scale of 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (trust completely). These questions were based on those asked within the 2022 and 2023 European Social Survey (ESS) across a range of European countries, and the 2025 CSO Trust Survey in Ireland.

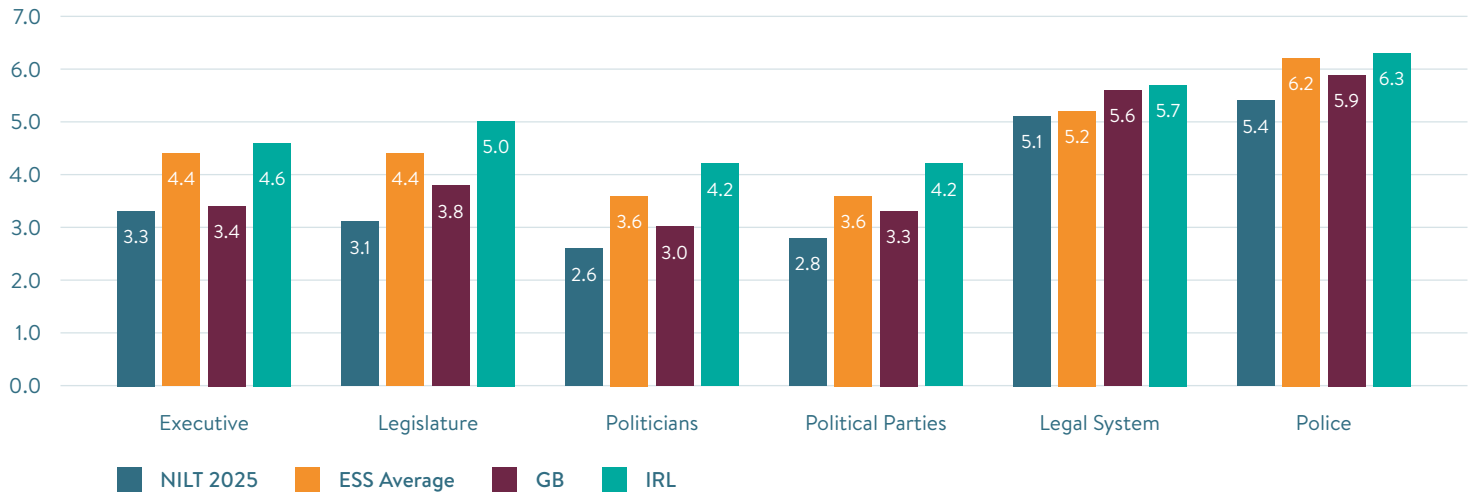
Figure 3 presents the mean score for each institution and actor, with higher values representing higher levels of trust. It shows that NILT respondents have low levels of confidence in political institutions and actors, including the Assembly. It is not that the Northern Ireland public has low levels of trust across the board, however. It is notable that levels of trust in other social institutions and authorities (for example, scientific experts) are significantly higher than those associated with politics.

Figure 3: Trust in institutions and actors (Mean scores excluding "don't know", NILT 2025)



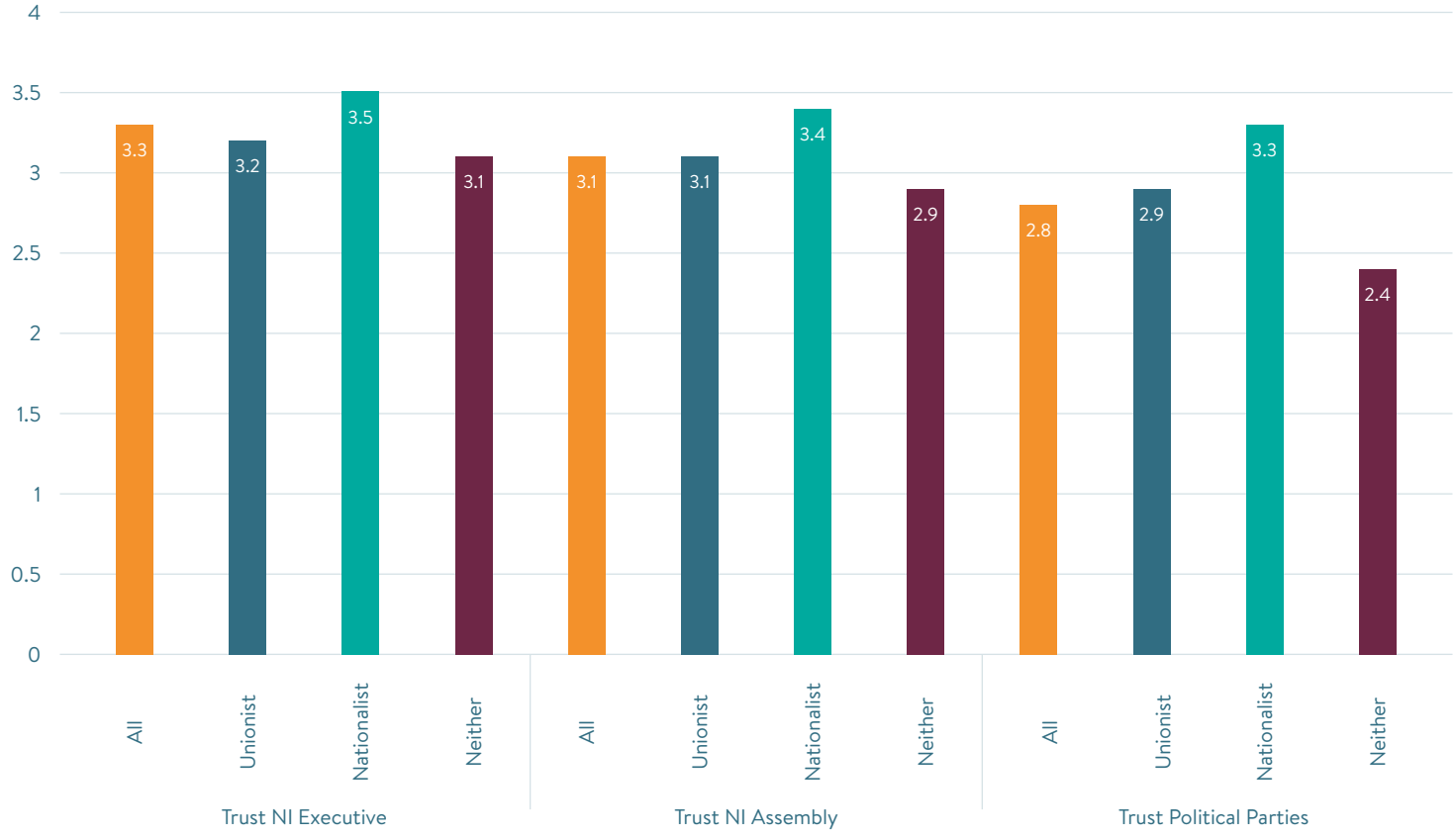
Trust in politicians in Northern Ireland (2.6) is strikingly low – lower, indeed, than in all European countries other than Ukraine, Croatia and Bulgaria, and significantly lower than in Ireland (4.2) or Great Britain (3.1). Indeed, when we compare levels of trust in political institutions in Northern Ireland to those elsewhere, we might note that, while lower than the average across some thirty European countries (in the European Social Survey, 2023), levels of trust in Great Britain (GB) are also very low (Figure 4). In contrast, levels of trust in Ireland are higher than the European average. Given that politicians and political parties will shape Northern Ireland's future, and that most respondents would like to see the Executive and Assembly play a part in that future too, these are worrying findings.

Figure 4: Trust in institutions and actors by country (Mean scores excluding "don't know", NILT, ESS and CSO)



Political distrust in Northern Ireland is not confined to one community tradition but appears to be a broader societal phenomenon. However, looking more closely, it is clear that those who identify as 'neither' unionist nor nationalist have the lowest levels of trust in political institutions in Northern Ireland (Figure 5). This is perhaps not surprising given that the institutions are designed to accommodate a unionist/nationalist binary. But what may be surprising to some is that the community that has most trust in the devolved institutions is nationalist. This finding, however, is perhaps related to the fact that nationalists have the highest level of trust in political parties whereas those who are 'neither' have the lowest levels of trust in parties (Figure 5). The challenge for Northern Ireland's political present, with an eye to its future, is not just maintaining the engagement of nationalists or balancing unionist and nationalist preferences but securing the confidence of those who do not identify with either tradition.

Figure 5: Trust in institutions and actors by political identity (Mean scores excluding "don't know", NILT 2025)



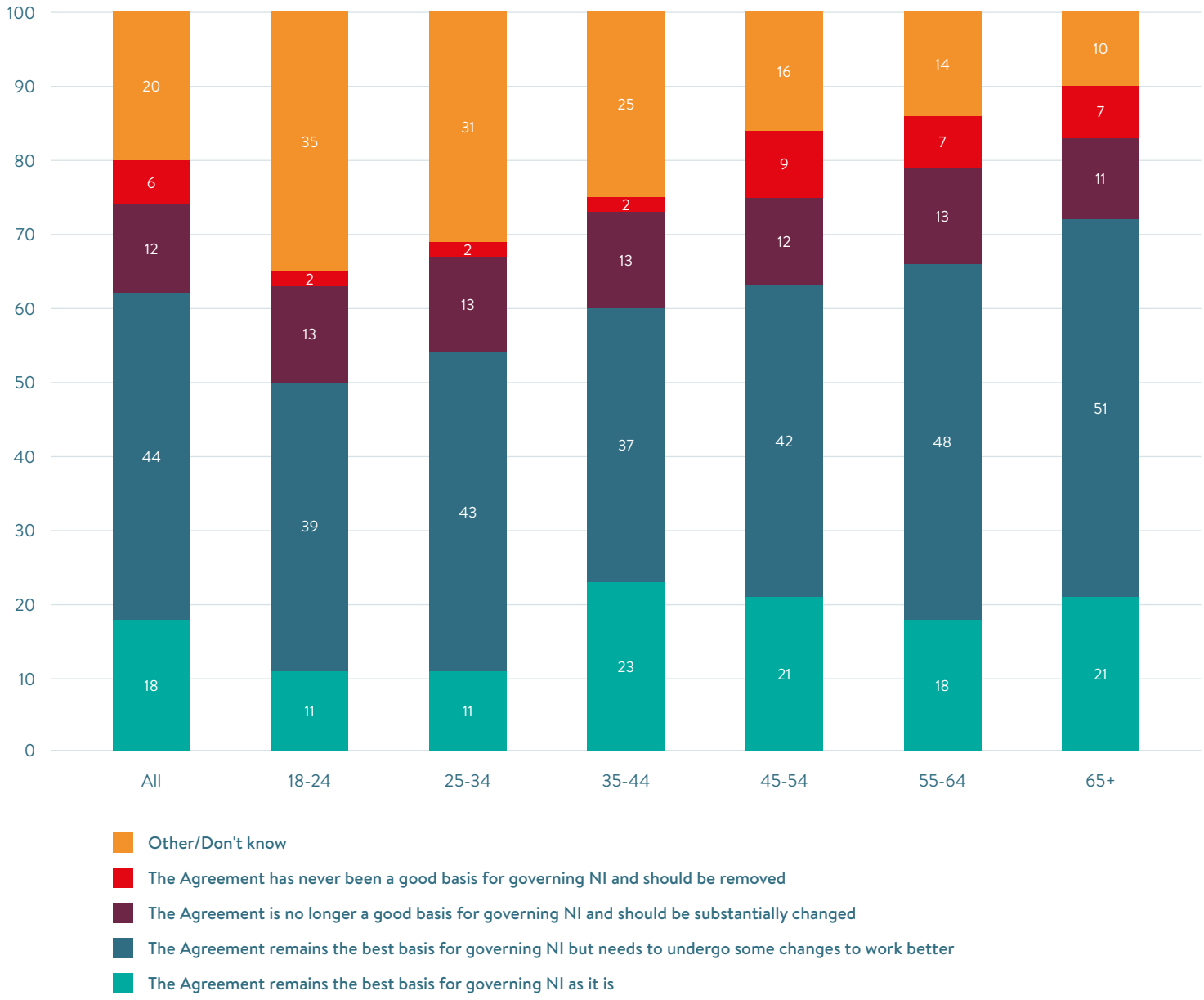
Agreement

The challenge of building trust in institutions that could be an essential focus of common interest in the midst – or lack – of constitutional change is inseparable from the framework of the 1998 Agreement. Within the 2025 NILT survey, we see steady majority support for the Agreement as the best basis for governing Northern Ireland (including 79% of nationalists and 56% of unionists). However, there has been significant decline since 2019 in the proportion thinking that it is good as it is (33% in 2019, down to 18% in 2025), with 44 per cent now thinking it needs some changes to work better.

Looking more closely at the 2025 results, we see that there are differences between the generations in these attitudes (Figure 6). These are not too surprising when we consider that all those under the age of 27 today were not born at the time of the Agreement, and those aged under 45 today were school age or younger in 1998. With that in mind, we note that almost all of those wanting the Agreement removed altogether are people who would have had a vote at the time of the 1998 Agreement.

Looking at the younger generation, we note that they are less likely to think that the Agreement is fine as it is than those aged 35 years or over. We also see that a majority of the younger cohort think that the Agreement is the best basis for governing Northern Ireland, but this is a slimmer majority than for the older generations. This is not because of a growth in scepticism towards it, but rather the simple fact that they admit that they 'Don't Know'. Such a lack of knowledge and sense of ownership of the Agreement among the younger generation is a concern when it comes to the challenge of securing the political engagement of this generation.

Figure 6: Views about the 1998 Agreement by age group (%, NILT 2025)



Conclusion

Taken together, these findings suggest that Northern Ireland is experiencing change in constitutional preferences and political identities that has been affected by the post-Brexit conditions. However, the change is neither rapid nor radical. It is occurring alongside continued support for power-sharing institutions and a large middle ground that remains outside traditional unionist–nationalist identities and is non-aligned on the constitutional question. Of particular interest is that, regardless of their political identity or constitutional preference, people value the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland – even as they have very low levels of trust in them. This indicates that there appears to be a distinction between support for the *idea* of devolved institutions and approval of their *actual* performance.

This no doubt relates to the fact that the most people want to see some changes to the Agreement to make it work better. People in Northern Ireland continue to see the 1998 Agreement as having established the necessary basis for governing Northern Ireland but they have worryingly little confidence in the political actors operating within that system. In these results we see a remarkably clear message coming from NILT respondents as to the political future of Northern Ireland: it needs to include devolved institutions, in accordance with the framework of the Agreement, but these need to be reformed to reflect a society which is more Irish and less divided.

Key findings:

- Irish identity, particularly exclusive Irish identity, is growing, especially among younger generations.
- The 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement retains strong support, but there is increasing demand for reform.
- Younger people generally support the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement but are more likely to feel disconnected from it than older generations.
- Support for Northern Ireland remaining in the UK (45%) continues to exceed support for a united Ireland (36%) although the gap between these positions has narrowed considerably in the past decade, from 33 percentage points to 9.
- There is broad support for devolved self-government, with most respondents favouring a continuing role for the Northern Ireland Assembly and very little support for direct rule from London or Dublin.
- Nationalists are more open to transition than immediate constitutional change. Of a range of options offered, the most popular (39%) among nationalists is a united Ireland with a transitional period during which the Assembly continues to operate.
- While the devolved political institutions are widely valued in principle, trust in their performance remains low – and significantly lower than average levels of trust in parliaments and governments in Europe.
- Trust in the Assembly and Executive is lowest among those who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist, and highest among nationalists.

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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 2025, 1,244 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

The results are presented here with a margin of error of +/- 2.8 per cent.

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