

## ***What do voters in Northern Ireland think about the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland?***

David Phinnemore, Katy Hayward, Lisa Whitten and Billy Melo Araujo

As part of a three-year ESRC-funded research project on the *Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland*, a series of regular surveys has been commissioned to ‘temperature test’ voter attitudes on a range of issues relating to Brexit, the Protocol, and their implications for Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

The surveys are being conducted quarterly during 2021-2023 by [LucidTalk](#) using its online Northern Ireland Opinion Panel.<sup>2</sup> This means that the survey is not based on systematic random sampling across Northern Ireland (NI) society. Instead, it is a reliable indicator of the opinion of NI voters across the spectrum, who take an interest in current affairs and politics, and who are likely to exercise their right to vote. From the sample of 1,500 responses, the results of the first survey presented here are weighted to be representative of the adult population of Northern Ireland (e.g. by gender, party support).

### **The context for this poll**

This second survey was undertaken on 11-14 June 2021, so six months into the post-transition period of Brexit and three months after the [first survey](#) in March 2021. Much has happened in this time to shape the context for this poll.

It took place two months after the [violent protests](#) in Belfast in early April 2021, since when public [protests](#) against the Protocol have become fairly regular occurrences in some largely unionist areas. News reports over these three months in Northern Ireland have frequently centred on the Protocol and tensions in UK-EU relations on the matter. At the time the poll was taken, the issue of the Protocol featured in global coverage of the [G7 summit](#) in Cornwall (11-13 June 2021) and British newspapers speculated about a UK-EU [‘sausage war’](#) if matters weren’t resolved.

The co-chairs of the UK-EU Joint Committee overseeing the Protocol (Lord Frost and European Commission Vice-President Šefčovič) are the key actors in this high-level drama. They have had one [informal](#) meeting (15 April 2021) and one [formal](#) meeting (09 June 2021) which concluded without a joint statement being issued.

Meanwhile, UK and EU officials have continued to seek [resolutions](#) to the challenges being faced with the implementation of the Protocol. The survey was undertaken prior, however, to the UK government’s [request](#) (16 June) to the European Commission for a three-month extension to the grace period covering meat products.

The survey also took place following the UK government’s formal [response](#) to the European Commission’s notice of legal action from 15 March 2021, although no further EU action has been taken. [Judicial review](#) proceedings challenging the Protocol have also been ongoing.

Survey participants were asked six sets of questions and offered the opportunity to provide written comments in response to the poll. The questions covered attitudes towards Brexit and the Protocol, assessments of the impact of the Protocol, degrees of concern about related matters, and trust in different actors to manage it.

The survey also asked participants how they would like their MLAs to vote in the ‘democratic consent vote’ on the Protocol that will be held by the NI Assembly at the end of 2024. A final section included questions on various issues, including whether the institutions established by the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement should play a greater role in overseeing the Protocol’s operation.

**Attitudes to Brexit and the Protocol**

The consistency in opinions on Brexit and the Protocol from the first of our temperature testing polls in March and this one in June is quite remarkable.

There has been negligible (<2%) movement in the results from some of the core questions (Figure 1). Seven out of ten respondents still claim a ‘good understanding’ of the Protocol, despite the fact that (also as in March) only four out of ten think that reliable information on the subject is available.

The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland seeks to ‘address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland’ (Article 1(3)). That ‘particular arrangements’ for Northern Ireland are needed to manage the effects of Brexit is a view shared by two-thirds (67%) of respondents, with 45% strongly of this view – this too was the case in the last poll. Also as in March, more than a third of those surveyed still think that Brexit is on balance ‘a good thing for the UK’ (37%), whilst a clear majority (57%) disagree or disagree strongly.

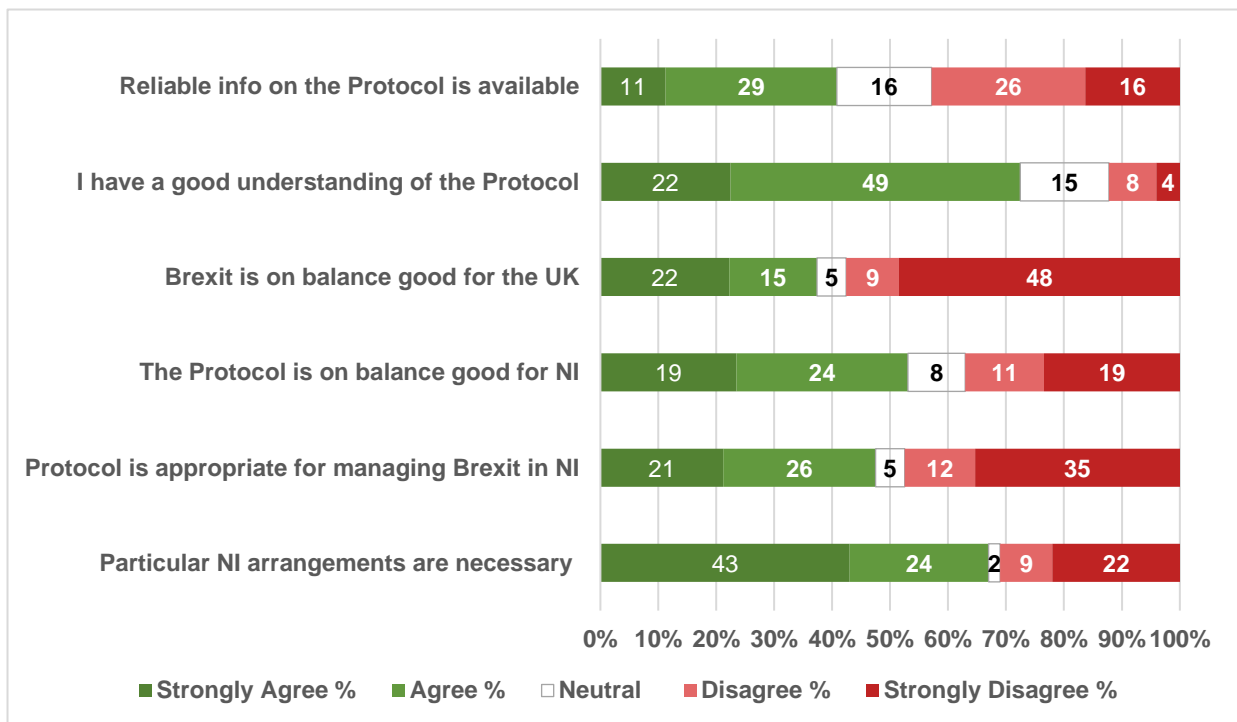


Figure 1. Opinion of Brexit and the Protocol

Opinion on the Protocol itself remains more evenly split. When asked whether the Protocol ‘provides appropriate means for managing the effects of Brexit on Northern Ireland’, 47% agree and 47% disagree overall. These results reflect a small move from the undecideds to the ‘disagree’ camp (up by four percentage points from March). Similarly, on the matter of whether the Protocol is on balance ‘a good thing’ for Northern Ireland, there has been a four-percentage point increase in ‘disagree’ response (48%). Those agreeing remained unchanged at (43%).

This is despite the fact that there has been an increased majority (57% – up from 50% in March) of respondents thinking that the Protocol provides Northern Ireland with a ‘unique set of post-Brexit economic opportunities compared to the rest of the UK which if exploited could benefit Northern Ireland’. In both surveys, one third of respondents disagreed with the proposition.

### Views on impact of the Protocol

Although views on whether the Protocol is ‘on balance a good thing’ are almost evenly split, a substantial majority of respondents currently view the Protocol to have a negative impact on a range of matters (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, opinions have shifted in a positive direction on some topics since March. In the first poll, no more than a third of respondents saw the *current* impact of the Protocol to be positive in relation to the topics about which we asked. In June 2021, the figures had increased to or towards 40% support in terms of the Protocol’s impact on the economy of Northern Ireland, protecting the 1998 Agreement, and north-south cooperation on the island of Ireland.

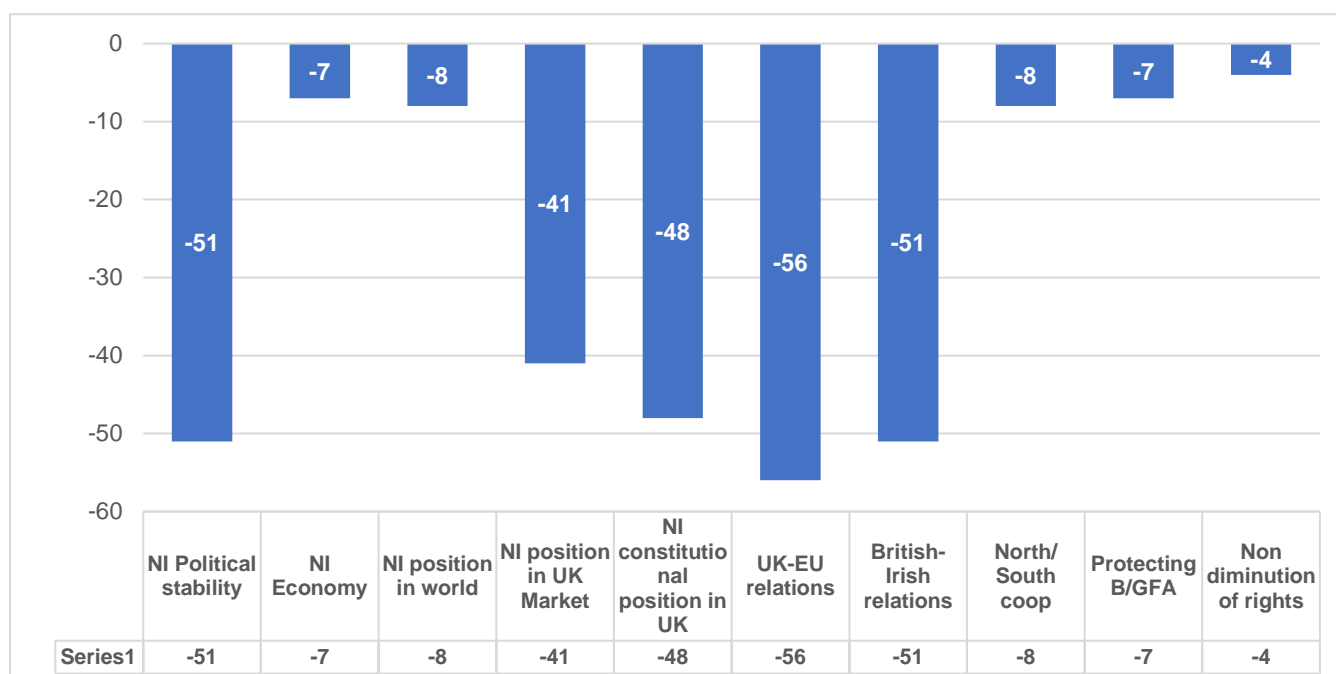


Figure 2. Overall assessment of the current impact of the Protocol (agree minus disagree)

However, for all topics, a majority see negative impacts, and in some cases the majority is considerable. More than two thirds continue to see the Protocol impacting negatively on political stability in Northern Ireland (68%). The two topics on which the overall assessment of the Protocol's impact is seen to have worsened are British-Irish relations and UK-EU relations (seven out of ten see this impact as negative or strongly negative).

For certain issues – Northern Ireland's position in the world, north-south cooperation on the island of Ireland, the economy of Northern Ireland, and the 1998 Agreement – respondents' views of the current impact of the Protocol are less starkly negative.

One new topic introduced in this survey was the impact of the Protocol on ensuring 'no diminution' of individual rights as set out in the 1998 Agreement. Opinion here was almost evenly split: 39% positive, 43% negative.

Views expressed in the written comments again reveal a large number of respondents characterising the Protocol as necessary and/or beneficial provided it can be depoliticised and implemented rationally.<sup>3</sup>

"I believe the protocol is an unfortunate but necessary outworking of Brexit. In principle it could be OK but there needs to be lots of mitigations to make it nearly invisible otherwise it could create political instability."

"It should be made clear that very few people really want the protocol but it's necessary because of Brexit"

The next largest set of comments reflects more negative views on the Protocol and why it exists, often accompanied with calls for its removal or replacement. Some of these concerns are strongly expressed.

"The Protocol is destroying the economy of Northern Ireland, its place in the UK and the fabric of the UK in general."

"The Protocol was not voted on. It was imposed on Northern Ireland and would leave us without representation to a place which makes laws for us. And makes me a second-class UK citizen in the UK. Scrap the Protocol."

"It is outrageous that a border has been forced on us without a vote between constituent parts of the UK."

### **Concerns regarding Brexit and the Protocol**

With the UK outside the EU's customs union and single market since 1 January 2021, and the Protocol in force, the first six months of 2021 have seen various concerns voiced regarding the effects of Brexit and the Protocol. The survey results indicate a clear majority of respondents being concerned or very concerned about the effects of Brexit and/or the Protocol on Northern Ireland, based on their current experience (Figure 3). More people are concerned about the cost of certain products (69%) and the choice of products for consumers (61%) than the existence of checks and controls on goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain. These figures are slightly lower than in March 2021, but only by 2-3 percentage points.

An even greater proportion of respondents remain concerned or very concerned about Northern Ireland's voice being heard on the implementation of the Protocol (73%), about the public availability of clear and detailed information on the Protocol (73%), and about

scrutiny of the UK-EU bodies taking decisions on its implementation (71%). These results are almost exactly the same as in the first poll.

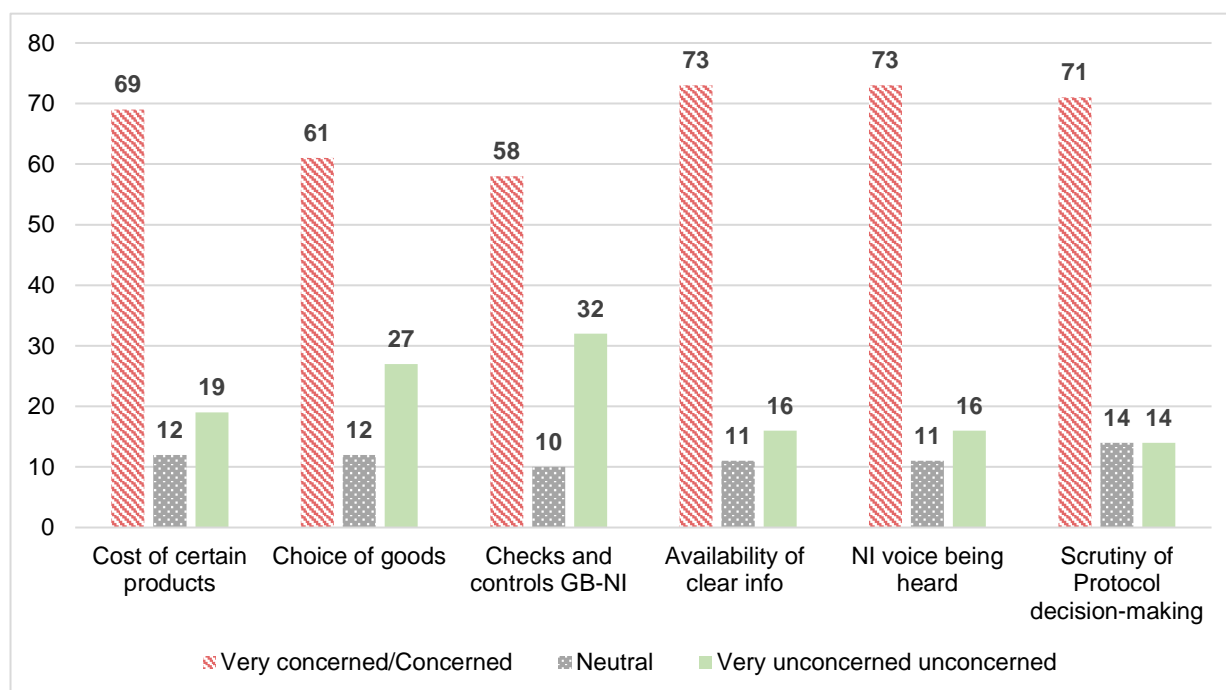


Figure 3. Concerns about Brexit and the Protocol

In the written comments, there are various concerns about the quality of information and debate on the Protocol. Several respondents complain about the politicisation of the Protocol.

“Truthfully, there isn't enough reliable, unbiased information without politicising the protocol into an orange or green issue.”

“I am deeply concerned that the protocol is being misrepresented in the British media and that the benefits (economic and security) are not being exploited fully.

“The protocol is the least worst outcome for NI following Brexit. Its negatives are being heavily overplayed and its positives downplayed by a number of political parties for purely political motives.”

### Trust to manage the interests of Northern Ireland *vis-à-vis* the Protocol

The adoption of the Protocol and its implementation involves a range of actors. As with the last poll, the only group that is trusted by a majority (56%) to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol are NI business representatives.

Indeed, trust among survey respondents in the ability of all other actors to manage the interests of Northern Ireland in respect of the Protocol remains strikingly low (Figure 4). This was particularly true of the UK government in March 2021 and the results have not changed this time round. More than four-fifths of respondents (86%) continue to distrust the UK government (and 53% distrust it a lot).

By contrast, distrust of the European Commission/EU is significantly lower at 48%, with two-fifths of respondents (40%) indicating trust in the European Commission/EU. The levels of distrust (48%) and trust (38%) in the Irish government are broadly similar. Trust in the NI Executive to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol stands at just 17%. These figures are just about the same as in the first poll. However, distrust of the NI Executive has fallen from 63% in March to 52% in June, with an increase in respondents (almost a third) saying they are neutral or don't know.

In this poll we asked about levels of trust/distrust in the five political parties that form the NI executive. Those trusted most are the Alliance Party (43%) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) (42%). Both are distrusted to the same degree. Almost a third of respondents trust Sinn Féin (31%) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) (32%), but levels of distrust are markedly higher for Sinn Féin (56%) than the UUP (39%). Perhaps a most interesting finding for the UUP is quite how many respondents (three out of ten) are neutral towards the party. More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) say they distrust the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (56% distrust the DUP a lot – a higher figure than for even the UK government (53%)); overall trust of the DUP sits at 13% (compared to 6% for the UK government).

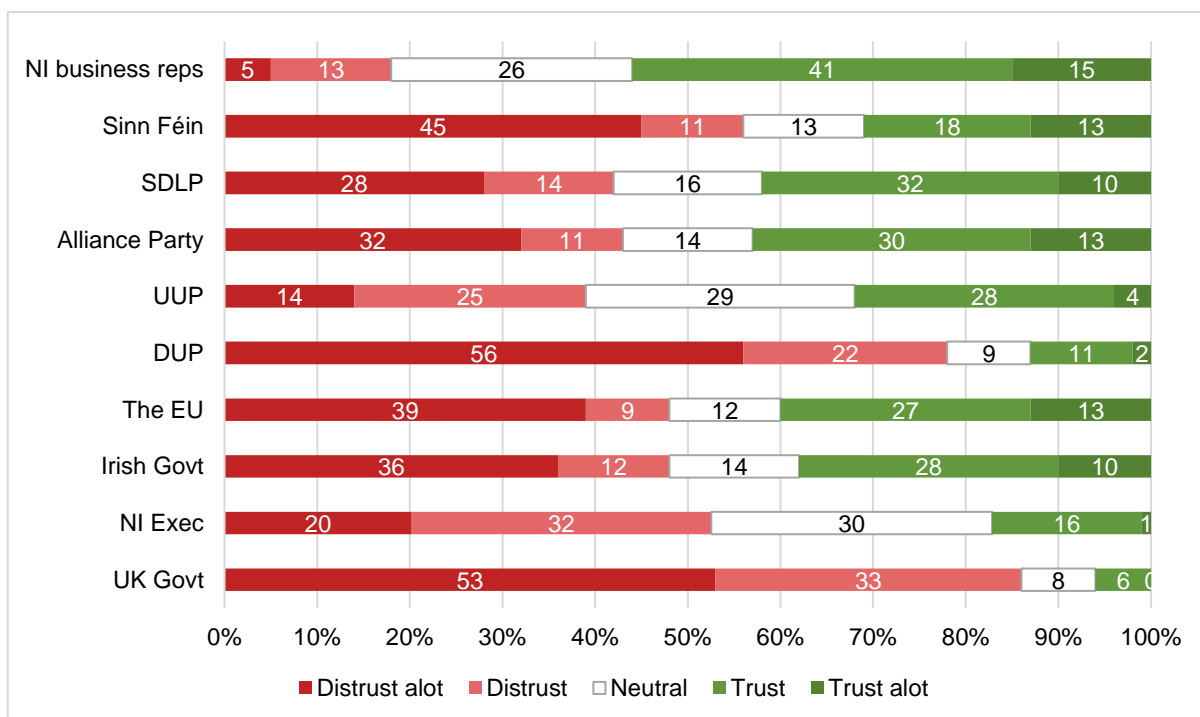


Figure 4. Levels of trust/distrust of actors to manage NI interests in the Protocol

The comments section reveals significant criticism of the UK government, much of it from unionist/pro-Leave respondents with several focusing on its enacting of a ‘hard’ Brexit and its apparent disregard for the interests of Northern Ireland. Some put the blame for the effects and problems with the Protocol on the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

“Protocol is direct result of the Brexit stance of UK government. If not in customs union and single market this is the result”

“PM Johnson is entirely to blame for the insecurity felt by unionists due to his haste to get a hard Brexit without doing any preparation for implementation of the NI protocol”

There are also concerns at the UK government’s handling of the Protocol:

“It is clear that UK government were well aware of the problems which would arise and thought that they could sign the agreement and renege on it after, while blaming EU. Behaviour of Johnson, Gove and Frost et al makes me ashamed to be British”

“The UK government only agreed to the protocol to get Brexit through, in the hope they could wriggle out of the obligations at a later date. The UK government has shown little or no regard for NI, which is shameful”

And with regard to the political parties in Northern Ireland, criticism of the DUP is particularly prevalent.

“DUP need to be called out every time they raise NI Protocol concerns. They campaigned for Brexit, and they dismissed May’s previous deal. Leave voters claimed they knew what they were voting for. This is a result of Brexit.”

### Democratic consent

The future of core provisions of the Protocol – those relating primarily to the movement of goods (i.e. Articles 5-10) – is subject to the democratic consent of the members of the NI Assembly (MLAs) as frequently as every four years. A first vote will take place in November/December 2024.

Most respondents (91%) have a view on how they wish MLAs to vote: 46% in favour of the continued application of Articles 5-10 and 45% against (Figure 5). The figures in March 2021 were 47% and 42% respectively.

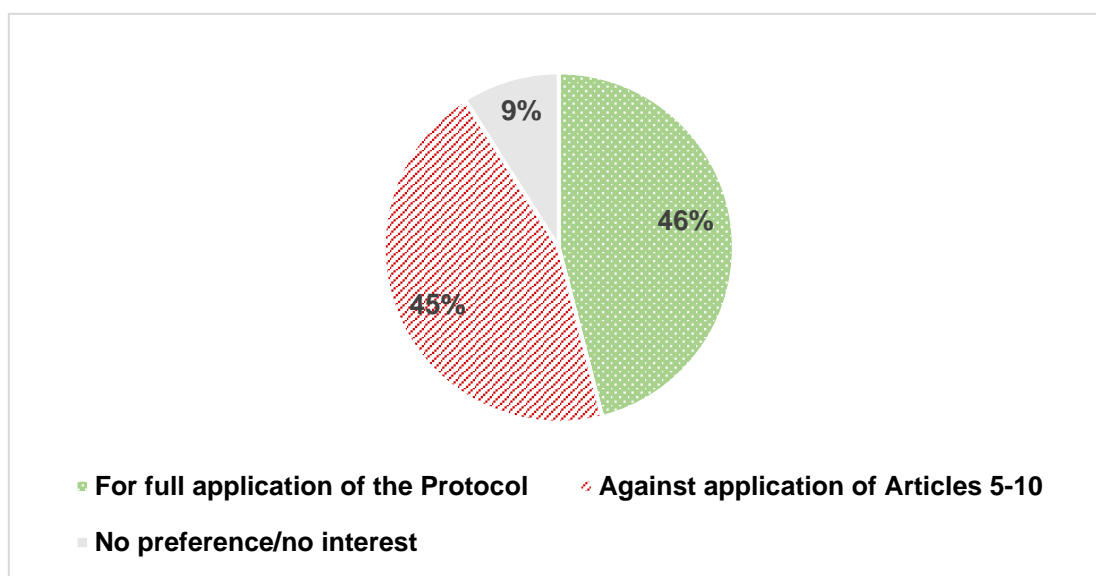


Figure 5. How voters would like their MLAs to vote on the Protocol in 2024



Most respondents say they will vote in the next NI Assembly election (expected in 2022) for candidates who share their view. In results almost identical to the last poll, 40% say they will only vote for candidates in favour of the continued application of Articles 5-10 of the Protocol; 38% say they will only vote for candidates opposed to its continued application. Of those who want their MLAs to oppose the Protocol, more than two thirds (68%) want it removed in its entirety (although this is not possible under the terms of the consent vote).

There is a high level of determination among respondents to use their votes in the next NI Assembly election to vote for MLAs who share their view on the Protocol. 41% are willing to vote for different candidates to the ones they voted for in 2017 to ensure they vote for candidates who will vote in accordance with their view on the Protocol. The willingness is stronger (29%) among opponents of the Protocol compared to those if supportive of it (12%). Only 24% of respondents indicated that a candidate's position in the next NI Assembly election is irrelevant to them.

### **Options for the future**

We asked questions regarding the future of the Protocol. The responses to these reveal deep divisions in Northern Ireland on the subject. As noted, a prominent concern is the extent of the increased formalities, checks and controls on trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. One way to reduce these would be for the UK to agree to regulatory alignment with the EU. A majority (57%, as in March 2021) of respondents continues to support such a move, although more than a third (36%, up from 24% in March 2021) oppose such an option.

We also asked whether formalities, checks and controls should be moved from ports and airports in Northern Ireland to the land border between the UK and Ireland. A slight majority (51%) disagreed; more than a third of respondents (38%) agreed that they should be moved to the land border.

Two further questions asked whether institutions established by the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement should be given a greater role in overseeing the operation of the Protocol. Respondents agree more than they disagree with giving a greater role to the North-South Ministerial Council (46% and 40% respectively) with slightly lower figures for the 'east-west' institutions (i.e. the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference) (42% and 34%) respectively.

We also asked whether the UK minister (David Frost) and the European Commissioner (Maroš Šefčovič) should be invited to give evidence on a regular basis (e.g. every six months) on the implementation of the Protocol to a Committee of the NI Assembly. More than two-thirds of respondents (67%) agree. Only 14% disagree.

A final question asked whether it is too early to take a definitive position on the merits or otherwise of the Protocol. A majority (55%) disagree; only a third (29%) agree.

As with the previous poll in March, a significant number of comments were made about the possibility of a 'border poll'. Again, these all assume that Brexit and/or the Protocol make it likely to happen, and to happen more quickly than otherwise.



## Key Findings

- Opinions with respect to the Protocol and its impact and implementation remain essentially unchanged in June 2021 compared to March 2021. This suggests that the divisions over it are fairly entrenched even six months in.
- After six months of implementation, the overall assessment of the economic and political impact of the Protocol among NI voters is predominantly negative.
- A clear majority of NI voters, as represented in this survey, have concerns about the current impact of the Protocol across a range of areas.
- Most of our survey respondents (67%) continue believe that particular arrangements for Northern Ireland are necessary to manage the impact of Brexit, but they are evenly split as to whether the Protocol is the appropriate means for this task.
- There remain very high levels of distrust of those involved in managing the Protocol in Northern Ireland, most particularly so for the UK government. The Irish government and the European Commission/EU also do not have the trust of most NI voters on the Protocol.
- Levels of trust in political parties that form the NI Executive to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol varies. The Alliance Party and the SDLP are equally distrusted as they are trusted. Sinn Féin and the UUP are trusted by three in ten voters, but distrust in Sinn Féin is much greater. Almost four in every five voters distrust the DUP on this issue.
- NI business representatives continue to be the only actors who enjoy the trust of a majority of voters in Northern Ireland when it comes to managing NI interests with respect to the Protocol.
- A majority of our respondents continue to agree that the UK should align more closely with EU rules to reduce formalities, checks and controls on trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
- Almost two-fifths of voters (38%) support moving formalities, checks and controls from ports and airports in Northern Ireland to the land border between the UK and Ireland. A majority (51%) disagree.
- Respondents are almost evenly split on whether their MLAs should vote in favour of (46%) or against (45%) the continued application of the Protocol in the 2024 'democratic consent'.
- A clear majority (67%) support the idea of David Frost and Maroš Šefčovič giving evidence on the implementation of the Protocol regularly to a Committee of the NI Assembly.
- There is support for the North-South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference being given a greater role in overseeing the operation of the Protocol.

## Authors

David Phinnemore, Professor of European Politics (QUB)  
 Katy Hayward, Professor of Political Sociology (QUB) and Senior Fellow, *UK in a Changing Europe*  
 Lisa Whitten, Research Fellow (QUB)  
 Billy Melo Araujo, Senior Lecturer in EU and International Economic Law (QUB)

- <sup>1</sup> The project - *Governance for 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland* – is part of the [Governance after Brexit](#) (Phase II) programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).
- <sup>2</sup> Polling was carried out by Belfast-based polling and market research company [LucidTalk](#) through its online *Northern Ireland (NI) Opinion Panel*. This panel has over 13,000 members and is regularly polled and surveyed to obtain views and opinions on a range of issues relating to Northern Ireland. This panel is balanced by gender, age-group, area of residence, and community background. A data auditing process was carried out to ensure that all completed poll surveys were genuinely 'one person, one vote' returns. The base dataset was then weighted by community and other demographic measurements to reflect the demographic composition of Northern Ireland. All results presented are accurate to a margin of error of +/-2.3% at 95% confidence.
- <sup>3</sup> A summary of the qualitative comments received in the open-text part of the survey:

Theme/Issue	Occurrences
Protocol viewed as necessary/inevitable/potentially beneficial/make it work	149
Protocol viewed negatively	116
Critical of DUP / Unionist politicians / PUL activists	115
Critical of UK Government/UK Prime Minister or Great Britain	91
Lack of information / misinformation	87
Brexit as mess / folly / viewed negatively	80
Scrap the Protocol / Irish Sea Border / have hard land border	77
Brexit, not Protocol as cause of disruption	58
Lack of full NI representation / consent	53
Critical of EU and/or EU approach to implementing the Protocol	45
Protocol contrary to BA/GFA	32
UK as a whole ought to Leave EU	25
[referendum on] United Ireland more likely/desirable due to Protocol/Brexit	25
Protocol needs to be changed	23
Critical of EU/Ireland for 'using' Northern Ireland	23
Fear of violence / threat to peace, 1998 Agreement or stability	22
Critical of NI politicians in general	13
Protocol as undemocratic	11
UK-EU alignment/SPS	11
Protocol as consequence of threats of violence	10
Critical of threats of violence	7
Brexit as a threat to 1998 Agreement	4

This report is produced as part of the ESRC-funded project on *Governance for 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland*. For further details see: [www.qub.ac.uk/sites/post-brexit-governance-ni](http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/post-brexit-governance-ni); and to follow the project on Twitter follow [@PostBrexitGovNI](https://twitter.com/PostBrexitGovNI)

