

## Political attitudes at a time of flux

Katy Hayward and Ben Rosher

2019 was a year of tremendous political significance in Northern Ireland in terms of what failed to happen. On-off talks between the DUP and Sinn Féin went nowhere and the Assembly Chamber in Stormont remained empty for a third year. Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement failed to be passed by the House of Commons and so the UK remained an EU member-state into the new year.

There can be little doubt that these two 'failures' contributed to the shape of the results of the three elections in 2019. The local and European elections in May 2019 brought noteworthy success for non-aligned (i.e. not officially Nationalist nor Unionist) parties, with Alliance taking the third seat in the European Parliament. The December general election called by Boris Johnson saw further gains for the Alliance Party – a 'remain' party in a Brexit election and a vocal critic of the failure of the two largest parties to form an Executive.

Yet the decisive victory for the Conservative Party under the mantra "Get Brexit done" meant that the growth of the 'centre ground' parties in Northern Ireland made no difference to Parliamentary arithmetic. The revised Withdrawal Agreement – and with it the contentious Protocol on Northern Ireland/Ireland – was passed and the UK left the EU on 31st January 2020. In the meantime, under the watch of UK Secretary of State Julian Smith and Irish Tánaiste (deputy Prime Minister) Simon Coveney, the parties got back around the table. The *New Decade, New Approach* document (9 January 2020) led to the Executive and Assembly getting up and running just in time to meet the biggest challenges facing the region for a generation. This Research Update

highlights public attitudes relevant to some of these political challenges, based on data from the 2019 *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey.

### The NILT survey

The fieldwork for the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey was conducted from September 2019 to the start of February 2020 and just over 1200 face-to-face interviews with adults across Northern Ireland were carried out. The primary purpose of NILT is to provide a time-series and a public record of how attitudes in Northern Ireland develop on a wide range of social policy issues. In 2019 we were able to expand the number of questions seeking to test attitudes on a range of political topics.

Although an election did occur during the period of fieldwork, it should be remembered that NILT is not an election study. The survey records general affiliation with a political party, but not how a respondent votes. Thus, when compared to election results, Sinn Féin supporters are under-represented and Alliance Party supporters are over-represented in our weighted sample and we should bear this in mind in our analysis. That said, given that we are considering political attitudes overall, we should note that 44% of respondents to NILT said that they did not consider themselves likely to support any of the main political parties in an election (and the abstention rates at the polls in 2019 ranged from 38-55%).

### Support for power-sharing

Given the absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) and Executive for almost three years prior to this

fieldwork, it is notable that devolution remains by far the preferred form of governance for Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is striking that the most popular view among all respondents (42%) (and among Catholic, Protestant and those of other backgrounds), is for the devolved administration to have more powers than it currently has (i.e. being responsible for all decision-making). The next highest level of support (16%) was for the arrangement as it currently exists, i.e. with the UK Government (UKG) retaining decision making powers over taxes, benefits, immigration, defence and foreign affairs). Only 10 per cent said that they would like to see the UK make all the decisions for Northern Ireland. Although the general trends of support are the same across communities, it is clear that respondents from a Catholic background are considerably more enthusiastic for giving powers to the devolved institutions (see **Figure 1**).

Support for devolved government perhaps tallies with the fact that there is generally strong support for the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement as the basis for it. When asked which statement came closest to their view, we see that over two thirds of respondents agree that the Agreement 'remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland' (see **Figure 2**). Interestingly, there is a significant difference between Catholic and Protestant respondents' answers to this question in two respects. The first is that Catholics are more likely to say that the Agreement should not be changed (39% compared to 31% Protestants). Secondly – and consistent with previous NILT survey results – Protestants are more likely than Catholics and others to say that the Agreement is no longer good or that it never has been (14% compared to 4% of Catholics). That said, almost exactly the same proportion (36%) of both Catholic and Protestant respondents say that the Agreement 'needs to undergo some changes to work better'. Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess how much consensus there would be about *what* those changes should be.

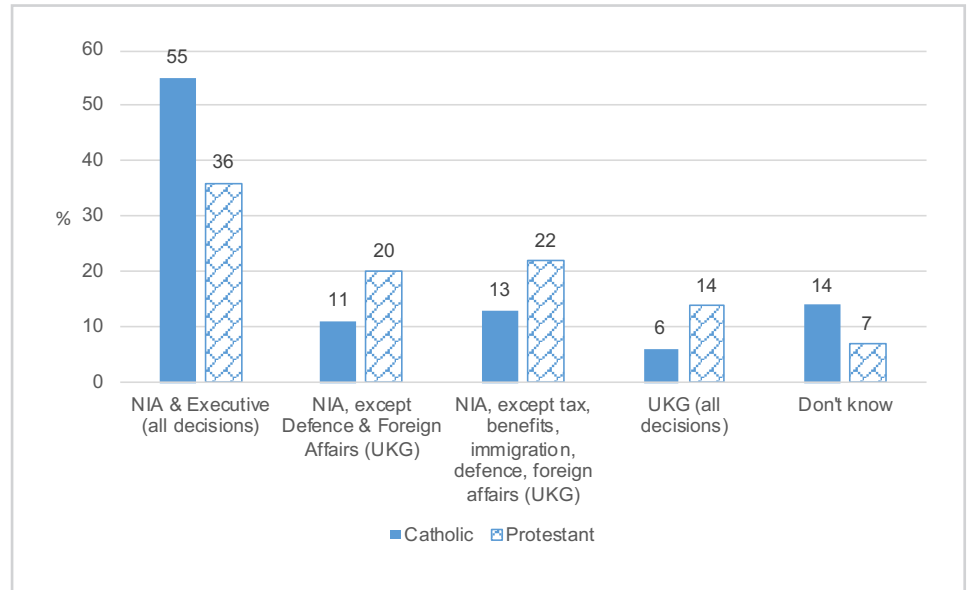
## The eroding middle ground?

The 1998 Agreement frames Northern Ireland as a society made up of two traditions or communities. One of the most striking findings from the 2018 NILT survey was that one out of two respondents claimed to be ‘Neither’ Unionist nor Nationalist. There has been a considerable change to this in 2019, with the proportion of ‘Neithers’ having dropped by over 10 points to 39 per cent. At face value, the difference seems to have come from a rise in those claiming a Unionist identity (up from 26% in 2018 to 33% in 2019). The proportion claiming a Nationalist identity has also risen, but by a much smaller degree (21% in 2018 to 23% in 2019).

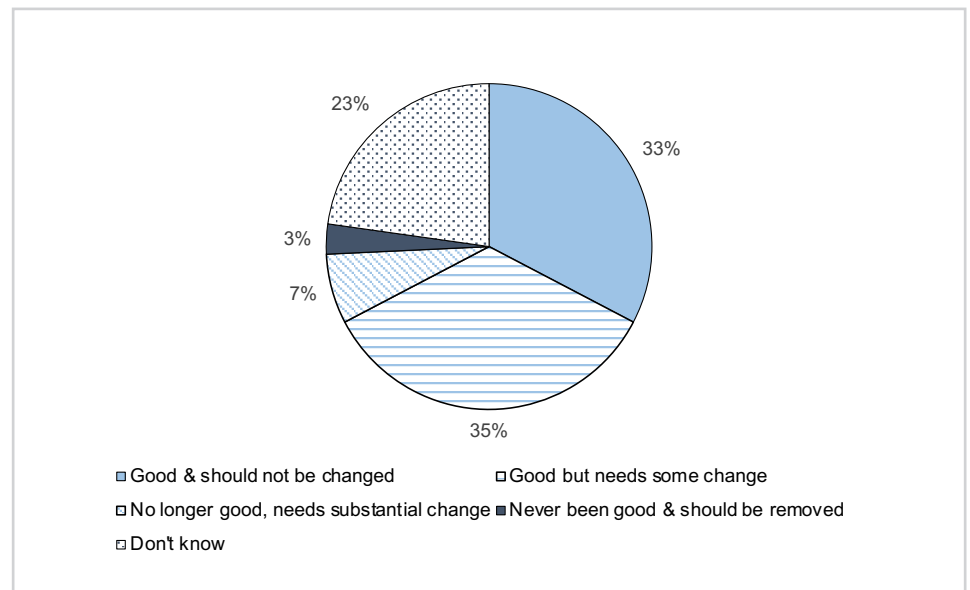
Closer analysis of these results, however, reveals interesting shifts within communities. Although they still make up the greatest proportion of those describing themselves as Neither, the proportion of Catholics describing themselves as Nationalist rose by nine points last year (59% compared to 50% in 2018). This figure is higher than it has been in any NILT survey since 2003. At the same time, whilst 55 per cent of Protestants described themselves as Unionist in 2018, this rose to 67 per cent in 2019. Whilst a striking change in the course of a year, 67 per cent is the same figure as in 2017, which suggests that 2018 was an unusual year rather than that we have seen a great move towards Unionism. Notably, whilst there have been shifts towards Nationalism and Unionism among Catholics and Protestants respectively, there has been little change among those of No Religion. This group has been fairly consistent over the past few years with up to around two thirds identifying as Neither and up to one quarter as Unionist (62% and 22% respectively in 2019).

When we look at the time series data since 1998, we see that the trajectory has been fairly steadily towards a growth of the ‘Neithers’ over this time (see **Figure 3**). It is too soon to tell whether 2018 or 2019 will prove to be the ‘exceptional’ year in this particular respect. The proportion of those identifying as ‘Neither’ has not been this low since 2005. One point to note is that, whereas in 2005, the proportion of those with a Unionist identity was the

**Figure 1: Who should make government decisions for Northern Ireland?**



**Figure 2: Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement as the basis for governing Northern Ireland**



greatest (then 40% compared to 35% Neither and 22% Nationalist), in 2019 those identifying as ‘Neither’ represent the largest proportion of respondents. So the key point remains: more people identify as ‘Neither’ than those identifying as either Unionist or Nationalist, but this proportion has shrunk considerably in the course of 2019.

If 2019 is not a ‘blip’ and we are seeing a ‘retrenchment’ of identity positions, it is worth considering the strength of feeling in which people hold these identities. Again, it is interesting to compare these results to those of 2018 (see **Figure 4**). What these seem to

indicate is that, although we have had a rise in the proportion of those identifying as Unionist, this increase seems not to mean a growing intensity of that Unionist identity. Instead, there are more saying that they ‘don’t know’ whether they would call themselves a ‘strong Unionist’, and the largest proportion of Unionists would say their Unionist identity is ‘fairly strong’. In contrast, among those who are Nationalist, there has been a significant strengthening of that identity in a short period of time. Indeed, those who are saying they are ‘very strong’ Nationalists is higher than it has ever been, and rose by 11 points in 2019 to 31

per cent. Overall, NILT data across the past 20 years indicates a fairly steady rise in the proportion of those describing themselves as ‘very strong’ Unionists and Nationalists.

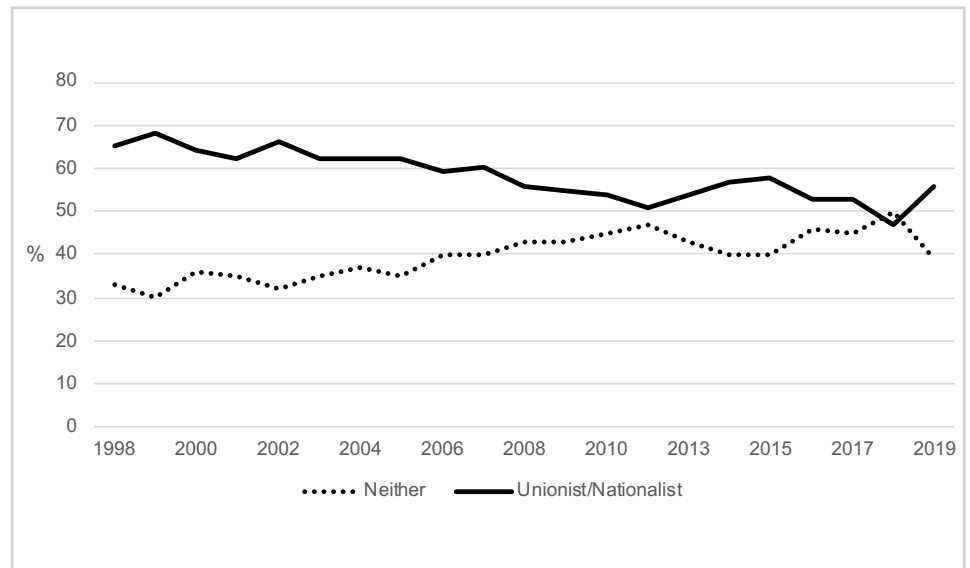
## The big picture

These trends are particularly interesting given that they are not reflected in any major shift in people’s views on the prospects for Irish unification. In response to the question as to whether a United Ireland (UI) is likely in the next 20 years, 30 per cent say it is, whilst 46 per cent say it is unlikely (almost exactly the same as in 2018). Unsurprisingly, there is a very strong difference between Unionists and Nationalists in their response to this question, with Nationalists being much more expectant of Irish unification (54% seeing it as likely compared to 20% of Unionists). But their expectancy does not match the scepticism of Unionists – 62 per cent of whom see Irish unification as unlikely in the next 20 years, as (notably) do 37 per cent of Nationalists.

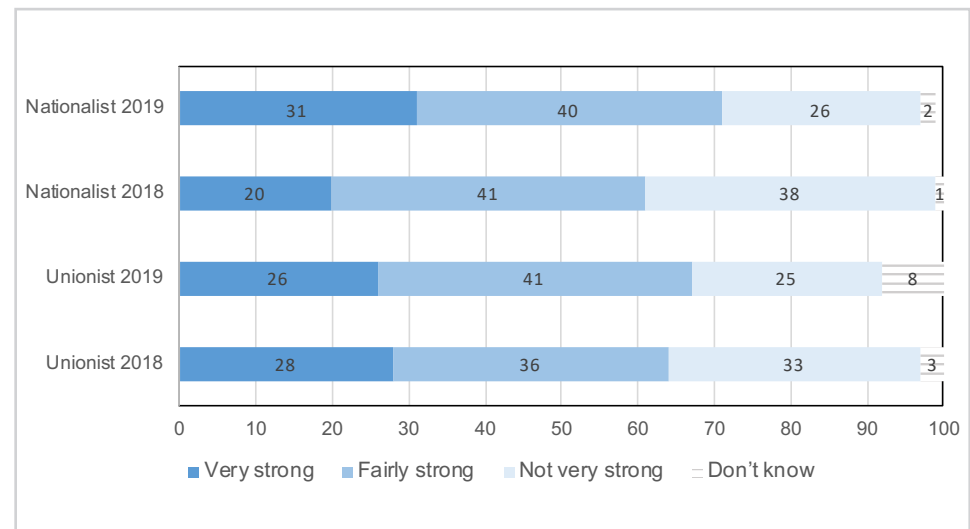
Given the significance of Brexit as a topic throughout 2019 and, with it, intense international focus on the topic of ‘avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland’, it is worth noting the difference in attitudes between Unionists and Nationalists when it comes to the impact of Brexit on views about Irish unification (see **Figure 5**). There are two interesting points of comparison with the results from 2018. Nationalists are significantly more in favour (69% up from 50%) and more expectant of Irish unity (77% up from 62%) than they were in 2018. Among Unionists, there have been less dramatic shifts since 2018; there is a slight increase (of around 7 points) in those answering ‘Don’t Know’ and in those reporting that Brexit has made ‘No Difference’ to their views with regards to both the likelihood and favourability of Irish unity.

As noted at the start, 2019 was a year of considerable uncertainty but no major change. In that context, we see from NILT data that, even as identities were shifting away from the ‘non-aligned’, support for devolved government and for the 1998 Agreement remains strong. What happens to these attitudes and identities after such a tumultuous year as 2020 will be not only fascinating to observe but highly consequential.

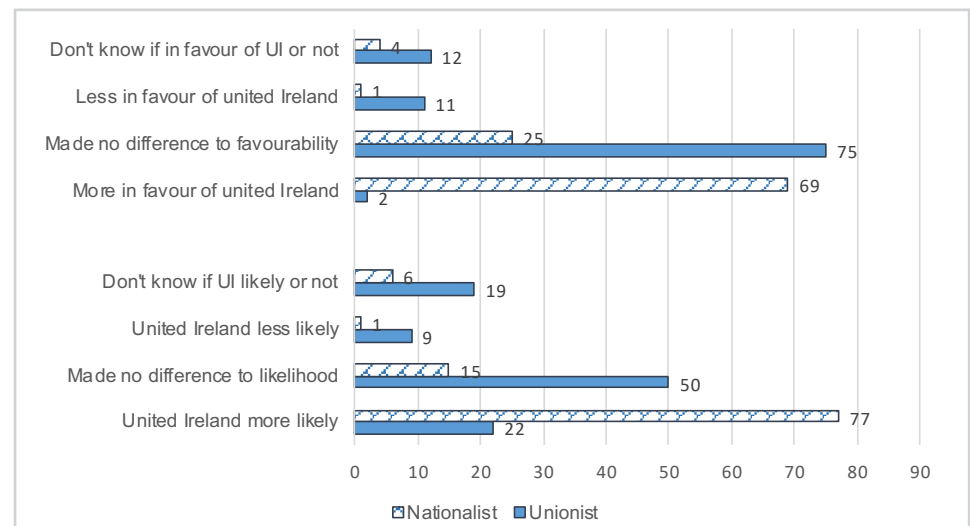
**Figure 3: Political Identity**



**Figure 4: Would you say you are a strong Unionist/Nationalist? (%)**



**Figure 5: Impact of Brexit on the likelihood and favourability of Irish unification (%)**



## Key Points

- The majority of NILT respondents (from all communities) support the devolved institutions
- There is strong support for the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement as the basis for governing Northern Ireland, although most would like to see some change to it
- 39% of NILT respondents identify as ‘Neither’ Unionist nor Nationalist, which is the lowest figure for 15 years. Nevertheless, it is still the most preferred of the three categories of political identity
- There has been an increase in the proportion of respondents identifying as Unionist compared to 2018, when there had been an unusual shift in the proportion of Protestants identifying as ‘Neither’
- 2019 saw a greater proportion of Catholic respondents identifying as Nationalist (59%) than has been the case since 2003
- The proportion of Nationalists describing themselves as ‘very strongly’ Nationalist in 2019 is higher than it has been since 1998
- Nationalists are strikingly more expectant and more in favour of Irish unity as a consequence of Brexit. In contrast, the majority of Unionists see Brexit as making no difference to their views regarding the prospect of Irish unification.

## References

Dr Katy Hayward is Reader in Sociology in Queen’s University Belfast and a Senior Fellow in *The UK in a Changing Europe* think-tank, where she leads a major project funded by the ESRC on ‘The future and status of Northern Ireland after Brexit’.

Ben Rosher holds a NINE doctoral training scholarship in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. 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)

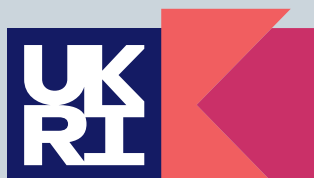
In collaboration with Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences  
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University  
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB

Tel: 028 9036 6339  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work  
Queen’s University Belfast  
Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)



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