

Political attitudes at a time of flux

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2019 was a year of tremendous political significance in Northern Ireland in terms of what failed to happen. On-o talks



The eroding middle ground?

The 1998 Agreement frames Northern Ireland as a society made up of two

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 in those answering

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

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