

Ulster and the Union: the view from the North

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC

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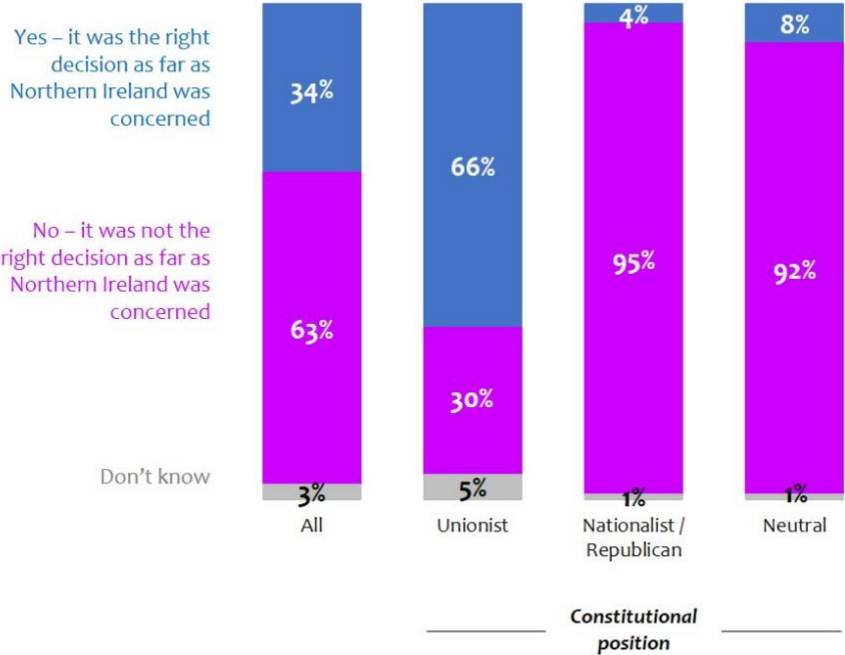
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Brexit and the Protocol

Northern Ireland and Brexit

Do you think the UK's decision to leave the EU was the right decision as far as Northern Ireland was concerned, or not?



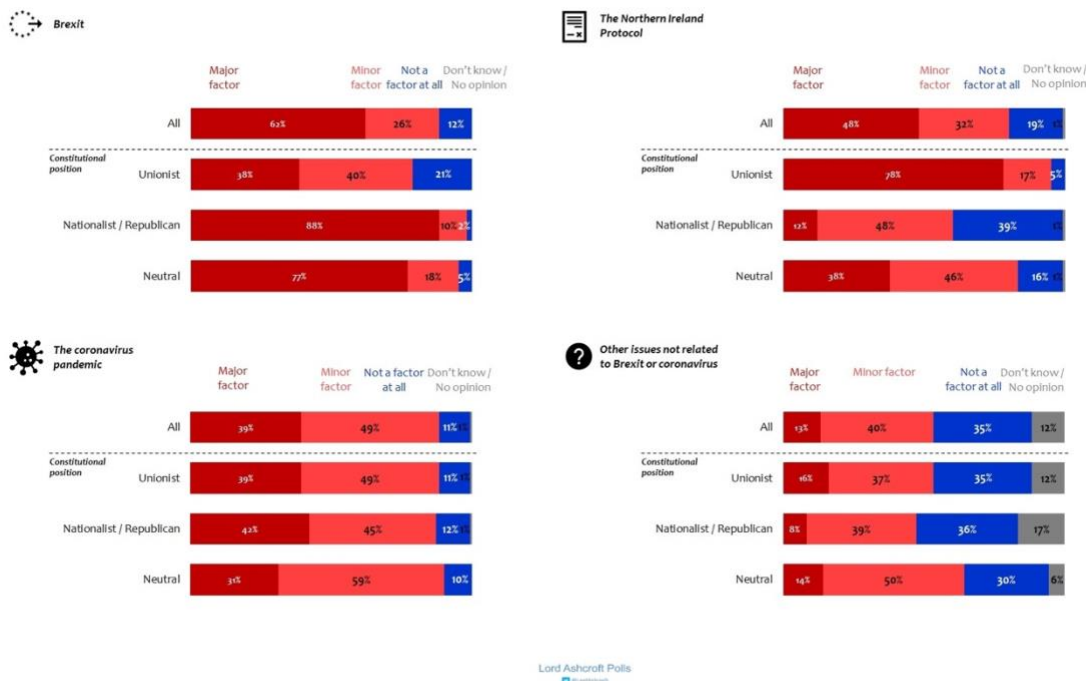
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A clear majority of voters (63%) said they thought that leaving the EU was not the right decision as far as Northern Ireland was concerned. This included 19% of those who had voted Leave in the 2016 referendum, as well as 95% of those who had voted Remain.

One in five 2017 DUP voters (20%) and 43% of UUP voters said they thought Brexit had been a bad decision for Northern Ireland. Two thirds (66%) of Unionists as a whole thought it had been the right decision, while 92% of neutrals and 95% of Nationalist/Republicans thought it had been a mistake.

Shortages in shops

In recent months there have been reports of shortages of some kinds of food and other goods in shops in Northern Ireland, and difficulties in ordering products online. How far do you think each of the following has been a factor in causing such shortages and difficulties?



Nearly 9 in 10 voters (88%) said they thought Brexit had been a cause of shortages of food and other goods in Northern Ireland, including 62% who said it had been a major factor. This was especially true of Nationalist/Republicans, with 73% of 2017 SDLP voters and 90% of Sinn Féin voters saying they believed Brexit had been a major factor.

Three quarters of 2016 Leave voters said Brexit had had a part to play in shortages, including 29% thinking it had been a major factor.

Unionists, however, were more likely to blame the pandemic and (especially) the Northern Ireland Protocol. Nearly 8 in 10 (78%) of them, including 89% of 2017 DUP voters, said they thought the Protocol had been a major factor, compared to 38% who said the same of Brexit more generally.

Participants in all our focus groups spoke about rising prices and shortages of goods, including food, clothes, household items and building materials. Several noted that ordering items from overseas had become more expensive or in some cases impossible; several had experienced Amazon being unable to ship certain items to Northern Ireland. Such problems were attributed to Brexit, the Protocol, covid, the Suez Canal blockage, or various combinations of all four.

The Northern Ireland Protocol

Most in our groups had an idea of what the Northern Ireland Protocol was – a “line down the Irish Sea” and “we still have to jump to the laws of the EU even though we’ve left” were two typical explanations – but few had followed the details of the debate.

“Not many people know much about it other than that there’s a line down the Irish Sea affecting goods coming in.”

Sinn Féin voter

“To be honest, I don’t think the politicians even understood it.”

DUP voter

“I don’t care if I never see another sausage from England. We have plenty of sausages here and they’re much nicer.”

Sinn Féin voter

For many Unionist voters the problem with the Protocol was one of principle rather than practicality: that no barrier between Great Britain and Northern Ireland could be countenanced. Some felt that the Protocol and the reaction to it could only undermine the Union in the longer term.

“The ECJ still has the final say over Northern Ireland but not the rest of the UK. To a Unionist worth his salt, that’s not acceptable.”

UUP voter

“Having a sea border is pandering into the hands of the Republicans. They’re loving this, so they are. Every bus that’s burned, they’re popping a bottle of champagne because they know it widens the gap between us and the mainland.”

DUP voter

“At the end of the day we’re the United Kingdom. I’m not against the South in any way but the border should be between two countries, not the same country.”

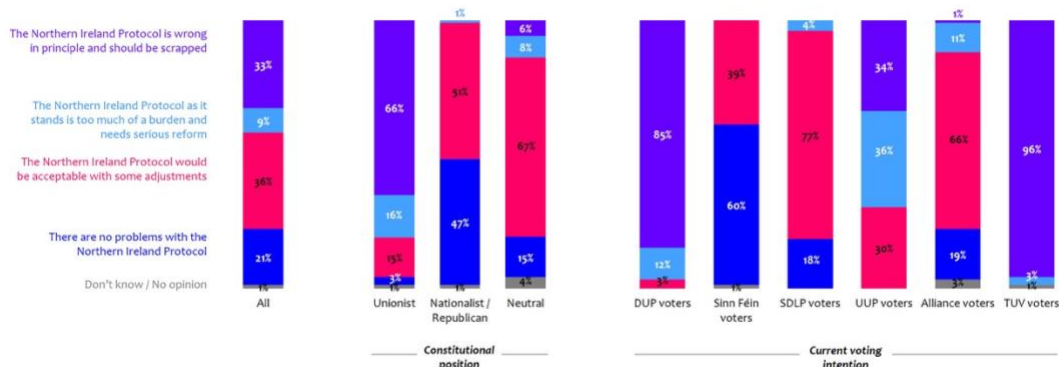
Alliance voter

In our poll, one third (33%) of voters said they thought the Protocol was wrong in principle and should be scrapped – including 83% of 2017 DUP voters and 66% of Unionists as a whole. A further 9% – including 32% of UUP voters – said the Protocol as it stands is too much of a burden and needs serious reform.

Another 36% of all voters – including 81% of 2017 SDLP voters, two thirds (67%) of Alliance voters and neutrals, and 26% of 2017 UUP voters – said they thought the Protocol would be acceptable with some adjustments. Only 4% of 2017 DUP voters said this.

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As you may know, under the Northern Ireland Protocol, part of the Brexit agreement, some rules of the EU single market still apply to Northern Ireland. This means checks take place on products entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain, and there are no checks on goods between Northern Ireland and Ireland. In this context, which of the following comes closest to your own view about the Northern Ireland Protocol?



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Just over one in five voters overall (21%) – including a majority (56%) of those who voted Sinn Féin in 2017 – said they thought there were no problems with the Protocol.

Those currently leaning towards voting UUP at the next Assembly elections were much more inclined to accept the Protocol with some adjustments than those inclined to support the DUP and (especially) the TUV – 96% of the latter said they thought the Protocol was wrong in principle and should be scrapped.

Who is to blame?

There was a feeling in our focus groups that Northern Ireland had been let down over the Protocol, both by the Westminster government and by their own politicians. Several were disappointed that Boris Johnson had agreed to a sea border that had the effect, in their view, of separating the province from the rest of the UK. Even some Sinn Féin voters mentioned that the PM had gone back on his word in this respect.

“Boris said before he was elected that he would never do anything to punish the union, then 30 minutes into it he put a border in the sea. He doesn’t think much of Northern Ireland.”

Alliance voter

“I blame the UK government 100%. Boris can be quoted as saying there would never be an Irish Sea border. The DUP put their trust in him, but when he won that huge majority he dropped them like a hot potato. What is now created is an economic border between this part of the UK and the mainland. Whereas with the Republic, which is still an EU country, the border is open and there are no trade barriers.”

DUP voter

“If I take my dog to England, I have to get a passport. Why should I have to get a passport when it’s part of the same country? If I lived in Shropshire, I could take my dog to Wales.”

Alliance voter

“It took years and they all signed to say this is what we’re doing, and it all went into an international agreement, and now nobody wants it.”

DUP voter

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Many blamed the Protocol and its attendant problems on a political class that had failed to understand or foresee the consequences that Brexit would have for Northern Ireland. Some, including their own voters, were particularly exasperated with the DUP for backing Brexit and thereby, in their view, helping to bring about the present situation. Several also blamed the EU (not least “the French”) for making things as difficult as possible as a way of punishing the UK for leaving.

“It wasn’t part of the campaign to get you to vote either way. Nobody mentioned it, then it was ‘surprise! There’s going to be a border!’”

Alliance voter

“The DUP didn’t understand or were too lazy. They didn’t seem to grasp what the Brexit deal was. They had four years.”

UUP voter

“Brexit is a mess for the UK and Northern Ireland. I voted DUP for the longest time, and they’ve let us down. I can’t understand how they voted for it. The DUP wanted Brexit, but nobody seemed to actually really know what it meant.”

DUP voter

“It suits the EU to make an example of the UK in general. They want to show other countries they’re not going to make it easy if they leave.”

Alliance voter

When it came to addressing the problems, politicians seemed to be more interested in what one participant described as the “stones in their shoes” – battles between and even within parties – than they did with finding practical solutions.

“They’ve been useless. There’s no-one fighting for our jobs. They can’t get away from their own party politics. They’re just fighting each other.”

Alliance voter

Suspension?

Some in the groups had heard about Article 16 and the possibility of suspending the Protocol, though there was very little understanding of what this would mean in practice (“I don’t know what it means, but I’ve heard of it. It’s like the Cloud,” as one participant put it). For all their complaints, few felt strongly that suspension would be the right approach since it did not amount to a lasting settlement, merely another form of the permanent limbo that seemed to characterise political life in Northern Ireland. Moreover, negotiations would then have to be carried out by the politicians who had brought about the current situation, or by others whom they might trust even less.

“A change is better than a suspension. All our country does is get things suspended and nothing ever happens.”

DUP voter

“If it’s suspended, who’s going to be negotiating to fix it? Who’s going to lead? Is it going to be the DUP, the UUP, Sinn Féin? Naomi Long?”

DUP voter

There was also a general view – shared even by many of the Unionists in our groups – that compared to a visible border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, a border in the Irish Sea was the lesser of two evils. The possibility of renewed violence was usually given as the reason.

“I don’t want either, but if there were a hard border there would be a lot of trouble. I’d be worried about the implications of that.”

Alliance voter

“I suppose it was a compromise, the lesser of two evils. They couldn’t very well stick the border back between north and south.”

UUP voter

A few argued that Northern Ireland’s unique position meant it could potentially enjoy the best of both worlds, having “one foot in the UK and one foot in the EU”. However, they tended to think the possibilities arising from this were being neglected as politicians dwelt on the drawbacks and used the Protocol to prosecute their traditional agendas.

“There are not enough people speaking up to say we’ve got the best of both worlds – trade with Europe, Britain, the Republic of Ireland. If Scotland or Wales had this, they’d be sitting rubbing their hands. The DUP bang on about the Protocol, so the media highlight the negatives rather than the positive aspects.”

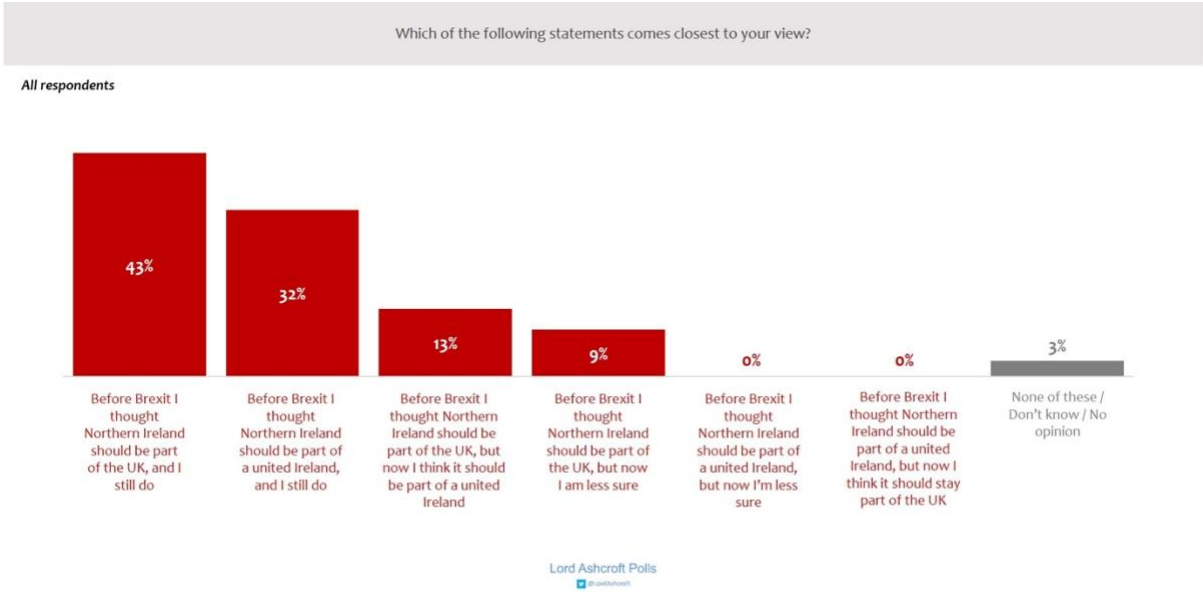
SDLP voter

“Businesses are seeing it as a viable option to move to Northern Ireland because it’s still in the single market. They could have a foot in the EU through Northern Ireland.”

Alliance voter

Brexit and the Union

We asked in our poll whether Brexit had affected people’s views as to whether Northern Ireland should be part of the UK. For three quarters, it had made no difference: 43% said they had thought the province should be part of the UK before Brexit and still did; 32% said they had favoured a united Ireland before Brexit and they still did.



However, 13% said they had thought Northern Ireland should stay in the UK before Brexit, but now favoured a united Ireland. This included 40% of 2017 SDLP voters, 34% of those who had backed the Alliance party, and 36% of those who described themselves as neutral on the constitution.

A further 9% (including 36% of 2017 Alliance voters, 29% of constitutional neutrals and 9% of self-described Unionists) said Brexit had made them less sure that Northern Ireland should be part of the UK.

Less than 1% of all voters said Brexit had shifted their view away from backing a united Ireland and towards remaining in the UK.

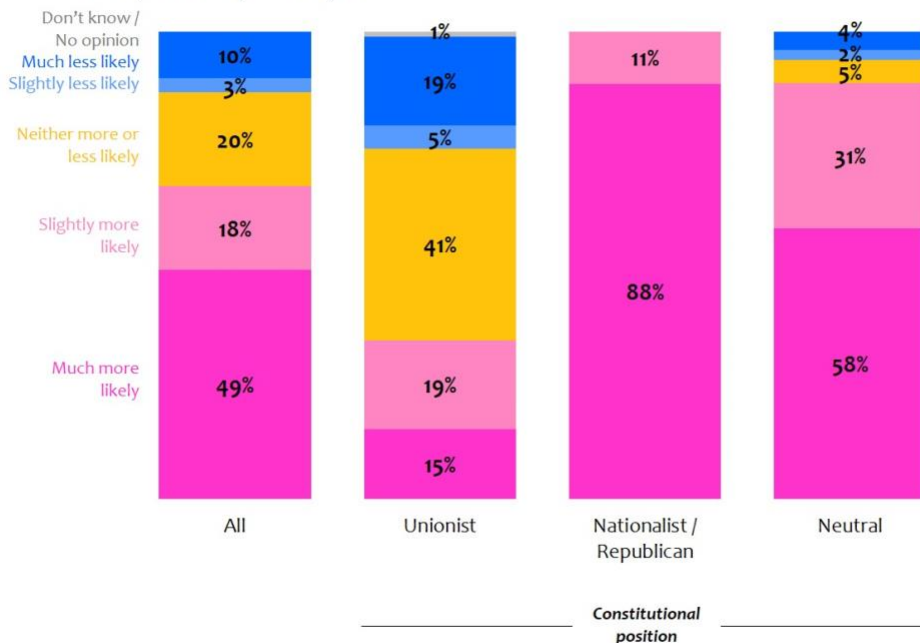
Does Brexit make Irish unification more likely?

Two thirds (67%) of voters said they thought Brexit had made Irish unification in the foreseeable future more likely, including 49% who said they thought it was much more likely. Only 13% thought unification had become less likely because of Brexit.

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Do you think Brexit makes Irish unification in the foreseeable future more likely, less likely, or has it made no difference?

Brexit makes Irish unification in the foreseeable future...



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Sinn Féin and SDLP voters were the most likely to think Brexit had increased the chances of unification (99% and 95% respectively), though 34% of Unionist voters also thought this, including 41% of 2017 UUP supporters. 93% of Alliance voters agreed.

In our groups, many participants on all sides thought Brexit and its consequences would have the effect of hastening a border poll and increasing the chances of unification. Nationalists were the most likely to think this.

“I feel it’s on the cards all of a sudden. The gap is closing.”

Alliance voter

“Brexit might push us towards a united Ireland because it’s caused so many problems. It’s affected a lot of people’s jobs, ability to travel... One side effect is that some of the less hardline Unionists are coming over to this side.”

Sinn Féin voter

“Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson did more for Irish unity than all the years of the Troubles.”

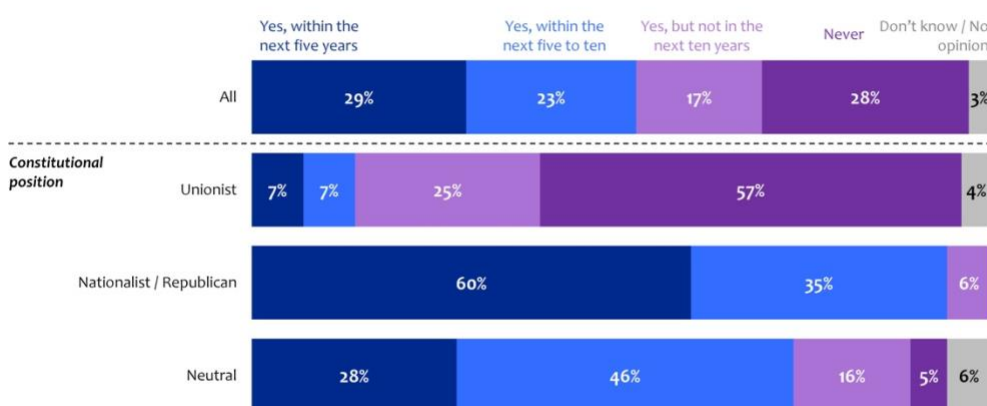
Sinn Féin voter

The Union and a Border Poll

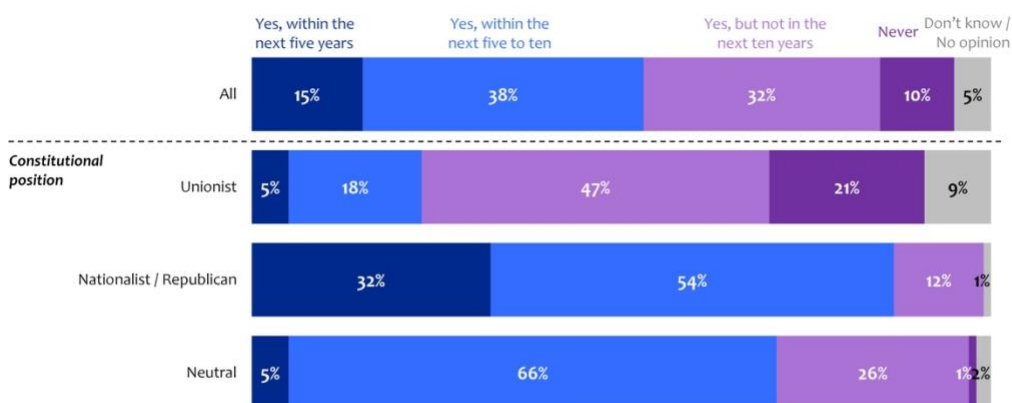
Should there be a border poll? Will there be a border poll? And when?

More than two thirds (69%) of Northern Ireland voters said there should be a referendum on Irish unification or “border poll” at some point in the future. Nearly three in ten (29%, including 69% of 2017 Sinn Féin voters but only 29% of those who backed the SDLP) thought this should take place within the next five years.

Do you think there **should** be a referendum on Irish unification (a ‘border poll’)?



Do you think there **will** be a referendum on Irish unification (a ‘border poll’)?



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Overall, only just over half (57%) of those describing themselves as Unionists said there should never be a border poll; 25% of Unionists (including 18% of 2017 DUP voters and 37% of 2017 UUP voters) said they thought it should happen but not in the next decade.

85% of those aged 18-24 said there should be a border poll at some point in the future, with 72% thinking it should be held within the next 10 years.

Voters were much more likely to think there would be a border poll in the future than that there should be one. 85% of NI voters thought there would be a referendum in the future, with nearly four in ten (38%, including nearly one in five Unionists and more than half of Nationalist/Republicans) saying they thought it would happen in the next five to ten years. Only just over one in five Unionist voters (21%) thought there would never be a border poll; 0% of Sinn Féin, SDLP and Green voters thought the same.

Many in our groups – by no means all – thought a border poll was likely within the next few years. Many were also nervous about the prospect, including some who favoured a united Ireland in principle. They tended to think that a referendum would be divisive, re-awakening tensions rather than resolving them, and that a return to violence would be more than likely.

Despite the majority of Unionists thinking there should never be a border poll, 7 in 10 said they thought it would happen. Nearly a quarter (23%) said they expected a referendum within the next decade.

“There would be people on the streets either way. Both sides would be sharpening their pitchforks.”

Alliance voter

“It will just make everything more complicated. Everybody’s hackles go up.”

SDLP voter

“I’ve got family in Dublin, they come up here, I go down there, there’s no issues, no drama. But if you start bringing all this stuff up...”

SDLP voter

“It would cause a lot of conflict. Most people, especially younger people, don’t give a damn, but this would bring up things you never usually think about. It would be something you’d never talk about with your friends, but all of a sudden you’re thinking ‘they want something I don’t.’”

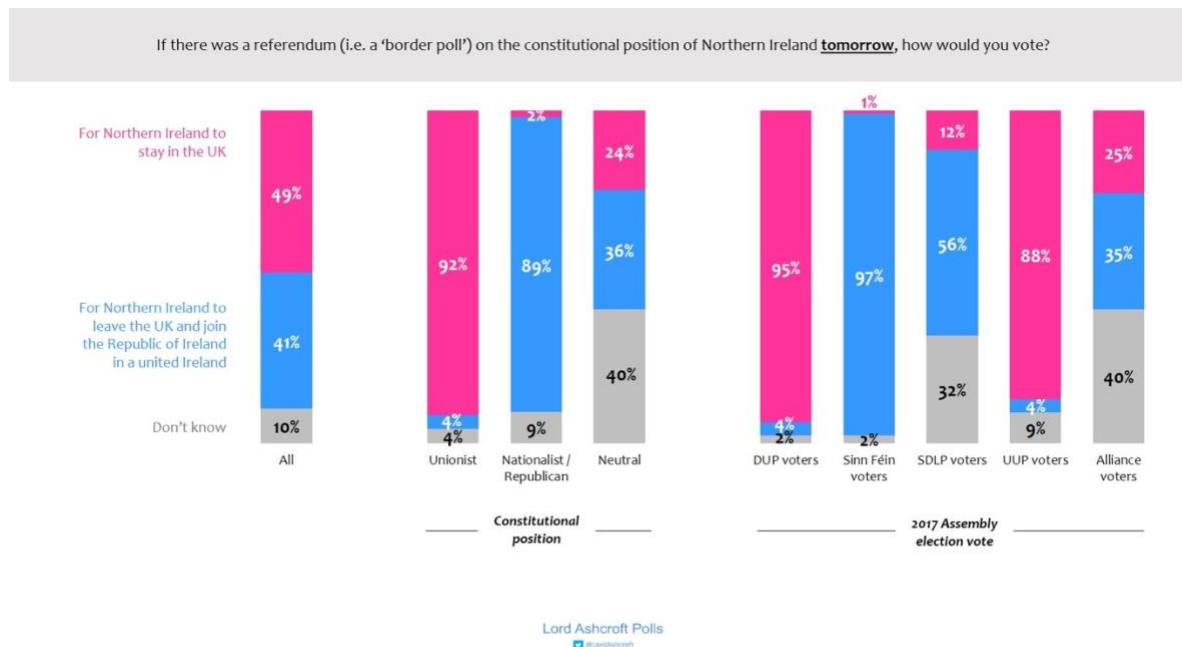
UUP voter

“I love the South of Ireland. I love going down there, I love the people. But I lived through the Troubles and I don’t want to go back there again. And there’s no way you’re going to get a trouble-free united Ireland.”

Alliance voter

How would you vote in a border poll?

Overall, voters said that in a border poll tomorrow they would vote for Northern Ireland to stay in the UK by 49% to 41%. One in ten said they didn't know. Excluding don't knows, this amounts to a margin of 54% to 46% for the status quo.



Support for a united Ireland declined sharply with age: 71% of those aged 18-24 said they would vote for unification, with 24% opting to stay in the UK; among those aged 65 or over, only 25% backed a united Ireland, with 55% choosing the status quo.

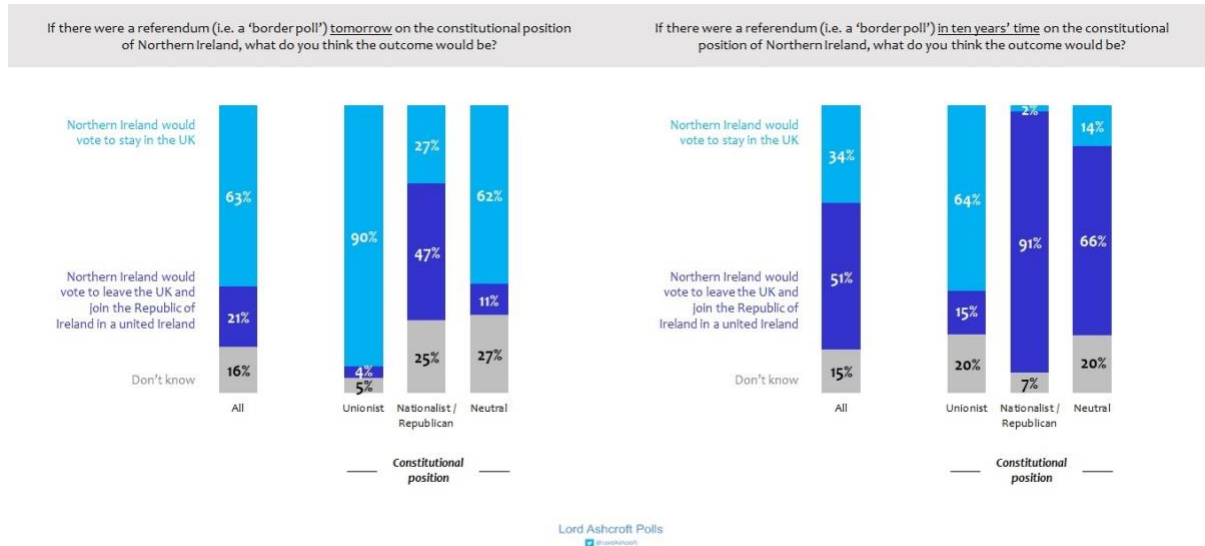
While 95% of 2017 DUP voters chose the UK and 97% of Sinn Féin backed unification, SDLP voters backed a united Ireland by 56% to 12%; 32% of them said they were undecided. Alliance voters opted for a united Ireland by 35% to 25%, with 40% saying they didn't know.

One in ten said they were undecided – though women (18%) were six times as likely to say this as men (3%). Four in ten of those saying they were neutral on the constitutional question – rather than describing themselves as Unionist or Nationalist/Republican – said they were unsure how they would vote in a border poll. However, the remainder of these neutral voters chose a united Ireland by 36% to 24%.

What would the outcome be tomorrow – and in 10 years?

Nearly two thirds (63%) of voters thought that in a border poll tomorrow, Northern Ireland would vote to stay in the UK. However, by 51% to 34% they thought that a referendum in 10 years' time would produce a majority for joining the Republic in a united Ireland.

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A majority (59%) of Sinn Féin voters said they thought a border poll tomorrow would back a united Ireland, with 95% thinking this would be the result in ten years' time. SDLP voters were less sure: only 15% thought Irish unification would be the outcome tomorrow, rising to 77% for a referendum in a decade.

While 90% of self-described Unionists thought voters would choose the UK in an immediate border poll, only 64% thought this would be the outcome ten years from now.

Among neutrals, 62% thought voters would choose the status quo tomorrow, but 66% thought they would back a united Ireland in ten years' time.

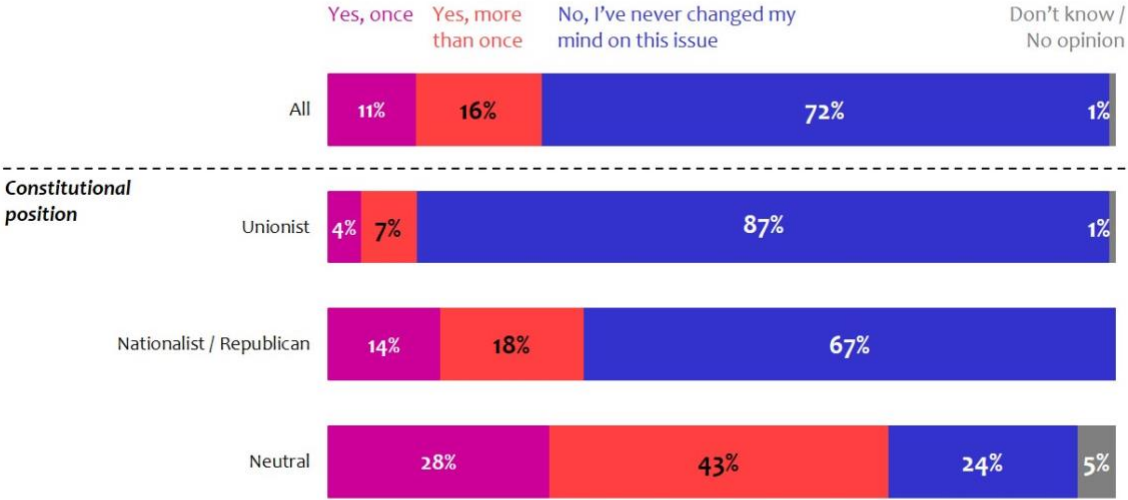
Have you ever changed your mind?

More than a quarter of voters (27%) said they had changed their mind on the question of whether or not Northern Ireland should stay in the UK, including 16% who said they had done so more than once. 31% of women, 38% of those aged 18-24 and 71% of those who describe themselves as neutral on the constitution said they had changed their minds at least once.

Protestants (86%) were more likely than Catholics (64%) to say they had never changed their mind about Northern Ireland's position in the UK.

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Have you ever changed your mind on the question of whether Northern Ireland should be part of the UK or become part of a united Ireland?



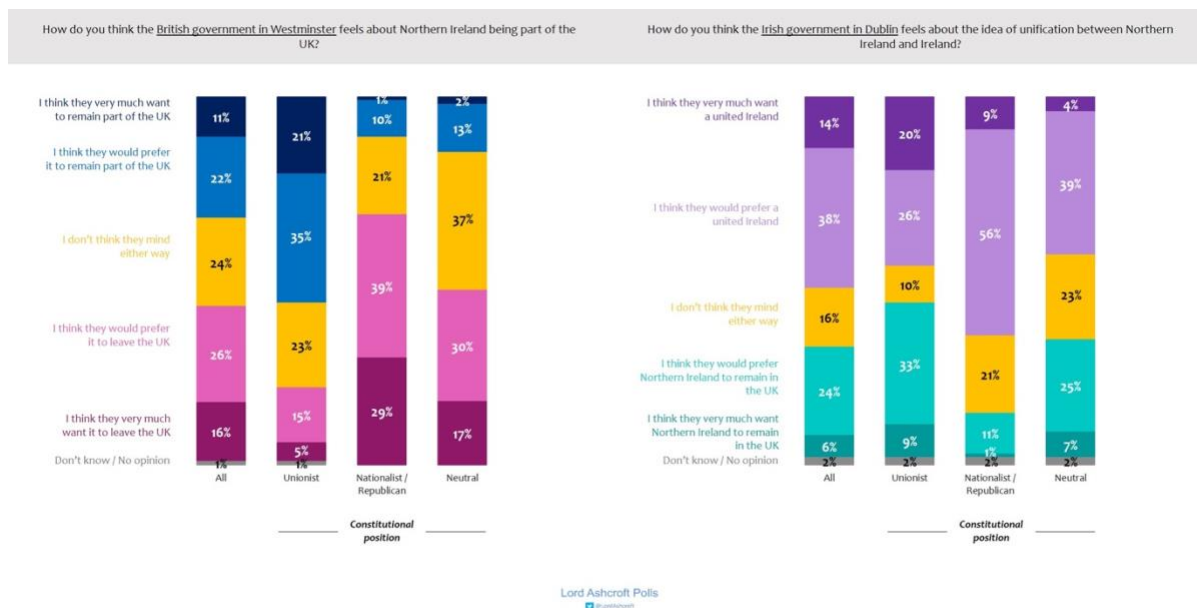
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Westminster and Dublin

In our poll, more voters thought the Westminster government would rather see Northern Ireland leave the UK than thought it would rather keep the province as part of the Union.

Only 11% of voters, and only 21% of Unionists, said they thought Westminster very much wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. A further 22% of all voters thought it would prefer to keep the province as part of the Union.

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Nearly a quarter (24%) thought Westminster didn't mind either way – including 40% of 2017 SDLP voters, 35% of UUP and 30% of Alliance voters. Another quarter (26%) thought it would prefer to see Northern Ireland leave, while 16% thought Westminster very much wanted Northern Ireland to leave.

Overall, just over half (56%) of Unionist voters said they thought Westminster either preferred or very much wanted to keep Northern Ireland in the UK. More than two thirds (68%) of Nationalist/Republicans said they thought Westminster would rather see the province leave, while 21% of them thought it was neutral; only 11% of Nationalist/Republicans thought the British government wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the Union.

In our focus groups, voters on all sides believed that for the Westminster government Northern Ireland was an “inconvenience” or an “afterthought”. For some, the Protocol was evidence that the government had “washed its hands of us” and cast doubt (particularly among Unionists) on the Conservatives’ claim to be a Unionist party (“if it was, the border would be between North and South, wouldn't it?”)

Boris Johnson’s “levelling up” agenda seemed to the groups to apply only to the north of England, rather than further afield. Many also thought that people in Britain had a distorted view of life in Northern Ireland, often believing that occasional unrest was much more prevalent and widespread than was really the case.

“I think they'd care more if they lost Scotland. Scotland has the oil.”

DUP voter

“You hear things about the north-south divide in England, but we're a third cog down. But it's always been like that.”

Alliance voter

“There have been MPs quoted as saying we're a troublesome province. And we cost too much.”

Alliance voter

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“When Derry-Londonderry was the European City of Culture, the UK culture minister couldn’t even be arsed to come and visit.”

Alliance voter

“We’re a strain on them. An anchor”.

SDLP voter

Both Unionists and Nationalists tended to feel that the Westminster government was at the very least ambivalent about Northern Ireland’s place in the UK. Many thought the government would be relieved if the province voted to leave, even if it could not say so.

“It would be a handy way out to be rid of us. I’m not saying they want to be rid of us, but it would be a handy way out.”

UUP voter

“They probably don’t want to lose us, but they don’t want us.”

Alliance voter

At the same time, only just over half (52%) of voters thought the Irish government in Dublin would either prefer (38%) or very much wanted to see (14%) a united Ireland. One in three (30%) said they thought Dublin would rather see Northern Ireland remain in the UK, while 16% thought the Irish government was neutral on the question.

Nationalist/Republican voters (65%) were more likely than Unionists (46%) and neutrals (43%) to think Dublin wanted to see a united Ireland.

Many focus group participants felt that, as things stood, Ireland would be reluctant to take on the North – because of the cost, the existing problems and tensions, and the resurgence of unrest that many thought would follow a vote for unification. However, some Sinn Féin voters thought this was likely to change if, as they expected, their party entered government in Dublin.

“They don’t want us. They can’t afford us. We’d be a ball and chain.”

Alliance voter

“Look at the problems we bring. The idea of paying for Northern Ireland as a peaceful place is difficult enough. But if you make it a united Ireland, you’re paying for a Northern Ireland that’s at war.”

Alliance voter

“The only thing in our favour [as Unionists] is that Ireland can’t afford to take us at the moment. They don’t really want us. So timing wise, it’s not right.”

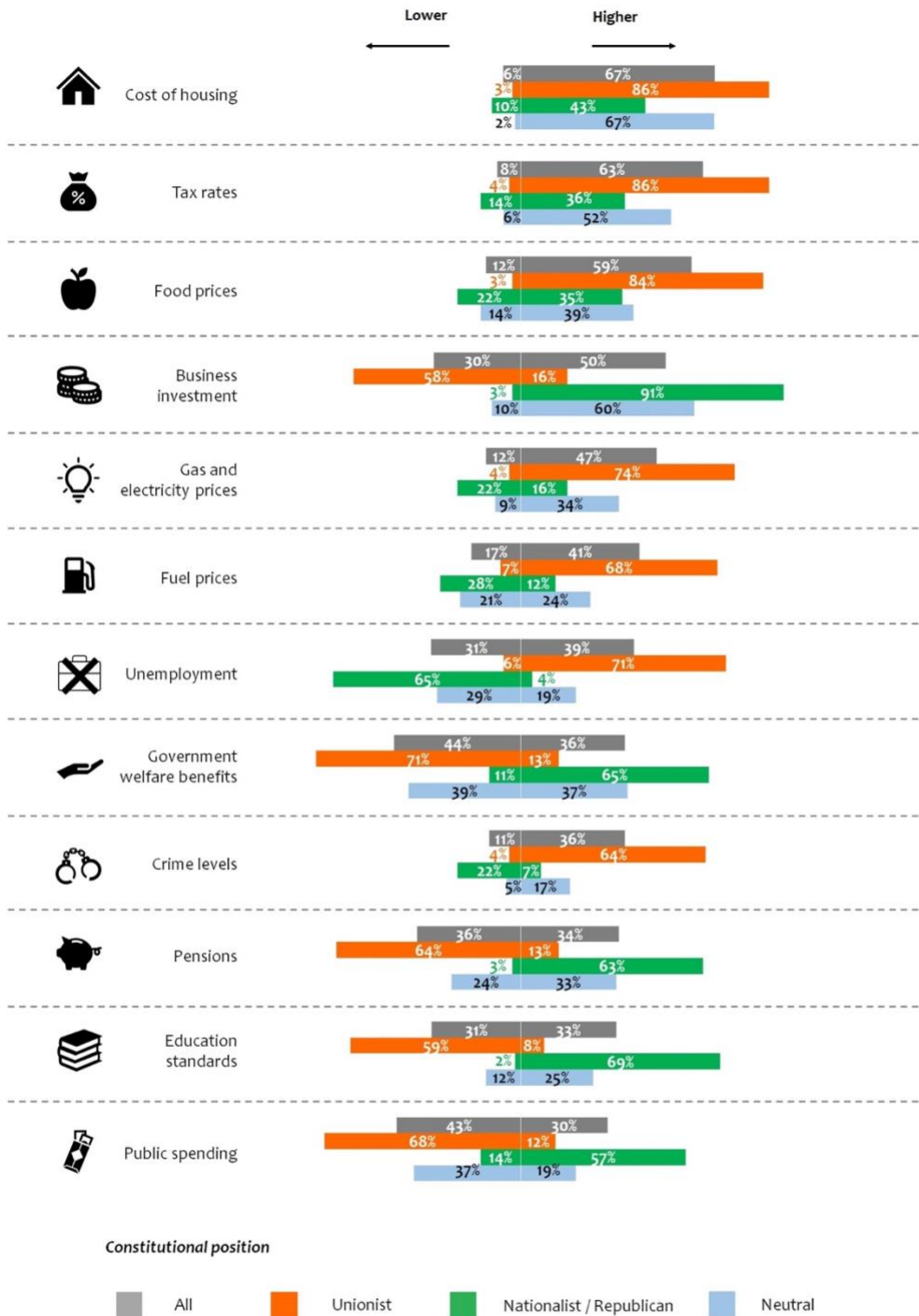
UUP voter

“Not at the moment. But the next Taoiseach is Mary-Lou. According to the polls at the moment they’re well in front, so we’ll have Sinn Féin North and South.”

Sinn Féin voter

What would change in a united Ireland?

If Northern Ireland left the UK and joined the Republic of Ireland in a united Ireland, do you think each of the following would be higher, lower, or stay about the same, in what is now Northern Ireland?

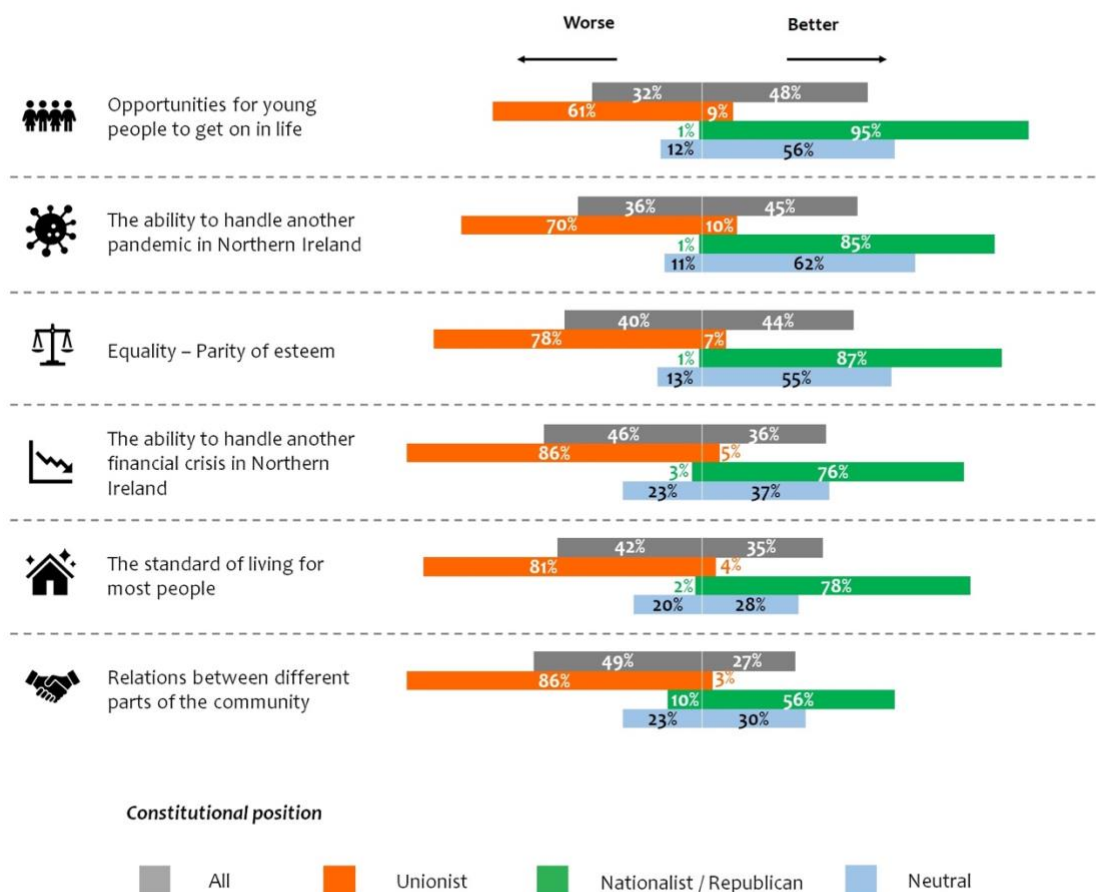


Voters as a whole were more likely to think that housing costs; food, fuel and energy prices; tax rates and unemployment would be higher in a united Ireland than that they would be lower,

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while public spending, welfare benefits and (by a small margin) pensions were more likely to be lower. Business investment was thought more likely to be higher than lower in a united Ireland.

If Northern Ireland left the UK and joined the Republic of Ireland in a united Ireland, do you think each of the following would be better, be worse, or stay about the same, in what is now Northern Ireland?



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By a small margin, voters thought equality and parity of esteem would be better in a united Ireland (though 78% of Unionists thought the opposite), as was also the case with opportunities for young people to get on in life and the ability to handle another pandemic. The ability to handle another financial crisis, relations between different parts of the community and the standard of living for most people were thought more likely to be worse in a united Ireland.

Destiny or practicality?

In our groups, many on all sides felt there was a growing number of voters, particularly younger voters, who would see a referendum in terms of practicalities rather than religion, nationality or tradition – or as one put it, “some will vote green or orange, but a lot of people will vote with their heads.” Even some SDLP and Sinn Féin voters said they would want to be sure of “the

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package” before they voted for a united Ireland. Charges for healthcare and a higher cost of living were often cited as factors that would make voters think twice before choosing unification.

“They haven’t thought through the consequences. They would have to pay for their own health. You don’t get queues in A&E because you have to pay for it.”

Alliance voter

“In my generation, whether people are protestant or Catholic, people would vote for a united Ireland if it meant things were cheaper, if jobs are worth more, if the economy was good.

They might think ‘my grandmother would turn in her grave’ but they have to have a comfortable life. At the moment I don’t think they’d be interested in a united Ireland unless there were more benefits than negatives, regardless of religion.”

UUP voter

“It depends what package is on offer, definitely. They won’t be able to have a border poll without laying it all out. It matters for our generation – we’re the ones who are going to have to work until we’re 70.”

Sinn Féin voter

“Nationalists would like it in title but they still want benefits and free prescriptions. And everything is more expensive down South.”

DUP voter

“Everything would change, everything we know as normal.”

Alliance voter

“I have concerns because I work for the government. And what’s going to happen to your pension, your job, all that?”

SDLP voter

Parity of esteem in a new Ireland?

Many Nationalists in our groups explained that they saw a united Ireland as a new country, rather than the existing Republic of Ireland with six new counties. As such, they were at pains to emphasise that protestants and loyalists would be as much part of the new Ireland as Catholics and Nationalists (though this sentiment was not universal: “They don’t want it the same way we didn’t want to be in the UK,” as one Sinn Féin voter put it. “They should have given it back 100 years before now. It’s their turn to suck it up.”)

“It’s a new Ireland. There would be a million protestants. It has to be a shared community. No matter what the history says about everything, this is now their home. So if it’s a united Ireland they’re very much entitled, as we all are, to have their say as well.”

SDLP voter

“It has to be something different. You have to respect everybody. You can’t just turn around and say ‘you have to do as we say,’ which is how it was in this country for years. Change the flag, bring the Unionists and the loyalists in, make everybody the same. Everybody has to come together.”

Sinn Féin voter

Unionists, however, were much less likely to feel there would be “parity of esteem” for them in a united Ireland. Though some argued that attitudes had changed and there would be an ethos of “live and let live,” many felt they would be treated less well than Nationalists in today’s Northern Ireland, and that some of their traditions would not be respected or even tolerated.

“If you voted no, and your religion voted no, you’d be at the bottom of the priority list. Historically Sinn Féin means ‘ourselves, alone,’ and that’s how they see themselves.”

UUP voter

“If Catholics want to go to mass or whatever, they can do that. But if there was a united Ireland, there would be no Orange Parade, no 12th of July. They would shut protestant schools. We’d be told to get off the land, they’re taking it over. They would make life hell.”

UUP voter

“Walk through Dublin wearing a Rangers top and see what reception you get. Try and display your protestant Unionist heritage in the Republic of Ireland and let me see how welcome you’re made.”

DUP voter

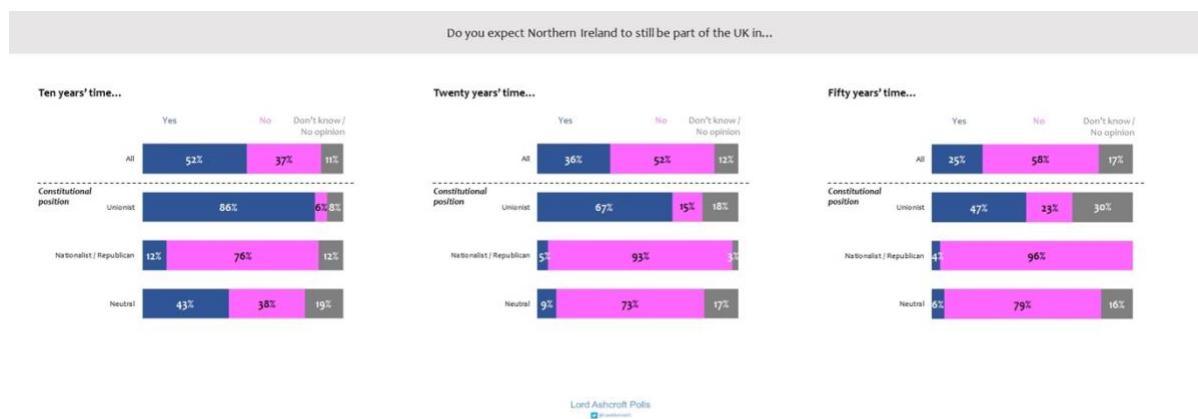
“It’s not 1980. Time has moved on. If you forever view this nation to our south as a potential siege force, you’ve had it.”

DUP voter

The long game

Looking at the longer term, 52% of voters said they expected Northern Ireland still to be part of the UK in ten years’ time, falling to 36% in 20 years’ time and 25% in 50 years’ time.

Three quarters (76%) of Nationalist/Republicans expected Northern Ireland to be out of the UK within 10 years, rising to 93% in 20 years and 96% in 50 years.



Nearly 9 in 10 Unionists (86%) thought the province would still be part of the UK in a decade, falling to two thirds (67%) in 20 years. Fewer than half of Unionists (47%) said they thought Northern Ireland would still be part of the UK in 50 years; 23% said they thought it would not, and 30% said they didn’t know.

Lord Ashcroft Polls

This pattern of opinion was reflected in our focus groups. Whether or not they thought a border poll was imminent, many on all sides felt that history was moving in one direction – either because of demographics, the strategic discipline of the Nationalists, Unionist mistakes, or a combination.

Many Unionists felt – and Nationalists tended to agree – that the Nationalist side had gained the from the peace process and the Belfast Agreement (though none would want to repudiate it). The Troubles becoming a more distant memory, or history of which they had no personal experience, also meant that traditional loyalties were giving way to more practical day-to-day concerns and a more transactional view of the issue.

“We breed better than they do. They have big TVs; we have big families.”

Sinn Féin voter

“I would definitely say the Catholics did better out of it than the Protestants, and the Protestants know that, and that’s why, every once in a while, they kick off. I think they feel stung by it.”

Sinn Féin voter

“Sinn Féin will soon be the biggest party in the North and the South. What was a terrorist organisation that was slaughtering people is going to be in charge of all of Ireland. They got everything they wanted.”

UUP voter

“Sinn Féin always play the long game, whereas the Unionists are renowned for their kneejerk reactions. The flag process is a prime example. Sinn Féin chipped away and chipped away at that for ages, and the Unionists did nothing until it went through.”

Alliance voter

“In 50 years, it will be like asking people in Spain about the civil war.”

UUP voter

Most observed that sectarianism was much less evident in everyday life, though politics was still largely organised along traditional lines and politicians still tried to play on sectarian loyalties. However, many felt that tensions were still “simmering” and that it would not take much to reignite them. Several felt that such tensions were mostly confined to Belfast.

“The grievances are still there on both sides. The violence has gone away but the sectarianism hasn’t. it wouldn’t take two seconds for it to start up again.”

Alliance voter

“Things are less tribal now. It’s not like you walk up to people and say ‘Protestant? Catholic? Buddhist?’”

SDLP voter

“It’s more of a problem in Belfast, less so with rural people. We’re closer to the border but they take it more seriously.”

UUP voter

Lord Ashcroft Polls

“We have to get past the generation where the children sit round and listen to their grandad tell war stories.”

Sinn Féin voter

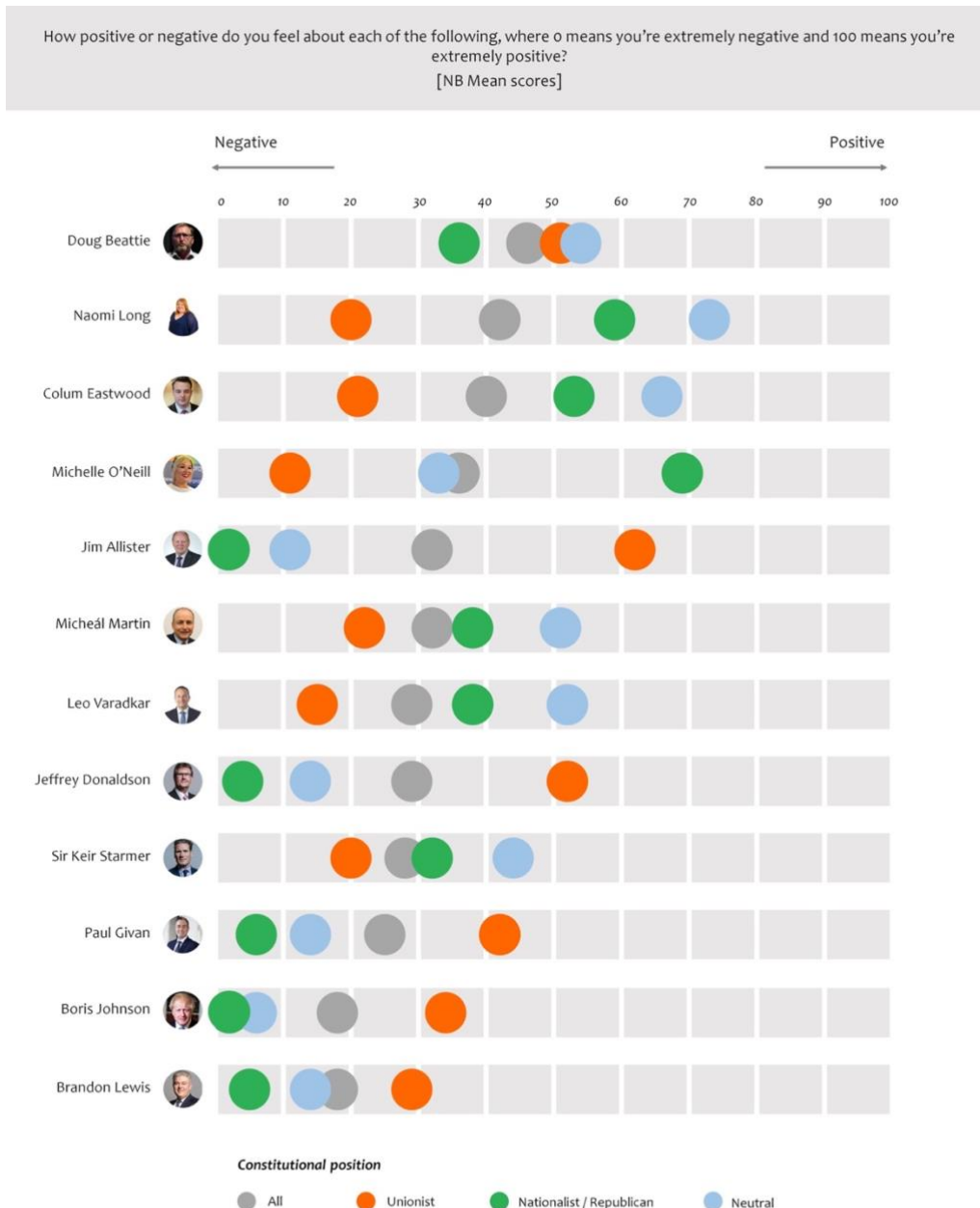
“If it’s still bubbling it’s probably coming from people of our generation, not the younger people. We’re really damaged goods from a time that was just awful. One of the reasons we voted for the Good Friday Agreement was for our kids, so they didn’t have to go through this.”

DUP voter

Parties, Leaders, Assembly elections

Rate the leaders

In our poll we asked voters to say how positive or negative they felt about a range of political leaders on a 100-point scale. The highest mean score was for UUP leader Doug Beattie, with 45.5, followed by Naomi Long (42.2), Colum Eastwood (39.5) and Michelle O'Neill (35.7).



Lord Ashcroft Polls

Those who voted DUP in the 2017 Assembly elections rated TUV leader Jim Allister (73.4) higher than DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson (62.2) and First Minister Paul Givan (51.7) – as did voters as a whole.

The highest mean score for any leader among any group of voters was for Jim Allister, who scored 94.0 from those currently leaning towards voting for the TUV at the next Assembly elections.

Many in our focus groups lamented what they regarded as the lack of clear leadership at Stormont. Several said they found it confusing that the roles of First Minister and DUP leader were now held by two different people, which they felt made for ambiguity and lack of direction. Few had anything very positive to say about current politicians, with the notable exception of Health Minister Robin Swann, who was praised on all sides for his response to the covid crisis.

“Michelle O’Neill and Arlene Foster, they got on with each other, they were always doing something or saying something. But these last few months, the new fella, I don’t know where he is. He’s just disappeared. The head of the DUP is not the First Minister, so it’s very confusing. Even though we do have a First Minister, he doesn’t really have a say, he’s just there to shake hands. It’s the head of the DUP who makes the decisions.”

Alliance voter

“Paul Givan, I don’t know much about him. He came from nowhere.”

DUP voter

“You hardly know who’s leading them now. You listen to Boris more when he’s in the news, when he makes an announcement. The rest just go backwards and forwards and you don’t know who’s in power, the DUP have made that much of a balls-up. If it was a soap opera it would be one of the best.”

UUP voter

“I think Robin Swann is brilliant, I have to say. He has taken a lot of flak but he’s led us through.”

SDLP voter

Many focus group participants thought the DUP had fallen into disarray since the departure of Arlene Foster – any episode which they also felt reflected badly on the party. DUP voters were as likely to think this as other participants. Some supporters of other parties spoke warmly of Foster and felt sympathy for her over the way she was treated.

“I think she was grand. There was a wee bit of working with her. It was sad to see her hoisted.”

SDLP voter

“She wasn’t a pushover. She was a head figure, she wasn’t afraid to say what she thought. I think the way she was treated will have lost them a lot of votes.”

UUP voter

“She was a moderate. She should never have gone to the DUP.”

UUP voter

Lord Ashcroft Polls

“The way they booted Arlene out, a public humiliation. If they’re doing that to their own party members, what are they prepared to do to other people? How are they going to negotiate? They couldn’t even negotiate what biscuits to have in their meetings.”

Alliance voter

“There are no head figures now. You would hardly know who was in charge.”

UUP voter

However, disillusionment with the DUP was deeper and more longstanding than this. People complained about incompetence in office, including the “cash for ash” heating scandal, what they saw as the failure to foresee the consequences of Brexit, and in some cases negligence over the Protocol and the border in the Irish Sea. Many also observed that what they regarded as its outdated stance on a number of social issues made it hard for committed Unionists to vote for, let alone younger generations for whom constitutional issues are a much less prominent concern.

“I don’t want to vote for the DUP, I think they’re atrocious. I don’t agree with them on the gay marriage thing or abortion. But you have to, otherwise Sinn Féin will get in. Sinn Féin only have one party and we have a hundred.”

DUP voter

“The DUP are just shouting about abortion and gay marriage, and we don’t want to know about that. If you’re a gay couple and you want to get married, you should have that right. The rest of the UK is laughing at us because we’re the ones who fight against it. When we were children, it was the Catholics who were anti-abortion and anti-gay. Now it’s the other way round.”

DUP voter

“I call myself a Christian, but I still think they’re over the top, the way they go on. Especially with the gay thing, that was just absolutely ridiculous. And a lot of good it did them!”

Alliance voter

“You had generations of people coming through that weren’t effected by the Troubles, they were more normalized like English or Scottish or Welsh people, and they looked at the DUP and said ‘well they don’t stand for my values, they’re out of touch, they’re dinosaurs’. So they went to the Alliance party and things. All of a sudden, for these generations, the border is not the most important thing. Whereas for me, it is.”

DUP voter

“Sinn Féin judged the mood of the generations coming through. With the DUP it was a kind of stubbornness, an arrogance. They think they can put the orange banner on the street and everyone’s going to run after it. Those days are gone.”

DUP voter

Several of our participants who had voted DUP in recent elections (and sometimes all their lives) said they were thinking of backing Jim Allister and the TUV next time round. Even if the party was at least as conservative on social issues as the DUP, they felt it did not put these questions at the forefront of its campaign.

Lord Ashcroft Polls

“Who’s asking the questions? Jim Allister and the TUV.”

DUP voter

“The DUP have proved the union is not safe in their hands, so it’s got to go to someone else.”

DUP voter

“The Unionists of both parties laughed at him, but now that the DUP have let so many of their voters down, he’s being seen as somebody they can turn to. He’s like an old hardline Unionist that we don’t really have anymore.”

DUP voter

“Standing as one man, he has one conscience to look after where the DUP have so many different divisions and hierarchies.”

DUP voter

“He definitely isn’t pro-abortion or pro-gay marriage. But as long as he doesn’t spout about it, that’s better. The DUP never shut up about it.”

DUP voter

However, few saw the TUV as a permanent solution – rather a signal to the other Unionist parties that they needed to get their act together. Many complained about the divisions and lack of unity and leadership within the Unionist movement, which they thought could only damage their cause both in terms of elections and Northern Ireland’s longer-term position in the UK.

“I’m changing my vote to TUV in this election but that’s the short term. In the long term, what’s the majority going to be? There’s no point saying ‘we’re not going to do this and we’re not going to do that’ when the other side can just turn round and vote you out. On the numbers, you’re up against a brick wall.”

DUP voter

“You’d really like to see someone in the DUP or the UUP with a bit of balls saying, ‘let’s pull together and share the power’. If Sinn Féin and the DUP can work together, why can’t the DUP and the UUP pull their socks up? It’s just a joke.”

UUP voter

“Politics in Northern Ireland at the moment is terrible. We need direction. Where is it going to come from? I don’t know.”

DUP voter

“If the term ‘unionism’ vanished it would be a productive step. Unionism is being held back by its own labels and its own past. That doesn’t mean the union shouldn’t be protected foremost, but if it moves out of the areas of orange and green, that’s where it should go.”

DUP voter

Where do they stand?

Focus group participants who had voted for the Alliance Party said they had been attracted by its non-denominational character and its focus on non-sectarian issues and ideas. However, even supporters who felt strongly one way or the other about Northern Ireland's place in the UK were unsure which side Alliance would come down on in a border poll campaign.

"They're the voice of reason in some senses. Otherwise, we have one party who won't go to Westminster and another party who don't think the earth is round."

Alliance voter

"People have always voted for one of the main parties not because of what they believed in but because they were going in a certain direction. I think by voting Alliance you're slowly pushing that train of thought out of the way."

Alliance voter

"[In a border poll] they'll pick a side for the right reasons. They'd have a list of things that would have to be in place."

Alliance voter

"I'm not sure, they sit on the fence. They could sway either way."

Alliance voter

This reflected the results of our poll, in which voters were divided as to the Alliance party's constitutional position. Just over one in five (22%) thought of the party as Unionist, though mostly moderately, while 38% considered the Alliance to be Nationalist/Republican (including 14% who thought they took this position strongly). Another 39% thought the party was neutral on the constitutional question.

Lord Ashcroft Polls

When it comes to Northern Ireland's constitution, how would you describe each of the following political parties?



Lord Ashcroft Polls
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Unionist voters as a whole were the most likely to think of the Alliance as Nationalist/Republican (73%). Meanwhile, most Nationalist/Republican voters themselves considered the party to be either Unionist (48%) or neutral (49%); only 2% of them thought the Alliance shared their own view about the constitution.

Alliance voters themselves overwhelmingly considered the party neutral on the constitution (81%).

Nearly three quarters (73%) of all voters believed People Before Profit took the Nationalist/Republican position (with Unionists being the most likely to think this). 37% thought the same of the Green party, while another 51% thought the Greens were neutral.

The next Assembly election

Asking people what would be most important when deciding how to vote in the next Assembly elections revealed some important differences between party supporters, both between and within the Unionist and Nationalist/Republican communities.

The next elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are due to take place by May 2022. Which three of the following will be most important to you when it comes to deciding which party to vote for in those elections?
[NB % naming issue in top three]

Most important factors by current voting intention

All

Policies on health, education and public services	57%
Policies on the economy and jobs	40%
Commitment to the union with the UK	33%
The party that shares my values	28%
Overall competence	24%



DUP voters

Commitment to the union with the UK	79%
Policies on health, education and public services	37%
The party that shares my values	32%
How strongly the party stands up for my community within Northern Ireland	31%
Policies on the economy and jobs	29%



Sinn Féin voters

Commitment to unification with Ireland	80%
Policies on health, education and public services	57%
Policies on the economy and jobs	48%
The party that shares my values	21%
Policy towards the Northern Ireland Protocol and the EU single market	20%



SDLP voters

Policies on health, education and public services	83%
Policies on the economy and jobs	57%
Overall competence	48%
Commitment to good relations between different communities	36%
The party that shares my values	23%



UUP voters

Policies on health, education and public services	64%
Commitment to the union with the UK	53%
Policies on the economy and jobs	34%
Overall competence	30%
The quality of the party leader	23%



Alliance voters

Policies on health, education and public services	90%
Policies on the economy and jobs	52%
Commitment to good relations between different communities	46%
Overall competence	43%
The party that shares my values	26%



TUV voters

Commitment to the union with the UK	94%
How strongly the party stands up for my community within Northern Ireland	51%
Policy towards the Northern Ireland Protocol and the EU single market	39%
The party that shares my values	37%
Policies on health, education and public services	22%

While “commitment to the union with the UK” was the most important factor for those leaning towards the DUP and the TUV, it was mentioned by 94% of TUV supporters compared to 79% of those intending to vote DUP. And while health, education and public services were the next biggest priority for those leaning to the DUP, the second consideration for TUV leaners was “how strongly the party stands up for my community within Northern Ireland” followed by policy towards the Protocol and the EU single market.

For those naming the UUP as their most likely party at the next Assembly election, commitment to union with the UK was only the second most important factor, after policies on health, education and public services.

Eight in ten of those intending to vote for Sinn Féin named “commitment to unification with Ireland” as among the most important factors in their choice of party. This compares to just 13% of those leaning towards the SDLP – for whom public services and the economy were the main considerations.

Those leaning towards the Alliance party named public services, the economy, and “commitment to good relations between different communities” as their most important priorities.

Assembly election voting intentions

We asked our poll respondents how likely they were to vote for each party at the next Assembly elections on a 100-point scale. Sinn Féin voters were the most inclined to stay with their 2017 party, followed by those who had voted for the Alliance and the UUP.

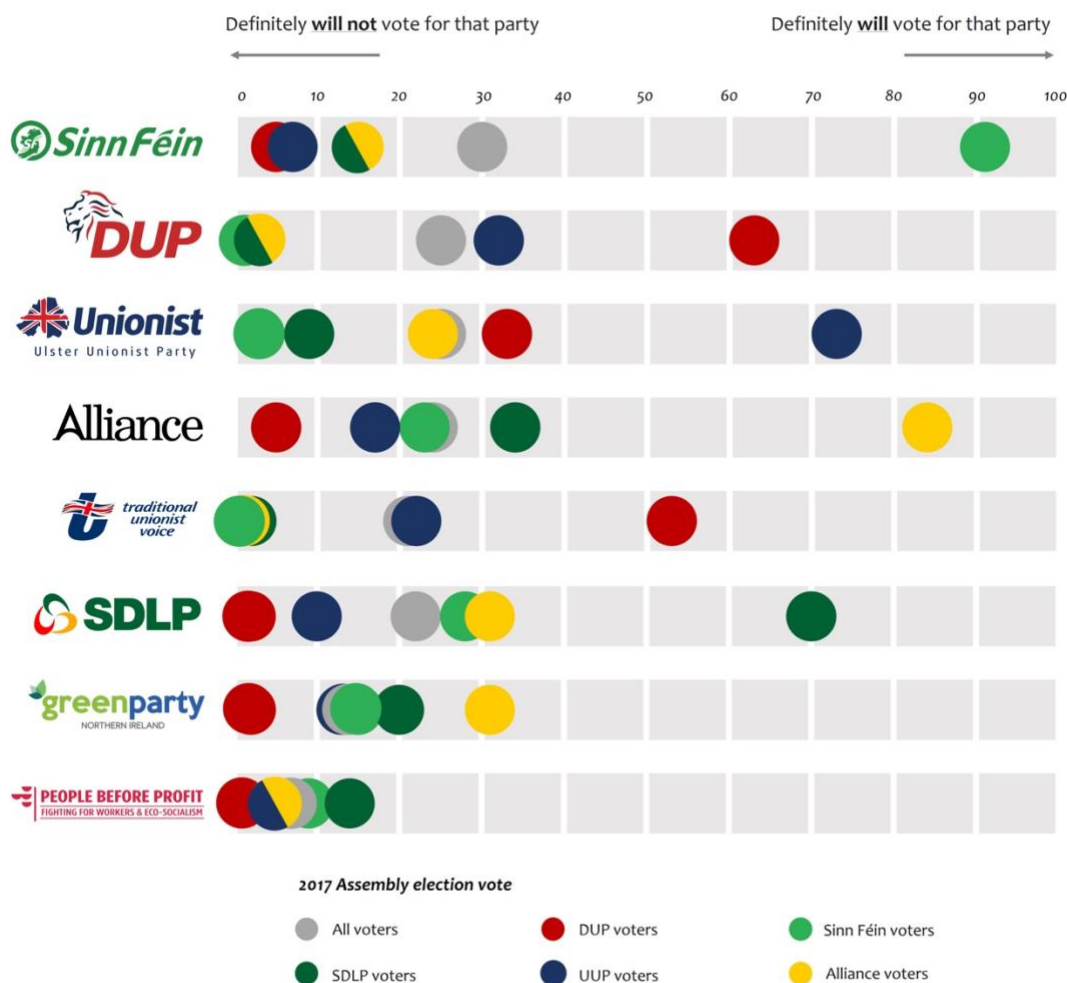
Among self-described Unionist voters there was a clear three-way split: their mean likelihood of voting DUP was 48.2, followed by 42.1 for the UUP and 41.6 for TUV. Those who voted DUP in 2017 put their chance of voting the same way again at 63.4, with the TUV quite close behind on 52.5

This means that 2017 DUP voters were the least confident of sticking with their party in 2022. Previous voters for the SDLP (69.5), UUP (72.7), Alliance (84.4) and Sinn Féin (91.3) all rated themselves more likely to vote the same way again.

Lord Ashcroft Polls

The Northern Ireland Assembly election must be held in May 2022. When it comes to that election, how likely do you think it is that you will end up voting (i.e. first preference) for each of the following parties, where 0 means 'The is NO CHANCE I will vote 1st preference for that party' and 100 means 'I will DEFINITELY vote 1st preference for that party'?

[NB Mean scores]



Lord Ashcroft Polls
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Taking those who rated their chance of voting for a particular party at 90/100 or above, we find Sinn Féin ahead on 25%, with the DUP on 16%, the Alliance on 14%, TUV on 12% and the UUP and SDLP each on 10%.

In our focus groups, voters from all parties thought there was a good chance of Sinn Féin becoming the largest party at Stormont after the next Assembly elections. Many thought that the nature of power sharing meant this would be more of a symbolic development – albeit a very significant one, and perhaps an indication of the longer-term direction of politics in Northern Ireland – than a catalyst for immediate changes in policy. However, some expected that a Sinn Féin First Minister would take a more oppositional approach when dealing with Westminster and use the position to push for an early border poll.

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“The DUP and UUP will not be able to get it together, the vote will be split down the middle and Michelle will be ahead of the game, and it will be only a matter of time. It will be all-Ireland in the next 10 years.”

UUP voter

“They’ll have a better say. If Sinn Féin were the largest party, Westminster would have to listen.”

Sinn Féin voter

“They might do a great job. If anyone is going to argue against Boris, whether it’s for the right or wrong reason, it will be Sinn Féin. The DUP just says ‘yes yes yes,’ but sometimes the UK does get it wrong. There has to be a balance of opinion, and the DUP would be there to rein them back.”

UUP voter

“I definitely think they’d push for a referendum on a united Ireland.”

DUP voter

Most thought Unionists would react badly in the event of Sinn Féin becoming the largest party and taking the post of First Minister, and some anticipated loyalist unrest. However, there was very little support among Unionists in our groups for the idea of withdrawing from power sharing and collapsing the institutions – most thought it would be politically counterproductive, as well as damaging for public services and other aspects of life in Northern Ireland.

“You had Ian Paisley saying ‘never!’ but he ended up working with Martin McGuinness and they became good friends. If we’re going to get that on the flipside, the protestants will have to work with it, otherwise they’ll be alienated.”

Sinn Féin voter

“If the DUP say they won’t work with a Sinn Féin First Minister, where’s the democracy there? It gets people’s backs up.”

SDLP voter

“It would be like taking the Monopoly board away because you’re not winning.”

UUP voter

“The continual whispered threat of collapsing Stormont is counterproductive. It perpetuates them being seen as the troublesome party, the ones who stamp their feet, the old days of ‘no no no’. The tantrum throwers.”

DUP voter

“Hospitals and schools would suffer. We’d be back to where we were when Sinn Féin collapsed it and there was no money spent. You actually have to keep Stormont going. Or just go for direct rule and be finished.”

DUP voter

Many in our groups talked about how Sinn Féin had managed to broaden its appeal by campaigning on a wider range of contemporary issues, and through sophisticated presentation. Even Unionists who thought the party was still the same at heart had a degree of grudging admiration for the way it operated.

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“They’ve done a kind of U-turn. They have the mentality of all-Ireland, but policies of getting things done around this town. I vote for them because they come to my door.”

Sinn Féin voter

“They’re being tactical. They’re bringing in young, up-and-coming people like John Finucane, debonair, well-spoken, people who haven’t been tarred with the history, people who are young and educated. And glamorous! The girls in the posters are all glamorous.”

Alliance voter

“My experience growing up was that people voting Sinn Féin were people who believed in the IRA and were very republican, whereas now I vote for whoever is talking the best game, and in recent years Sinn Féin are talking the best game. They’re more prolific with today’s issues, women’s rights and stuff. Sinn Féin has moved on, but the DUP is back in the 70s and 80s.”

Sinn Féin voter

“They’re better at politics, basically. They’re magicians.”

DUP voter

Methodological note

3,301 adults in Northern Ireland were interviewed online between 15 and 18 November 2021. Results have been weighted to be representative of all adults in Northern Ireland. Full data tables are available at LordAshcroftPolls.com

Eight focus groups were held in Lisburn, Strabane, Enniskillen and Carrickfergus between 15 and 18 November 2021. Participants were from a range of social, religious and political backgrounds and included equal numbers of men and women.

About Lord Ashcroft

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. He is a former treasurer and deputy chairman of the UK Conservative Party. He is also honorary chairman and a former treasurer of the International Democrat Union. He is founder and chairman of the board of trustees of Crimestoppers, vice-patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, chairman of the trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy, a senior fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association, former chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University and a former trustee of Imperial War Museums. His political books include:

Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party

Call Me Dave: The Unauthorised Biography of David Cameron

Hopes and Fears: Trump, Clinton, the Voters and the Future

Well, You Did Ask: Why the UK Voted to Leave the EU

The Lost Majority: The 2017 Election, the Conservative Party, the Voters and the Future

Jacob's Ladder: The Unauthorised Biography of Jacob Rees-Mogg

Diagnosis of Defeat: Labour's Turn to Smell the Coffee

Going for Broke: The Rise of Rishi Sunak

Reunited Nation? American Politics Beyond the 2020 Election

Red Knight: The Unauthorised Biography of Sir Keir Starmer

Victoria Cross Heroes, Volumes I and II

Special Forces Heroes

George Cross Heroes

Special Ops Heroes

Heroes of the Skies

Falklands War Heroes

White Flag? An Examination of the UK's Defence Capability

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