

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO REFERENDUMS ON IRISH UNIFICATION:

THE RESULTS OF A PUBLIC CONSULTATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the summer of 2020, the Constitution Unit at University College London (UCL) ran a public consultation in Northern Ireland on possible future referendums on Northern Ireland's constitutional status. The consultation was initiated by the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland, and informed the Working Group's *Final Report*, published in May 2021. The present working paper outlines the responses to the consultation in more detail than the Working Group's report could do. It provides a valuable flavour of how people are thinking and talking about the possibility of unification referendums across Northern Ireland at present.

As the consultation responses show, Irish nationalists are currently, for understandable reasons, much more willing to participate in discussions on such referendums than are unionists, who prioritise the maintenance of the current Union. Those identifying with neither community also engaged, albeit to a lesser extent than those identifying as nationalists. This working paper highlights some trends and key themes that emerge from the responses, and lets the respondents speak in their own words.

Most noteworthy is the extent and depth of both hopes and fears on this topic across society. Many respondents expressed hopes around how referendums should be held and how unification should take place. But there were also concerns, and sometimes fears, across all communities. Should a referendum process take place in the future, political actors, including both governments, should be attentive to the hopes and fears expressed here.

Strong public views appear not yet to have emerged as to how any referendum should be conducted: respondents expressed a wide variety of views on the details, and there were few specific points on which large numbers coalesced. Wider public reflection on the mechanics of any referendum process would be desirable in order to foster greater understanding of what the processes of any decision-making about Northern Ireland's constitutional future would actually involve.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This working paper analyses the responses to a public consultation run in Northern Ireland in summer 2020 on the topic of unification referendums on the island of Ireland. The consultation asked people about their views on the prospect of a referendum on Northern Ireland's constitutional status. It was conducted by the Constitution Unit at University College London for the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland. We hold no view either for or against such a referendum; nor do we think a referendum is imminent. Rather, our goal has been simply to better understand public views on this subject.

The Working Group's *Final Report* summarised the consultation's findings (Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2021: 55–63). The present working paper provides more details.

We begin, in section 2, by providing more details on the Working Group, by way of background. Section 3 reviews existing research on public attitudes in Northern Ireland towards unification referendums, while section 4 outlines our methodology, in terms of survey design, dissemination, and analysis. We then set out consultation results in six sections, the first two setting out who responded to the consultation and analysing attitudes towards a referendum and a united Ireland in broad terms, and the remaining four looking at views on specific aspects of a referendum. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings.

2. BACKGROUND: THE WORKING GROUP ON UNIFICATION REFERENDUMS ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

The consultation conducted on behalf of the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland. The Working Group was an academic project exploring how any future referendums on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (sometimes referred to as a 'border poll') would best be designed and conducted. It was based at the Constitution Unit at University College London, and comprised experts in political science, law, history, and sociology, from universities in Northern Ireland, Ireland, Great Britain, and the United States. It was funded by the British Academy through its 'Humanities and Social Sciences Tackling the UK's International Challenges 2019' programme and by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

The project did not look at, or take a view on, whether a referendum or a united Ireland would be desirable. A referendum of this kind is, however, allowed for by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998: the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland may call such a vote at any time, and must do so if a majority for a united Ireland appears 'likely'. While the latter condition has not been met, it could be in the future. If such a vote ever does happen, it will be vital that the process be designed and conducted well. Yet the 1998 Agreement is silent on many aspects of how this would be done. The Working Group's purpose was to help fill that gap.

Over the course of its research, the Working Group sought information through multiple channels, including a call for written evidence and interviews with expert witnesses. The present working paper outlines the findings of one strand of this information-gathering exercise: a public consultation designed to examine perspectives across wider society in Northern Ireland.

This paper was prepared by its named authors. Other members of the Working Group were involved in the conception of the public consultation and commented on our preliminary analysis, but they were not otherwise involved directly in this paper's preparation.

3. EXISTING RESEARCH

We are not the first to investigate public views on the prospect of a referendum on Northern Ireland's constitutional status. Existing research takes both quantitative and qualitative forms. Quantitative studies—those drawing on opinion polls and surveys—typically focus on the basic questions around support for or opposition to unification itself and whether a referendum should be held. Until around 2013, almost all such studies found support for unification to be below 30%. Since then, results have become much more varied. While some studies continue to suggest little or no change, a small number since 2017 have placed support for unification at or close to 50% (Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2021: 49–53). Some polls have found a majority for the idea of holding a referendum in the next five years (Lucid Talk 2021). The Northern Irish Life and Times (NILT) survey, carried out annually, has asked more specific questions, including on how attitudes on the constitutional question are affected by Brexit and by differing current provisions between Ireland and Northern Ireland on matters such as abortion access, same-sex marriage, healthcare, and the economy (NILT 2020).

In recent years, deliberative methods have also been deployed to assess views towards a possible united Ireland, particularly with respect to different possible Brexit outcomes. A citizens' assembly held in 2018 identified 'a group of conditional Catholics who support Irish unity, but only under "hard [Br]exit" conditions' (see Garry et al. 2020b: 1). Participants also shared their fears that a referendum would cause division and lead to violence. They favoured clear information during any referendum and an inclusive and rational debate (Garry et al. 2020b). Elsewhere, another citizens' assembly, in 2019, found that, after learning about the different possible models of Irish unification, citizens' support for a 'devolved' model declined, particularly among Protestant participants (Garry et al. 2020a). This suggests that many people in Northern Ireland do not yet have clear preferences on the constitutional form of any future unified state.

An Oireachtas report by Senator Mark Daly (2019) drew on contributions from unionist politicians and civic activists as well as focus groups with members of unionist organisations in Northern Ireland. It identified seven fears among unionists concerning a united Ireland: identity loss; Republican triumphalism; retribution to former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), British military and prison officers for their roles during the Troubles; confiscation of land; violence; return to the EU; and concerns about healthcare, economy and welfare (Daly 2019: 8). Elsewhere, while unionists are clear they do not want Irish unity, a sentiment analysis of unionists and nationalists in a town in Northern Ireland (Dornschnieder and Todd 2020: 17) has found a willingness among some unionists to talk about the issue, despite its previously 'taboo' status.

Existing work thus examines attitudes to unification itself and provides some information on sentiment towards the prospect of a referendum on this subject. It provides little information, however, about public attitudes towards the modalities or form of any such referendum. On the questions examined by the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland, it is therefore largely silent.

4. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Multiple methods could be used to address this gap in the existing research. Traditional polls or surveys would yield systematic evidence. On relatively technical questions that few people may have thought about in detail, however, answers may not be especially meaningful, and may be highly dependent on the specific question wording. A deliberative exercise could yield deeper insights, but would be relatively costly to do well. For an initial scoping exercise, we opted to conduct a public consultation that anyone could take part in if they chose. This, we hoped, would give access to a wide range of opinion from Northern Ireland's different communities and regions. It would give evidence on who wants to engage with this subject, and what people who are engaged are thinking. In addition, in the context of the Working Group, it was important for us to have a mechanism through which anyone who wanted to express their views was able to do so.

We began by reviewing the questions that the Working Group had identified as needing attention. This gave us an initial sense of the matters we might seek people's views on. Then, still in the early stages of the consultation design work, we engaged with contacts working with civil society in Northern Ireland, discussing the purposes of the public consultation and how best to promote it, and piloting some of the questions we wished to explore. This helped ensure the consultation was easy to understand and likely therefore to yield meaningful responses. Through this process, we developed a consultation questionnaire, which we piloted and adjusted, before putting it out for public consideration.

4.1. CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

We designed the consultation questionnaire with two goals in mind: first, to enable respondents to express their general thoughts and feelings regarding the prospect of a referendum on the unification question; and, second, to gather information on what thoughts, if any, people had about the specific features of any such referendum. With the first of these purposes in mind, we began the questionnaire with very broad questions that would enable respondents to express their thoughts freely:

- Q1: What do you feel when you hear talk about such a referendum? What are your hopes? What are your fears?
- Q2: Would you want answers to any questions ahead of a referendum, to help you decide how to vote? If so, what questions would you want answers to?
- Q3: What (if anything) do you think might help to overcome your fears? Or, what would help to fulfil your hopes?

Our pilot exercise showed that asking about the specific features of any referendum would not be straightforward: very few people have thought in any detail about those features. There was a risk both that respondents would find the process of completing the questionnaire uncomfortable, and that the results would lack meaning. We concluded that it would therefore be important to provide background information on some of the particular issues being examined by the Working Group. This information detailed some of the questions that the Working Group was considering, but we did not ask for responses to these questions one

by one. We therefore label those questions here as ‘background questions’ and label them ‘BQ1–5’:

The current arrangements for a referendum on Northern Ireland’s future were laid down in 1998. They were part of an agreement between the UK and Irish governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland. This agreement is known as either the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement. The 1998 Agreement sets out some of the rules for holding any referendum:

1. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (the government minister with responsibility for Northern Ireland) must call a referendum if it appears likely that ‘a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland’
2. The issue would be decided on a simple majority of those voting (50% of the valid votes cast, plus at least one vote).

But many other aspects of the referendum process have not be[en] worked out. It is these that the Working Group is looking into. Here are some of the main questions:

1. **How would the Secretary of State decide when to call a referendum?** How should the Secretary of State judge whether a majority of voters in Northern Ireland are likely to support a united Ireland? For example, would he or she rely on opinion polls or would there need to be evidence from election results or some other source? (BQ1)
2. **When would a referendum happen?** Would a referendum take place before discussions on the form of a united? Would it take place after that? Might referendums be desirable at both of these stages? Should a referendum (or referendums) take place in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on the same day, or on different days? (BQ2)
3. **How would plans for a united Ireland be worked out?** For example, how would it be decided whether Northern Ireland would retain its own devolved government (the Assembly held in Stormont) within a united Ireland or whether powers would transfer to Dublin? How would future arrangements for things like healthcare, pensions, and policing be decided? Would such matters be decided, say, within the current Republic of Ireland, or by people across the whole island of Ireland? What roles, if any, would be played by the UK or Irish governments or the Northern Ireland Executive? What would be the role of political parties or of organisations in civil society? What would be the role of members of the public in this process—for example, through participation in a citizens’ assembly? (BQ3)
4. **What about the option to stay in the UK?** Would there also be a process for deciding whether, if voters opted to stay in the UK, Northern Ireland’s relationship with the rest of the UK would be reformed? If so, what would this process look like? (BQ4)
5. **How would the referendum be run?** Referendum procedures and regulations are very different in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Considering this, how would

the referendum campaigns be regulated? How much campaigners could spend and who could make donations? How would reliable information about the options be made available to voters, and how would any misinformation be tackled? Who would be entitled to vote in referendums both north and south? Do you have views on how any of these issues should be resolved? If you do, please indicate clearly in your response which aspect or aspects you are referring to. (BQ5)

After this background information was provided, the following questions were asked:

Q4: Do you have views on how any of these issues should be resolved? If you do, please indicate clearly in your response which aspect or aspects you are referring to.

Q5: You may feel you do not have enough information on these questions in order to express a view on them. If so, what further information would you want?

Q6: Have we missed anything?

Some reflection is in order on our approach of setting out a range of background questions, but then asking only one general question seeking responses to any of these (Q4). We took this approach, in light of our pilot exercise and discussions with civil society actors, because we did not want to present consultation respondents with a long list of questions asking about matters that most people would not have views on, which could have led many of them to conclude the consultation was not for them. The approach that we took has an important implication: the numbers of respondents offering views on any individual background question are generally low. This is reflected in the results that we present in the following sections.

In the final part of the questionnaire, to enable us to understand who had taken part in the consultation, we asked questions about demographics and identity, based on those asked by the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT 2020).

4.2. CONSULTATION PROCESS

The consultation ran over a six-week period from 22 July to 2 September 2020. Our aim was to reach across society and the various communities in Northern Ireland as much as possible. In addition to the Constitution Unit's own social media channels and posts on academic and political blogs, we therefore promoted the consultation through mainstream media—information about the consultation was featured in articles in major newspapers and radio outlets in both Northern Ireland and the Republic—and through the newsletters, email lists, and Facebook pages of voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland. It is worth noting that outlets with traditionally nationalist audiences in Northern Ireland covered the news, as did BBC Radio Ulster, but outlets with traditionally unionist audiences did not. This may have affected who saw the survey announcement—a point that we return to below.

Two weeks into the consultation, it was apparent that some groups were underrepresented: in particular, women, Protestants, unionists, those identifying as British, and those educated to A Level or lower. To address this, we identified and contacted additional community groups and networks working closely with these groups. In total, we directly contacted 55 community groups.

4.3 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESPONSES

After the consultation closed, to analyse the large number of responses received, we developed a ‘coding’ framework for each of the main questions asked. Every response was read and categorised, highlighting the themes and issues that respondents raised. Three people coded the responses. For each question, they began by coding separately. They then examined each other’s work, conducted a series of blind coding rounds, and gradually developed a common set of categories. These categories reflected answers to the key questions asked in the survey, as well as other issues which were prominently raised by respondents. The categories or ‘codes’ had two layers. The first was the overarching theme or issue the response was situated within: for example, ‘fear of a united Ireland’. The second captured the more specific point being raised: for example, ‘loss of healthcare’. After initial analysis, we assessed the coding scheme as a whole and identified some gaps. We renamed, split, merged, and in some cases added new codes based on an agreed scheme. One coder added the new codes to the responses in the survey, while a second person checked them.

We then analysed the responses based on the coding, looking at patterns both overall and within particular demographic and identity groups. As we elaborate in the following section, one key feature of the responses was that they came disproportionately from nationalist identifiers. As a result, the aggregate patterns across all respondents considered collectively have little meaning: they are in no sense representative of opinion across Northern Ireland’s population. In the sections that follow, we therefore report only breakdowns by respondents identifying as unionist, nationalist, or neither. Given the self-selected nature of our sample, caution is, of course, needed in interpreting even these patterns. But they do give a flavour of the thinking of those members of each group who chose to engage with the consultation.

During the early analysis, the coders noticed repetition in a small number of responses. On investigation, we found 39 responses that appeared to contain coordinated messages, with respondents raising similar themes framed in almost identical language. A further 27 responses had somewhat similar messages or language. These responses tended to call for a referendum ‘in the next 5 years’ and for the establishment of an ‘all-Ireland representative citizens’ assembly/forum’. They also frequently said that a vote to stay in the UK ‘does not suspend the right to self-determination or resolve the constitutional question’. These responses constituted only 3–5% of the total sample, so they did not strongly affect the distribution of opinion. The issues raised by these respondents were not uncommon, and there is no reason to doubt that these were genuine people expressing genuine views. Thus, while noting the patterns, we have not removed these responses from our analysis.

Beyond these observations regarding the nature of our sample, we should also note the effects of our survey questions upon the responses. We prompted people to think about certain matters through background questions BQ1–5, but there are, of course, many other matters that we did not bring explicitly to respondents’ attention. Whether we mentioned a point in the questionnaire or not is clearly likely to have affected how many people raised it in their responses. We therefore make it clear in what follows where a point was highlighted by our background questions and where it was not. The responses should be interpreted in light of that.

For the several reasons just given, great caution should be exercised in attaching meaning to the precise numbers of respondents expressing particular views. We do, however, report such numbers (as percentages of respondents from each group), to enable readers to see the prevalence of those views as expressed by this particular set of respondents in response to this particular questionnaire. These figures are helpful illustrations of the issues that members

of each community raised with us, and gives some indication as to the hierarchy of salience across issues. Where views were expressed by fewer than 4% of the respondents from the given group, we report simply that ‘a small number’ of respondents mentioned it.

Alongside these numbers, we also quote the words of respondents directly, to provide illustrations of the precise points that they wanted to make. It should be noted that we quote these responses exactly as they were submitted, without editing for spelling or grammar. Where an ellipsis appears within a quotation without parenthesis, that is because it was part of the response itself.

5. WHO RESPONDED TO THE CONSULTATION?

In total, we received 1,377 responses, including 803 from respondents who said they lived in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland residents were our primary focus—gathering a cross-section of views in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain as well would have required a wider promotional exercise on our part, which was beyond our means. The following analysis therefore focuses on responses in Northern Ireland. We did examine the responses from the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, and elsewhere, but this did not identify any major views or themes which differed from those voiced by respondents from Northern Ireland. It is notable that the majority of respondents from Great Britain identified as either Irish (63%), Northern Irish (11.8%), or Ulster (2%); only 7.8% identified as British and 7.8% identified as Other. The figure for respondents who identified as British could include both respondents originally from Great Britain and those originally from Northern Ireland now residing in Great Britain who identified as British. This suggests that only a small number of respondents originally from Great Britain engaged with the survey.

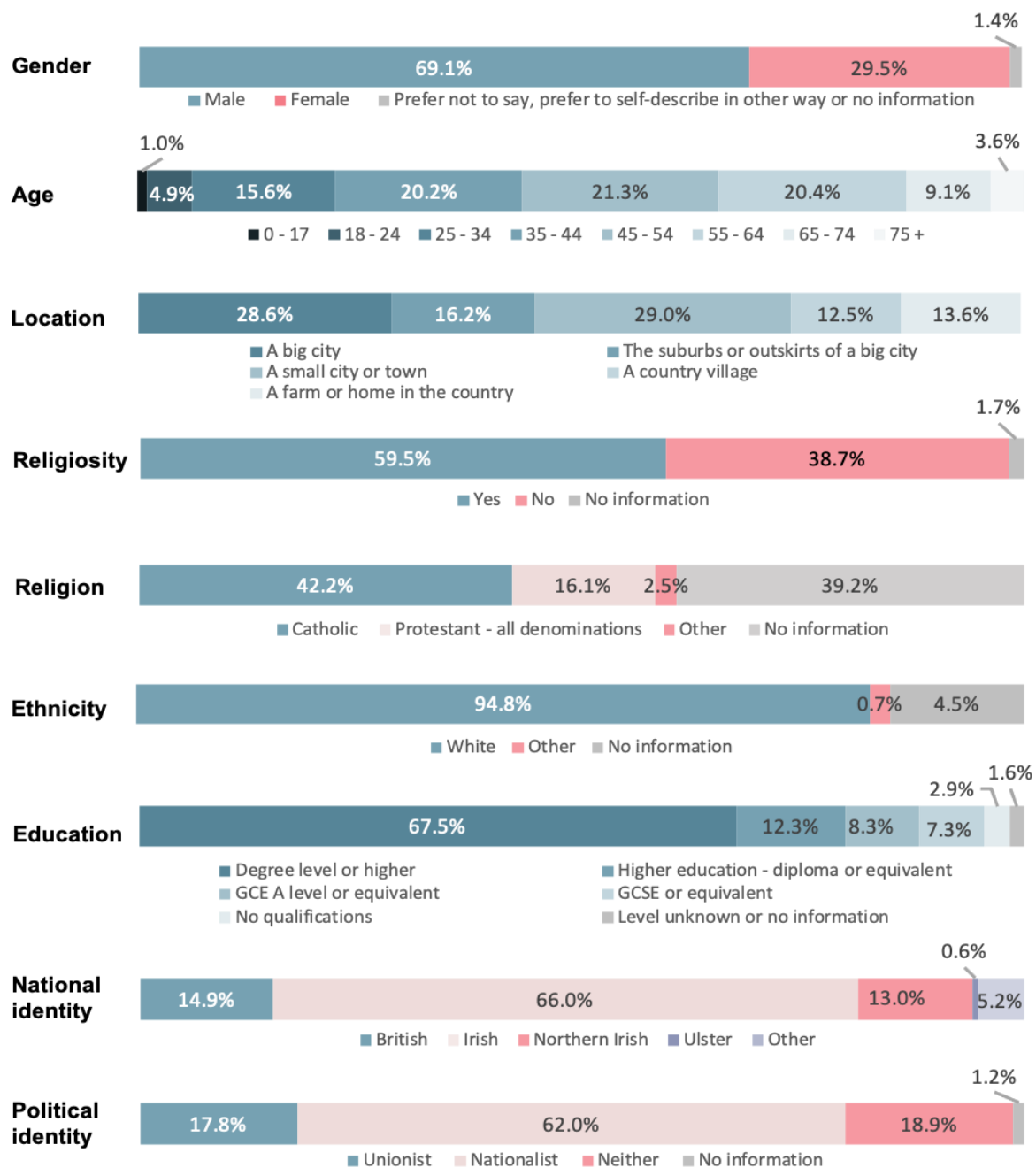
Figure 1 below breaks down the Northern Ireland respondents across demographic categories and groups within society. As is evident, they skew strongly towards some groups. Most notably, and unsurprisingly given the subject, many more nationalists and people identifying as Irish responded than did unionists and people identifying as British. As noted above, this might partly reflect the news outlets that carried information about the consultation, but it is likely to reflect deeper patterns too. That is, it provides an important indication of the state of debate on these matters within Northern Ireland: while many nationalists are keen to consider the prospect of a referendum on the unification question, most unionists are very wary. Despite this, significant numbers identifying as British and/or unionist, or identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist, did respond, and so the consultation does give valuable insights into thinking in these communities too.

An issue arose with regards to place names in the survey. The consultation asked where respondents were resident, and provided a series of answers to select from (Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, or elsewhere). Ticking the ‘elsewhere’ response in the survey allowed the respondent to then type in their own answer. This was intended for respondents living in countries outside these islands, but it was also used by some people who rejected the terms ‘Northern Ireland’ or ‘Republic of Ireland’. Some selected ‘elsewhere’ and then entered ‘the North’ or words that implied they lived in the six counties that constitute Northern Ireland (23 respondents). Some simply wrote ‘Ireland’ (25 respondents) which made it unclear which jurisdiction they were resident in. In almost all of these cases, respondents identified themselves as nationalists (a few also stated they were neither unionist nor nationalist). Given the ambiguity, their responses were not added to the

final analysis of nationalist responses in Northern Ireland. Doing so would not have significantly altered the results.

There is also a marked gender imbalance in the responses. As noted above, we observed this pattern early in the consultation period and sought to address it by contacting civic organisations working specifically with women. That a strong imbalance remained may reflect wider patterns of political discourse (see: Potter 2020). Respondents also skewed strongly towards those with a higher level of formal education. How far this reflects patterns in society and how far it is a result of the survey having been produced and disseminated by a team based in a university is impossible to say.

Figure 1. Demographic breakdown of consultation responses



6. ATTITUDES TO A REFERENDUM IN GENERAL

We turn now to the content of people's responses, beginning with their perceptions of a referendum in general. Our broad opening questions (Q1–3) elicited a wide range of perspectives. Respondents frequently discussed whether they favoured or opposed holding such a vote and when, if at all, it should be held. They also expressed hopes and fears of many kinds. Some suggested possible means of addressing their fears, while others, most notably many unionists, were clear that the only way to address their concerns would be not to hold a referendum.

Respondents expressed hopes and fears about many different things: about what would happen if there was a referendum or if there was not; about ways in which particular actors might, in the eyes of the respondent, behave helpfully or harmfully in the context of a referendum. In addition, many respondents did not express hopes or fears at all. In particular, a majority of unionist respondents and some respondents who identified as neither said that they were either completely opposed to a referendum or stated that it was premature to discuss the matter. Given these patterns, it would not be meaningful to present aggregate numbers of those who expressed hopefulness or fearfulness in the round.

Instead, in what follows, we highlight key general themes that emerged from respondents' answers. We focus on themes that were shared by around 10% or more of respondents from at least one of the communities in Northern Ireland. We close the section by looking at past referendums that were mentioned by respondents in their answers. This gives an indication of the kinds of referendum experiences that shape how people view the prospect of a future referendum on the question of Irish unification.

As we emphasised in setting out our methodology above, the nature of our sample means that precise meaning should not be attached to exact numbers. Where the opinions were expressed by fewer than 4% of respondents, we therefore say simply that a small number of respondents raised it.

6.1. CONCERNS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL DIVISIVENESS OF A REFERENDUM

One of the most frequently shared concerns was a fear that a referendum would be divisive and could further polarise society in Northern Ireland. 10% of nationalists, 23% of unionists and 29% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist raised this prospect. One nationalist said: 'I fear that some parties will use the referendum campaign to stoke fear, division and sectarianism in order to influence the electorate.'

A unionist said: 'I see it as an attack on the British people of Northern Ireland. There is no place for British people among SF they only have an agenda of removing everything that is British. If a referendum is brought forward anytime soon it will only cause division and cause trouble'. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: 'I feel despair at the thought of prolonged campaign that might (I think probably will) lead to more instability, tension and threat or occurrence of violence. I don't think a referendum will "settle" anything—no matter what the outcome, the issues that divide us will remain'. Some respondents expressed fears of fake claims being used to manipulate public opinion (see section 8.2 below).

6.2. FEARS OF VIOLENCE

Another recurring issue was the fear that violence could break out if a referendum took place. 19% of nationalists, 31% of unionists and 35% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist mentioned fears of violence when responding to various questions throughout the survey.¹ For example, one respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I feel anxious when I hear it discussed, because I know it’ll cause violence, but I also feel hopeful for a brighter future.’

5% of nationalists and small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist specifically referred to fears of loyalist violence. One nationalist wrote: ‘My fear is that hardline unionism and loyalism would not accept the outcome and react violently.’

Small numbers of respondents from each group specifically referred to fears of republican violence. A unionist said: ‘We will have to live in fear of the IRA.’

Some respondents also shared fears that the losing side could fail to accept the results, which, among other things, could lead to violence (see section 10.1).

Additionally, small numbers in each group shared fears that there could be intimidation of voters and minority groups during a referendum campaign. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I worry that violence and intimidation could rise (from one or both “sides”) in the lead-up to a referendum, and that this could affect the vote. Intimidation at voting stations could also present itself.’

6.3. CROSS-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOMMODATION

Another prominent theme—raised by 15% of nationalists, 4% of unionists, and 16% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist in response to the question about how to address fears and fulfil hopes concerning a referendum (Q3)—was the need for cross-community engagement.

One nationalist wrote: ‘accepting unionist views so they feel they belong as without their vote this will not be possible’. A unionist said: ‘An honest dialogue, north and south. Serious thinking, and some compromise shown by republicans in NI that we are different and will remain so in UI’. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Steps such as consultations with different parts of the community in NI (such as the one the SDLP announced this week²) would show how a positive, constructive discussion around these issues could be possible’.

Similarly, a small number of nationalists, 9% of unionists and 5% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist particularly highlighted that the unionist community had to be protected in a united Ireland. One nationalist said: ‘I would hope that it is handled correctly so as to allay the fears of the unionist community so that they could realise that a new Ireland would also be their home and that their culture and identity would

¹The Final Report of the Working Group mentions different figures for fears of violence arising from a referendum: 15% of nationalist respondents, 21% of unionists, and 27% of those who identify as neither (Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2020: 50; 2021: 60). These numbers presented responses only to Q1. Due to the prominence of the issue in responses to various questions throughout the survey, we have now recalculated the numbers, including all responses mentioning fears of violence.

² See the SDLP’s ‘New Ireland Commission’: https://www.sdlp.ie/new_ireland_commission

not be under threat.’ A unionist said: ‘Some clear answers and plans on these issues before any referendum takes place and a guarantee that Unionists would still have all the benefits of British citizenship and nationality that Nationalists currently enjoy in relation to Ireland’. Another respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘A guarantee that the British Identity in Northern Ireland and our way of life would stay the same’.

Meanwhile, 5% of nationalists, 7% of unionists and 7% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist stressed that all communities should be protected in a united Ireland.

6.4. ASPIRATIONS FOR A WELL-PLANNED REFERENDUM AND A CLEAR PLAN FOR UNIFICATION

Finally as regards hopes and fears about a referendum in itself, 6% of nationalists, 10% of unionists and 10% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist highlighted that a clear roadmap for unification should be produced before a referendum. One nationalist said: ‘A clear, cross-party plan showing all parts of the economy, infrastructure, healthcare and personal status have been properly considered and budgeted for.’ A unionist said: ‘There must be a detailed economic and constitutional proposal which is independently validated. No Brexit lies. A website could allow people to enter their current wages and expenditures to see how they would be affected financially by changes in taxes and cost of living.’ Another respondent who identified as neither unionist nor nationalist said: ‘A coherent plan of action for post referendum. The referendum must clearly state what the people are being asked to vote for.’

10% of nationalists, 10% of unionists and 13% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist also highlighted that campaigning and deliberation on the prospective united Ireland should be based on impartial information (see also section 8.2). One unionist said: ‘A fully informed detailed list of everything that would change if there was an all Ireland and this to be made public by the media and I think they could never cover everyone’s questions.’

6.5. POSITIVE EXPECTATIONS FOR A UNITED IRELAND

Though we did not ask specifically for respondents’ views on a potential united Ireland—Q1 was about hopes and fears concerning a *referendum*—many nonetheless shared them. We report on positive expectations here and negative expectations in the subsection that follows.

The commonest hope, mentioned by 25% of nationalists, a small number of unionists and 13% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist, related to better community cohesion in a united Ireland. One nationalist said: ‘I have a hope and aspiration of a new inclusive and prosperous Ireland of equals. A country that is welcoming and representative of everyone.’ A unionist said: ‘My hopes would be that there is a neutral society from which we could all live in together . A new National anthem and a new flag and remove all churches from having any influence on politics . Have a new National holiday free from old dogma like Easter rising’. A respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I hope that both NI and ROI can reimagine the sectarian States that were created in a mirror image of each other and create an agreed and shared country for the benefit of everyone.’

12% of nationalists, a small number of unionists and 7% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist shared hopes about a positive economic impact of unification. One nationalist said: ‘My hope is it’ll finally bring the country together and in doing boost most things related to it. One economy, one health system, one transport system and one education system. I truly believe the 26 + 6 counties will function much better under one Gov’. A unionist said: ‘Hopes: Greater economic prosperity and stability. A free healthcare service for those living in the South’. A respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘The possibility of a referendum excites me as I think a united island inside the EU could have enormous potential in many areas: the environment, health and education, business and inward investment, potential to influence peace and wellbeing on the world stage and within the EU, and more.’

6% of nationalists, a small number of unionists and 11% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist were hopeful about re-joining the EU in the event of unification. One nationalist said: ‘I hope the referendum happens soon and is based on a clear thought out plan that gets us back in the European Union as soon as possible.’ A unionist said: ‘I would also be pleased if there was an immediate EU membership for all NI citizens of such a referendum passed.’ A respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Personally speaking I am sad to be leaving the EU and this is an opportunity for my children to have all those benefits for their futures.’

6.7. NEGATIVE EXPECTATIONS FOR A UNITED IRELAND

Some respondents also expressed negative expectations regarding a united Ireland. A small number of nationalists, 19% of unionists and 7% of those identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist shared concerns and fears about the future of unionists and unionist identity. Some unionists voiced fears of ‘ethnic cleansing’, a loss of British identity, or discrimination in a united Ireland. One unionist said: ‘[I am] extremely fearful for the future if this takes place and scared for my life due to high level of support between Republican political parties and paramilitary groups. [...] I would be fearful that certain cultural groups could only commemorate behind closed doors and secretly as they would be fearful of physical and emotional attacks. I would be forced to live in a state I have no wish to be a part of and feel I would not be welcome in’. Although one of the themes discussed in recent years has been whether some unionists would leave in the event of a united Ireland, this was mentioned in only a very few responses. When replying to the question on how to address their fears and fulfil their hopes (Q3), one unionist said, ‘I would vote to stay in the UK—if that vote was lost I would expect a financial package to leave’.

Another respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I fear it will be the end of the “British-Irish” identity and that “republican-Irish” identity will be the only legitimate “Irishness”. I fear that the special link with the monarchy will be lost and I fear that there could be revenge upon Unionists. I fear that there will be no place for Unionists (unless they keep their head down and say nothing)’. One nationalist also said: ‘I fear the unionist community will feel unwelcome or completely disengage from the debate. This could fuel an insular closed community who may turn to civil unrest and violence- should a yes be secured’.

15% of unionists and small numbers of nationalists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist also expressed fears of economic downturn in the case of unification. One nationalist said: ‘The economic impact is the greatest fear, as it is the lack of jobs that will prove to be a strong influence on appetite for violence’. A unionist said: ‘I would be

afraid that a united Ireland would lead to [...] economic harm to Northern Ireland by the loss of redundant civil service jobs and the British subsidy to Northern Ireland. [...] It could also lead to higher taxation and increased sectarianism in the Republic of Ireland and could lead to increasing problems with good governance given the additional difficulties in forging coalitions'. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: 'Anxious and fearful of what being dragged into a unitary Irish Republic might do to peace the health care system the economy'.

A small number of nationalists, 8% of unionists and 5% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist mentioned that they were worried about losing the existing standard of healthcare in a united Ireland. One nationalist said: 'I fear [...] the healthcare situation of going from the NHS to a private healthcare'. Similarly, a unionist said: 'I also do not relish putting my family's health etc. at risk due to the cost of health care currently in Ireland'. A respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: 'Losing the NHS is a fear'.

6.8. INFORMATION AND ACTIONS

Beyond our question about hopes and fears (Q1), we also asked what information respondents would want before deciding how to vote (Q2) and how what might overcome their fears or enable their hopes to be fulfilled (Q3). Regarding the former, some respondents explained that they already knew how they would vote and no further information would change that. Indeed, 11% of nationalists, 20% of unionists and 9% respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist replied that they had no questions. One nationalist said: 'I don't need any questions answered, I feel that I know enough about the entire situation that I would be comfortable voting.' Nationalists and some respondents who identified as neither were looking forward to a referendum and hoped to see it either as soon as possible or within five to ten years. By contrast, unionists who reported having made up their minds about the vote were overwhelmingly opposed to unification and, indeed, to holding a referendum. One unionist said: 'I need no answers—I would never vote to alter the constitutional position of Northern Ireland in any way.' Another said: 'That there will be no referendum at all, no Pandoras box opened.'

But other respondents, across all three communities, reported that they would like to have answers about the shape of a united Ireland. Table 1 shows aspects were mentioned by 10% or more respondents from at least one community.

Table 1. Issues on which respondents reported wanting more information

Aspects of the shape of a united Ireland mentioned by respondents	Nationalists	Unionists	Neither nationalist nor unionist
Healthcare	45%	25%	45%
Finance and economics	29%	18%	22%
General constitutional arrangements	17%	11%	25%
Pensions	11%	13%	20%
Education	17%	7%	18%
Protection of minorities	13%	13%	9%
Relationship of a united Ireland with the UK	7%	8%	11%
Funding the costs of reunification	7%	11%	7%

Similarly, when answering the question on how their fears should be addressed and their hopes fulfilled, some unionists and respondents who identified as neither unionist nor nationalist stated that their fears could not be addressed, due to the extent of their opposition to a referendum. Some proposed that their fears would be addressed if unity was rejected at a referendum. Others said they would need reassurances of equality and protection from discrimination in a united Ireland. One unionist said: ‘A genuine Ireland of Equals... Were minorities are genuinely looked after and can maintain our British birthright... Just like nationalists can in northern Ireland... This can't be one sided... It has to go both ways otherwise unfortunately it would create over a million people who would be a thorn in the side of a new Ireland.’

6.9. LESSONS LEARNT FROM PREVIOUS CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUMS

When answering various questions throughout the consultation, respondents mentioned previous referendums on constitutional issues in the UK as examples to follow or learn from. (Perhaps surprisingly, very few mentioned referendums in Ireland.) This provides useful evidence on the reference frames through which people view possible future referendums.

Combining responses to all questions, 18% nationalists, 12% unionists and 24% respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said the example of the 2016 Brexit referendum should not be followed. One nationalist said: ‘Another fear would be a knee jerk referendum returning a “yes” result but without extensive work going into how reunification would be implemented. Just look at the Brexit mess to see what happens when the Leave vote won but no one had any idea how to implement it, and it looks most likely to be a devastating crash out Brexit now.’ One unionist said: ‘Fears: Brexit was supported because there was no detail. Irish unity sounds nice until you put some detail on it, then hardline republicans will join hardline unionists in rejecting it, so we might have the same vague ideas dominating the discussion and find that we could have chaos as bad as Brexit, but with guns in the

background.’ One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘This will be a highly contentious issue and it will be important that there is clear transparency on donations, limits on funding for both side options and rigorous fact checking—particularly important is that the Broadcasters do not allow ‘facts’ to go unchecked as happened so often with the Brexit vote.’

Many others also mentioned the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. 11% nationalists, 5% unionists and a small number of respondents who identified as neither would like certain aspects of how it was run to be considered in any unification referendum on the island of Ireland. One nationalist said: ‘I believe that 16/17 year olds should have voting rights on this occasion, like in the Scottish referendum.’ One unionist said: ‘Although I fear, like Scotland, that some will want referendum after referendum until it goes their way.’ One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Scotland have made major plans if they were ever to vote for independence and the same should be done in Ireland.’

Finally, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement referendum of 1998 was also mentioned as an example to follow by 7% respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist along with small numbers of nationalists and unionists. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Any vote should be done under the same aegis as that for the GFA.’ One nationalist said: ‘Produce a booklet addressing the benefits of reunification in a clear concise manner and deliver to every household i.e. like the Good Friday Agreement.’

7. DESIGN OF A REFERENDUM

This section and the three that follow focus on more specific features of any referendum process. Here, we outline attitudes to key design features of a referendum itself: the referendum threshold; the franchise; the sequence of referendums north and south; and the evidence that might be used by the Secretary of State to assess whether he or she is obliged to call a vote.

Most of the responses presented here reflect points that we highlighted in background questions BQ1–5. One exception is the threshold: we did not mention this, but respondents brought it up themselves in response to a number of questions. These themes were not as prominent as those presented in the previous section, so the numbers of respondents addressing them are relatively small.

7.1. THE REFERENDUM THRESHOLD

We did not mention referendum thresholds in our background questions because the 1998 Agreement is clear that a simple majority (50% + 1) in Northern Ireland is what would be required for it to consent to unification in a referendum. The Working Group took the clear view that this requirement should be adhered to (Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2021: 196). Likewise, for any referendum on this matter in the Republic of Ireland, the normal and constitutionally entrenched threshold of 50% + 1 would apply. Nevertheless, respondents raised the issue of the threshold when discussing their hopes and fears with regard to a referendum (Q1), when discussing the ways to address their hopes and fears (Q3), and when providing their views on how a referendum should be run (Q4). Overall, 13% of nationalists, 10% of unionists and 12% of respondents who identified as neither shared their views on the referendum threshold.

12% of nationalists as well as a small number of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist wrote in favour of a simple majority to determine the results of any future referendum. One nationalist said: ‘That ALL votes count the same. A declaration that 50% + 1 whilst not being an ideal majority is a valid outcome. I will not accept a higher threshold under any pretence as that is juggling the books and could lead to tangible problems.’

Another respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Re Simple majority—a weighted majority is unavoidably undemocratic and means that some votes weigh more than others. A slim majority either way would be damaging, but this should be avoided by using good data to decide when to call a referendum (i.e. election results).’

Many of those in favour of a simple majority highlighted that it was an explicit requirement of the 1998 Agreement. One nationalist said: ‘Regarding the referendum voting procedure, in line with the Belfast Agreement/Good Friday Agreement a majority vote of 50% plus 1 vote will decide the outcome.’

Elsewhere, even though the Good Friday Agreement and the Irish constitution require a threshold of 50% + 1 of votes, 10% of unionist respondents, 9% of those who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist, and a small number of nationalists stated their support for a supermajority threshold, varying from 60% to 75% in favour of unification. One unionist said this was needed ‘to avoid a split country’. A nationalist said ‘50% plus one vote, is too contentious and problematic—we’ve seen this with brexit. The parameters need to be redefined to support more clarity, say at 60% or so.’

Some of those in favour of a supermajority thought that a simple majority would result in violence. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘My greatest fear is that, if there were a narrow margin in NI in favour of a united Ireland, the loyalists in NI would create mayhem. I believe that this would be less likely if the benchmark for the referendum were changed from 50% + 1 to a majority of two thirds. I think it is reasonable that such a major change would require a greater majority than 51%. I would accept there being a referendum once every ten years until there was a greater than two thirds majority either way.’

7.2. THE REFERENDUM FRANCHISE

We included a background question on who should be entitled to vote in referendums both north and south (BQ5). We received responses on the subject from 20% of nationalists, 10% of unionists and 13% of respondents who identified as neither. Small numbers of respondents from each group said they favoured including those on existing electoral registers or those eligible to vote in parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One respondent identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘All citizens in the electoral register in Ireland and Northern Ireland should be eligible to vote’.

Respondents mentioned franchise rules relating to citizenship, residency, and age.

On citizenship, small numbers explicitly favoured allowing resident citizens of other EU countries or other foreign nationals to vote. One nationalist said: ‘The constitutional arrangement affects all those living on the island of Ireland and therefore I would be open to the idea of allowing citizens and residents within the island the opportunity to be heard and therefore vote.’

By contrast, 5% of unionists and small numbers of other respondents mentioned votes only from those holding British or Irish passports. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: 'I think the people allowed to vote should be Irish or UK citizens/passport holders, and not merely resident in the countries.'

Turning to residency, 6% of unionists and small numbers of nationalists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist wanted to restrict voting to residents of the island of Ireland. One unionist said: 'Any British or Irish Citizen over 18 registered to vote and resident in NI or ROI on the day of the vote should be allowed.'

Small numbers respondents (but, curiously, no unionists) said they were in favour of voting throughout the UK. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: 'I think people on both islands should be entitled to vote with each ballot paper representative of how it effects their futures. EG on the mainland, the opinions should be if they wish NI to remain part of the UK yes or No. Do you think UK needs to assist financially for a set period of time for the transition yes or no'.

Small numbers of nationalists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist supported Irish diaspora votes in a referendum. One said: 'I think we need to really allow for all those abroad to be able to come home and vote, if they can.'

By contrast, small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist, but no nationalists, explicitly opposed diaspora votes. One unionist said: 'Passport holders living outside the island of Ireland should NOT be allowed to vote in a referendum.'

Finally, in respect of age, small numbers from each community favored lowering the voting age to 16. One nationalist said: '... young people over 16 should also be given a vote as this whole thing would be about their future.'

By contrast, a small number of unionists highlighted that they would like the voting age to be 18. One said: 'Only those aged 18 or over and of UK or Irish citizenship should be allowed to vote.'

7.3. SEQUENCE OF REFERENDUMS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

We included a background question on whether referendums in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland should take place on the same day or on different days (BQ2). In total, we received responses from 28% nationalists, 8% unionists and 17% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionists on this matter. 25% of nationalists, 6% of unionists and 16% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said that they were in favour of simultaneous referendums in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One nationalist said: 'The referendum must be carried out on the same day north and south otherwise exit polls might influence voters who had yet to cast their vote.' A unionist said: 'Both referendums would need to be done on the same day with the same questions.'

By contrast, small numbers favoured separate referendums north and south at different stages. For example, one respondent proposed to have a referendum in the Republic of Ireland only if a vote in Northern Ireland backed unification, saying: 'I also believe that if a referendum is called, the North would have an initial vote. If those results are in favour of Unity, a vote in the South should be timed within 6 months.'

A small number of respondents proposed to have a referendum in the Republic of Ireland first. One said: ‘Referendum on a new proposed constitution in case of unification should happen in ROI first, then one in NI.’

7.4. EVIDENCE FOR THE SECRETARY OF STATE

We included a background question on how the Secretary of State should decide whether a majority of voters in Northern Ireland are ‘likely’ to support a united Ireland (BQ1). This suggested opinion polls and election results as examples of the evidence sources that might be used, and asked whether other sources should be used too. In total, 41% of nationalists, 14% of unionists and 36% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist shared their views on the matter.

18% of nationalists, 11% of unionists, and 14% of those who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist explicitly supported the use of election results. One unionist said: ‘SoS should call a Border Poll once Nationalist Parties have an overall vote share more than 50%.’ One neither nationalist nor unionist respondent said: ‘A Border Poll should only be called when Nationalist Political Parties have more than 50% of the vote share at any election.’ A nationalist said: ‘Election results would be a good gauge for the staging of a referendum; if the British secretary of state must hold one when a "Yes" vote looks likely, then the existence of a nationalist majority of voters in Assembly or Westminster elections would be a good indicator of this.’

14% of nationalists, a small number of unionists, and 11% of respondents who identified as neither unionist nor nationalist supported the use of opinion polls. One respondent who identified as neither unionist nor nationalist said: ‘The Secretary of state should commission an independent and internationally adjudicated indicative poll to confirm the voting intentions of the majority of Northern Ireland for remaining part of UK, or transitioning to Irish Unity’.

6% of nationalists and small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist supported the use of census data. One nationalist said: ‘I feel that census data is particularly useful in determining the political background of all citizens.’ It should be noted, though, that the census, which is conducted only once every ten years, does not ask about political background. It does include a question on religion, but the link between this and political perspective is of course imperfect.

10% of nationalists, a small number of unionists and 7% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist advocated a mixed evidence approach. For example, one unionist said: ‘A series of opinion polls, north and south over a 5 year period. Results of election results also considered along with a series of votes in the Assembly (run alongside the opinion polls).’

8. DESIGN OF A REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

This section summarises views on how any referendum campaign should be conducted. It includes issues of campaign funding, the roles of the governments and the political parties in a campaign, information provision, and how to deal with misinformation. This section predominantly addresses themes raised in our background questions (BQ1–5) and reflects answers to Q4. However, some of the themes in this section featured in responses to our

general questions about hopes and fears about a referendum (Q1) and how to address them (Q3).

8.1. CAMPAIGN FUNDING AND THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Respondents expressed a variety of views in relation to campaign funding. In all cases, the numbers making particular points were small.

Some highlighted the need for transparency and accountability in campaign funding. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘There would need to be absolute transparency about donations.’

Some supported a cap on donations or spending by campaigners. One unionist said: ‘I can make no comment on how much any party can spend electioneering, only that it must be an equal amount or ALL, regardless of size.’

Some said a campaign should be protected from external interference by banning all non-UK and non-RoI funding. A unionist said: ‘Tight control of funding of any campaigns would be needed to ensure that money from outside the UK and Ireland would not be used to influence any campaign.’

Some favoured state-funded campaigns. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Regarding funding, a set amount for each side, given by the governments of each area (Stormont and Dublin) only. No donations.’

By contrast, a small number of nationalists, but no unionists or respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist, stated that they were opposed to government-led campaigns. One said: ‘I think both governments should be prohibited from using public money for campaign materials or officially endorsing a positions, though governing political parties should be free to campaign.’

Small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist stated that there should be official ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns.

Finally, some explicitly supported political parties campaigning in a referendum. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘..... The referendum campaign can be led by political parties either in support of or against.’ One nationalist said: ‘Any campaigns should only allow established political parties on the island i.e. no party created to campaign specifically on the referendum.’

8.2. INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION

Many respondents highlighted the importance of impartial information availability during a referendum campaign, and the question on how misinformation should be tackled. Overall, 19% nationalists, 8% unionists and 22% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist stressed that impartial information would be very important. One said: ‘Facts only no fake news.’

Some respondents from each community shared fears of manipulation of referendum campaigns by politicians, media, social media, or external forces. Fears were variously expressed of ‘media bias’, ‘bot manipulation’, ‘misinformation’, and campaigners’ use of ‘social media to manipulate public opinion’.

Respondents calling for fact-checking or truthful information often also stressed the importance of clarity in advanced planning for unification. One nationalist said: ‘I think the more information that is available (factual) on both sides of the argument would enable people to make an informed decision.’

Brexit was brought up throughout the survey as a bad example of how misinformation was handled during a referendum campaign. One respondent identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Factual information with tight legal rules about what claims can be made during campaigning—Unlike the Brexit referendum where no one was held to account for outright lies told whilst campaigning. To be treated in same way as an election, not a referendum, where the telling of lies in a campaign could mean that result was overturned’. One unionist said: ‘The lesson from the Brexit referendum is that we need to think things through to the 'nth' degree before voting on constitutional change. That means everything from the colour of the post boxes to the future of the NHS’. Small numbers of respondents in all communities referenced the 1998 referendum on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as an example of good practice when providing impartial information. One nationalist said: ‘When issues agreed the government should provide a clear summary of information, similar as to what was provided for the referendum on the GFA.’

Turning to misinformation, 12% of nationalists and small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist called for an independent body to oversee referendum campaigns and tackle misinformation, in some cases saying specifically that this should have a fact-checking role or a role in distributing factual information. One respondent identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Fact and evidence based research and scenarios. An independent cross country (UK, Ireland, N. Ireland) body to determine a charter for how this process can be managed, regulated and holding political leaders to account for participating fairly in the process.’ A nationalist said: ‘An external fact checking service may be useful to adjudicate claims by the various campaigns.’

Small numbers of respondents from all communities advocated sanctions for spreading misinformation during a campaign. One unionist said: ‘Misinformation issued by any person should be punished severely—through financial penalty and judicial sanction.’

9. PLANNING FOR A REFERENDUM/IRISH UNIFICATION

This section outlines views on how any process of planning for a referendum and/or unification should be organised. Some of these views were shared in response to Q4: we included a background question on how plans for a united Ireland would be developed (BQ3). Views on this subject were also shared in response to the question about hopes and fears (Q1) and how to address them (Q3). This topic includes the role of various stakeholders: the British and Irish governments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, political parties, civil society and the public, and international actors. Many respondents did not distinguish between planning for a referendum and planning for unification, so we present views on both together.

Understandably, few unionists expressed views on planning for a referendum, reflecting their preference that it not take place.

9.1. THE ATTITUDES OF THE UK AND IRISH GOVERNMENTS

Respondents shared views on a range of aspects of the attitudes of the British and Irish governments to a referendum.

Small numbers of respondents from each community shared concerns that the Irish government would be reluctant to engage with a referendum. One respondent identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I feel that the referendum on reunification and any open discussion about it has been overly politicised by extremist sectarian groups with the backing/ and or neglect of powerful bodies in both Westminster and Stormont, with a blind eye turned by Dublin. Effectively creating an inaccurate grand narrative as a result of laziness or malicious, or both, by the British and Irish states and the result has been a dangerous silencing of local on the ground inclusive debate.’

Small numbers of nationalists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist expressed similar concerns in relation to the British government—often specifically over whether it would allow a referendum to happen. One nationalist said: ‘My fears are that a Sec of State will renege on allowing such a referendum even when the evidence suggests it would be endorsed’.

A small number of nationalists and unionists shared their doubts about whether the Republic of Ireland would be willing to accept unification. One nationalist said: ‘We can’t just take it for granted that the population and government of Ireland would welcome us back with open arms. I would hope that if we were to have a referendum that the result would be accepted by all no matter which way it goes. I fear though that this wouldn’t be the case.’

Meanwhile, small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist were wary that the British government or the EU might be biased towards unification. One unionist said: ‘I fear the EU is trying to stage-manage a unification against the will of the NI unionist protestant people and has used ROI in the early stages of the Brexit process.’

Some respondents voiced concerns in relation to both governments. One identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘My fears would be that the process is hijacked by governments unwilling to let the people of Ireland decide their future for themselves. Be it a London government unwilling to hold a referendum or delaying matters and interfering and siding with a unionist political establishment or a southern government afraid of its people changing the political playing field and threatening their own source of power. Thus leading them to make unification a top down process.’

9.2. THE ROLES OF THE UK AND IRISH GOVERNMENTS

8% of nationalists, 6% of unionists and 12% of those who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist advocated inter-governmental cooperation between the British and Irish governments (some also included the Northern Ireland Executive) as a way to address their fears and fulfil their hopes about a referendum.

A small number of nationalists (but no other respondents) specifically called for the Irish government to take the lead on a referendum. One said: ‘The Irish government, as a joint guarantor and signatory of the GFA, is constitutionally obliged to be an advocate for Irish unity.’ Some other nationalists advocated neutrality. One said: ‘That the UK and ROI governments remain neutral during the referendum.’ Conversely, another nationalist said: ‘The Irish govt much be an advocate for unity and as stated in GFA no other outside

influence should be brought to bear, therefore the British govt must remain natural in the debate.’

Respondents expressed a variety of views on the roles of the UK or Irish governments or the Northern Ireland Executive in policy decisions relating to a united Ireland. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘Ideally I'd like to see the NI executive manage the process in partnership with the two governments, but realistically don't think it will have the capacity to do so.’ Small numbers from all communities argued that plans for unification should be made by the Irish and British governments. Some nationalists, but no other respondents, said that planning should be done by the Stormont and Dublin governments without the British government having a say, or with the British government only facilitating negotiations. One respondent identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘The north south ministerial bodies should take the lead on discussions, but a citizens’ assembly (joint north and south representation) should have a role.’ Small numbers of nationalists, but no other respondents, envisaged a role for the British government as a voice of the Ulster unionists in these negotiations. One said: ‘Plans should be worked out between the governments of NI and the Republic, with the UK government also involved to ensure the protection of unionist interests in the case of a vote for a UI.’

9.3. PUBLIC DELIBERATIONS AND CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES

Respondents brought up citizens’ assemblies in relation to planning for a united Ireland both when specifically prompted about the possible roles for members of the public in planning for unification through participation in a citizens’ assembly (BQ3), and when answering questions about hopes and fears with regard to a referendum (Q1) and ways of addressing them (Q3). There were marked differences between respondents from different communities on the matter. Overall, 24% of nationalists and 17% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist specifically stated that citizens’ assemblies would be useful for discussing terms of unification prior to a referendum, but only a small number of unionists proposed the use of such assemblies. This appears to mirror patterns in the wider discourse. When answering the question about other issues they wanted to raise that were not covered by the survey (Q6), 12% of nationalists specifically called for an all-Ireland citizens’ assembly set up by the Irish government.

One nationalist said: ‘The Irish government must take the lead in establishing an all-Ireland forum to plan for Irish unity and the future of this country.’ A respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘A citizens assembly should be set up to answer all the questions for 12 months before the vote’. A unionist said: ‘a referendum should be held in Northern Ireland but only on whether a majority wanted to begin serious discussions, mainly between the Irish and UK Governments, on how a United Ireland would be organised and importantly be financed. Unionist parties would presumably not engage in this out of principal. Once this work was completed it would be communicated and debated by all Parties and citizens across the Island via the media and consultation such as Citizens Assemblies.’

Small numbers of nationalists and unionists advocated other kinds of civic forum. One nationalist said: ‘an independent forum agreed by the British & Irish governments made up of academics, senior civil servants, senior politicians and members drawn from citizens assembly’s in NI, RoI, GB—also need some eminent International input. They should set out a draft plan for UI for approval by NI assembly & govts’. Another said: ‘That forum should address issues like healthcare provision, policing, democratic structures, social welfare

system, tax systems—the mechanics of merging two political and governmental systems. Inter-state issues (pension, debt etc.) would be subject to negotiation between Ireland and Britain’.

It would seem that, in a relatively short space of time, holding a citizens’ assembly has become associated with one particular side of the constitutional debate. (As we previously mentioned, the use of such assemblies was one of the themes raised in some of the coordinated responses, but there is no reason to doubt that the views expressed were genuine.) Given that citizens’ assemblies are designed to bring all parts of a community together in dialogue, such a skew in advocacy could clearly pose challenges in the future.

9.4. ROLE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN PLANNING FOR UNIFICATION

Small numbers of respondents from all communities specifically mentioned that political parties should participate in planning for a united Ireland. One unionist said: ‘Probably a talks process involving the two governments and main parties similar to GFA discussions would be required.’ A respondent who identified as neither a nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I believe a citizens assembly should be consulted on building/contributing to policy/plans on the transition roadmap to UI. This should be inclusive of representatives from all political parties’.

Meanwhile, a small number of nationalists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist argued that political parties should not be the only ones to have a say in laying out plans for a united Ireland. One nationalist said: ‘It’s really important that we don’t repeat the mistakes of Brexit. Citizens need to clearly understand what they are voting for. This really needs a citizen’s assembly and clear academic input. Left to the big 2 parties in (NI) it will be a disaster.’

9.5. INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN PLANNING FOR UNIFICATION

Respondents mentioned a number of international actors, states, and organisations that they would like to see involved in any planning for unification.

A small number of nationalists, but no other respondents, said they would like to see the EU involved in planning for a united Ireland. One nationalist said: ‘the Irish, British and EU could lay out a detailed plan of action backed by funding to show what would happen in the new Ireland.’

7% of nationalists, but again no others, specifically mentioned support from the EU—including financial support—as a means to address their hopes and fears concerning a referendum. One said: ‘I would like the European Union to state in the advance of a referendum that they will provide financial support to a reunified Ireland to aid the transition from NI’s regional economic weakness as part of the UK to a more prosperous region as part of the EU again’.

Small numbers of nationalists and unionists saw a role for the USA in negotiations about possible unification. A unionist said: ‘There would need to be a serious consultation period with responses from as many stakeholders as possible. Maybe the US could supply a chairman.’ A nationalist said: ‘Process should be managed and regularly published by an impartial US senator’. Another nationalist said: ‘We also need the EU, USA and others to provide financial support for the new country both in terms of investment and wiping some existing debt’.

Small numbers of nationalists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist proposed that the Commonwealth or the UN could become involved in a future process. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I would also suggest the Commonwealth could play a valuable role in acting as an honest broker.’ A nationalist said: ‘This should be a matter for all of the parties involved and will require serious deliberation and engagement, ideally Ireland and Britain should create a forum to engage the political elites in NI to discuss and negotiate high-level terms in this respect, to pave for a clear outcome. One option would be to engage with UN and other international mediators to achieve some steps toward some clarity on an outcome.’

Finally, a small number of nationalists called for a neutral third party to be involved without mentioning a specific organisation or country. One nationalist said: ‘United Ireland plans would need to be talks on the scale of the GFA negotiations, bilaterally with UK/Ireland and possibly third parties if a neutral arbiter were needed.’

9.6. INPUT OF EXPERTS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Small numbers of respondents mentioned other stakeholders who should also be involved in discussions. One identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘That is something that should be negotiated between 6 and 26 county politicians (TDs, MLAs, MPs, the Irish govt and the Executive). The two governments, the executive, trade unions, ‘civil society’, all have a role now in the conversation, and Citizens’ Assemblies are a very good idea. If unity is decided upon then these would continue to have a role in making unity come about’.

Small numbers also highlighted expert input. One nationalist said: ‘The discussions and forums need time, rational discussion, a dignified context away from social media. It needs a multifactorial approach which encompasses policy, legal, creative and cultural, educative, health, social care, business, innovation and science.’

A small number of nationalist respondents mentioned that the Irish diaspora should have a say. One said: ‘We need political support from both governments and local parties to drive the conversation forward, plus the US government and other areas where the Irish diaspora is strong, as everyone identifying as Irish or Northern Irish has a say in this decision.’

9.7. OPINIONS ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL FORM OF A UNITED IRELAND

While the previous subsections outline respondents’ views on the processes of designing a united Ireland, this subsection lays out their opinions on how a united Ireland should be governed.

We did not request such views specifically, but we did include a background question on how it should be decided whether Northern Ireland would retain its own devolved government within a united Ireland or whether the powers should be transferred to Dublin (BQ3). 5% of respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist as well as small numbers of nationalists and unionists proposed to retain the Northern Ireland Assembly indefinitely or to leave it up to MLAs or political parties to disband it at some point. One nationalist said ‘Ultimately I believe a devolved government should stay in the North to address Northern issues. However Ultimately the Republic should have final say over certain issues. Such as it is currently except not the UK gov.’

Small numbers from each community were in favour of a federal arrangement for Ireland or enhanced regional powers for other provinces, so that the Northern Ireland Assembly would

not be the only regional body. One unionist said: ‘If there had to be a United Ireland I think it would be important to continue to have an Assembly at Stormont and perhaps have a Federal setup based on 4 Provinces at least in the medium term this would allow a more gradual adjustment for NI services such as NHS, Police, Civil Service.’

5% of nationalists and small numbers of unionists and respondents identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist were in favour of keeping the Northern Ireland Assembly for a ‘transition period’ before transferring all powers to the Dáil. One nationalist said: ‘My own view is that Stormont should have a transitional role in the process of reunification however all powers should eventually be transferred to the new Dáil Éireann in Dublin.’

4% of nationalists, a small number of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist mentioned transferring all powers to Dublin immediately without any reference to a transition period. One respondent identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I think there should be one parliament in Dublin otherwise it is too fragmented and becomes swayed by very localised issues.’

10. AFTER A REFERENDUM

This section lays out views on what should happen after a referendum. This includes views on the acceptance of referendum results and, in the event that voters in a referendum rejected unification, recurring referendums and the desirability of reforming the position of Northern Ireland within the UK. This section draws upon relevant responses to the questions about hopes and fears concerning a referendum (Q1) and ways to address fears and fulfil hopes (Q3). Some responses also come from Q4: we included a background question on whether the relationship between Northern Ireland and the UK should be changed if unity was rejected at a referendum, and if yes, what the process of change should be (BQ4).

10.1. ACCEPTING THE RESULTS OF A REFERENDUM

In addition to the general fears of violence as a result of a referendum and concerns about referendum’s divisiveness (see section 6.1), small numbers from all communities voiced aspirations for the results of a referendum to be respected, as well as fears that the losing side might reject the outcome. One unionist said: ‘A commitment from all parties and paramilitary groups that they will accept the outcome as democratically justified whatever that outcome is.’ A nationalist said: ‘I fear that the British government will drag its heels in implementing the result of the referendum if the outcome is in favour of reunification.’

Small numbers also shared fears that a losing party might resort to violence. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘I fear that a referendum will plunge Northern Ireland back into the dark years. No matter what result will appear the other side will be angry and will resort to desperate measures to try and stop it from coming into being.’ Some particularly worried that a close result in a referendum would be divisive and might lead to violence. One unionist said: ‘My preference would be for a significant result either way to avoid any malcontent in the population. A 50%+ 1 would be very unsatisfactory and would not lead to a peaceful solution.’

10.2. RECURRING REFERENDUMS

On what should happen if voters opted to stay in the UK (BQ4), 6% of nationalist respondents said that, in this case, another referendum should be scheduled. One said: ‘I’m the event of a decision to remain in the status quo, that should be time bound also. Perhaps a further vote within five years.’ The 1998 Agreement requires that seven years pass from any previous referendum; thereafter, the Secretary of State would be obliged to call a referendum on if it appeared to them that a majority would vote for unification (Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2021: 190). Nevertheless, some respondents argued (erroneously) that the 1998 Agreement would require a new referendum after seven years if unification was rejected. One said: ‘There would be no change in the position with the UK after an unsuccessful referendum, except that the GFA position should come into play, as in there should be a further referendum not longer than seven years later.’

By contrast, some unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist were wary about repeated referendums. One unionist said: ‘That a referendum, even if it doesn’t result in a UI, will open the Pandoras box of more referenda every 7 years & that this will continue until Sinn Féin in particular create as much division & hatred as possible to make NI unworkable.’ Another said: ‘If a majority us returned in favour of remaining, will this be accepted by Nationalists in perpetuity or merely a pause until the next vote— hopefully more to their liking? If the latter, will nationalists accept that unionists will have a right to a re-run in the event of the poll going against them?’

10.3. THE UNION AFTER A ‘NO’ VOTE

There was no clear preference among respondents as to whether Northern Ireland’s position in the UK should be reformed if voters opted to stay in the UK (BQ4). Small numbers from all communities opposed discussing this possibility before a referendum and having options for reform on the ballot. One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘yes or no, United Ireland or not. Must make this straightforward for everyone to understand—definitely do NOT muddy the waters by giving third option of reformed relationship between (NI) and GB.’

On the other hand, small numbers disagreed. One nationalist said: ‘Staying in the union should be one of the options I investigated. The details should be concrete, no if you vote to stay we’ll look to give you x, y and z. All options should be in black and white with plenty of community engagement at least 6 months before the vote’.

5% of nationalists, 6% of unionists and a small number of respondents who identified as neither favoured a changed relationship between Northern Ireland and the UK. One nationalist said: ‘If voted to remain in the UK, then the relationship must be reformed—consultations need to take place in NI with all parties, public opinion polls, open meetings for the public to voice concerns directly.’ A unionist said: ‘I suppose this would be a matter for those advocating NI’s continued position within the UK. It seems logical that a binding agreement could be placed on the UK Government if NI were to vote to stay in the UK, for example more powers for Stormont, much like the Scottish Independence referendum in 2014.’ One respondent who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said: ‘If a majority in the UK decide to stay within the UK, there must be reforms to respect the minority this includes addressing paramilitaries, sectarianism and respecting the Irish identity in NI.’

Sectarianism needs to be as unacceptable as racism. The process should include a British/Irish government plan for these reforms to be implemented by the NIE³.’

The possibility of holding a citizens’ assembly to explore possible reforms after a vote against unification was mentioned by one nationalist respondent: ‘If we lose the referendum, and I hope we don’t, there will be need for reform of relationship with UK to be decided by citizens assembly, political representatives and expert groups’. This was not a major theme, however, unlike proposals from nationalists for a citizens’ assembly to explore unification options (see section 9.3).

4% of nationalists and small numbers of unionists and respondents who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist explicitly stated that they were opposed to changing the status quo within the Union. One nationalist said: ‘For me, if the vote is no then it has to go back to the current state. There is no merit in redefining the relationship with the UK.’ A unionist said: ‘If the poll results in remaining in the UK then I don’t see why that position needs to be renegotiated—unless the position of Scotland and Wales was also being renegotiated at the same time.’

Some expressed the view that change was unlikely. One unionist said: ‘If we got to the stage where a referendum does happen, it is unlikely that any major change could be negotiated with the UK about our place if the referendum voted no to Irish unity.’ By contrast, small numbers of nationalist respondents and those who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist said that Northern Ireland’s relationship with the Union was already undergoing change due to Brexit. One said: ‘The relationship with GB is evolving over Brexit and, I imagine, will continue to do so. He who pays the piper calls the tune. Views of GB people to be considered, too’.

Some nationalists said that the 1998 Agreement does not allow for review of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland be it during a referendum process or otherwise. Some also argued that the 1998 Agreement required that only questions about unification should be asked during a referendum. One said: ‘There is no mention in the Good Friday Agreement of a Question on retaining the Union to be put to the people. A simple Yes/No answer will determine for Unity or the status quo. The only qualification in the Good Friday Agreement is the a subsequent referendum can not be held within a seven year period.’

CONCLUSION

The results of this public consultation provide a valuable flavour of how people are thinking and talking about the possibility of unification referendums across Northern Ireland at present.

As we noted at the start, caution is needed in interpreting the findings. The respondents are self-selected and therefore not representative of the population of Northern Ireland as a whole. There was evidence of a small amount of coordination in consultation responses. Many of the questions addressed relate to matters that few people have thought about deeply, with the result that the framing of our questions may have had marked effects on the views expressed. The consultation was also conducted a year before publication of this paper, and much has happened in the intervening months.

³ Northern Ireland Executive.

Nevertheless, the results do merit serious attention. The overall response rate was remarkable for an exercise such as this, and drew in views from people identifying as unionist as well as nationalist and neither. As we pointed out above, the patterns of who responded are themselves instructive: they highlight that nationalists are much more willing to participate in discussion of this matter—at least discussion as we have structured it here—than unionists and those identifying with neither community. That is not surprising, but it does provide a clear illustration of an important feature of the contemporary political debate.

Beyond that, what is perhaps most noteworthy is the extent and depth of both hopes and fears. Many nationalist respondents expressed an ardent desire for referendums to be held and unification to take place. But there were also concerns, and sometimes fears, across all communities. These responses illustrate the challenges that would be faced if referendums were held—or, equally, if referendums were not held—under the terms of the 1998 Agreement.

That underlines the importance of ensuring that any such processes be conducted well. Careful thought would need to take place before any referendum was called about what that means and how it could best be achieved. The public consultation responses starkly illustrate what is at stake.

Strong public views appear not yet to have emerged (or, at least, they had not done so by the summer of 2020) as to how any referendum should be conducted: respondents expressed a wide variety of views on the details, and there were few specific points on which large numbers coalesced. We noted above one exception to that: support for a citizens' assembly on unification-related issues appears to have risen rapidly, specifically among nationalists. We pointed out that the skew of this proposition towards one side of the constitutional debate may prove problematic: citizens' assemblies are designed to foster discussion across the whole community; and cross-community agreement on referendum processes would be highly desirable. The discourse on citizens' assemblies is an exception, however, to a general pattern in which clear perspectives on referendum processes have not yet emerged. Wider public reflection on the mechanics of any referendum process would be desirable in order to foster greater understanding of what the processes of any decision-making about Northern Ireland's constitutional future would actually involve. The case of citizens' assemblies illustrates the importance of conducting such reflection in ways that avoid creating new lines of division between the communities, but rather encourage the maintenance of consensus on process as far as possible.

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