



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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25 YEARS

A New Beginning

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# A Deliberative Forum on Possible Reforms to Power-Sharing

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# Exploring Public Opinion

An **opinion poll** is one way to explore public opinion:

- ✓ Large, representative sample
- ✓ Snapshot of wider public opinion on various issues

**But**, some potential drawbacks:

- ✗ People might not be familiar with the topic(s)
- ✗ Not always able to understand reasons behind people's views



# A Deliberative Forum

- Deliberative forum held on Saturday 5 March 2022 (in partnership with Ipsos)
- Brought together 46 participants from across Northern Ireland on Zoom
- Combination of expert presentations and facilitated small group discussions

Variable	Category	Population %	Target N	Achieved N
Gender	Male	48%	24	20
	Female	52%	26	26
Age	18-34	25%	13	14
	35-44	26%	13	10
	45-59	24%	12	14
	60+	25%	12	11
Socio-Economic Group	ABC1	44%	22	22
	C2DE	56%	28	24
Community Background	Catholic	45%	22	22
	Protestant	48%	24	19
	Neither	7%	4	5
Political ID	Nationalist	19%	10	14
	Unionist	35%	18	15
	Neither	42%	21	17
	Other/ DK	4%	1	-



# Three Broad Options

## Maximal power-sharing

Any party with a certain number of seats guaranteed a place in the Executive; ministers appointed via d'Hondt.

## Voluntary coalition

Parties would have complete freedom to negotiate who should form the government.

## Qualified voluntary coalition

Parties would have complete freedom to negotiate who should form the government, but with additional rules to ensure cross-community representation.



# Structure of the Deliberative Forum

Welcome & Introductions

Animation 1: How are governments currently formed in NI?

Presentation 1: Why do we have power-sharing? – Dr Joanne McEvoy

Facilitated small-group discussion – Ipsos

Animation 2: How else could governments be formed in NI?

Presentation 2: What are the pros & cons of reform? – Prof Jon Tonge

Facilitated small-group discussion – Ipsos

Post-survey



*Why do we have power-sharing in Northern Ireland?*

SESSION ONE

Dr Joanne McEvoy  
University of Aberdeen  
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*Two possible alternatives to 'mandatory coalition':*

*(1) Voluntary coalition*

*(2) Qualified voluntary coalition*

# Views on the Current Model: Strengths

People cited two significant and interrelated benefits:

1. It has presided over a sustained period of relative peace since 1998
  2. It is representative and inclusive of NI's different political traditions
- Beyond these (important) benefits, participants generally struggled to cite any further advantages of the current model
  - A sense of frustration that because there is peace, the shortcomings of the status quo are overlooked and/or accepted

"I think it has brought people together. I'm at an age to remember going back to the '60s and I think it's great now."

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

"Nobody can be excluded from it."

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

"The main pro is peace. That's why we accept the political stalemate. We are still happy to have peace."

Male, 45-59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

# Views on the Current Model: Weaknesses

Three broad frustrations:

1. Executive instability and collapse
2. Lack of cohesion/cooperation in the Executive
3. Perceived dominance of identity politics

“Cross-community power-sharing is not the be-all and end-all...What if you’re not a part of the nationalist or loyalist groups? What if you see yourself as just bang in the middle...? People who don’t align themselves, their voice is less heard. The focus is more on “Can we get the nationalists and unionists to agree.”

Male, 18-24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

“you can’t get people sitting around a table and compromising with each other... that’s when we all get penalised. You have to wait longer for legislation, for decisions on health and education. It just doesn’t work.”

Male, 35-44, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

“It’s sad when one party can walk out...and [it] collapses. I think that needs to be changed in some way.”

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist



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# Alternatives: Views on Simple Voluntary Coalition

Despite recognizing some benefits, there were widespread concerns about majority rule or one community not being represented.

“It sounds scary. Younger people would be more open to it but the older age group have the fear of not being represented...You have this fear of not being represented if it was voluntary.”

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

“I don’t want to offend anyone but if one side was making the decision for my community, would I like that? We need to think more openly.”

Female, 34-45, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

“This agreement was built on peace, if nobody’s representing this side of the community, they might think, “what are we getting from this? Wasn’t it better when we got on with what we were doing?””

Female, 45-59, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist



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# Alternatives: Views on Qualified Voluntary Coalition

“The benefits of the arrangement would be greater because you still get the opposition and the increased scrutiny, but you don’t get the potential fall out of an under-represented community.”

Male, 25-34, ABC1, Protestant, Nationalist

“qualified voluntary coalition model is the one that appeals to me most as it seems to be a normal model of government and it would bring us into line with the other devolved administrations.”

Male, 45-59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

“qualified voluntary coalition seems to be a stepping stone, a bit of a safety net. It is a bit more representative, and it seems to be more fair.”

Male, 25-34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist



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# Alternatives: Views on Qualified Voluntary Coalition

“I’m looking at the qualified model, are you risking major parties being excluded? I wouldn’t like that. These major parties are representing the major areas within a community. You wouldn’t want a major part of the community to be excluded.”

Female, 45-59, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

“The risk of it taking more time...everything may take a bit longer than people would like. In terms of forming the government, which reduces the amount of time where legislation could be formed as well.”

Male, 18-24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

“Determining exactly what “qualified” means could be difficult and open to corruption.”

Male, 25-34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

# A Case for Reform?

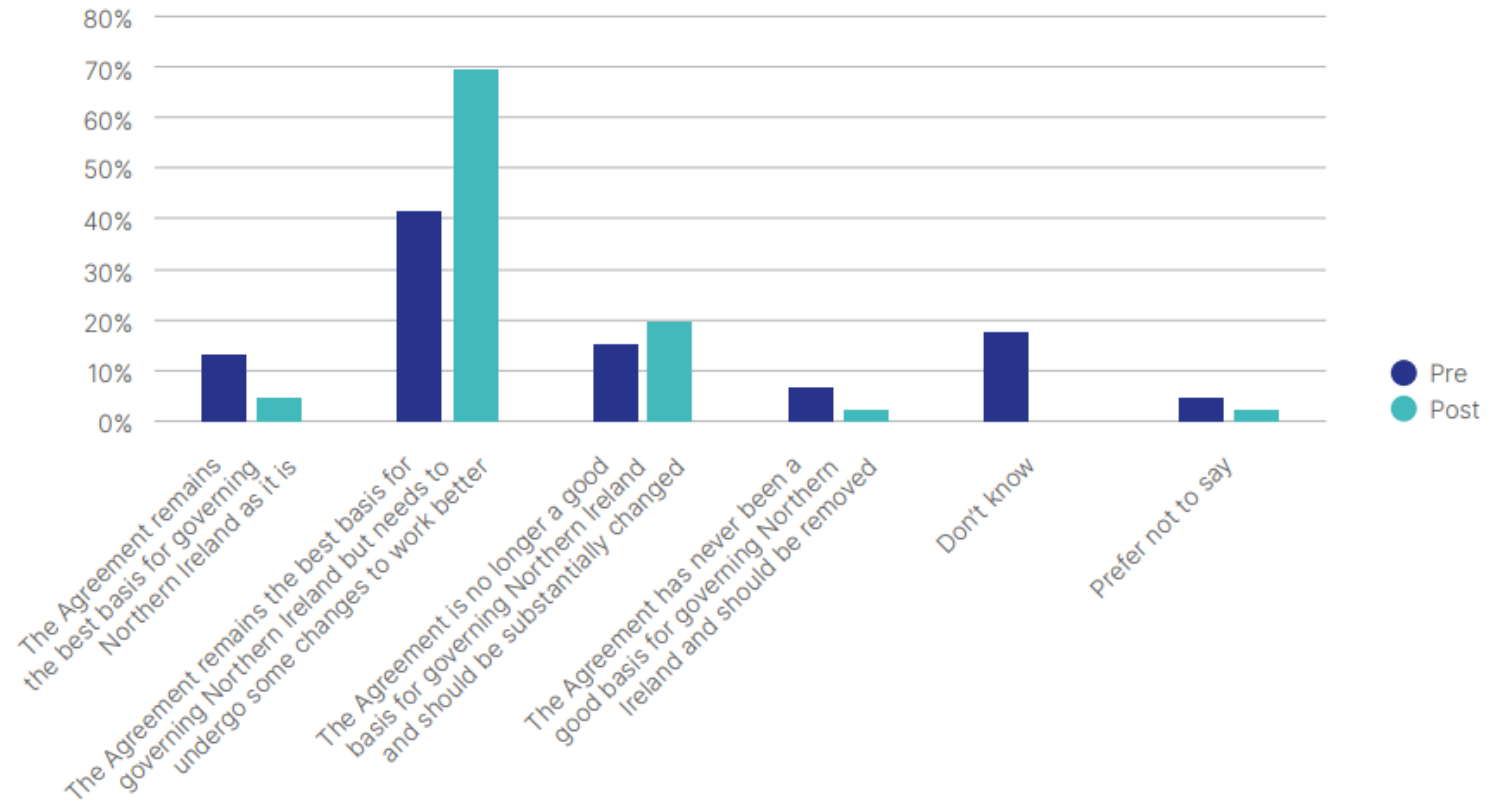
- A clear favourite did not emerge in the post-event survey – simple voluntary coalition the least-supported option; identical levels of support expressed for mandatory coalition and QVC
- Even mandatory coalition and QVC elicit only modest support (4.26/7)
- Fear of unknown and/or need for attitudinal (not necessarily institutional change) cited as reasons for sticking with mandatory coalition: “Better the devil you know?”

“I’m just wondering, is it the devil you know? Can we tweak the one we have rather than going to a new system? [...] I think if we | could get rid of the vetoes and stop the collapsing, I would just stick with what we’ve got.”

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

# A Case for Reform?

- Majority view did emerge in terms of how substantively the governance structures of the Good Friday Agreement need to be reformed

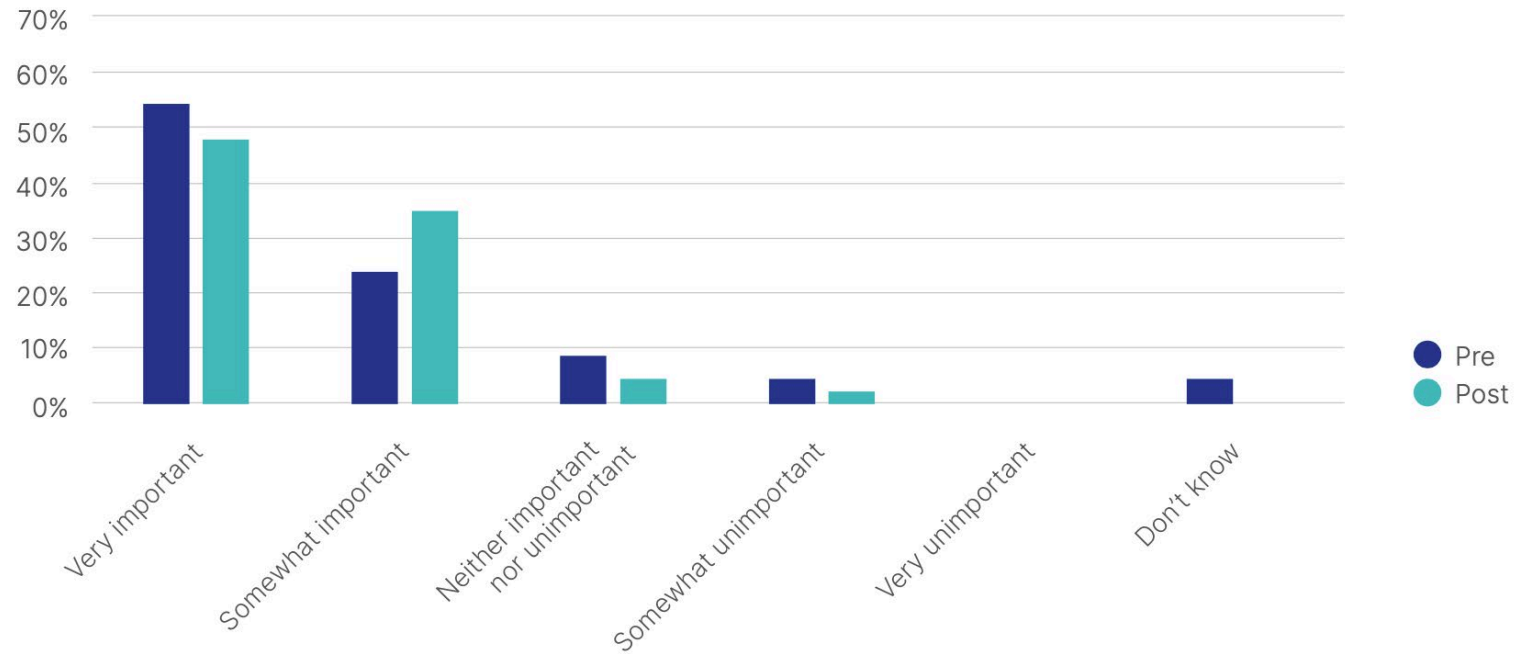


# How Should Any Reform Come About?

A majority of MLAs support the reform...

“That would be the minimum.”

Male, 25--34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist



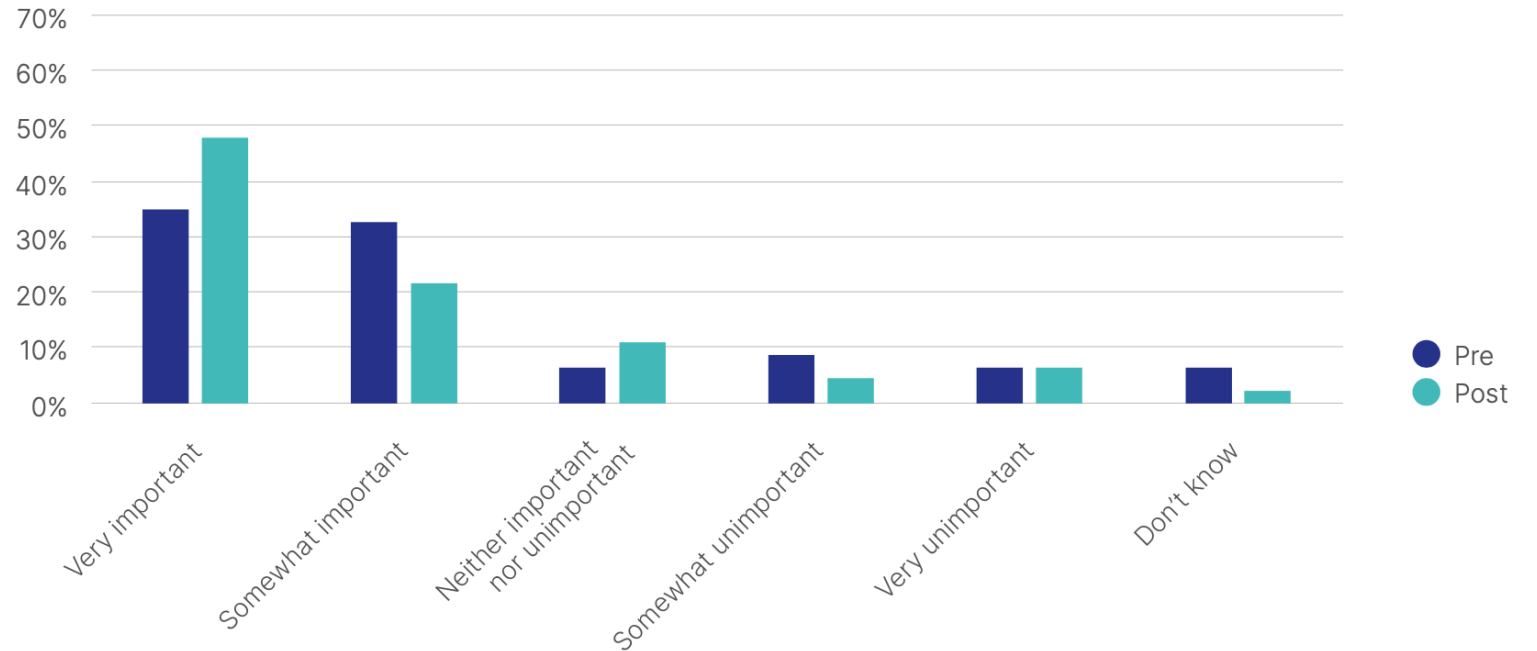
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# How Should Any Reform Come About?

A majority of MLAs support the reform – including a majority of unionist MLAs, a majority of nationalist MLAs, and a majority of other MLAs...

“I prefer to see the parallel consent where you have the majority from each community.”

Male, 25--34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

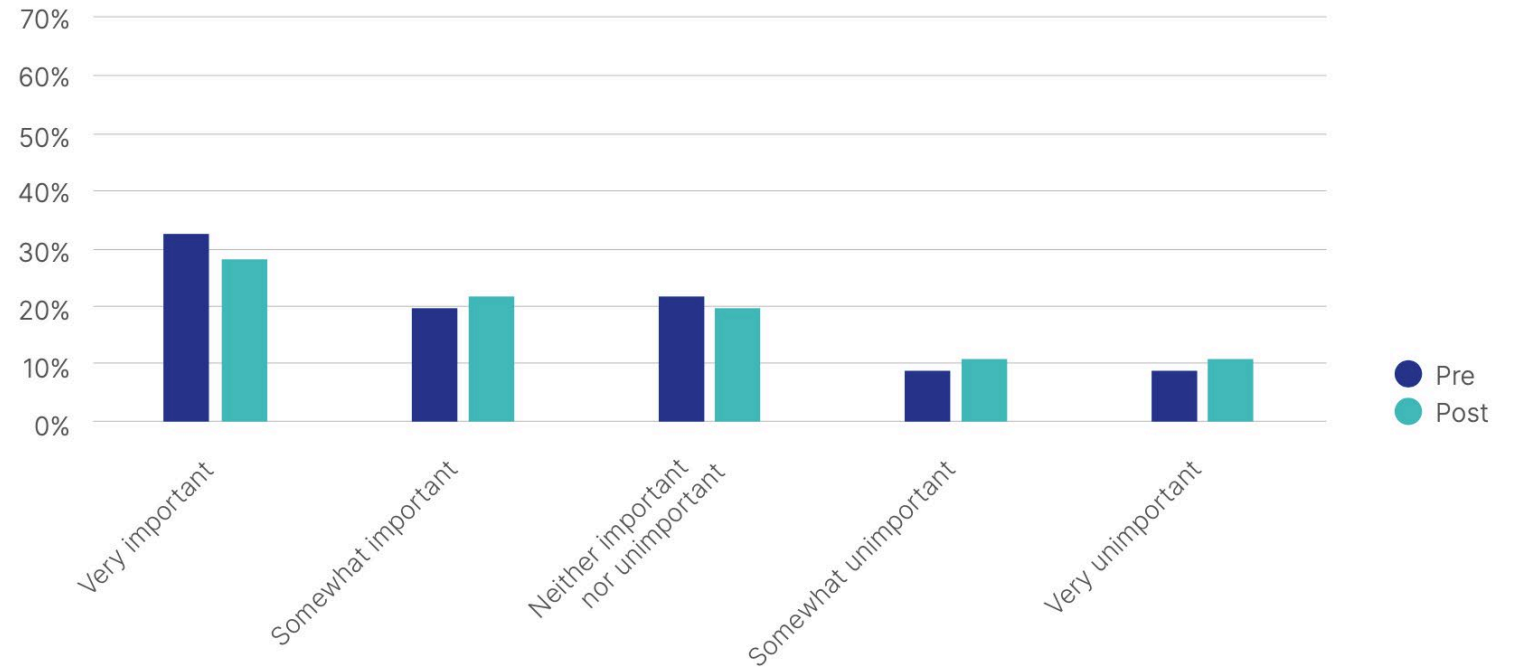


# How Should Any Reform Come About?

The British government recommends the reform.

“There has to be buy-in from all the stakeholders before you move forward.”

Female, 60+, C2DE, Catholic, Neither

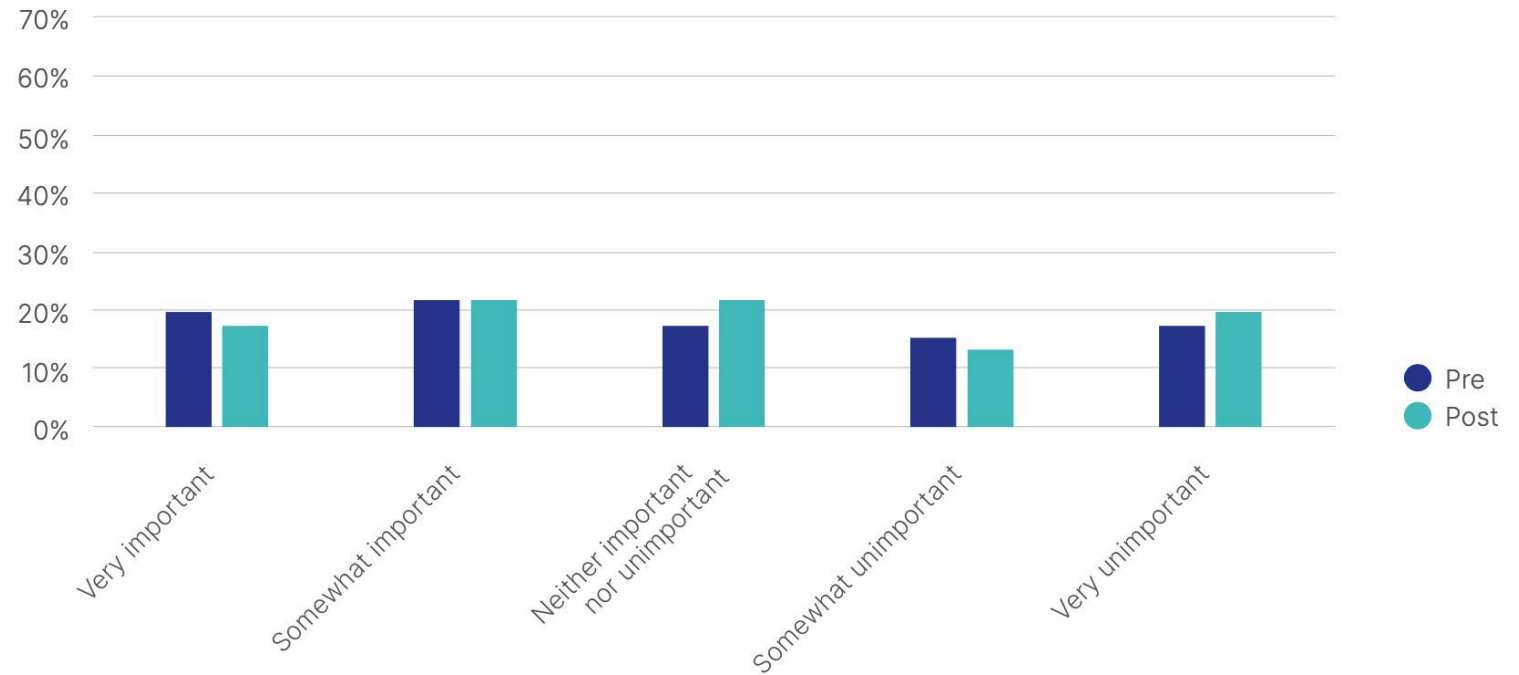


# How Should Any Reform Come About?

The Irish government recommends the reform.

“It’s more important for the people of Northern Ireland to support the reform. Then get London and Dublin involved.”

Male, 45-59, C2DE, Protestant, Neither



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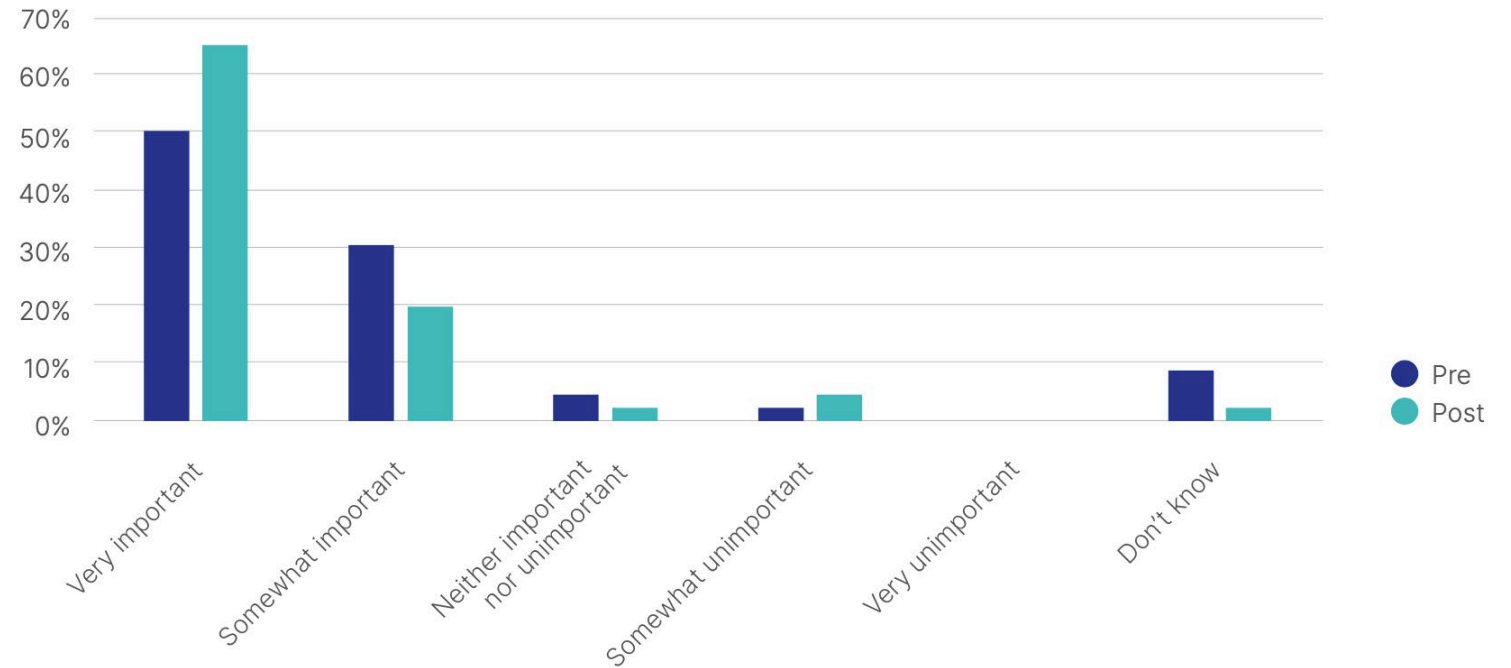


# How Should Any Reform Come About?

A majority of voters in Northern Ireland support the reform in a referendum.

“It’s our country, so we should have a say in how it’s run.”

Female, 35-44, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist



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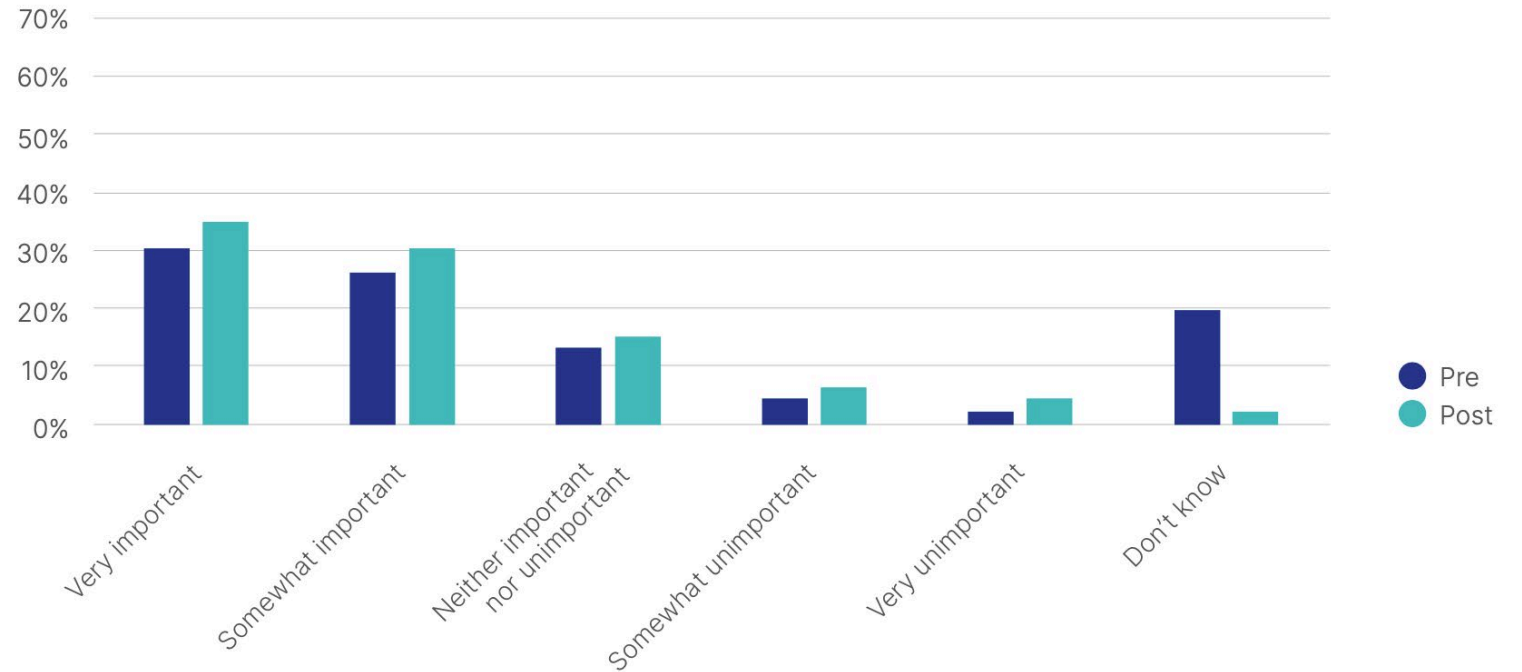
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# How Should Any Reform Come About?

An official citizens' assembly recommends the reform.

“The public would need to be informed of the option, and how it’s going to work. I feel that in the past, we’ve been kept in the dark.”

Female, 45-59, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist



# Summary

## What do people think about the current model of government in Northern Ireland?

- *Positives include peace and inclusivity, but negatives include instability, poor cooperation within Executive, and perceived dominance of ethno-national divisions*

## What do people think about possible alternatives?

- *Scepticism about simple voluntary coalition model; more openness towards qualified voluntary coalition model; no clear consensus around a single model*

## How should any reform(s) come about?

- *Clear appetite for inclusive and extensive public consultation*

