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Public opinion on the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive and options for reform

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1 Introduction

This briefing paper has been prepared following a request from the Assembly & Executive Review Committee (AERC). The committee asked for:

- a research paper which identifies, collates and analyses the existing public opinion/survey data on institutional reform options/preferences.

This briefing paper identifies and summarises public opinion on institutional reform options in Northern Ireland. It begins by outlining some existing evidence on the subject from surveys and opinion polls. This data provides useful information regarding public perceptions of the political institutions in Northern Ireland. However, evidence on actual preferences for institutional reform is more limited.

The second section describes evidence from small-scale deliberative exercises and focus groups conducted in Northern Ireland.

2 Surveys and public opinion polling

A large number of surveys and opinion polls have examined public perceptions of the political institutions in Northern Ireland. More recently, an increasing amount of data on issues such as Brexit and the constitutional position of Northern Ireland has become available. However, data on specific reform proposals relating to the Assembly and Executive is more limited. This section identifies and summarises existing evidence from a number of surveys regarding the political institutions, highlighting any information on reform proposals.

2.1 Northern Ireland General Election Survey (University of Liverpool, 2024)

The Northern Ireland General Election Survey is organised by academics at the University of Liverpool and has run five times since 2010 (2010, 2015, 2017,

2019, 2024).¹ It asks respondents questions about identity, politics, and options for constitutional change.² Key findings and accompanying analysis from the most recent survey are reproduced below.³ This is taken from a submission to AERC by the relevant academics.

Which of the following comes closest to your view about the power-sharing system of government in Northern Ireland?

- The most popular view among the public (44.2%) is that the power-sharing system remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland 'but requires changes'.
- When non-responses and 'don't know' responses are excluded, support for 'requires changes' rises to 56.9%: this includes a majority of unionists (53.9%); a majority of nationalists (62.5%); and a majority of neithers (55.1%).
- Support for the institutional status quo ('no changes') sits at 20.3%. This rises to 26.1% when non-responses and 'don't know' responses are excluded.
- The least popular view (6.4%) is that power-sharing is no longer the best basis for governing Northern Ireland and requires 'substantial changes'. This rise to 8.2% when non-responses and 'don't know' responses are excluded.

If the First Minister or deputy First Minister resigns, what should happen next?

- There is majority support among the public (53.4%) for making TEO nomination rights transferable in the event of an FM/dFM resignation, but there is a difference of opinion as to whether communal bloc/designation status should be factored into the transfer process.

¹ [Northern Ireland General Election Survey \(2010, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2024\) - Data and Statistical Services](#)

² [Northern Ireland: What the numbers tell us - Royal Irish Academy](#)

³ The study is based upon a representative sample of 2,034 Northern Ireland residents, who were surveyed face-to-face between 19 July 2024 and 27 August 2024.

- 33.6% believe the right to nominate to TEO should transfer to the next largest party within the same bloc/designation as the resigning party, whereas 19.8% believe the right to nominate should transfer to the next largest party regardless of bloc/designation.
- When ‘don’t know’ and non-responses are excluded, support for making TEO nomination rights transferable rises to 70.3%: 44.2% support transferring nomination rights within the same bloc, and 26.1% support transferring nomination rights to the next largest party regardless of bloc/designation.
- The status quo arrangement – that the Executive should come to an end in the event of an FM/dFM resignation – is supported by 15.6% of respondents (rising to 20.6% when ‘don’t know’ and non-responses are excluded). A further 6.6% would prefer to abolish the devolved institutions altogether (rising to 8.7% when ‘don’t know’ and non-responses are excluded).

2.2 Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study 2022 (Queen’s University Belfast)

The Democracy Unit at Queen’s University Belfast coordinated the Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study 2022⁴, with data available here⁵. Relevant questions on options for reform and accompanying analysis are set out in figure 1.

Question	Analysis
Currently the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have identical powers, they differ only in their titles. Which of the following options do you prefer? Their titles should be changed, so that both are called Joint First Minister / Their titles should stay as they are,	There is a slight overall balance of opinion, among all respondents, in favour of changing the titles to ‘Joint First Minister’. Catholics are evenly divided, with Sinn Féin voters somewhat more negatively disposed

⁴ [Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study 2022 | The Democracy Unit | Queen's University Belfast](#)

⁵ [Data | The Democracy Unit | Queen's University Belfast](#)

<p>with the First Minister being nominated by the largest party / These positions should be abolished and replaced by something else / Don't Know.</p>	<p>than SDLP voters. Protestants are on balance somewhat positive, as are DUP and UUP voters. Most positive are Alliance voters.</p>
<p>We should get rid of the power-sharing system of government altogether in Northern Ireland, and instead any combination of parties that together have a majority in the Assembly should be able to form a government.</p>	<p>Respondents are very evenly divided on whether the current rules should be changed to allow a government to be formed by any coalition of parties that collectively has a majority of seats.</p>
<p>Instead of all the main parties being in government, we should have a form of government in which there's a very clear distinction between some parties being in government and others being in opposition.</p>	<p>There is a more pronounced overall balance of opinion – among all respondents, among both Catholics and Protestants and among all sets of party voters – in favour of there being a clear distinction between governing parties and opposition parties.</p>
<p>There should be no cross-community vote because it just lets one side – either unionist or nationalist – block key decisions being made.</p>	<p>Support is much lower when the question highlights the tendency for this voting rule to 'just let one side or other ... block key decisions'. There is an even balance of opinion on this version of the question, except for Alliance voters, and to some extent SDLP voters, who agree with changing the rule when the question is phrased in this way.</p>

Figure 1: Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study 2022 (Queen's University Belfast)

2.3 Public opinion and consociationalism in Northern Ireland: Towards the 'end stage' of the power-sharing lifecycle?

A representative survey, carried out on behalf of the Institute for Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, to “explore public support for, trust in, and knowledge about power-sharing.”⁶⁷ A summary of the results is reproduced below.

- The principles of power-sharing continue to resonate with the NI public
- There is net public agreement that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for NI, with citizens more likely to agree (42%) than disagree (28%) with this statement
- Similarly, a plurality⁸ of citizens (41%) agree that, overall, power-sharing has been good for NI
- Nationalists are noticeably more positive about power-sharing relative to their unionist counterparts. For example, whereas the majority of nationalists (56%) believe that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for NI, only a plurality of unionists (39%) take the same view
- Modest levels of support for the principles of power-sharing contrast sharply with near universal dissatisfaction with the practical operation of the power-sharing institutions
- Two-thirds of respondents disagree that the Assembly does a good job in holding ministers to account while 70% disagree that the Executive functions well as a government, resulting in net agreement scores of –58% and –63% for these questions respectively
- Importantly, however, the public do not regard the problems affecting the institutions to be insurmountable: majorities in all three designation groups agree that power-sharing could be improved with further

⁶ Sean Haughey, *Public opinion and consociationalism in Northern Ireland: Towards the 'end stage' of the power-sharing lifecycle?*, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 26, Issue 1, first published online May 2023: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13691481231174164>

⁷ The survey was carried out by Ipsos MORI and fielded between 30 September and 6 October 2021. The 840 respondents were drawn from the NI sample of Ipsos MORI's 'UK Knowledge Panel' with respondents recruited to the panel via random probability address based sampling.

⁸ Plurality in this instance means the largest group within the sample, even though it may not reach 50%.

institutional reforms. And, despite the public's verdict on the day-to-day performance of the institutions, there is still net public agreement that more powers should be devolved from Westminster to the power-sharing administration in Belfast

2.3 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) has run annually since 1998 and covers a range of policy issues.⁹ Although questions significantly vary by year, several editions have asked about attitudes to the political institutions in Northern Ireland. Examples of questions are set out below, along with the year(s) in which the questions were included in the survey.

Module: Political attitudes¹⁰

AACHIEVE: How much has the N Ireland Assembly achieved? 2002, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015

GOVEXEC: The NI Executive must always include the largest nationalist party and the largest unionist party 2021

GOVVOTE: Key votes in the Assembly should be passed on the basis of a weighted majority, e.g. 60% of all MLAs regardless of their unionist/nationalist/other affiliation 2021

GOVPETIT: 30 MLAs from 2 or more parties should be able to use a 'petition of concern' to block legislation that has been passed by a majority in the Assembly 2021

GOVINCR: The devolved powers of the NI Assembly should be increased, e.g. to allow Northern Ireland to set its own trade and immigration policies 2021

The most recent NILT survey questions relating to the Assembly and Executive were asked in 2021.

⁹ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey: [NILT | ARK - Access Research Knowledge](#)

¹⁰ [NI Life and Times Survey - Political Attitudes](#)

In 2023 research from the Constitution Unit summarised some of the findings from NILT surveys. Its analysis is reproduced below:¹¹

In 2021, 58% of respondents agreed that ‘Key votes in the Assembly should be passed on the basis of a weighted majority, e.g. 60% of all MLAs regardless of their unionist/nationalist/other affiliation’, against only 7% who disagreed. Meanwhile, only 19% agreed that ‘30 MLAs from 2 or more parties should be able to use a ‘petition of concern’ to block legislation that has been passed by a majority in the Assembly’, while 38% disagreed. Neither question showed substantial differences between religious groups (NILT 2021). But both questions must be interpreted with caution, as no alternative to the stated arrangement was defined. We cannot assume, for example, that people were stating a preference for weighted majority voting over the current cross-community voting system.¹²

2.4 The Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, Opinion Poll April 2022

The Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University and The Irish News published several tracker surveys in 2022.¹³ Three groups comprising nationalists, unionists and neither nationalist or unionist (of near equal size) were asked a number of questions on constitutional issues. There were 1,000 respondents.

The relevant questions and results are summarised in figure 2.

¹² [Perspectives on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), 2023, Constitution Unit

¹³ [Institute of Irish Studies Tracker & Attitudes Survey | Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences | University of Liverpool](#)

	Agree	Neither agree/disagree	Disagree	Do not know
The titles of 'First Minister' and 'deputy First Minister' should be renamed 'Joint First Ministers'	51.8	24.1	18.6	5.5
The requirement for MLAs to designate as 'nationalist', 'unionist' or 'other' should be removed.	55.4	19.8	18.7	6.1
The procedure for cross-community support, which privileges the views of nationalist and unionist MLAs, should be reformed so that nationalist, unionist and 'other' MLAs are treated equally.	62.5	20.6	7.8	9.0
If a policy is supported by 60 of all MLAs, that should be enough to demonstrate cross-community support in the Assembly.	61.7	22.7	7.2	8.2

Figure 2: The Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, Opinion Poll April 2022

3. Deliberative engagement and qualitative methods

Quantitative research in the form of surveys has the benefit of collecting data from large sample sizes, but doesn't allow for informed consideration of issues. Focus groups and deliberative research goes beyond the limited 'Agree/Disagree' approach of quantitative surveys by allowing participants to expand on their opinions about given subjects.

As the Constitution Unit notes:

Surveys such as NILT show how representative samples of people respond to specific questions. They provide much insight, but...also have limitations: they do not show the thinking underlying those responses; they can be misleading if the questions are on issues that most people do not have clear views on.¹⁴

Deliberative methods, such as citizens assemblies, where "members of the public share their own perspectives, hear those of others, listen to experts, and, through discussion, come to conclusions"¹⁵ may help bridge this gap. Some forms of deliberative engagement have been used to explore public attitudes to governance in Northern Ireland and the key findings are summarised below.

3.1 Perspectives on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: Examining diverse views, 1998-2023

As part of its report published in 2023, the Constitution Unit included findings from eight mini-focus groups "exploring perceptions of and attitudes towards the Agreement".¹⁶ As part of this, participants were asked for their views on the Strand One institutions, including ideas for potential reform. The focus groups were conducted online in July 2022, at a time when the institutions were not functioning. The key findings are summarised in figure 3.

¹⁴ Perspectives on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 2023, Constitution Unit

¹⁵ As above

¹⁶ Perspectives on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 2023, Constitution Unit

Ideas for reform of Strand 1

While most participants...wanted to see the power-sharing institutions restored, some – particularly among nationalists and the non-aligned – also saw structural flaws in those institutions. The most commonly expressed such view was that it should not be possible for one party to collapse the institutions.

Another concern related to the lack of any institutionalised opposition.

A third concern, expressed exclusively in the non-aligned groups, was that the parties that do not designate as either unionist or nationalist are disadvantaged. These views were sometimes based on slight misunderstanding of what are very complex rules.

In short, most participants wanted the parties in Stormont to work cooperatively together in order to deliver effective government for Northern Ireland. They were fed up with 'bickering' and parties 'throwing their toys out of the pram'. They wanted reasonableness to prevail. At least for many nationalist and non-aligned participants, that meant that one party that, in their eyes, was not behaving reasonably should not be able to stop the institutions from functioning. Yet many unionists and loyalists already had a strong sense that the system was stacked against them; it was unclear that nationalist or non-aligned participants had thought through what the implications of forming an executive without the DUP would be.

One final aspect of the Executive that was raised in the discussions concerned the titles of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Many participants were aware that these two posts have co-equal powers, though some were not and assumed that the first had higher authority.

A range of views were expressed on whether the titles should change. In the nationalist groups, all of the participants agreed that the issue was being discussed now only because the DUP was no longer the largest party, and most resented what they saw as double standards.

There was also a range of views among unionists. Some reversed the logic voiced by nationalists, offering a different interpretation of recent practice [in that Michelle O'Neill had referred to herself as the joint First Minister].

Figure 3: Perspectives on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: Examining diverse views, 1998-2023

3.2 Public Attitudes to Institutional Reform in Northern Ireland *Evidence from a Deliberative Forum* (June 2022)

This research, led by Dr Sean Haughey, University of Liverpool and Dr Jamie Pow, Queen's University Belfast, consisted of:

a programme of deliberative research exploring citizens' views on reforming the system of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Forty-six citizens, broadly representative of the Northern Ireland population, convened on Saturday 5th March 2022 to participate in a three-hour deliberative forum, involving expert presentations and group discussion.¹⁷

A deliberative approach:

is particularly useful when seeking answers about complex topics, or where awareness is low, which makes it an appropriate method to use to understand public opinion on power-sharing arrangements and coalition government in Northern Ireland. A deliberative approach facilitates the development of informed opinions, illuminates what underpins people's views, and demonstrates how views may change when people are given new information and have the opportunity to discuss the topic with one another. Cumulatively, these benefits serve to provide a much deeper level of insight into the views and behaviours of the public. This makes a deliberative forum a particularly useful tool for getting to grips with public

¹⁷ Public Attitudes to Institutional Reform in Northern Ireland Evidence from a Deliberative Forum, Dr Sean Haughey, University of Liverpool, Dr Jamie Pow, Queen's University Belfast: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Public_Attitudes_to_Institutional_Reform_in_Northern_Ireland_Final_Report.pdf

perceptions of power-sharing, which have so far only been explored in a limited way through public opinion surveys.¹⁸

The forum explored:

- What citizens in Northern Ireland expect from their devolved government
- Views on the current model of power-sharing, commonly known as 'mandatory coalition'
- Views on possible alternatives to the current model
- Views on how institutional reform, if desirable, should come about

A summary of the findings on views on possible alternatives to the current model, namely simple voluntary coalition and qualified voluntary coalition, is provided below.

Simple voluntary coalition

- A simple voluntary coalition system would not use the d'Hondt formula to automatically divide seats in the Executive amongst the political parties based on their electoral mandates, rather, it would be left to the parties to decide amongst themselves who forms the government after an election
- Participants recognised two important benefits of a simple voluntary coalition system: that government would likely be more cohesive because parties will have secured a coalition agreement before taking office, and that parliamentary scrutiny would be enhanced by the near-guaranteed existence of a more substantial opposition.
- Despite participants recognising some benefits in simple voluntary coalition, concerns about the potential loss of cross-community government tended to take precedence in discussions about this model. The potential for a voluntary coalition emerging in which only one political tradition was represented, for example in an exclusively unionist or an exclusively nationalist Executive, was widely regarded as problematic.

¹⁸ Public Attitudes to Institutional Reform in Northern Ireland Evidence from a Deliberative Forum, Dr Sean Haughey, University of Liverpool, Dr Jamie Pow, Queen's University Belfast

Qualified voluntary coalition

- Similar to simple voluntary coalition in that seats in the Executive would not be divided amongst the political parties using the d'Hondt formula. Instead, after an election, political parties would have some scope to negotiate with one another to decide who forms the next Executive. Importantly, however, with QVC parties would be required to negotiate within certain parameters, namely that it would not be possible to form a government in which only one political tradition is represented. Thus, for example, an exclusively unionist or an exclusively nationalist Executive would not be permitted under the rules of QVC.
- ...participants were generally more open to the idea of Northern Ireland adopting a QVC system of government. This was primarily due to QVC's cross-community safeguard.
- With a degree of cross-community representation in government assured, some participants felt comfortable exploring what benefits a QVC model might offer, such as a clearer system of government and opposition, enhanced parliamentary scrutiny, and a more cohesive Executive.
- Participants acknowledged that QVC would not come without drawbacks. Concerns were expressed about the potential for lengthy post-election negotiations, especially given the track record of Northern Ireland's political parties in terms of reaching agreements.
- Some participants were critical of QVC because it could potentially lead to a major political party, such as the Democratic Unionist Party or Sinn Féin, being excluded from government. Whilst it is not unusual for major parties to form the opposition in other coalition contexts, some participants seemed to suggest this would be problematic in Northern Ireland.
- Participants were asked in a post-event survey about how far they would support or oppose the three models of government discussed during the deliberative event. The simple voluntary coalition model was the least supported option.

- Identical levels of support were expressed for qualified voluntary coalition and for the status quo of mandatory coalition.

Attitudes to power-sharing

- Separate from the issue of what precise reforms might look like, it is important to note that a majority of participants regarded the principle of power-sharing in positive terms before and after the event.
- By the end of the event, 65% of participants said that power-sharing has, overall, been good for Northern Ireland
- However, when it comes how power-sharing works in practice, we see more mixed attitudes. When asked to consider whether it is working better now than in the past, participants were evenly split, and those perceptions remained largely unchanged by the end of the event
- When asked whether they thought power-sharing could be improved with further reforms, a clear majority agreed before the event (70%). By the end of the event, this rose to 84% — including 50% who strongly agreed

Conclusion

There have been a number of public opinion surveys seeking views on the political institutions since their establishment. Results of such surveys should be placed in the political context in which they were conducted, for example during periods when the Assembly and Executive were not functioning.

Public opinion on the actual mechanics and potential for reform is less readily available, and is most usefully explored through deliberative engagement. This allows a more nuanced approach to issues as participants have an opportunity to discuss their views, rather than simply providing 'Yes/No' or 'Agree/Disagree' answers.

Looking ahead, academics have noted the potential use of conjoint analysis¹⁹ provides an opportunity to explore what citizens might be prepared to accept in

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics, [Valuing official statistics with conjoint analysis: April 2021](#): "Conjoint analysis is a revealed preference approach to estimating preferences by describing a product by its attributes and asking a series of questions to respondents, each time to choose their preference

considering reforms, in effect the trade-offs that they would make to reach a compromise.²⁰

between different products with varying levels of each attribute. These questions are typically called “trade-off” questions where attributes and levels are “considered jointly”.

²⁰ This was discussed in the evidence session of 4 November 2025:
<https://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-37506.pdf>