

comments on the paper and how to improve it. To contact the authors, please write to Alan Renwick (a.renwick@ucl.ac.uk).

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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 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.

Final Report summarised 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 368 data points 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.

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 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 a 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

by one. We therefore label those questions

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).

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.

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,

After the consultation closed, to analyse the large number of responses received, we developed 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

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

issue the response was situated within: for example, captured the more specific point being raised: for example, 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 the 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 for a separate Ireland representative

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

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.

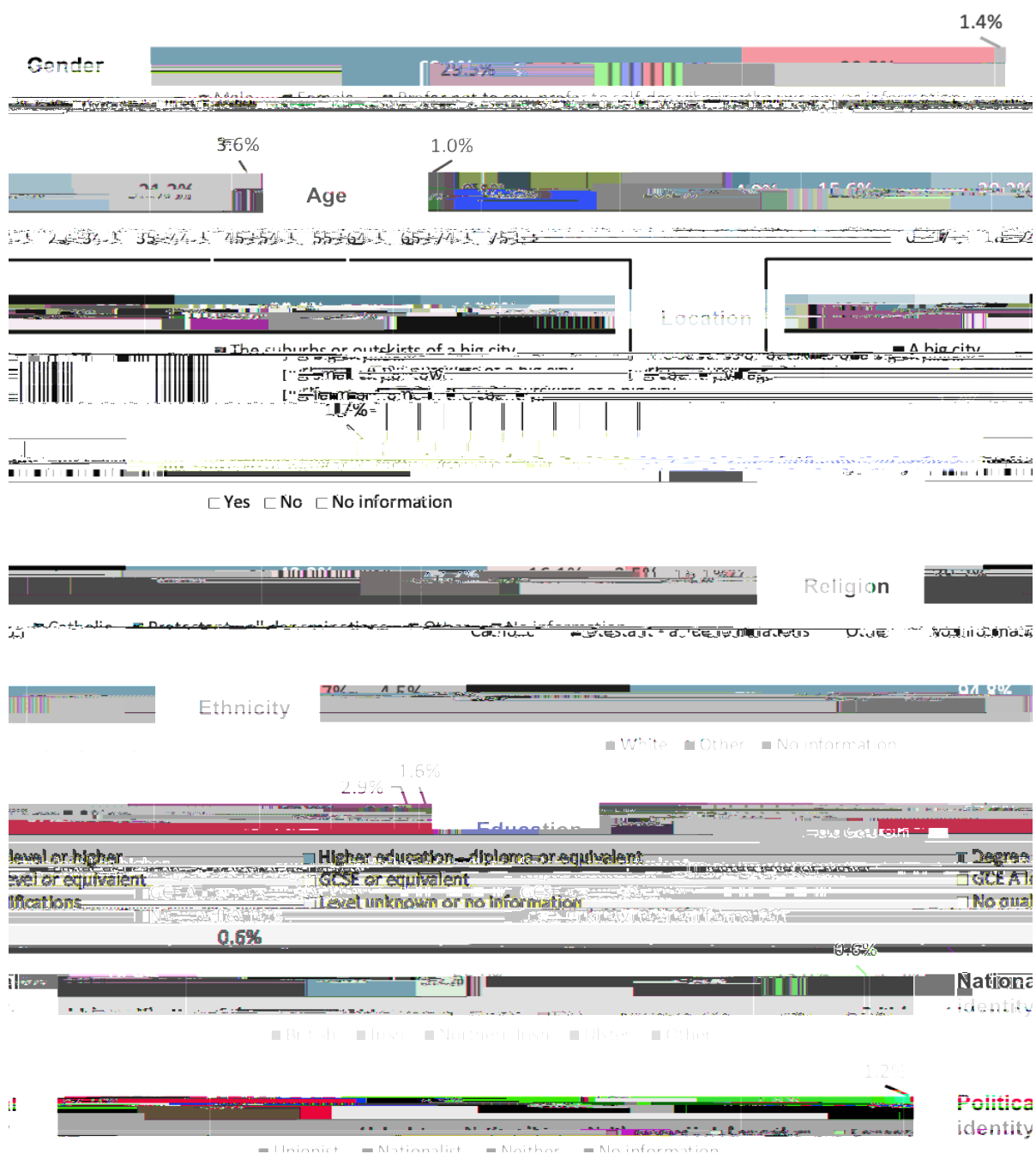
For the several reasons just given, great caution should be exercised in attaching meaning to the precise numbers of respondents expressing particular views. We do, however, report such numbers (as percentages of respondents from each group), to enable readers to see the prevalence of those views as 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

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



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 in 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.

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.

division a

place for British people among SF they only have an agenda of removing everything that is British. If a referendum is held, it will be a referendum on the future of Northern Ireland, not on the future of the United Kingdom. The only way to address the concerns of British people in Northern Ireland is to hold a referendum on the future of Northern Ireland. The only way to address the concerns of British people in Northern Ireland is to hold a referendum on the future of Northern Ireland.

12% of nationalists, a small number of unionists and 7% of respondents who identified as
neit

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

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

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

Another respondent who identified

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

Many of those in favour of a simple majority highlighted that it was an explicit requirement

line with the Belfast Agreement/Good Friday Agreement a majority vote of 50% plus 1 vote

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

contentious and problematic

Some of those in favour of a

Respondents calling for fact-checking or truthful information often also stressed the more information that is available (factual) on both sides of the argument would enable

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

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,

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

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:

manage the process in partnership with the two governments, but realistically don't think it will have the capacity to d Small numbers from all communities argued that plans for

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

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

together in dialogue, such a skew in advocacy could clearly pose challenges in the future.

Small numbers of respondents from all communities specifically mentioned that political parties should participate in planning for a united Ireland. One unionist saw a process involving the two governments and main parties similar to GFA discussions would

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

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

for

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 and EU could lay out a detailed plan of action backed by funding to show what would happen in the

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 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

Small numbers of nationalists and unionists saw a role for the USA in negotiations about

with responses from as many stakeholders as possible. Maybe the US could supply a

provide financial support for the new country both in terms of investment and wiping some

nd 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

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

On what should happen if voters opted to stay in the UK (BQ4), 6% of nationalist respondents said that, in this case,

I

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

and I hope we don't, there will be need for reform of relationship with UK to be decided by

however, unlike proposals from nationalists 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

renegotiated unless the position of Scotland and Wales was also being renegotiated at the

where a referendum does happen, it is unlikely that any major change could be negotiated with the UK about our place if the referendum numbers of nationalist respondents and those who identified as neither nationalist nor

change due to Brexit. One said imagine, will continue to do so. He who pays the piper calls the tune. Views of GB people to

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 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 se

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

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