

Restoring the Assembly?

Executive Summary

- The Institute of Irish Studies commissioned Social Market Research (SMR) to conduct a public opinion survey on **Restoring the Assembly?** The survey is based on a sample of 1074 Northern Ireland adults aged 18+. The survey was conducted using an online panel methodology with the data weighted to be demographically representative of the adult population. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.1% at the 95% Confidence Level. Fieldwork was undertaken between 26th October and 3rd November 2023 and in accordance with ISO20252:2019.
- Respondents were asked how they voted in the most recent council elections. As reported in Table 1, the votes cast in the sample closely reflect wider political views in NI as expressed in the May 2023 elections. It also pinpoints the reliability of the survey and the confidence within.
- Surveys show that Brexit did not have the effect that was predicted regarding growth in support for Irish unification. The share supporting that they would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow is down 5% since our last survey in June 2023. In terms of faith/no faith 60% of Catholics, 10% of Protestants and 18% of non-religious would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow.
- We find here, as before, that amongst Alliance voters, who express an opinion, there remains a c2-1 ratio with regard to remaining in the UK. However, with respect to the question *'if the Assembly remains suspended that would encourage me to think that a United Ireland is a better option'* that ratio is reversed with 54% of Alliance voters agreeing. In effect, suspension of the Assembly is a more pronounced, compared to Brexit, factor in some voters re-considering their constitutional position.
- 31% stated that they would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow compared to 49% who stated that they would not. 9% stated they did not know how they would vote. When removing those who did not express an opinion 62% supported remaining in the UK. This is a constant feature of most surveys and also indicates, that despite some decline, remaining in the UK holds a significant lead.
- With regard to the question *'I want the Assembly to return rather than the current situation where civil servants are making decisions'* a mere 7% disagreed with 15% stating they neither agreed or disagreed. 72% agreed. With regard to identity 74% of Unionists, 81% of Nationalists and 74% of Neithers agreed.

- Regarding the question *'without the Assembly improvements to the NHS and other public services cannot be delivered'* 72% agreed compared to 9% who disagreed. With regard to identity 68% of Unionists, 82% of Nationalists and 80% of Neithers agreed.
- 53% agreed *'the Windsor Framework means the DUP should re-enter the Executive and the Assembly'*. 13% disagreed and a significant 22% stated they neither agreed or disagreed. With regard to identity 48% of Unionists, 66% of Nationalists and 61% of Neithers agreed.
- Over three quarters agreed (78%) that *'access to both the EU and UK markets is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland'*. With regard to identity 78% of Unionists, 86% of Nationalists and 84% of Neithers agreed.
- Regarding the proposal *'the British government delivering additional legislative changes that would mean the Green Lane would facilitate less paperwork and a better flow of goods from GB to Northern Ireland is critically important with regard to the restoration of the Assembly'* 57% agreed and 10% disagreed. With regard to identity 68% of Unionists, 50% of Nationalists and 58% of Neithers agreed.
- 36% concurred that *'if the DUP oppose the Windsor Framework Direct Rule with input from the Irish government should follow'* 31% disagreed. With regard to identity 21% of Unionists, 64% of Nationalists and 38% of Neithers Agreed.
- The majority (74%) Agreed that *'no single political party should have the power to bring down the Assembly'*. With regard to identity 68% of Unionists, 87% of Nationalists and 83% of Neithers agreed.
- 63% Agreed that they accepted *'... that there are issues within the Windsor Framework that require resolution but these are not as important as restoring the Assembly and challenging public service needs'*. With regard to identity 59% of Unionists, 77% of Nationalists and 68% of Neithers agreed.
- Just under half (49%) supported *'it has been proposed that the UK government set up an east-west council that will bring together all parts of the UK to collaborate on trade and maximise other opportunities presented by the Union. I support the creation of such a council'* only 7% Disagreed. With regard to identity 65% of Unionists, 45% of Nationalist and 43% of Neithers agreed.
- A small majority (52%) agreed that *'if the DUP continues to refuse to go back into the Assembly - then Direct Rule from Westminster should be introduced immediately'* with a significant minority disagreeing (20%). With regard to identity 21% of Unionists, 64% of Nationalists and 38% of Neithers agreed.
- Concerning *'if the Assembly remains suspended that would encourage me to think that a United Ireland is a better option'* a significant 41% agreed and 35%

disagreed. With regard to identity 13% of Unionists, 80% of Nationalists and 47% of Neithers Agreed.

- 18% agreed that they opposed the Windsor Framework. Among this small but statistically relevant cohort 68% agreed the Assembly should be restored. 57% of this group agreed that *'despite the Windsor Framework, constitutional and sovereignty issues remain so problematic that it should be scrapped even if that means losing access to the single market'* and a similar share (53%) agreed that they accepted *'... that there are issues within the Windsor Framework that require resolution but these are not as important as restoring the Assembly and challenging public service needs'*. With regard to identity, within this sub-cohort, 59% of Unionists, 77% of Nationalists and 68% of Neithers agreed.
- There is virtually no difference in preferences regarding what respondents wish the Assembly to prioritise and there is evidence that the Windsor Framework is receding as a priority. In March 2023 we found that 6.1% stated that the Windsor Framework was their first priority with 10.6% stating it was their second. This has now fallen to 0.9% and 2.6% respectively.

Voting and the Constitutional Question

As noted previously the survey has a close relationship between how respondents voted and the vote share achieved by respective parties (Table 1). Like many polls of this type there is always a smaller share of non-voters than we observe in elections. Therefore, results should be read as those who tend to vote.

Table 1: How did you vote in May 2023 election versus May election result (%)

Voting	Sample	Actual vote share May 2023
TUV	4	4
SDLP	8	9
UUP	12	11
Alliance Party	15	13
DUP	24	23
SF	30	31

Table 2 indicates that SF remain the largest party, that the DUP is up slightly since the May 2023 elections. The SDLP are up 1% since May but still down on their 2019 vote share. Arguably, the DUP's stance has not brought forth a significant rise in electoral fortunes. However, there is no evidence that the TUV is cutting into their voter base.

Table 2: What party do you intend to vote for in next year's General Election?

Voting	Sample (valid %)	Actual vote share 2019
TUV	5	Did Not Stand
SDLP	9	15
UUP	11	12
Alliance Party	15	17
DUP	25	31
SF	31	23
I will vote but undecided	14 ⁱ	

31% stated that they would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow compared to 49% who stated that they would not. 9% stated they did not know how they would vote. When removing those who did not express an opinion 62% supported remaining in the UK. This is a constant feature of most surveys and also indicates that despite some decline remaining in the UK remains with a significant lead.

The share agreeing that they would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow is down 5% since our last survey in June 2023. In terms of faith/no faith 60% of Catholics, 10% of Protestants and 18% of non-religious would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow.

Table 3: I would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	7.3	2.9	87.9	1.9
SF	70.7	12.5	11.7	5.1
SDLP	54.7	12.0	29.3	4.0
UUP	11.7	5.8	80.6	1.9
Alliance	24.8	13.9	43.1	18.2
TUV	6.0	2.0	92.0	0.0

Table 4: I would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	6.8	3.4	88.5	1.3
Nationalist	72.8	8.7	13.8	4.7
Neither	25.8	18.6	40.7	14.9

Surveys show that Brexit did not have the effect that was predicted regarding growth in support for Irish unification. Amongst Alliance voters, who express an opinion, there remains a c2-1 ratio with regard to remaining in the UK. However, with respect to the question ‘if the Assembly remains suspended that would encourage me to think that a United Ireland is a better option’ that ratio is reversed with 54% of Alliance voters agreeing. In effect, suspension of the Assembly is a more pronounced, compared to Brexit, factor in some voters re-considering their constitutional position.

Table 5: If the Assembly remains suspended that would encourage me to think that a United Ireland is a better option?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	11.1	12.6	73.2	3.0
SF	78.4	15.2	4.4	2.0
SDLP	69.0	14.1	14.1	2.8
UUP	25.6	12.8	58.1	3.5
Alliance	54.5	20.7	22.3	2.5
TUV	7.5	7.5	80.0	5.0

As shown in Table 6 the main priorities of respondents were the economy/cost of living and fixing the NHS. Sites of conflict such as the Windsor Framework and Legacy are lower priorities. That does not mean they are unimportant but evidently, yet again, we find that everyday priorities are more critical. There is virtually no difference in preferences by identity and there is now evidence that the Windsor Framework is receding as a priority. In March 2023 we found that 6.1% stated that the Windsor Framework was their first priority with 10.6% stating it was their second. This has now fallen to 0.9% and 2.6% respectively.

Table 6: If and when devolution returns, what should be the Executive's most important priority?

	1st Preference	2nd Preference
Economy/Cost of Living	41.0	26.8
Fixing the NHS	34.6	34.0
Reforming the Assembly	6.3	7.0
Climate	5.5	3.1
Housing	3.3	8.3
Constitutional Issues	3.2	3.3
Crime/Law and Order	2.9	4.4
Education	2.2	8.9
The Windsor Framework	0.9	2.6

Legacy Issues	0.1	1.6
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Table 7: If and when devolution returns, what should be the Executive’s most important priority (by identity)?

	Nationalists	Unionists	Neithers
Fixing the NHS	34.4	35.1	33.1
Economy/Cost of Living	24.9	27.7	31.4
Housing	9.2	5.8	6.8
Reforming the Assembly	8.0	6.0	8.9
Education	7.0	8.4	11.3
Crime/Law and Order	4.8	4.2	2.4
Climate	4.0	2.4	2.7
Constitutional Issues	3.3	2.9	1.7
Legacy Issues	3.3	2.1	0.3
The Windsor Framework	0.7	5.5	1.4

The Windsor Framework and the Assembly

The majority and/or plurality of all voters wish for the Assembly to return. 11% of DUP voters and 22% of TUV voters disagree. Interestingly, the Alliance voters at 91.3% show the strongest support for the return of the Assembly.

Table 8: I want the Assembly to return rather than the current situation where civil servants are making decisions

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don’t Know
DUP	70.0	16.4	11.1	2.4
SF	77.7	12.1	6.6	3.5
SDLP	80.0	13.3	5.3	1.3
UUP	77.9	14.4	1.9	5.8
Alliance	91.3	5.8	2.2	0.7
TUV	50.0	18.0	22.0	10.0

When examined by identity there is no doubt that the greater number seek the return of devolved government. Fewer than 10% of unionists disagreed.

Table 9: I want the Assembly to return rather than the current situation where civil servants are making decisions

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
Agree	74.5	81.2	73.6
Neither Agree/Disagree	12.7	12.3	3.3
Disagree	9.6	3.3	4.1

As indicated in Tables 10 and 11 the vast majority of voters believe that the return of the Assembly will provide the opportunity for the NHS and other public service delivery to be improved. 68.5% of unionists agreed compared to 15.4% who disagreed.

Table 10: Without the Assembly improvements to the NHS and other public services cannot be delivered

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	69.9	14.6	13.6	1.9
SF	83.2	9.0	2.3	5.5
SDLP	84.9	6.8	8.2	0.0
UUP	65.4	19.2	11.5	3.8
Alliance	92.0	2.2	5.1	0.7
TUV	41.2	17.6	41.2	0.0

Table 11: Without the Assembly improvements to the NHS and other public services cannot be delivered

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
Agree	68.5	81.8	79.6
Neither Agree/Disagree	13.3	8.4	11.9
Disagree	15.4	5.1	5.4

Tables 11 to 14 present questions that would assist in removing the present impasse. There is very strong support among DUP voters and Neithers for the UK government to reduce paperwork and aid the flow of GB goods that only reach the Northern Irish market. There is less support among SF voters but a plurality of Nationalists agree. Regarding the establishment of an East-West council there is significant support among unionists and significant shares of Nationalists and Neithers who neither agreed or disagreed.

Table 11: The British government delivering additional legislative changes that would mean the Green Lane would facilitate less paperwork and a better flow of goods from GB to Northern Ireland is critically important with regard to the restoration of the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	65.8	21.6	4.0	8.5
SF	47.4	26.9	17.7	8.0
SDLP	64.3	18.6	10.0	7.1
UUP	75.3	12.9	7.1	4.7
Alliance	56.7	25.0	12.5	5.8
TUV	43.6	10.3	30.8	15.4

Table 12: The British government delivering additional legislative changes that would mean the Green Lane would facilitate less paperwork and a better flow of goods from GB to Northern Ireland is critically important with regard to the restoration of the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	68.0	17.2	7.3	7.6
Nationalist	50.0	27.4	15.7	6.9
Neither	58.2	23.5	9.5	8.8

Table 13: It has been proposed that the UK government set up an east-west council that will bring together all parts of the UK to collaborate on trade and maximise other opportunities presented by the Union. I support the creation of such a council

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	64.6	21.9	5.2	8.3
Nationalist	44.7	36.7	11.3	7.3
Neither	43.4	40.3	4.1	12.2

Table 14: It has been proposed that the UK government set up an east-west council that will bring together all parts of the UK to collaborate on trade and maximise other opportunities presented by the Union. I support the creation of such a council

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	62.1	28.8	3.5	5.6
SF	40.2	39.4	10.8	9.6
SDLP	64.3	24.3	8.6	2.9
UUP	64.7	24.7	1.2	9.4
Alliance	52.9	29.8	9.9	7.4
TUV	65.0	10.0	2.5	22.5

As indicated in Tables 15 and 16 access to both the EU and UK markets is understood, both by identity and voters, as vital to the economy of Northern Ireland. This has been understood in several surveys and it is evident that there is no significant disagreement with regard to Northern Ireland having ‘unfettered’ access to the EU market.

Table 15: Access to both the EU and UK markets is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	77.9	13.0	7.0	2.1
Nationalist	86.5	6.2	4.7	2.5
Neither	83.7	10.9	2.7	2.7

Table 16: Access to both the EU and UK markets is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	71.2	18.2	7.6	3.0
SF	85.9	7.2	2.8	4.0
SDLP	76.1	12.7	9.9	1.4
UUP	85.9	9.4	2.4	2.4
Alliance	86.1	8.2	4.9	0.8
TUV	69.2	2.6	25.6	2.6

Tables 17 and 18 consider, by identity and voting, if resolving the Windsor Framework is more important than restoring the Assembly. In terms of identity a majority of all identity groups agree with a 3 fold difference between unionists in agreement compared to those who disagree. There is a lower ratio among DUP voters but still a 2 to 1 ratio in favour of agreement versus disagreement.

Table 17: I accept that there are issues within the Windsor Framework that require resolution but these are not as important as restoring the Assembly and challenging public service needs

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	59.4	15.9	20.1	4.7
Nationalist	77.0	11.7	6.6	4.7
Neither	68.1	18.3	8.5	5.1

Table 18: I accept that there are issues within the Windsor Framework that require resolution but these are not as important as restoring the Assembly and challenging public service needs

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	48.5	25.3	23.2	3.0
SF	74.2	12.9	8.1	4.8
SDLP	73.2	16.9	7.0	2.8
UUP	74.4	11.6	7.0	7.0
Alliance	87.6	7.4	2.5	2.5
TUV	17.9	10.3	66.7	5.1

DUP voters with regard to this survey remain reticent, as they were in previous surveys. Regarding opposition to the Windsor Framework there is over a 2 fold gap between those who agree or disagree that they oppose the Windsor Framework, but there is a near 60% share who neither agreed or disagreed, did not know or disagreed. Only TUV voters held a majority who agreed. Among other parties the range was 9.8% to 16.9%.

Table 19: I am opposed to the Windsor Framework

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	39.7	32.2	17.1	11.1
SF	12.4	36.4	37.2	14.0
SDLP	16.9	33.8	39.4	9.9
UUP	12.9	38.8	36.5	11.8
Alliance	9.8	39.3	43.4	7.4
TUV	72.5	12.5	7.5	7.5

Sub-group Opposed to the Windsor Framework

At this point we examine, via Tables 20 to 25, only those who stated that they were opposed to the Windsor Framework. Even within this group the majority, by voting and identity, agreed that the Assembly should return. The highest level of disagreement was among TUV voters.

Table 20: I oppose the Windsor Framework but support a return of the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
DUP	65.8	17.7	16.5
SF	71.0	19.4	9.7

SDLP	75.0	16.7	8.3
UUP	63.6	18.2	18.2
Alliance	83.3	8.3	8.3
TUV	55.2	6.9	37.9

Table 21: I oppose the Windsor Framework but support a return of the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Unionist	67.2	12.5	20.3
Nationalist	65.7	22.9	11.4
Neither	66.7	25.0	8.3

However, despite high support for returning to the Assembly for most who opposed the Windsor Framework there was also general support among DUP, SDLP, UUP and TUV voters for the scrapping of the Windsor Framework even if it meant losing access to the single market. This compares to over 70% of all DUP voters who agreed that access to the single market is vital for the economy.

Table 22: Despite the Windsor Framework, constitutional and sovereignty issues remain so problematic that it should be scrapped even if that means losing access to the single market?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	51.9	39.2	6.3	2.5
SF	45.2	35.5	12.9	6.5
SDLP	58.3	25.0	16.7	0.0
UUP	54.5	27.3	9.1	9.1
Alliance	50.0	25.0	25.0	0.0
TUV	89.3	10.7	0.0	0.0

Table 23: Despite the Windsor Framework, constitutional and sovereignty issues remain so problematic that it should be scrapped even if that means losing access to the single market?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	65.4	26.0	4.7	3.9
Nationalist	50.0	29.4	14.7	5.9
Neither	33.3	50.0	16.7	0.0

As well as being prepared to sacrifice access to the single market 48% of unionists, 45.6% of DUP and 78.6% of TUV voters, who oppose the Windsor Framework, disagree that the issues regarding the Windsor Framework are more important than restoring the Assembly to challenge public service needs. Among all DUP voters a 2-1 ratio agreed that restoration was more important than resolving the Windsor Framework 48% in disagreement. Evidently among those oppose there is significant disagreement between them and their fellow voters and identity group members.

Table 24: I accept that there are issues within the Windsor Framework that require resolution but these are not as important as restoring the Assembly and challenging public service needs

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	40.9	11.0	48.0	0.0
Nationalist	80.0	11.4	8.6	0.0
Neither	72.0	8.0	16.0	4.0

Table 25: I accept that there are issues within the Windsor Framework that require resolution but these are not as important as restoring the Assembly and challenging public service needs

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	44.3	10.1	45.6	0.0
SF	86.7	13.3	0.0	0.0
SDLP	50.0	16.7	33.3	0.0
UUP	50.0	8.3	33.3	8.3
Alliance	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
TUV	21.4	0.0	78.6	0.0

The Future?

In returning to all respondents within the survey we examined attitudes to what should happen next regarding the present suspension. Nearly twice as many DUP voters agreed compared to those who disagreed, that the Windsor Framework meant their party should return to the Assembly and Executive. There was at least 60% support among other parties with strongest opposition among TUV voters. A plurality of unionists and a majority of Nationalists and Neithers agreed.

Table 26: The Windsor Framework means the DUP should re-enter the Executive and the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	43.0	24.2	24.2	8.7
SF	64.5	19.5	7.8	8.2
SDLP	64.0	17.3	12.0	6.7
UUP	62.5	18.3	9.6	9.6
Alliance	78.3	14.5	2.2	5.1
TUV	20.0	14.0	58.0	8.0

Table 27: The Windsor Framework means the DUP should re-enter the Executive and the Assembly?

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
Agree	47.7	65.7	60.9
Neither Agree/Disagree	19.3	17.5	22.1
Disagree	23.4	8.0	6.8

Table 28: If the DUP continues to refuse to go back into the Assembly - then Direct Rule from Westminster should be introduced immediately?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	47.0	22.2	24.2	6.6
SF	48.6	16.5	29.3	5.6
SDLP	58.6	11.4	28.6	1.4
UUP	59.3	19.8	12.8	8.1
Alliance	64.5	14.9	15.7	5.0
TUV	48.7	2.6	30.8	17.9

Unsurprisingly, Nationalists agreed that Direct Rule with input from the Irish government should follow if the DUP do not return to the Assembly. Over half of unionists disagreed with majority disagreement among DUP and TUV voters.

Table 29: If the DUP oppose the Windsor Framework Direct Rule with input from the Irish government should follow?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	21.1	16.7	56.5	5.7
Nationalist	64.4	19.6	11.3	4.7
Neither	37.8	30.3	21.8	10.2

Table 30: If the DUP oppose the Windsor Framework Direct Rule with input from the Irish government should follow?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	18.1	17.1	60.3	4.5
SF	64.7	18.1	11.6	5.6
SDLP	58.6	21.4	14.3	5.7
UUP	20.9	25.6	48.8	4.7
Alliance	53.7	23.1	14.9	8.3
TUV	12.8	15.4	66.7	5.1

Finally, the majority of voters and respondents agreed that the capacity of a party to bring down the Assembly should end with only the TUV having a minority who agreed.

Table 31: No single political party should have the power to bring down the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
Unionist	68.3	13.5	16.6	1.6
Nationalist	86.9	7.6	3.6	1.8
Neither	83.3	11.2	2.0	3.4

Table 32: No single political party should have the power to bring down the Assembly

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't Know
DUP	57.6	21.7	19.2	1.5
SF	85.9	8.4	2.4	3.2
SDLP	86.1	6.9	5.6	1.4
UUP	84.7	12.9	1.2	1.2
Alliance	90.9	3.3	2.5	3.3
TUV	40.0	10.0	50.0	0.0

ⁱ The 14% represents the whole sample. The voting figures actual percent of those who said they would vote.