

Voting, Identity, Trust and Media

Executive Summary

- The Institute of Irish Studies commissioned Social Market Research (SMR) to conduct a public opinion survey on **Voting, Identity, Trust and Media**. The survey was conducted using an online panel methodology with the data weighted to be demographically representative of the NI adult population. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.1%. Fieldwork was undertaken between 17th and 30th June 2023.
- Respondents were asked how they voted in the most recent council elections. As reported in Table 1, the views of the sample closely reflect wider political views in NI as expressed in the May 2023 elections.
- 47.5% of respondents were male and 52.5% female. Women are more supportive of the availability of abortion services than men (66.6% v 59.8%) and more likely to declare '*do not know*' regarding how they would vote (14.2% v 6.0%) in a border poll.
- Strongest support for maintaining the union is found among the following identity groups: British only (81.3%), Northern Irish only (54.7%) or British and Irish only (47.6%). Majorities supporting Irish unification sat within Irish only (51.6%), and Irish/Northern Irish only (66.7%).
- Support for Irish unity is strongest among the 18-34 age group (42% would vote for unity; 38% would vote against). Opposition to Irish unity is strongest among the 60+ age category (64% would vote against).
- Overall, 36% would vote for Irish unity tomorrow; 47% would vote against. Support and opposition levels change when respondents were asked about voting on Irish unification in 15-20 years. 40% would vote for Irish unity in 15-20 years; 36% would vote against.
- The greater number of Catholics joining the electoral register has not translated into a surge in votes for pro-unity parties. Since 1998 the electorate has increased by over 195000 with an increase in the pro-unity vote equivalent to c16.0% of new registrations. During the same period, the growth in Alliance votes, equates to around a third of the growth in the electorate.
- Since 1998, Unionist parties have declined in terms of first preferences by over 50,000.
- 32.9% of Catholics would either **not** vote for a united Ireland tomorrow, not vote or do not know how they would vote compared to 18.8% of Protestants.

- More neithers (43.4%) would not vote for unification compared to those who would (28.6%). Neithers at 15.7% were the group most likely to not know how they would vote.
- A third (32.7%) and a fifth of SF voters stated that they voted '*to show support for a return to Stormont*' this compared to a fifth (19.1%) who chose the option '*to advance Irish unity*'. The highest 2nd preference was '*the party most likely to fight for public services*'.
- DUP voters compared to SF voters were more motivated by the constitutional issue (55.2%) which was significantly higher than the 16.8% who voted for the boycotting of Stormont.
- 40.5% of Alliance supporters voted '*to challenge constitutional and identity politics*' with a significant share voting (29.3%) to show support for the return of Stormont. Interestingly, across all 3 sets of voters voting due to being impressed by the party leader was the lowest ranked option.
- 69.9% who would vote for Irish unity tomorrow voted for a pro-unity party compared to 51.9% who would not do so who voted for a unionist party.
- Nearly one third of respondents (31.7%), the majority of whom were pro-union, did not vote for unionist or nationalist parties but declared that they would either vote for or against a united Ireland tomorrow.
- Over half of respondents considered the DUP, social media, the British government and journalists to be untrustworthy. 49% counted media commentators and Sinn Fein as untrustworthy. Only trade unionists, community leaders and academics gained over 50% approval as trustworthy.
- The majority of all political identity groups supported the availability of abortion services in Northern Ireland.

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

Voting	Sample (n=1017)	Actual vote share May 2023
DUP	24	23
SF	30	31
SDLP	9	9
UUP	11	11
Alliance Party	13	13
TUV	3	4

Green	3	2
Aontú	1	1
Conservatives	1	0
People Before Profit	2	1
Other (please specify)	3	5

Demography and Change?

The publication of Census results in 2022 was greeted by some political parties in Northern Ireland as a sign of an irreversible trend towards Irish unification. There is no doubt that the growth in those from Catholic community backgrounds has had an impact on the pro-nationalist vote share but it is also the case that these trends have or will flatten out due to what are predicted as more similar fertility rates between Catholics and Protestants. It could be argued that the capacity of the Catholic population to grow above 50+1 is now either less likely or not a short to medium outcome. This is not only related to changing birth-rates but also the rise in those who do not state their religion,

Of course, it should not be ignored that since the University of Liverpool General Election Survey and in subsequent surveys that the share of Catholics who wish for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK has fallen by some 5%, and that younger Catholics are more likely to support Irish unification than their older co-religionists. However, the greater number of Catholics joining the electoral register has not translated into a surge in votes for pro-unity parties. Since 1998 the electorate has increased by over 195000 with an increase in the pro-unity vote equivalent to c16.0% of new registrations. During the same period, the growth in the Alliance, equates to around a third of the growth in the electorate. Unionist parties have declined in terms of first preferences by over 50,000. If, we assume electorate growth is based upon registrations by first time voters it could be concluded that significant shares of those aged under 43 years of age are voting Alliance and/or not voting.

Despite those changes and the narrowing in the gap between support for a united Ireland and Northern Ireland remaining in the UK, a significant share of Catholics do not desire Irish unification whereas Protestants remain solidly supportive of remaining in the UK. In essence, support for remaining in the UK is more concrete than support for Irish unification. 32.9% of Catholics would either not vote for a united Ireland tomorrow, not vote or do not know how they would vote compared to 18.8% of Protestants.

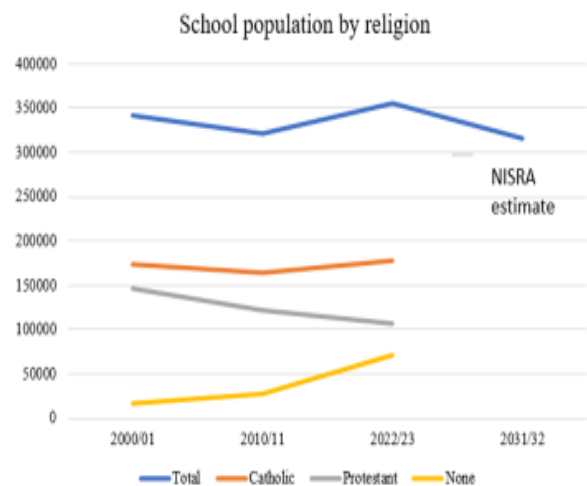
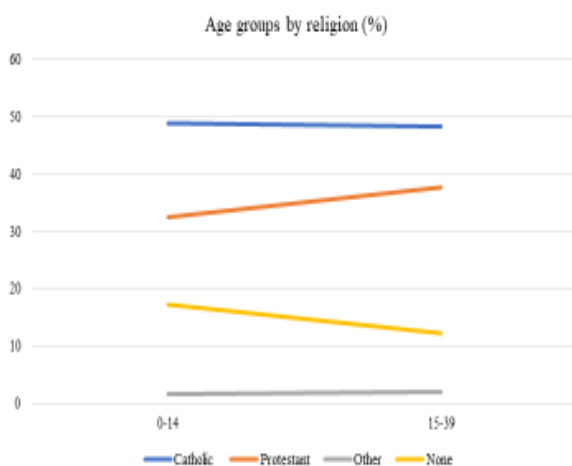
If fertility rates are stabilising then the capacity to gain the electoral support to deliver a border poll would require a significant share of Protestants and those with no religious affiliation to become supportive of the pro-unity agenda. Moreover, it is also

evidenced that there is a hidden and significant pro-union vote located among non-voters and parties such as Alliance (68% would not vote for a united Ireland tomorrow). In effect, we have probably entered a political and electoral stalemate.

Census 2022 showed that that the birth-rate had fallen significantly since 2011. In terms of the age categories 0-14 and 15-39 the share of those cohorts has remained stable concerning Catholics, declined by c8% for Protestants but witnessed continued growth in those who do not state a religion. As also shown Graph 1 the total school age population has remained relatively stable with a small growth in Catholics a decline in Protestants and a near 4-fold increase in pupils who do not have a designated religion. Given the fall in the birth-rate it is estimated that school enrolments will now decline by around 50,000. This rapid rise in secularisation challenges the rudimentary reading that is sectarian head counting. As indicated in Graph 2 the majority of those who do not state a religion are predominantly British or Northern Irish plus in terms of national identity.

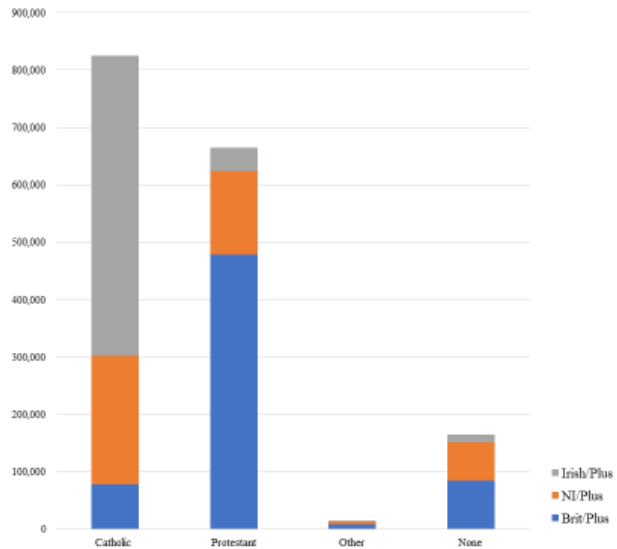
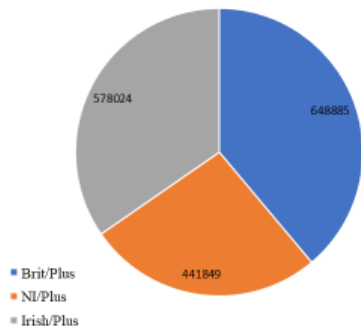
Graph 1: Age groups and school age population by religion

Age groups by religious composition



Graph 2: National Identity by Religion

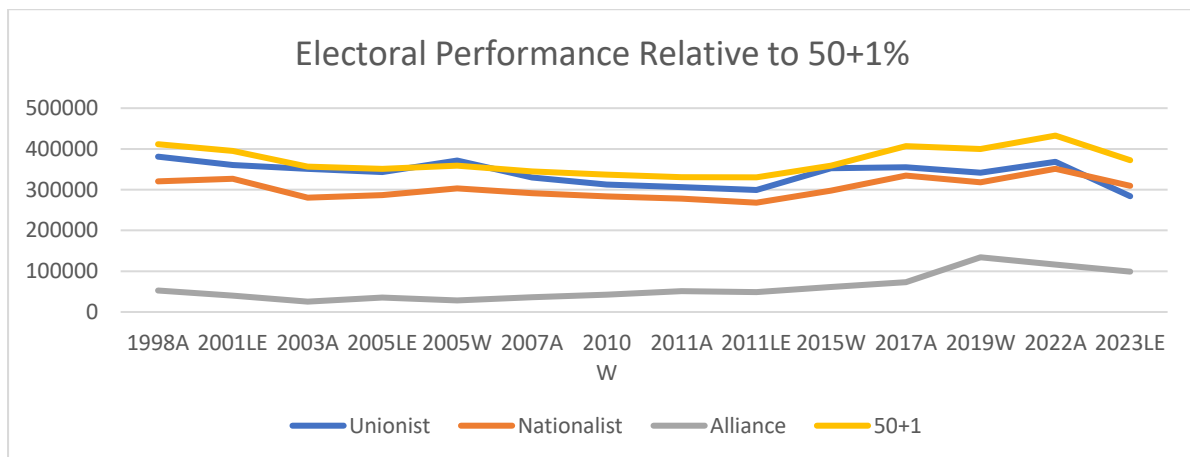
National identity



Voting and Party Support

There has been a rise in the votes gained by nationalist parties since 2011 yet, like all other parties, this declined numerically post 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election. Moreover, the share of the vote gained in the 1998 and 2022 Assembly election for the SDLP and Sinn Fein has remained at c39%. For unionist parties decline has been ongoing since 1998 with a few highpoints achieved when Northern Ireland was politically stable. Not since 2015 has unionism gained 50% of voters whereas nationalists parties have experiences marginal change. The rise of Alliance, if maintained, probably means neither identity bloc achieving 50+1 of voters in either the short to medium term.

Graph 3: Electoral Performance and 50+1 of votes cast



The Constitutional Issue

In terms of response to the question *'I would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow'* 36.1% agreed and 47.0% disagreed. One in ten stated that they did not know how they would vote with 6.2% stating they would not vote. 5% of unionists compared to 80.8% of nationalists would vote for a united Ireland. In comparison 12.1% of nationalists and 90.8% of unionists would not. More neithers (43.4%) would not vote for unification compared to those who would (28.6%). Neithers at 15.7% were the group most likely to not know how they would vote.

Table 2: I would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow by political identity

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
Agree	5.0%	80.8%	28.6%
Disagree	90.8%	12.1%	43.4%
I will not Vote	2.5%	0.3%	12.3%
Do not Know	1.6%	6.7%	15.7%

Majorities or a greater share of respondents who would vote against a united Ireland tomorrow were located among British only (81.3%), Northern Irish only (54.7%) and British and Irish (47.6%). Majority support for Irish unification sat within Irish only (73.7%) and Irish/Northern Irish (66.7%). The highest share of those who did not know was located among those who were Irish/Northern Irish.

Table 3: I would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow by national identity

	British Only	Irish Only	NI Only	British and Irish	Irish/NI	Other
Disagree	81.3	9.0	54.7	47.6	16.7	29.2
Do not Know	5.6	9.0	11.9	12.5	23.7	10.4
I will not Vote	5.2	7.2	0.9	5.0	12.4	6.2
Agree	4.7	73.7	39.6	35.1	66.7	34.6

With regard to the 3 largest parties the survey asked what were the primary and secondary motivations for giving a 1st preference to either SF, DUP and Alliance. A third (32.7%) and a fifth of SF voters stated that they voted *'to show support for a return*

to Stormont' this compared to a fifth (19.1%) who chose the option 'to advance Irish unity'. The highest 2nd preference was 'the party most likely to fight for public services'.

Table 4: What was your primary and secondary motivation for voting Sinn Fein

	1st Preference	2nd Preference
To show support for a return to Stormont	32.7	20.5
To advance Irish Unity	19.1	14.5
They are the party best suited to create jobs and investment in Northern Ireland	14.7	11.8
They are the party most likely to fight for public services	14.6	24.7
They are a party that have supported me and my family when we need advice and support	13.7	19.9
Because I am impressed by the party's leader	4.1	7.2
Other	1.1	1.3

DUP voters compared to SF voters were more motivated by the constitutional issue (55.2%) which was significantly higher than the 16.8% who voted for the boycotting of Stormont.

Table 5: What was your primary and secondary motivation for voting DUP as 1st preference?

	1st Preference	2nd Preference
To show support for NI's place in the union	55.2	25.6
To show support for the boycott of Stormont	16.8	16.4
They are the party most likely to fight for public services	10.5	12.8
They are a party that have supported me and my family when we need advice and support	9.9	9.4
They are the party best suited to create jobs and investment in Northern Ireland	5.9	20.3
Other (please specify)	0.3	5.5
Because I am impressed by the party leader	0.2	10.0

40.5% of Alliance supporters voted 'to challenge constitutional and identity politics' with a significant share voting (29.3%) to show support for the return of Stormont. Interestingly, across all 3 sets of voters voting due to being impressed by the party leader was the lowest ranked option.

Table 6: What was your primary and secondary motivation for voting Alliance as a 1st preference?

	1 st Preference	2 nd Preference
To challenge constitutional and identity politics	40.5	13.9
To shows support for a return to Stormont	29.3	27.4
They are the party best suited to create jobs and investment in Northern Ireland	13.7	18.3
They are the party most likely to fight for public services	12.2	23.6
Because I am impressed by the party leader	3.9	9.9
They are a party that have supported me and my family when we need advice and support	0.4	5.0
Other (please specify)	0.0	1.8

Nearly one third of respondents (31.7%), the majority of whom were pro-union, did not vote for unionist or nationalist parties but declared that they would either vote for or against a united Ireland tomorrow. Nearly a third of those who would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow did not vote for Sinn Fein or the SDLP. Over 40% would not vote for Irish unity but did not vote DUP, UUP or TUV. Overall, 69.9% who would vote for Irish unity tomorrow voted for a pro-unity party compared to 51.9% who would not do so who voted for a unionist party.

Table 7: You disagreed that you would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow but did not vote for a unionist party. How do you feel about the following issues? (by age category)

	18-34	35-59	60+	% Agree
Unionist parties are too traditional and are overly focussed on identity issues	65.7	74.8	84.6	74.8
Unionist parties do not reflect enough upon the needs of young people	55.2	80.7	78.4	73.0
Unionist parties lack policies that are relevant to me	56.1	75.4	80.4	71.1
I wouldn't consider myself a unionist but think NI is better placed in the UK	62.7	66.4	71.2	66.4
Unionist parties have failed to challenge social deprivation within my community	54.5	73.1	60.8	65.3
Unionist parties work within an identity I do not want to be a part of	41.8	63.0	67.3	58.0
Unionist parties are too socially conservative	47.0	57.3	51.9	52.2
I oppose Brexit	51.9	39.6	22.7	36.2
I am supportive of a united Ireland but do not believe the time is right	22.4	33.1	28.8	29.1

Table 8: You agreed that you would vote for a united Ireland tomorrow but did not vote for a nationalist party. How do you feel about the following issues? (by age category)

	18-34	35-59	60+	% Agree
Nationalist parties lack policies that are relevant to me	50.9	38.9	90.0	48.7
Nationalist parties do not reflect enough upon the needs of young people	50.0	37.0	63.6	45.5
Nationalist parties are too traditional and are overly focussed on identity issues	36.4	50.0	63.6	45.0
Nationalist parties have failed to challenge social deprivation within my community	43.6	18.2	27.3	42.9
I support Brexit	18.2	35.2	80.0	42.9
Nationalist parties work within an identity I do not want to be a part of	42.9	26.0	90.9	39.6
Nationalist parties are too socially liberal	43.6	18.2	27.3	30.6

In terms of the 3 main parties a) and their respective leaders Naomi Long was deemed the most supportive of parity of esteem and mutual respect. Michelle O'Neill was identified as the most effective communicator, the leader best placed to create jobs and investment. Jeffrey Donaldson enjoyed less support which is possibly linked to the general mood, even among those who are pro-union, that unionist political parties are underperforming (which is somewhat peculiar given the role the DUP played in bringing investment, such as Fintech to Northern Ireland). Brexit and the boycott of Stormont may also be factors and the inability of the DUP to adapt to the secularisation and social liberalism within the pro-union community (some of which is evidence below in terms of support for the availability of abortion services Table 18).

Table 9: Please say to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	DK
Michelle O'Neill is an effective communicator	49.3	17.5	23.8	9.4
Naomi Long is an effective communicator	47.4	22.6	20.6	9.4
Naomi Long supports parity of esteem and mutual respect	44.8	22.7	21.2	11.3
Michelle O'Neill has the leadership skills to create jobs and investment	42.6	19.5	26.2	11.7

Naomi Long has the leadership skills to create jobs and investment	40.1	25	23.7	11.3
Michelle O'Neill supports parity of esteem and mutual respect	39.2	21.2	28.6	10.9
Jeffrey Donaldson is an effective communicator	32.2	19.3	39.5	9.1
Jeffrey Donaldson has the leadership skills to create jobs and investment	27.1	21.2	40.6	11.1
Jeffrey Donaldson supports parity of esteem and mutual respect	22.9	20.6	45.0	11.5

Media and Trust

Respondents were asked about news sources and the frequency of their use. Television was the most commonly used medium at 78.5%. Over half chose social media and radio. Fewer than 20% used printed newspapers, podcasts and magazines (Table 10).

Table 10: Please say if you use any of the following platforms on a daily basis to access the news

Source	Use daily
Television	78.5
Social Media	57.9
Radio	50.7
Word of mouth (family/friends/colleagues)	42.1
Newspapers online (computer, laptop, netbook, tablet, mobile, etc)	39.6
Newspapers (printed)	19.3
Other internet sources	16.6
Podcasts	12.3
Magazines	4.4
Don't use any of the above on a daily basis to access news	1.7
Other	0.2

In terms of political identity, neithers were less likely than unionists and nationalists to use television and radio. Fewer than half of unionists use social media compared to around two thirds of nationalists and neithers. Neithers were less likely to use online and printed newspapers.

Table 11: Please say if you use any of the following platforms on a daily basis to access the news (by political identity)

Source	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
Television	85.2	79.7	55.2
Radio	58.4	51.9	33.8
Social Media	47.8	64.9	68.0
Newspapers online (computer, laptop, netbook, tablet, mobile, etc)	45.6	44.9	22.7
Word of mouth (family/friends/colleagues)	44.7	42.2	37.7
Newspapers (printed)	23.0	27.7	9.6
Other internet sources	21.4	11.1	14.3
Podcasts	10.7	13.5	11.5
Magazines	6.9	4.4	1.5
Don't use any of the above on a daily basis to access news	1.3	0.7	5.6
Other	0.3	0.3	0.0

As indicated in Table 10 around half of respondents access news via BBC television and UTV. The Belfast Telegraph gained 30.2% use. Most other mediums received between a fifth and a tenth of usage.

Table 12: Please say if you use any of the following outlets at least once a week to access the news.

Source	Use at least once a week
BBC NI television	54.4
UTV	47.6
Belfast Telegraph	30.2
Q Radio	19.8
Radio Ulster/Foyle	16.7
Downtown Radio	16.5
U105	15.7
Irish News	14.5
Local Paper	13.4
Don't use any of the above weekly	11.9
RTE television	8.4
Newsletter	8.3
RTE Radio	6.1
Irish Times	6.0
Other	5.1
LBC	3.1

Table 13 highlights the disparity between neithers and unionists and nationalists. They are nearly twice as unlikely to gain news from television and have low use of newspapers. They were also between a third and half as likely than other respondents to use any of the media sources listed.

Table 13: Please say if you use any of the following outlets at least once a week to access the news (by political identity)

Source	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
BBC NI television	67.2	54.4	28.0
UTV	55.0	52.4	27.7
Belfast Telegraph	36.2	28.0	27.0
Downtown Radio	20.2	13.2	15.0
Q Radio	17.9	22.6	21.3
Radio Ulster/Foyle	17.0	24.7	7.4
Local Paper	13.2	21.6	6.2
Newsletter	12.9	5.1	6.9
U105	10.1	22.3	10.4
Other	8.2	1.7	5.3
Don't use any of the above weekly	7.2	8.8	24.2
Irish News	3.5	35.8	7.1
LBC	2.8	5.1	1.8
RTE television	2.5	21.3	6.7
Irish Times	1.9	13.4	4.5
RTE Radio	1.9	14.2	5.3

Over 60s more commonly use printed news but are noticeably less likely, compared to other age groups, to use social media. Relatedly, three-quarters of the 60+ category use the BBC to access news on a daily basis compared to a third aged 18-34. Two-thirds of 60+ watch UTV to access news compared to a quarter of 18-34 year olds. 7% of 18-34 years olds access Radio Ulster/Foyle compared to 26% of those aged 60+.

Table 14: Please say if you use any of the following outlets at least daily to access the news (by age group)

	18-34	35-59	60+	Overall
Social media	71.1	63.0	32.2	58.0
Radio	42.0	54.9	52.3	50.6

Word of mouth	42.5	39.9	45.9	42
Online news	37.8	41.6	37.6	39.6
Printed news	10.4	17.8	33.1	19.3
Other internet sources	13.2	17.8	18.2	16.6
Podcasts	23.3	10.4	2.5	12.2
Magazines	3.5	4.5	5.5	4.4

Over half of respondents considered the DUP, social media, the British government and journalists to be untrustworthy. 49% counted media commentators and Sinn Fein as untrustworthy. Only trade unionists, community leaders and academics gained over 50% approval as trustworthy.

Table 15: Please say how trustworthy the following institutions, political parties and bodies are in delivering fair and accurate information?

	Trustworthy	Untrustworthy	Do Not Know
DUP	29.3	68.0	12.7
Social Media	23.2	67.4	9.5
British Government	29.0	61.9	9.1
Journalists	31.4	56.4	12.2
Media Commentators	37.9	49.5	12.6
Sinn Fein	39.5	49.1	11.4
Irish Government	40.5	44.0	15.6
European Union	41.6	43.7	14.7
Business Leaders	41.6	43.0	15.4
UUP	41.2	42.0	16.9
SDLP	45.2	37.5	17.4
APNI	48.3	34.3	17.4
Civil Servants	46.6	33.5	19.9
Trade Unions	51.5	31.2	17.3
Community Leaders	58.6	26.3	15.2
Academics	60.6	24.6	14.8

Abortion

The recent legalisation of abortion access in Northern Ireland was examined regarding knowledge of services, support for choice and support by political designation. 47.5%

were either unaware or unsure about what abortion services are available in Northern Ireland.

Table 16: How much do you feel you know about what abortion services are available in Northern Ireland?

I was not aware that abortion services are available in Northern Ireland	Table
I know a lot about what abortion services are available	13.5
I'm not sure about what abortion services are available	33.9
I know a little about what abortion services are available	42.9

A significant majority (63.1%) support the availability of abortion services in Northern Ireland. Fewer than one-in-four people oppose the availability of abortion services. Moreover, support for the availability of abortion services carries with strong cross-community approval. Support for abortion is most pronounced among the 'Neithers' (68%), followed by unionists (65%), then nationalists (60%).

Table 17: Do you support or oppose the availability of abortion services in Northern Ireland?

Support	Oppose	Do not know
63.1	23.9	13.0

Table 18: Abortion views by political designation

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
Support	64.6	60.0	68.3
Oppose	27.4	26.8	11.3
Do not know	8.0	13.2	21.0