

What do voters in Northern Ireland think about the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, Windsor Framework and 'Safeguarding the Union' deal?

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Executive Summary

- Majority opinion on the Protocol/Windsor Framework is either generally accepting or supportive of the arrangements that it has established for Northern Ireland.
 - Almost three quarters of respondents (73%) believe particular arrangements for Northern Ireland are necessary to manage the impact of Brexit.
 - 55% of respondents regard the Protocol/Windsor Framework as overall 'a good thing for Northern Ireland'. This is in line with previous polls in June and October 2023. 60% see the Protocol/Windsor Framework as an appropriate means for managing the effects of Brexit on Northern Ireland.
 - There has been a slight decline post-DUP deal in those disagreeing that the Protocol/Windsor Framework is overall a 'good thing' for Northern Ireland (29%, down from 35% in October 2023) and that it offers the appropriate means for managing Brexit (28%, down from 34% in October).
 - It appears that opposition to the Protocol/Windsor Framework has declined slightly but towards 'neutral/don't know' rather than towards support for it.
- The return of the DUP to Stormont following its *Safeguarding the Union* deal with the UK Government is welcomed by the majority of voters.
 - Almost three-quarters of voters (73%) agree the DUP was right to return to Stormont. 'Strongly unionist' voters are split: 44% agree, 42% disagree.
 - Around a quarter of voters (24%) agree that it was worth deferring the return of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Northern Ireland Executive for the 'deal' to be reached. A majority of 'strongly unionist' voters (56%) agree.
 - Voters are divided on whether the *Safeguarding the Union* deal secures Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future: just over a quarter (27%) agree that it does; this includes 29% of DUP voters. Most voters either disagree (38%) or are 'neutral'/'don't know' (35%).
 - Views have become more positive on the Protocol/Windsor Framework's impact on Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market. More voters now see the impact as positive (41%) rather than negative (34%), a contrast with

February 2023 (28% positive, 48% negative). In October 2023 views were equally split (39%).

- Views on the political impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework have become less negative; most positive views are on its economic consequences.
 - Voters continue to view the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework on political stability in Northern Ireland as being more negative (43%) than positive (37%), but the gap has significantly narrowed since October 2023, when it was 24% positive and 55% negative.
 - 56% of respondents think the Protocol/Windsor Framework is having a positive impact on the Northern Ireland economy; 29% disagree.
 - 68% think it offers unique opportunities that could benefit Northern Ireland.
 - More now see the Protocol/Windsor Framework as having a positive (42%) rather than negative (31%) impact on UK-EU relations.
 - On British-Irish relations, voters are evenly split as to whether the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework is positive (37%) or negative (37%).
- There are mixed levels of trust/distrust in political actors and institutions to manage Northern Ireland's interests with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework.
 - The UK Government is by far the most distrusted (81%) and least trusted (4%) of all actors, with the improvement in the figures seen in October (77% distrust, 7% trust) now reversed.
 - Voters currently trust (45%) slightly more than they distrust (40%) the European Commission/EU, although the gap is narrower than in June 2023 (49% trust, 41% distrust).
 - Northern Ireland business representatives continue to be the only actors enjoying the trust of a majority of respondents (60%); only 14% distrust them.
- Self-declared understanding of the Protocol/Windsor Framework remains high, with a substantial majority of respondents (70%) claiming 'a good understanding'.
- Views are mixed on arrangements to allow voices from Northern Ireland to be heard on the implementation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework.
 - Almost two-thirds of respondents (64%) claim they understand how the Stormont Brake works.
 - Almost a third of voters (32%) agree that MLAs should attempt to use the Stormont Brake to block updates to EU legislation 'irrespective of consequences'. The majority of voters (53%) disagree.
 - Most voters (84%) agree that it is important that business and civil society groups in Northern Ireland have their voices heard on the implementation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework.
- Respondents remain divided on how their MLAs should vote in the 2024 'democratic consent' vote on the Protocol/Windsor Framework, but with a larger proportion supporting a vote in favour.

- More than half of respondents (56%) continue to favour MLAs voting for the continued application of Articles 5-10 of the Protocol/Windsor Framework; less than one third (30%) want MLAs to vote against, the lowest proportion to date.
- The minority of voters (14%) who will only vote for candidates in a Northern Ireland Assembly election who are in favour of the scrapping the Protocol/Windsor Framework has decreased markedly since October 2023 (23%).
- The Protocol/Windsor Framework ranks low among voters' concerns, with only 2% of respondents placing as their top concern in a list of ten and 20% putting it in their top three; 54% put it in their bottom three concerns out of that list of ten.
 - Almost two thirds of voters (62%) agree that political debate in Northern Ireland should 'move on' from the Protocol/Windsor Framework; 24% disagree.
 - Almost a quarter of voters (23%) say that a candidate's position on the Protocol/Windsor Framework will not determine whether they will vote for them in a next Northern Ireland Assembly election.
 - For more than half of respondents (55%) say that a party's position on the Protocol/Windsor Framework will be 'key to whether they vote for that party in the next UK general election.

Introduction

As part of an extended ESRC-funded research project on the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/ Northern Ireland, a series of regular polls has been commissioned to 'temperature test' voter attitudes on a range of issues relating to Brexit and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, and their implications for Northern Ireland. This is the only polling in Northern Ireland dedicated to the topic of the Protocol (now also known as the 'Windsor Framework') and which has been running at regular intervals since the Protocol entered fully into force on 1 January 2021.

The polls are being conducted every four months during 2021-2024 by [LucidTalk](#) using its online Northern Ireland Opinion Panel. LucidTalk have a strong track record of accurately predicting election and referendum results in Northern Ireland on the basis of polling this Opinion Panel. The results presented here are from a sample of 1202 responses to the poll undertaken on 2-5 February 2024. The poll was completed by 2858 respondents. The sample of responses used is weighted to be representative of the adult population of Northern Ireland (e.g. by age, gender, region). All results presented are accurate to a margin of error of +/-2.3% at 95% confidence.

The context for this poll

This tenth poll was conducted three years after the end of the 11-month transition period that followed the UK's withdrawal from the EU on 31 January 2020. Most of our earlier [polls](#) were conducted in a context of ongoing contestation and political tensions around

the Protocol and often strained UK-EU relations. The context for more recent polls has been significantly improved UK-EU relations following the adoption of the Windsor Framework in February 2023 and its relatively smooth implementation since then. The Protocol has been amended to provide for a [‘Stormont Brake’](#) on amendments and replacements to certain EU laws applicable in Northern Ireland, revised arrangements for the movement of retail goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland (e.g. the so-called ‘green lane’) and for the supply of medicines agreed, and implementation milestones met. The existing joint EU-UK bodies overseeing implementation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework have now been meeting regularly, new bodies have been established, and commitments to joint UK-EU stakeholder engagement and European Commission consultation on its new work programme put in place. Nevertheless, some issues concerning the implementation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework still have to be addressed (e.g. on the supply of veterinary medicines into Northern Ireland once the current ‘grace period’ expires at the end of 2025) and concerns around the Protocol/Windsor Framework persist, particularly among unionist voters.

Of major significance for the context in which this latest poll was conducted, therefore, was the announcement in the days immediately prior to the poll that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) had agreed a ‘deal’ with the UK Government addressing its concerns about the Protocol/Windsor Framework. As a consequence of that deal, combined with a financial package, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson [announced](#) that the party would now support the return of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the establishment of a new Northern Ireland Executive. The substance of the deal was presented in the UK Government's [Safeguarding the Union](#) Command Paper published on 31 January 2024. On 3 February 2024, the NI Assembly convened and elected a Speaker and the same day Michell O’Neill (Sinn Féin) and Emma Little-Pengelly (DUP) were sworn in as First and deputy First Minister respectively and a new Executive was formed.

The *Safeguarding the Union* ‘deal’ for the return of devolved government in Northern Ireland [includes](#) new commitments regarding Northern Ireland’s position within the UK and actions to deliver on them. New internal UK bodies and structures (e.g. a UK East-West Council) are being established, government departments are to give ‘special regard to Northern Ireland’s place in the UK internal market’ when bringing forward regulation, a UK Government commitment to ‘no unnecessary checks within the UK internal market’ has been made, and a *UK Internal Market Guarantee* aiming to ensure that at least 80% of GB-NI freight movements go through what was the ‘green lane’ now renamed the ‘UK Internal Market System’.

Of particular significance for MLAs returning to Stormont is that legislation providing for the Stormont Brake is now in force and the UK Government has brought forward the timing of its promised independent review of the Protocol/Windsor Framework if there is only a simple (not cross-community) majority endorsing its continued application in the Assembly’s Democratic Consent vote towards the end of 2024.

Participants in the poll on 2-5 February 2024 were asked seven sets of questions and offered the opportunity to provide written comments in response to the poll. The

questions covered attitudes towards Brexit and the Protocol/Windsor Framework, assessments of the latter’s impact, and views on its relative importance compared to other current issues of concern (e.g. the state of the economy, health and social care provision). As in previous polls, participants were asked to indicate how much they trust different actors to manage Northern Ireland’s interest regarding the Protocol/Windsor Framework, how they would like MLAs to vote in the ‘democratic consent’ vote at the end of 2024, and how important the Protocol/ Windsor Framework would be for their voting preferences in a future NI Assembly election. Two final sections sought views on further questions concerning the Windsor Framework and the recently announced *Safeguarding the Union deal*.²

Attitudes to Brexit and the Protocol/Windsor Framework

This latest polling continues to show most voters in Northern Ireland as either generally accepting or supportive of the Protocol/Windsor Framework. However, opinion remains divided with continued opposition among many unionists to its arrangements, even with the *Safeguarding the Union* commitments from the UK government. The slight warming to the Protocol under the Windsor Framework (as seen in the June 2023 poll) continues to be reflected in the findings of this latest poll, where levels of support are generally marginally higher than in previous *Testing the Temperature* polls. That said, opposition to the Protocol/Windsor Framework remains firm among up to 30% of respondents.

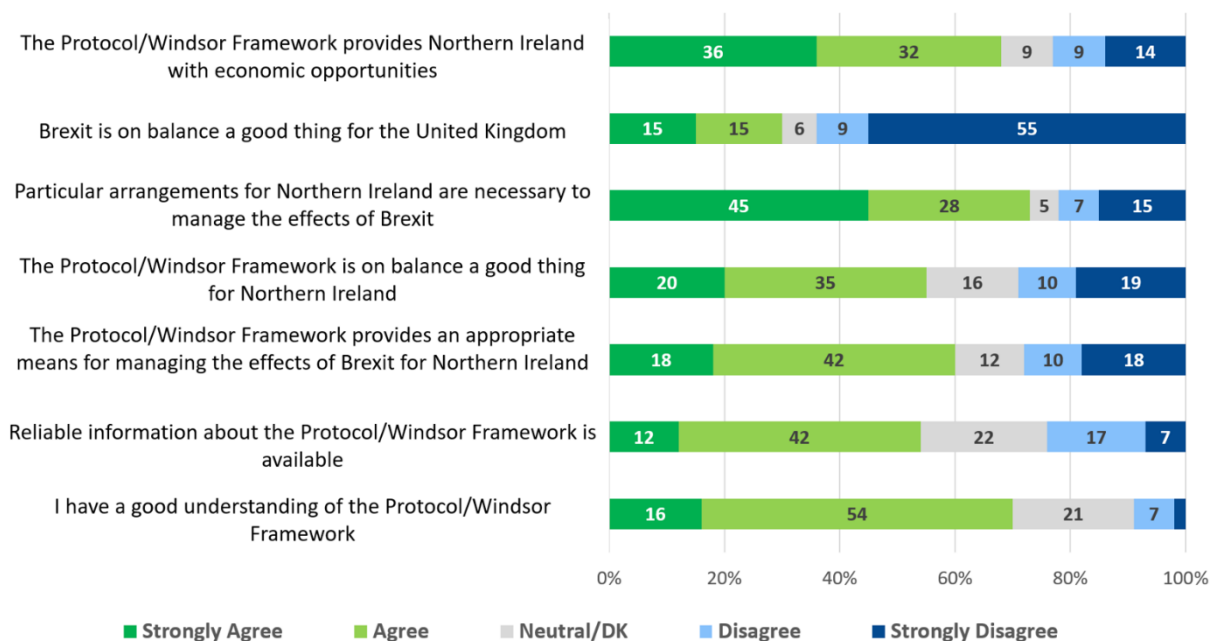


Figure 1. Opinion of Brexit, the Protocol/Windsor Framework, and the Safeguarding the Union ‘deal’ with the DUP (%)

A clear majority (70%) of respondents claim a ‘good understanding’ of the Protocol/Windsor Framework (see Figure 1), although this is slightly down on previous polls (74% in October 2023) The proportion of respondents who think that reliable

information exists on the Protocol/Windsor Framework (54%) remains unchanged albeit higher than in 2022 (44-47%) and above the 37% lowest level recorded in March 2021.

Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) agree that ‘particular arrangements’ for Northern Ireland are needed to manage the effects of Brexit. This is back up to the level it was in June 2023, having dropped to 70% in October 2023 (the same level it had been at in October 2022). The proportion of all respondents being strongly of this view (45%) is lower, however, than the highest figure recorded (50%) in June 2023 and June 2022.

The proportion of respondents who agree or strongly agree that the Protocol/Windsor Framework – now with the UK Government’s *Safeguarding the Union* ‘deal’ with the DUP – provides an appropriate means for managing the effects of Brexit for Northern Ireland is back up to 60% (as in June 2023) and higher than the 53-54% in previous polls when the question focused on the Protocol with the ‘grace periods’. A majority of respondents (55%) continue to regard the Protocol with the Windsor Framework as ‘on balance, a good thing’ for Northern Ireland, as in June 2023 and October 2023. In June 2021, the figure was just 43% (see Figure 2). Of note is that most overall ‘agree’ respondents now ‘agree’ rather than ‘strongly agree’. For those disagreeing with the proposition, the overall figure of 29% is noticeably lower than in our last two polls in June 2023 (34%) and October 2023 (35%) and markedly lower than a year ago in February 2023 (41%). The drop is mirrored by the increase in ‘Neutral/Don’t Know’ responses. The impact of *Safeguarding the Union* has been to temper some opposition to the Protocol/Windsor Framework, not to increase support for it.

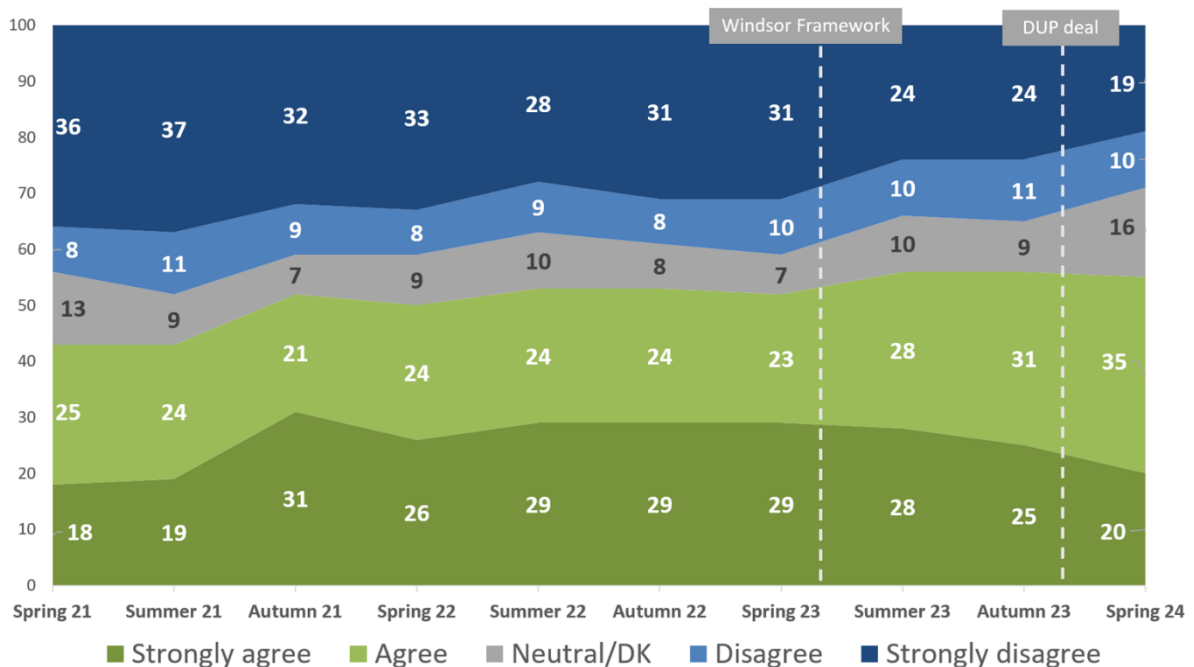


Figure 2. The Protocol/Windsor Framework is on balance ‘a good thing’ for Northern Ireland (%)

On whether Brexit itself is on balance ‘a good thing for the UK’, there continues to be a clear majority 64% who disagree. This is higher than in the polls conducted in 2023 (e.g. 60% in October). The majority (55%) strongly of that opinion is back up to the same level recorded in June 2023 which is the highest level across our polls to date.

Majority acceptance of the Protocol with the Windsor Framework is also reflected in responses to the question on whether the Protocol provides Northern Ireland with a ‘unique set of post-Brexit economic opportunities compared to the rest of the UK which if exploited could benefit Northern Ireland’. Just over two thirds of respondents (68%) agree that there are economic opportunities to be had from the Protocol/Windsor Framework. The figure – as in June 2023 (68%) – is the highest it has been since our first poll in March 2021. Just under a quarter of respondents (23%) disagree there are economic opportunities, the lowest figure to date although in line with the lower end of the range in previous polls (24-34%).

Views on the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework

The poll asked respondents for their assessment of the current impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework being implemented. Important to note here is that the phased implementation of the Windsor Framework removes the ‘grace periods’ for the application of some of the Protocol’s provisions and replaces them with new ‘green lane’ arrangements for reducing and in some cases removing formalities, checks and controls on the movement of goods into Northern Ireland from Great Britain. An important implementation milestone came on 1 October 2023 when initial ‘green lane’ arrangements came into operation. The *Safeguarding the Union* ‘deal’ renames the ‘green lane’ arrangements the ‘UK Internal Market System’.

Opinions remain divided on the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework (see Figure 3) but as this latest poll shows, there has been a significant easing of political tensions, most likely a consequence of the news prior to the poll that the NI Assembly was returning, and a new NI Executive would be formed. Whereas in previous polls, a majority of respondents (54-68%) saw the Protocol/Windsor Framework impacting negatively on political stability in Northern Ireland, the figure has now dropped to 43% (from 55% in October 2023). However, only 37% respondents believe that the Windsor Framework is having a positive impact on political stability in Northern Ireland, although the figure has increased markedly since October 2023 (26%).

The latest polling confirms the more positive views on the Protocol’s impact on British-Irish and UK-EU relations seen in 2023 since the Windsor Framework was adopted. In February 2023, a majority of voters viewed the impact of the Protocol as clearly negative (British-Irish relations – 58%; UK-EU relations – 57%). With the Windsor Framework, the figures are now significantly lower (37% and 31% respectively). Indeed, the impact of the Protocol with the Windsor Framework on UK-EU relations is perceived to be positive by more voters. As regards the impact on British-Irish relations, the proportion of voters (37%) perceiving the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework to be positive remains lower than in June 2023 (43%).

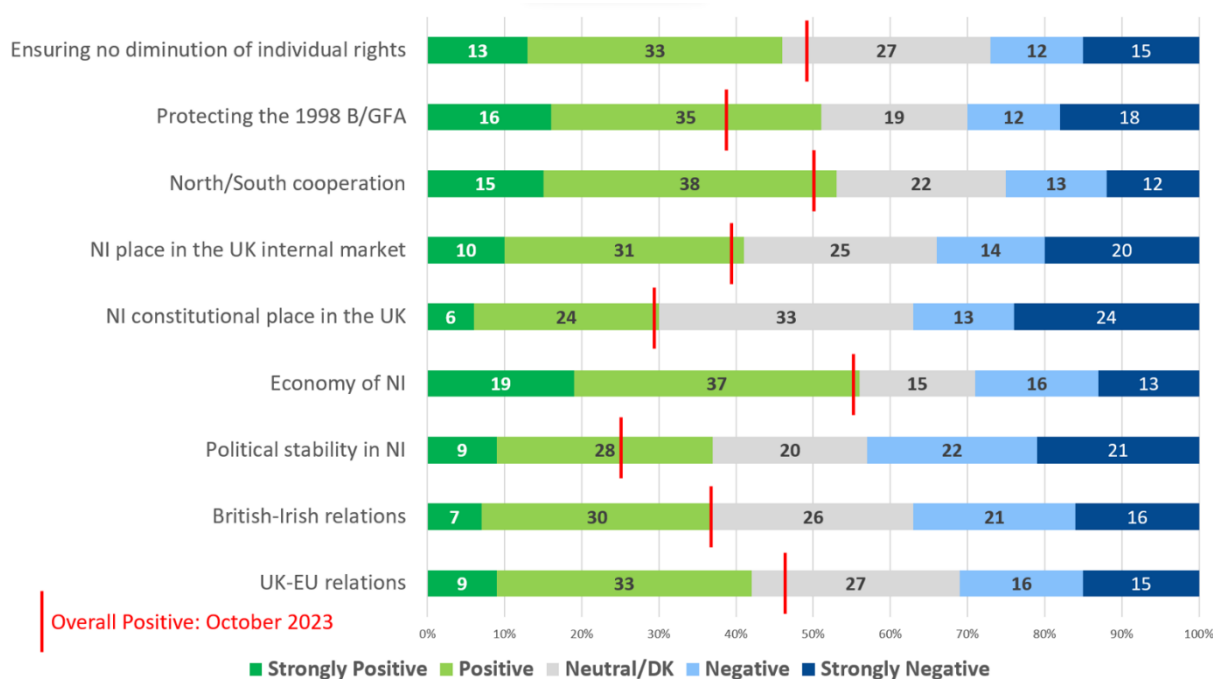


Figure 3. Overall assessment of the current impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework (%)

The proportion of respondents seeing the Protocol’s current impact as negative on Northern Ireland’s constitutional position in the United Kingdom (37%) is lower than it was in the two previous polls (43%) and its lowest across all polls. The *Safeguarding the Union* ‘deal’ would appear to have had an impact. Indeed, the proportion seeing the Protocol/Windsor Framework’s current impact on Northern Ireland’s place in the UK internal market as negative (34%) has also dropped compared to previous polls (39% and 40% in October and June 2023 respectively) and markedly so since pre-Windsor Framework polls (e.g. February 2023 48%, October 2021 60%). For the first time, more voters (41%) currently see the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework on Northern Ireland’s place in the UK internal market as positive. While the clear majority of ‘strongly unionist’ voters (70%) continue to view the impact as negative, ‘slightly unionist’ voters have moved since October 2023 from viewing the impact as negative (50%; positive 26%) to being almost evenly split: negative 38%, positive 44%. More than four in five nationalist and ‘neutral’ voters view the impact as either positive or neutral.

On the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework on ensuring ‘no diminution’ of individual rights as set out in the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, 46% of respondents regard it as positive. This is lower than in October 2023 (49%), but the drop is less than in the case of those viewing the impact as negative: 27% compared to 33% in October 2023, suggesting some voters’ concerns have been assuaged by the UK Government’s publishing of its *Safeguarding the Union* commitments.

On the question of the impact of the Protocol/Windsor Framework on the economy of Northern Ireland, over half of respondents (56%) currently view it as positive (up from 50% in February 2023); 29% view the impact as negative (it was 32% in October 2023).

Again, respondents are clearly divided along identity lines. While the clear majority of ‘strongly unionist’ voters (64%) continue to view the impact as negative, ‘slightly unionist’ voters have moved since October 2023 from being almost evenly split (negative 45%, positive 43%), to being clearly more positive (50%) than negative (29%). More than eight in ten nationalist and seven in ten ‘neutral’ voters view the impact as positive.

Most respondents continue to view the Protocol/Windsor Framework as having a positive impact on protecting the 1998 Agreement. Currently, 51% are of this view, back up in line with June 2023 and June 2022 polls (both 50%). The proportion of respondents who view the impact as negative has dropped from 37% in the June and October polls in 2023 to 30%, again the lowest negative figure to date.

By February 2023, almost equal proportions of respondents viewed the impact of the Protocol on north-south cooperation as negative and positive. With the Windsor Framework, a significant shift occurred. By October 2023, 50% were positive and 34% negative; the latest poll shows the gap widening further (53% positive; 25% negative).

Trust to manage the interests of Northern Ireland *vis-à-vis* the Protocol/Windsor Framework

Implementation of the Protocol involves a range of actors. As with all previous polls, the only group that is trusted by a majority to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework are NI business representatives (60%) (see Figure 4).

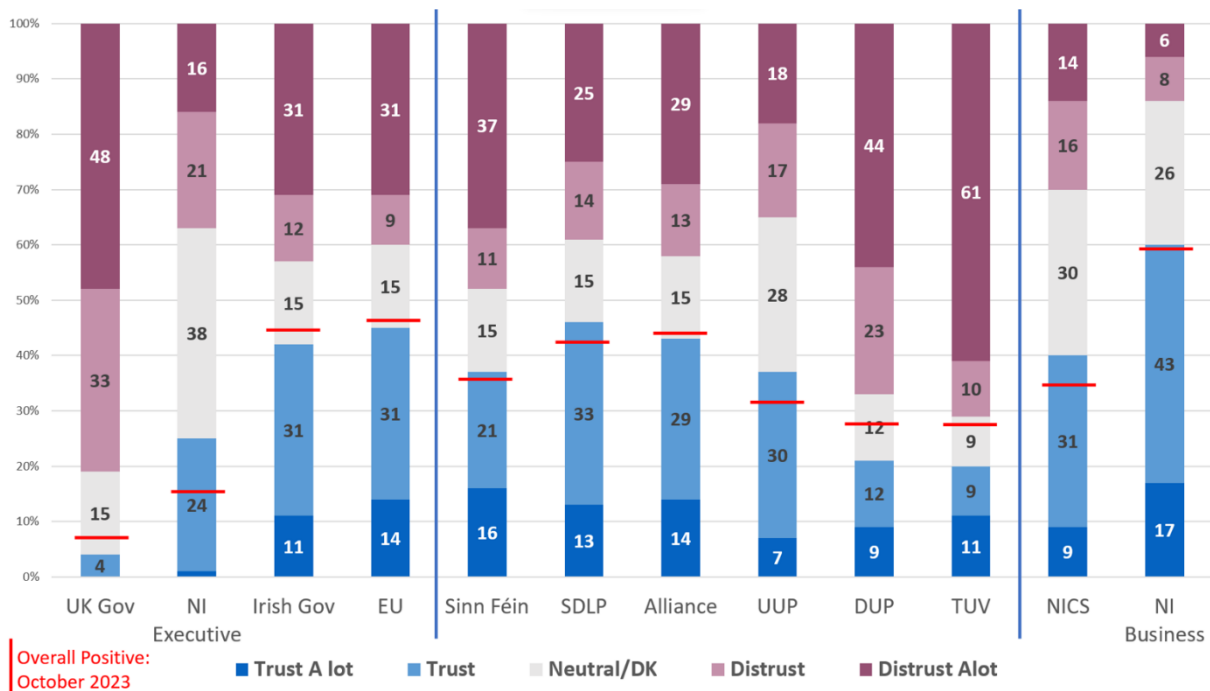


Figure 4. Levels of trust in/distrust of actors to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework (%)

Trust in the UK Government when it comes to managing the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework, having been at 7% in October 2023, is back down to 4% as it was in June 2023 and so remains extremely low. Distrust in the UK Government (81%) has also risen back to where it was June 2023 (80%), although this remains marginally better than immediately pre-Windsor Framework in February 2023 (85%). The largest proportion of respondents distrust the UK Government 'a lot' (48%), worse than in October 2023 (42%) although still better than in June 2022 (55%).

By contrast, trust in the European Commission/EU to manage the Protocol/Windsor Framework in the interests of Northern Ireland (45%) remains almost unchanged since October 2023 (46%) and so lower than in June 2023 (49%). Distrust in the European Commission/EU stands at 40%, so down on October 2023 (43%). Trust in the Irish Government stands at 42% (compared to 38% in February 2023). Distrust in the Irish Government has decreased slightly to 43% and so remains lower than in February 2023 (46%).

Trust in the NI Executive to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework (25%) has increased significantly since October 2023 (15%), most likely a reflection that an Executive is now in place. Distrust (37%) has dropped noticeably since October 2023 (49%). As in October 2023, this latest poll inquired into levels of trust/distrust in NI civil servants. Having been almost evenly split between trust (35%) and distrust (37%) with slightly fewer respondents (28%) being neutral, the latest poll revealed a decrease in distrust (30%) with respondents dividing more towards trust (40%) than being neutral (30%).

As for the five political parties that formed the last NI Executive, the level of trust in the Alliance Party (43%) remains essentially unchanged since October 2023 (44%) having previously peaked at 50% in June 2022. The most trusted party is the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) where trust in it (46%) has increased since October 2023 (42%). Seeing a slightly larger increase in trust is the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). In October 2023, 32% of respondents trusted it to manage the interests of Northern Ireland with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework; in February 2024, the proportion had risen to 37%. The UUP remains the party distrusted least (35% compared to 43% in February 2023).

Two thirds of respondents (67%) continue to distrust the DUP, with almost a majority (48%) also continuing to distrust Sinn Féin. Trust in Sinn Féin on this question remains almost unchanged (37%) since October 2023 (36%) and so down on June 2023 (41%). Trust in the DUP has dropped to 21% from 27% in October 2023. Respondents were also asked to consider the extent to which they trust the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) to manage Northern Ireland's interests on the Protocol/Windsor Framework. Distrust in the TUV, having remained the same in June 2023 and October 2023 (64%) has increased to 71%; 20% trust it compared to 27% in October 2023.

Democratic consent and MLAs

The future of core provisions of the Protocol/Windsor Framework – those relating to the movement of goods and the single electricity market (i.e. Articles 5-10) – is subject to the democratic consent of MLAs in a vote that is to be held up to every four years. MLAs will first vote in November/December 2024.

Most respondents (86%) have a view on how they wish their MLAs to vote. A majority (56%) are in favour of the continued application of Articles 5-10 (see Figure 5). This is the same as in October 2023. However, whereas in that poll, more than a third of respondents (36%) were against continued application, the figure has now dropped to 30%. Consequently, the gap between those for and against the continued application of Articles 5-10, has widened from 22 percentage points in June 2023 and October 2023, to 26 percentage points (see Figure 6). This is more than double what the gap was before the Windsor Framework was agreed, but still less than the gap in the ‘Extra’ *Testing the Temperature* poll on the Windsor Framework conducted in March 2023 shortly after its adoption. Then, 61% of respondents wanted MLAs to vote in favour of consent; 32% wanted them to vote against. Notable here is also the increase in the proportion of respondents who are either not interested in how MLAs will vote (5%) or have no preference (9%).

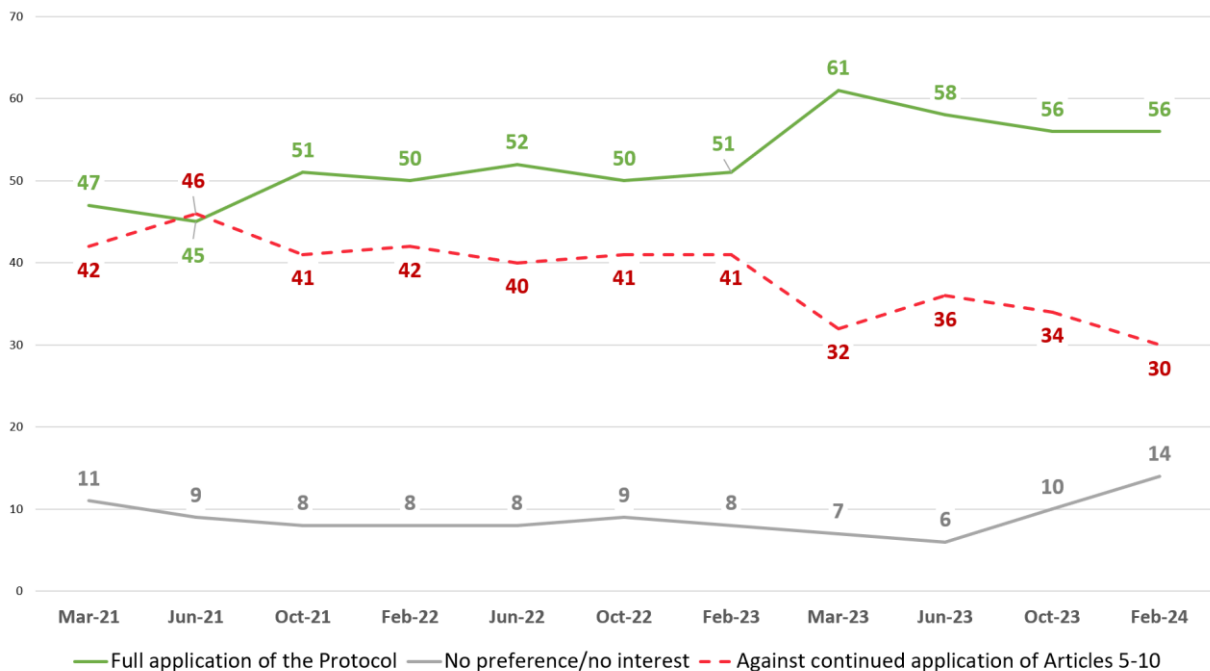


Figure 5. Democratic Consent: Based on what you currently know, and are experiencing now, how would you like the MLAs for whom you vote[d] in the 2022 NI Assembly election to vote in 2024 on the Protocol? (All polls)

As in most previous polls we asked how a candidate’s position on the Protocol/Windsor Framework might affect a respondent’s willingness to vote for them. If there were an

election to the Northern Ireland Assembly in the next twelve months, the position of a candidate would be a factor for more than three-quarters of respondents (77%). While the figure is high, it is lower than in October 2023 (84%) (see Figure 6). Moreover, within these figures, the latest poll reveals a shift in the overall proportion of voters who would vote for candidates either opposed to consent in 2024 (up to 13% from 9% in October 2023) or wanting to see the Protocol scrapped (down to 14% from 23% in October 2023). These figures suggest that within the slight weakening in the strength of opposition to ‘consent’ being granted to the continuation of the arrangements remains firm, there is no longer a clear preference for the Protocol/Windsor Framework to be completely scrapped.

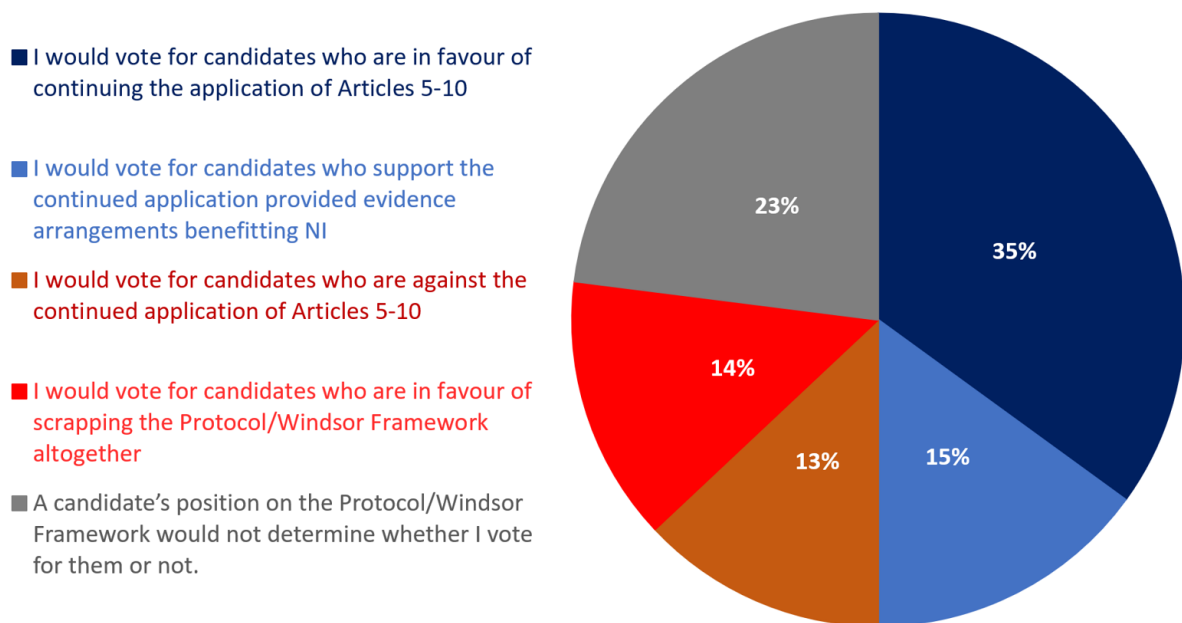


Figure 6. Democratic Consent and an NI Assembly Election: If an election to the NI Assembly were held in the next nine months, how important do you think a candidate's position on the Protocol would be for your vote? (%)

In terms of support for consent in 2024, just over a third of respondents (35%) would vote for candidates in favour of the continued application of the Protocol/Windsor Framework. This is again down on the figure of 43% in June 2023 and back in line with pre-Windsor Framework figure of 36% in February 2023. The proportion of respondents who would vote for candidates in favour of the continued application of the Protocol/Windsor Framework would rise, however, to half (50%) if there is evidence that the Protocol/Windsor Framework is seen to be benefitting Northern Ireland. For almost a quarter of respondents (23%), a candidate's position on the Protocol/Windsor Framework will not be important for whether they vote for them or not. This is higher than in October 2023 (16%).

The Protocol/Windsor Framework as a matter of Concern

This increase in the proportion of respondents for whom the Protocol/Windsor Framework will not be important for determining for whom they vote if a NI Assembly election were held this year corresponds to the relatively low priority given to the effects of the Protocol/Windsor Framework as a matter of concern for most voters. When placed alongside nine other issues, one fifth of respondents (20%) rank it in their top three issues of concern. For most respondents, however, concerns around health and social care provision, the economy and cost of living, public service delivery ranked higher. Over half of respondents (54%) placed the effects of the Protocol/Windsor Framework among their bottom three issues of concern alongside community relations and immigration.

The Windsor Framework

The next section of the poll focused on some specific aspects of the Protocol/Windsor Framework and its implications. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with certain specific statements (see Figure 7).

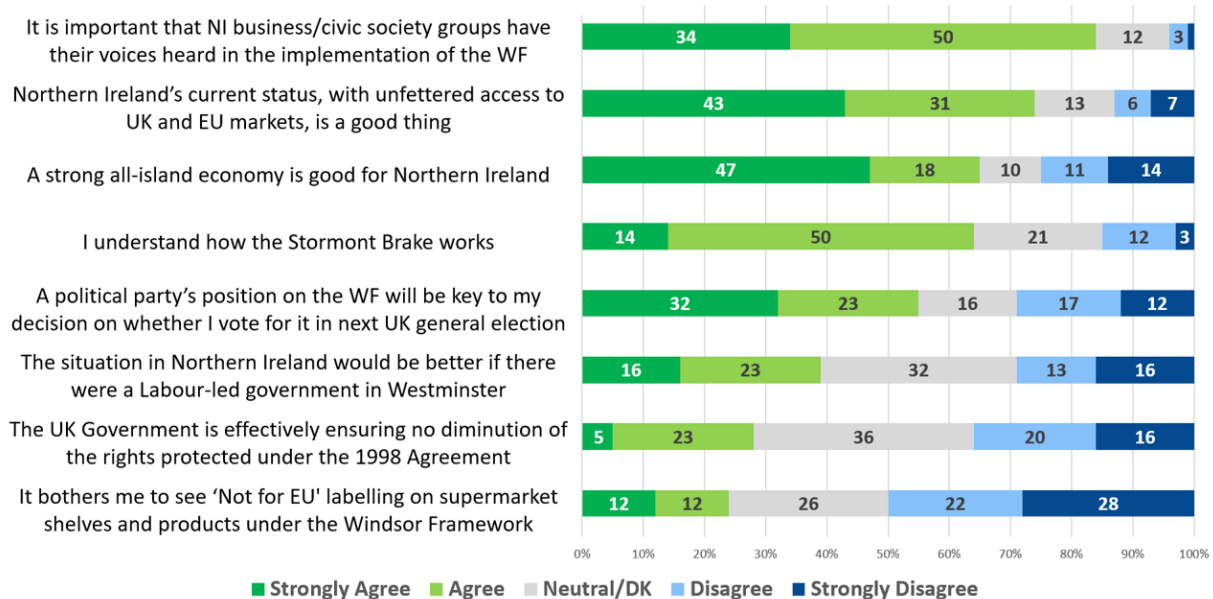


Figure 7. The Windsor Framework (%)

Among the questions were several that followed from questions asked earlier in the poll or in recent previous polls. So, on whether the UK government is delivering on its Protocol/Windsor Framework obligation to ensure no diminution of individual rights under the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, only 28% of respondents agreed. The remainder split evenly between those overall who disagreed (36%) and those who were either 'don't' know' or 'neutral' (36%). These figures differ from October 2023, when 36% agreed that the UK Government is delivering on its obligation; slightly more respondents (40%) disagreed. Compared to October 2023, majorities of respondents identifying as 'nationalist' and 'neutral' no longer agree that the UK Government is

delivering on its obligation; more responses are 'neutral', i.e. 'neither agree nor disagree'. Only a majority of respondents identifying as 'strongly unionist' continues to disagree, but this has fallen from 78% to 56%; possibly a response to the *Safeguarding the Union* 'deal'.

On the Stormont Brake, almost two-thirds of respondents (64%) agreed they understood how the mechanism works; only 15% disagreed. On stakeholder engagement, 84% of respondents agree that it is important that business and civic groups in Northern Ireland have their voices heard over the implementation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework. This is in line with the poll findings from June 2023, when a clear majority (71%) indicated that they would welcome increased UK-EU engagement with stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

On the issue of 'Not for EU' labelling appearing in shops – a requirement for GB-produced meat and dairy products entering Northern Ireland through the 'UK Internal Market System' – most voters (50%), as in October 2023 (51%), are not 'bothered' by the development. The 'Not for EU' labelling bothers only 24% of respondents (October 2023: 25%).

Related, a question asked whether respondents would be glad to buy food and drink in Northern Ireland that does not meet EU standards (see Figure 9). Under the Windsor Framework, goods produced in Northern Ireland must comply with EU standards, but goods brought into Northern Ireland from Great Britain need not. The majority of respondents (52%) disagreed, but almost a third (31%) agreed, that they would be glad to buy food and drink in Northern Ireland that does not meet EU standards. The latter included 69% of respondents identifying as 'strongly unionist' with those identifying as 'slightly unionist' almost evenly split (36% and 37%). Clear majorities of respondents identifying as 'neither' (75%), 'slightly nationalist' (85%) and 'strongly nationalist' (90%) disagreed that they would be glad to buy food and drink in Northern Ireland that does not meet EU standards.

As regards questions not previously posed, almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) agree that Northern Ireland's unfettered access to the UK and EU markets is a 'good thing'. This included the overwhelming majority of respondents who identify as 'slight unionist' (71%), or 'nationalist' (≥93%) or 'neither' (91%). Those disagreeing were overwhelmingly respondents who identify as 'strongly unionist' (32%) although most 'strongly unionist' respondents (44%) view such access as 'good thing'.

Views overall were more divided on whether a strong all-island economy is good for Northern Ireland. Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) agree; a quarter (25%) disagree. More than 94% of Alliance, SDLP and Sinn Féin voters agree, but overwhelming majorities of DUP (69%) and TUV (78%) voters disagree; UUP voters are more likely to agree (43%) than disagree (32%).

Looking to the future, for more than half of respondents (55%) a party's position on the Protocol/Windsor Framework will be 'key to whether they vote for that party in the next UK general election. This is particularly so for respondents identifying as 'strongly

unionist’ (75%), and much less so for respondents identifying as ‘neutral’ (32%). As to whether, more generally, the situation in Northern Ireland would be better if there were a Labour government, respondents were split: more agree (39%) than disagree (29%) but the margin is not large. Significantly, however, the majority of respondents identifying as ‘strongly nationalist’ (57%), ‘slightly nationalist’ (63%) and ‘neutral’ (63%) agree the situation in Northern Ireland would be better under a Labour government (32%); the majority of respondents identifying as ‘strongly unionist’ (62%) disagree; those identifying as ‘slightly unionist’ are almost evenly split: 30% agree, 33% disagree, and 33% neutral.

Safeguarding the Union... and a new NI Executive

The last section of the poll turned to the recently announced *Safeguarding the Union* ‘deal’ that led to the return of the NI Assembly and a new NI Executive being formed. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with certain statements (see Figure 9).

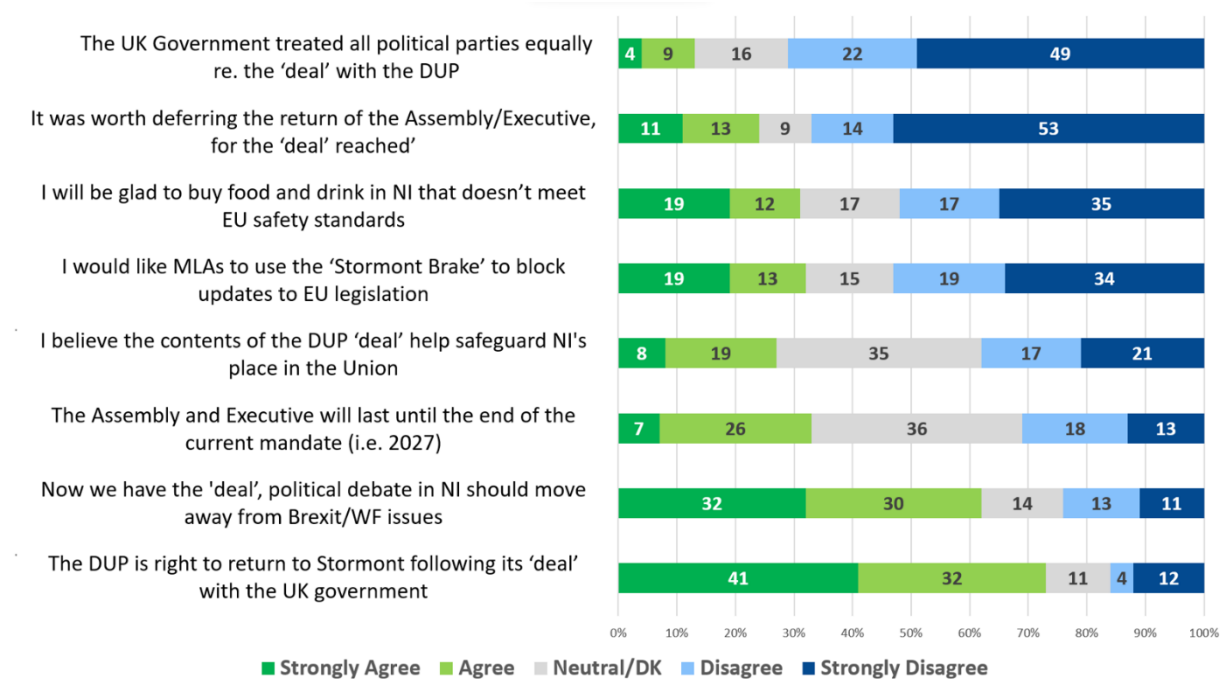


Figure 9. Safeguarding the Union (%)

Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) agree that the DUP was right to return to Stormont having concluded its ‘deal’ with the UK government. This includes a clear majority of Alliance, SDLP, Sinn Féin and UUP supporters. Almost half (47%) of DUP supporters agree the DUP was right to return to Stormont, although 35% disagree, including 28% strongly so. Almost four in five respondents (79%) identifying at ‘slightly unionist’ agree on the DUP’s post-‘deal’ return to Stormont; those identifying at ‘strongly unionist’ disagree are almost evenly split: 44% agree, 42% disagree.

Only a quarter (24%) of respondents agree, however, that it was worth deferring the return of the NI Assembly and NI Executive for the deal to be reached; this includes three quarters (75%) of DUP voters. Two-thirds of respondents (67%) disagree. This includes 95% of respondents identifying as 'nationalist', 61% of those identifying as 'slightly unionist'; and 82% of those identifying as 'neutral'.

As to whether the UK Government treated all political parties equally in the 'deal' with the DUP, most respondents (71%) disagree; only 13% agree. Even among DUP voters, only 39% agree; almost as many (36%) disagree.

As to the content of the 'deal', voters are split on whether it helps safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future: only 27% agree. Among respondents who identify as 'unionist', those 'strongly' so are almost evenly split: 39% agree, 42% disagree. Those who identify as 'slightly unionist' are more optimistic: 44% agree and only 19% disagree. This leaves 37% responding either 'don't know' or 'neutral'. Among respondents identifying as 'slightly nationalist' and 'neutral' the largest proportion of responses are 'don't know' or 'neutral' (45% and 49% respectively); only 5% of respondents identifying as 'strongly nationalist' think the 'deal' helps safeguard the Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom; 56% disagree.

With most voters welcoming the 'deal' and ranking the Protocol/Windsor Framework relatively low compared to given other concerns (see above), the poll's finding that most respondents (62%) agree that political debate 'should move on' from Brexit and Windsor Framework issues should not surprise. Almost a quarter of voters (24%) do not believe that it is time to move on. This includes more than half of respondents (52%) who identify as 'strongly unionist', a similar proportion (55%) of DUP supporters, and 78% of TUV supporters. More than three quarters of respondents identifying as 'nationalist' or 'neutral', agree that political debate should move on; less than 10% disagree.

Views on 'moving on' are reflected in attitudes towards the use of the Stormont Brake. Whereas the majority of respondents (53%) do not want MLAs to make use of the Stormont Brake irrespective of the consequences, almost a third of respondents (32%) do. This includes more than three quarters of respondents (78%) who identify as 'strongly unionist' and more than four in five DUP (85%) and TUV (86%) voters. Less than 4% of respondents identifying as 'nationalist' or 'neutral' agree; those identifying as 'slightly unionist' tend to disagree (40%) more than agree (31%).

Finally, with MLAs back at Stormont and a new NI Executive in place, do NI voters believe that the Assembly and Executive will last until the end of the current mandate in 2027? Views are split almost equally: a third (33%) think it will last; just under a third (31%) do not; and just over a third are either 'don't know' or 'neutral' on the question. Respondents identifying as 'nationalist' are more likely to believe that the Assembly and Executive will last until the end of the current mandate than not ('strongly nationalist': 39% last, 28% not; 'slightly nationalist': 32% last, 23% not); those identifying at 'unionist' are almost evenly split ('strongly unionist': 37% each; 'slightly unionist': 25% last, 27% not); and of those identifying as 'neutral' more do not think that the Assembly and Executive will last until 2027 (36%) than do (23%).

Written comments

Views expressed in the optional written comments section of the poll were also divided. It is important to note, however, that the reporting of these comments is not weighted to be representative.³ The majority of comments relate to the DUP 'deal' and return to Stormont rather than specifically on the Protocol/Windsor Framework. A good number of respondents comments on the sustainability of the political institutions, some advocating for reform and other expressing a wish for or an expectation of Irish unification. Here is a non-representative sample of some of the core themes:

Concern for democracy in NI

I don't think that I'll ever stop feeling sad and disappointed about the opportunities that have been denied (especially) young people as a result of it. I feel as much exasperation as relief that Stormont will be sitting again, and very wary about how long this will last. (95)

People are hurting, they need stability, the present political system is broken and tribal.

Thankful this ordeal is at an end and we can all move on and focus on the crippling issues affecting everyone living here! (2)

Education, employment, health welfare are more important than which lane goods enter by and believe power sharing in its present state can't last (175)

Can we just get on with running the country? Any chance?! (146)

Critical of the DUP deal

'Safeguarding the Union' is far too one-sided. The CNR community understand that the DUP needed this figleaf, but branding things with 'UK' rubs CNRs the wrong way. In addition, establishing (governmental) structures outside the Good Friday Agreement is anathema to CNR community. Priority needs to be given to re-establishing and working all GFA structures, especially Strand 2 (North-South bodies), to balance the pro-UK drift of 'Safeguarding the Union' and reassure CNRs. (138)

NI does not have 'unfettered access' to UK and EU markets - there is increased paperwork, restrictions etc. on NI-GB trade. The TUV were not part of the negotiations for the DUP deal, and the TUV would have sought a much stronger deal. NI is left in this position because Theresa May was so determined to get a 'deal' from the EU and the EU saw NI as the price that GB would pay to get that deal, regardless of its impact on the people here. (22)

It wasn't worth the collapse of the assembly for the deal that we got. However, it would have been worth it for a collapse of the protocol and sea border. (448)

Critical of DUP for having stayed out

The DUP are claiming that they alone stood up for NI, but if they had worked with the other politicians in the Assembly they would have achieved much the same thing and we would have had a functioning government. Also since they wanted Brexit so much and brought down Teresa May's deal which was by far the best option for NI, they are brazenly hypocritical about demanding a new deal. (6)

The DUP have wasted two years of our lives and been rewarded with the furniture being metaphorically rearranged to claim that as a win. Hopefully we can now move past this, I am sick to the back teeth of the entire issue. (10)

This is no victory for the DUP, they have inflicted severe damage on Northern Ireland on every level: economically, culturally and on public services during some of the most challenging times faced for decades. (40)

Critical of DUP for returning

Disgraceful from The DUP! Will never vote for them again EVER! Total sell out-shameful! 7 tests abandoned!!! (100)

The DUP will never get a vote or even a transfer from me following this absolute abdication. Donaldson should be ashamed of himself, but he's more loyal to the half-crown than the Crown. (38)

Re: this sell out deal why should I celebrate a deal that has confirmed I remain a second class citizen on my own country (297)

Notes

- ¹ Prof. David Phinnemore, Professor of European Politics, Queen's University Belfast; Prof. Katy Hayward, Professor of Political Sociology, Queen's University Belfast.
- ² We are grateful here to LucidTalk not only for flexibility in accommodating changes to the questions to reflect developments immediately prior to the launch of the poll, but also for offering to add an additional set of questions on the *Safeguarding the Union* deal.
- ³ The poll attracted comments from 511 of the 2,858 respondents to the poll. These comments inevitably include those from respondents who were not part of the weighted data sample, but they are nonetheless of interest in our quest to 'temperature test' public opinion in Northern Ireland.