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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a series of focus groups (two in Northern Ireland and two in the Republic of Ireland) organised as part of the recent ARINS/Irish Times project, this article explores the views of people who said they did not know how they might vote in a future unity referendum, a group likely to be

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significant for any future constitutional outcome. We look at the participants' level of information or misinformation on public policy on the 'other' side of the border; we explore how the participants construct their group identity; and we investigate participants' priorities for a constitutional process. Based on this analysis we argue for a sustained and systemic process of discussion and deliberation on the basis of the findings of both the survey and the focus groups, which collectively point to lack of knowledge, lack of prior awareness, and lack of prior discussion, and—for the focus groups—to the openness to discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The ARINS/Irish Times surveys and focus groups, conducted in 2022, are the first full-scale, systematic, representative and comparative sampling of public opinion in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on future political arrangements on the island of Ireland.[1] While there have been earlier studies comparing opinion North and South,[2] the importance of this research was that it was conducted at a time when the question of Irish unity had moved on to

[1] In-person surveys of 1,000 people in each jurisdiction were conducted by Ipsos—its Belfast office for Northern Ireland and its Dublin office for Ireland. Two focus groups were moderated by Ipsos in each jurisdiction, with an average of seven participants per group, composed of those who said they were undecided. Funding for the survey and focus groups was provided by ARINS and the Irish Times, with support from the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies in the University of Notre Dame. For results and early analysis, see https://www.ria.ie/news/publications-arins-analysis-and-research-ireland-north-and-south/assessing-state-public-opinion.

[2] There is comparative research based on European Values Study (EVS) and European Social Survey (ESS) surveys in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland. See for example Tony Fahey, Bernadette Hayes and Richard Sinnott, *Conflict and consensus: a study of values and attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2005). Qualitative research comparisons on identity and politics also exist, for example Jennifer Todd, *Identity change after conflict: ethnicity, boundaries and belonging in the two Irelands* (London, 2018). Comparisons of Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland on the question of constitutional change and the forms of unity include deliberative mini-publics, focus groups and deliberative cafes: see John Garry, Brendan O'Leary, John Coakley, James Pow and Lisa Whitten, 'Public attitudes to different possible models of a united Ireland: evidence from a citizens' assembly in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies* 35 (3) (2020), 422–50; John Garry, Brendan O'Leary, Paul Gillespie and Roland Gjoni, 'Public attitudes to Irish unification: evidence on models and process from a deliberative forum in Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33 (2) (2022), 246–86; Joanne McEvoy, Jennifer Todd and Dawn Walsh, 'Participatory constitutionalism and the agenda for change: socio-economic issues in Irish constitutional debates', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33 (2) (2022), 140–71; Joanne McEvoy and Jennifer Todd, 'Constitutional inclusion in divided societies: conceptual choices, practical dilemmas and the contribution of the grassroots in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland', *Cooperation and Conflict* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367221147790; Jennifer Todd and Joanne McEvoy, 'Obstacles to constitutional participation: lessons from diverse voices in post-Brexit Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481231160044.

the political agenda, following the Brexit referendum.[3] The surveys, as would be expected, corroborate the considerable differences in opinion North and South, across a number of dimensions. They confirm strong support for unity in the Republic of Ireland, even in the absence of information on the form that a 'New Ireland' would take, while in Northern Ireland there was a high level of support for the status quo, along with a high percentage of 'don't knows'. The focus groups were an integral part of this study and were designed to explore the reasoning behind the views stated in the surveys. Focus group participants were chosen from respondents who had not yet made up their mind or who did not have strong views, on the basis that they represented a swing constituency in Northern Ireland, who perhaps were more likely to be open to debate. We also chose to construct focus groups in the Republic of Ireland from those who said they did not know how they would vote, as even though they are unlikely to determine the outcome in the Irish republic, this gave us a better comparison with the Northern Ireland focus groups.

Within the attitude surveys, which were conducted separately North and South, respondents were asked their views on the potential institutional structure of a united Ireland. This was presented to participants in both the survey and focus groups as a binary choice between the two alternatives that the survey designers believed were the most feasible.[4] One option was described to participants as an 'integrated' united Ireland, where 'Northern Ireland would no longer exist as a political unit, and decisions would be made by an all-island parliament and government in Dublin'. The alternative was described as a 'devolved' united Ireland, where 'Northern Ireland would continue to exist … as a devolved region within a United Ireland … keep its own Assembly and power-sharing executive, and powers over policy areas such as health, education, and policing'. The survey asked respondents how willing they would be to accept a decision to implement one of these alternatives following a referendum. Post-survey discussion has highlighted the less strong opposition and somewhat higher support for a 'devolved' rather than 'integrated' model of a united Ireland in Northern Ireland (details below). It has been argued that the Irish government should promote a devolved model to strengthen the potential of winning 'losers' consent'—particularly from

[3] For background on Brexit and the renewed debate on a united Ireland see Eileen Connolly and John Doyle, 'Brexit and the changing international and domestic perspectives of sovereignty over Northern Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 30 (2019), 217–33.

[4] Brendan O'Leary and John Garry, 'Integrated vs devolved: two possible forms for united Ireland that divide opinion North and South', *Irish Times*, 10 December 2022.

unionists—should a united Ireland be decided in referendums. This article argues for a very different conclusion: the evidence from surveys and focus groups is that it is time for deliberation, not decision; the first priority is to generate maximum public convergence on preferences for the shape of society, rights and norms; only then can decisions on institutional structure reliably be made.

In what follows, we outline the survey results, describe the focus group methodology and examine three aspects of the focus groups findings. First, we look at the participants' level of information or misinformation on public policy on the 'other' side of the border and the implication this has for their views on the constitutional process. Secondly, we explore how the participants construct their group identity, given that the theme of identity is frequently seen to be at the heart of the Northern Ireland conflict and the associated divergent views on a united Ireland. Thirdly, we look at participants' key concerns for a potential future constitutional process. Each topic is directly relevant to the discussion about the institutional form of a united Ireland: whether public preferences are based on adequate knowledge; whether they are a direct expression of identity or instead negotiable; and whether these are priority issues for the public. We use our analysis to contextualise the survey results, and to reflect on the relevance of the findings for the institutional models of a possible future united Ireland. Finally, we explore how the debate on the possible future shape of a new Ireland might be best progressed.

THE SURVEY

The survey, as reported in the *Irish Times*, showed the existence of majorities North and South in favour of holding referendums on Irish unity in a ten-year timeframe.[5] Over 66% of respondents in the Irish republic said they would vote for a united Ireland (over 80% when the 'don't know' and 'will not vote' responses are excluded), confirming previous polls. In Northern Ireland, 50% said they would vote to 'remain' in the UK, 27% said they would vote to 'leave the UK and unify with the Republic of Ireland' and 23% said they did not know or would not vote. The results from Northern Ireland showed marginally higher support for remaining in the UK than the average of post-Brexit

[5] The analysis of survey results is based on the data as published in the *Irish Times*. The authors did not have access to the raw data.

opinion polls. The recorded support for Irish unity in the Northern Ireland survey was the lowest recorded in post-Brexit polling, and the number of 'don't knows' was significantly higher.[6]

On the question of the type of political institutions a united Ireland should put in place, O'Leary and Garry have pointed to the significant differences between the results North and South on whether devolved institutions would continue in Northern Ireland after unity.[7] However, it is also clear that many people, North and South, have not made up their minds. Participants were asked to score their attitude to both an integrated model and a devolved model on a scale of 1 to 7; or they could reply 'don't know'. O'Leary and Garry coded those scoring 1 or 2 as being 'strongly' supportive, while those scoring 6 or 7 were deemed to be 'strongly' opposed and those scoring 3, 4 or 5 were deemed to have no strong view. On the 'devolved model,' 38% of people in Northern Ireland and 45% of people in the Republic 'did not know' or had no strong view on the issue, including 34% of those self-defining as Protestant and 50% of those defining as 'other' in Northern Ireland. Moreover, there is little 'strong support' for continued devolution even in Northern Ireland, where it was recorded at only 34%. This lack of strong support for a devolved model is notable because the focus groups show that some participants reacted negatively to the words 'integrated United Ireland' and the visual cue of a map of the island with no border, and with only Dublin and not Belfast marked on the map (see Figure 1 below; NI1,11; S2,4).[8] Since the same cues were used in the survey, it is remarkable that this did not result in stronger support for continued devolution.

The survey results also show that receiving more information on political institutions was not a priority for respondents. Those taking part in the survey were asked what two issues, from a list of five, voters should know about to make informed decisions before any referendums. 'Political institutions and government' was the least popular answer, North and South. Only 12% of Northern Ireland respondents listed 'political institutions' in their top two priorities for information before voting, compared to 61% who selected the

[6] Different polls have used different question wording and methodologies, and each can only be a snapshot of the time it was conducted. See John Doyle, 'Explaining the different results in opinion polls on Irish unity', *ARINS blog*, 12 July 2022, https://www.ria.ie/ga/node/100291 (11 May 2023).

[7] Brendan O'Leary and John Garry, 'Integrated vs devolved: two possible forms for united Ireland that divide opinion North and South', *Irish Times*, 10 December 2022.

[8] Notation: (N1,1) = Northern Ireland focus group no. 1, participant 1; (S2,1) = Republic of Ireland focus group no. 2, participant 1.

economy, 60% who selected healthcare and 38% who selected peace.[9] In the Republic of Ireland, 19% selected political institutions among their two most important issues, compared to 66% who selected 'whether a united Ireland would be peaceful' and 57% who selected healthcare. It is also clear from survey evidence that knowledge of these key issues of public policy related to the 'other' jurisdiction is weak in both jurisdictions.[10]

The survey results indicate an electorate that is only beginning to discuss and reflect on the range of issues that would need to be addressed prior to a referendum on unity. This suggests the need for public engagement and for deliberation. It is much too early in the post-Brexit debate to advocate for a least bad option. The response to the survey also suggests that it is not possible to separate out constitutional models from public policy, as the focus groups indicate that participants were largely concerned with how Irish unity might directly affect their daily lives, economically and in the availability of public services. It would appear somewhat perverse to identify a least bad model, much less to suggest its adoption, while the public remains ill-informed, undecided and engaged with other concerns.

The focus groups were designed to allow a greater degree of reflection on these questions by exploring participants' views in more depth than is possible in a survey. To these we now turn.

PLANNING THE FOCUS GROUPS

The authors were part of an ARINS sub-committee which designed the focus groups that were then implemented by the polling company Ipsos, in conjunction with the attitude survey. Focus groups are a useful tool, allowing researchers to gain insight into participants' views of particular themes, while monitoring interaction and discussion within the group. Researchers can observe both the social construction of a collective voice within the group and the areas where disagreement is expressed and debated.[11] Unlike

[9] Pat Leahy, 'Many voters in Republic unwilling to make concessions to unionists to facilitate Irish unity, poll shows', *Irish Time*s, 5 December 2022.

[10] For poll findings and analysis, see https://www.ria.ie/news/publications-arins-analysis-and-research-ireland-north-and-south/assessing-state-public-opinion (11 May 2023).

[11] Katharina Lőhr, Michael Weinhardt and Stefan Sieber, 'The "World Café" as a participatory method for collecting qualitative data', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020), 1–15: 4. See also David L. Morgan and Margaret T. Spanish, 'Focus groups: a new tool for qualitative research', *Qualitative Sociology* 7 (1984), 253–70.

deliberative forums, focus groups do not provide information that might allow the reflexive questioning of initial ideas, as their key purpose is to understand participants' perspectives even when the views they express are based on inaccurate information and understanding.[12] In this regard, the basis of their views is as important as the views themselves.

The research design used the focus groups to explore the rationale of survey responses, and also to see what concerns were spontaneously volunteered by the participants about potential future developments, without being prompted by a moderator. Finally, we wanted to use the discussion in the focus groups to analyse how participants understood the issues at stake, when they had the opportunity to say more than a simple survey reply can capture. Early in the planning process the decision was made to sample citizens in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland separately, both in the surveys and in the focus groups.[13] Within each jurisdiction, the focus groups were composed of the constitutionally undecided or constitutionally agnostic constituency. In Northern Ireland, this constituency—approx. 23% of the survey respondents—would have a pivotal role in the outcome of a referendum. In the Republic of Ireland, where a clear majority would vote for a united Ireland, the views of this undecided constituency could be influential in an all-island process of deliberation.

A 90-minute schedule was designed for the focus group moderators, beginning with approximately 20 minutes of free-ranging discussion around the following question:

> Over the last couple of years, there has been increased discussion about the future of Northern Ireland, and whether or not there should be a referendum in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland in which people could choose Irish unity or choose Northern Ireland to stay in the UK. And so we really want to know what you think about these issues …
> Q: Do you ever think about them? What are your thoughts and concerns?

[12] Nicole Curato, David Farrell, Brigitte Geissel, Kimmo Grönlund, Patricia Mockler, Jean-Benoit Pilet, et al., *Deliberative mini-publics: core design features* (Bristol, 2021).

[13] The survey and focus groups were in practice run and managed separately by the two offices of Ipsos in Belfast and in Dublin. There were four focus groups—two in each jurisdiction.

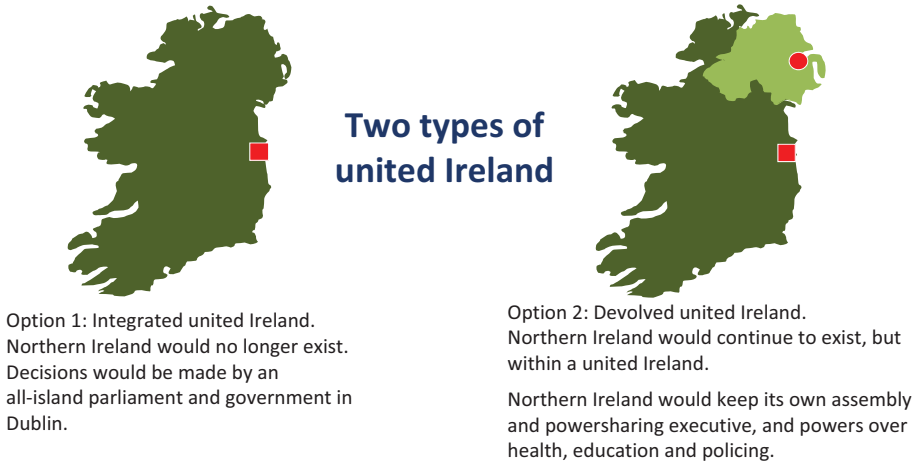

Figure 1. Visualisation of the two models

The schedule then moved on to themes that reprised questions in the surveys: attitudes to a referendum; views on a united Ireland; opinions on the two different types of united Ireland that had been used in the attitude survey (for this question the maps representing the two models were shown to the participants (Figure 1)). Finally, there were more open questions aimed at inviting participants to address issues of concern and views on the type of process. Additional probes were given to the moderators to use if discussion faltered.[14] A central aim of the focus groups was to maximise room for participants to volunteer their views while including their perspectives on key questions that had been asked in the survey.

THE FOCUS GROUPS: NORTH–SOUTH KNOWLEDGE OF THE 'OTHER SIDE'

Knowledge and information is central to reasoned decision-making and—on many accounts—to democracy itself. It can lead people to change their preferences and to moderate their opposition to others.[15] Therefore it is of key importance that analysis of public preferences and advocacy of public policy

[14] This schedule was agreed with the Irish Times and Ipsos.

[15] James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond and Norman Bradburn, 'Is deliberation an antidote to extreme partisan polarization? Reflections on "America in One Room"', *American Political Science Review* 115 (4) (2021), 1464–81.

on the basis of such preference take account of the extent of public knowledge and information, for this is likely to affect the development of preferences. The focus groups give clarity about this question.

Moreover, the desire for accurate knowledge is very strong among the participants in the focus groups.[16] While a possible vote on the principle of a united Ireland, to be followed by negotiations on the detail, might have been a plausible model before Brexit, there is little appetite for it in post-Brexit public debate, and that was reaffirmed in these focus groups. Participants wanted information as to what would follow a positive vote for unity: not only on the form of state institutions, which was prompted by the moderators, but also about other issues that arose spontaneously, most frequently the health system but also education and the economy. One participant said they wanted to know 'exactly what it would look like. Not like Brexit, but exactly how it would look before it was passed?' (N1,1), while another summed up their feelings as 'I would prefer no change to unknown change' (S2,1).

The absence of knowledge was not, however, just about the future; there was a very noticeable lack of knowledge on the starting points in the two jurisdictions. In each of the four focus groups, low levels of awareness about life and policy on the 'other' side of the border, and how public services such as health and education were currently provided, were openly acknowledged by the vast majority of those taking part. Some people explained that they were still undecided because they had not envisaged constitutional change happening in the near future until Brexit. One participant from Northern Ireland, in their 40s, who grew up at the end of the conflict and said that 'I only recently have really started to think about it', was reflective of the position of many people (N1,3).

Participants' lack of knowledge about the consequences of unity was quite fundamental and included issues where the outcomes are in reality already clear. Despite extensive media coverage of the fact that Northern Ireland would immediately rejoin the EU, and therefore would join the euro zone, in the event of a united Ireland, this was not understood by many participants. One asked quite openly 'Would we go back into Europe again?' (N1,5). Another asked 'So, there's lots of things that are up for discussion, so, currency, what happens?' (N2,13).

[16] Desire for knowledge is also clear from earlier research, for example McEvoy et al., 'Participatory constitutionalism and the agenda for change'.

On public services, many participants in Northern Ireland asked very basic questions about their entitlements after unity. People worried they would be treated like people who had never paid taxes, national insurance or pension contributions. One said 'So we've lived all our lives and we've paid into the British government. I've never paid into the Irish. I haven't. So would we be entitled to anything?' (N1,2). Another asked, in the context of UK-wide nurses' strikes at the time, 'Would nurses become less paid? Would they become more paid?' (N2,10). A Southern participant, in the context of a discussion on possible changes to anthems, asked 'Does Northern Ireland have a national anthem, a different national anthem or is theirs "God Save the King"?' (S2,1). A Northern Ireland participant said 'I don't know what it's like in terms of what their prices are for gas, electricity, oil, coal, all that sort of fuel and everything else' (N2,13). Southern participants, as might have been expected, were more likely to talk about the cost of unity, and more likely to reflect on the weak economy and perceived poor infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Even where participants asserted a strong view about public services in the 'other' jurisdiction it was often inaccurate, and this was seen in groups in both jurisdictions—on issues such as health, education and infrastructure such as roads and trains. The most frequently discussed topic in all the focus groups was healthcare. Fairly typical comments on health from the Northern Ireland groups included 'You'd have to pay for your doctor [in a united Ireland], or you'd have to pay for your dentist' (N1,3); 'Well obviously we get it free and down there doesn't. What is it, £50 to go to see a doctor then so much for a prescription afterwards' (N1,2); and 'You know, we do have a Health Service' (N2,7). In the Southern groups there were comments such as 'As it is, our health service is no matter where you go hospital, doctor, dentist, you have to pay for it, in Northern Ireland you don't' (S1,7); in Northern Ireland 'you don't have to pay to go to see your GP, you don't have to pay to go to the hospital, that is one good aspect of the overall picture of Northern Ireland' (S1,3); 'They have a great thing going with the NHS' (S2,4). For many participants there was no nuance on the question of health—it was a mythical NHS in the North and it was assumed that everyone, regardless of income or health condition, paid for every health service in the South. There was for many no appreciation at all that those on low income in the South (approximately 35% of the population) do not pay to see a GP, for hospital treatment or for prescriptions; in addition, all those below the average median income and everyone aged 70 and above, and seven and below, have the costs of GP

visits paid by the state. There was no evidence that this was known at all in the Northern Ireland groups, and it was never mentioned in the Southern groups by those who were commenting on the NHS.

The discussion on the NHS, however, eventually led to some more critical reflection. One Northern Ireland participant, after stating that people in the South have to pay for 'everything', went on immediately to say 'But at the minute up here if you want to go to the hospital or get some sort of work done you have to go private anyway' (N1,2). Another Northern Ireland participant asked 'Are they going to try and meet us in the middle somewhere with the health service, sort of, well, I wouldn't say that looks a bit like what we have now because the health service is on its knees' (N2,7). One Northern Ireland participant, after criticising the Southern health system, went on to say 'Maybe that's part of the South that works well, that if you do actually have a problem … that you pay for it and you get what you need' (N2,10). One Southern participant was aware of challenges for the NHS in England, saying 'in England at the moment you could be waiting two to three weeks to see the doctor. So I'd rather pay for it, but maybe not pay what we are paying now' (S1,2); another said 'I don't think the NHS is all it's cracked up to be either. Like I lived in the UK and you would ring in the morning and need a doctor's appointment and they are like yeah you can have one in three weeks. I'm like well I'm actually sick now; I do need to see a doctor' (S2,1). Significantly, a number of participants changed their position in the middle of a single contribution, starting off with a robust defence of the NHS, assuming everything was private in the South and ending up saying that there was little difference in reality, due to non-availability; others would rather pay and be able to assess healthcare instead of it being free and unavailable.

There were also comments on other public services, most of them factually inaccurate. In talking about benefits of the UK, one participant from Northern Ireland said 'Like we had a good education system here in Northern Ireland' (N1,5); however, the use of the past tense made it unclear whether they still thought that was true. A Northern Ireland participant talking about schools in the South said 'any of the schools that I would be aware of, that are over the border, are community schools and, to me, it's integrated, everybody goes to the one school, no matter where you're from' (N2,7). While there obviously are 'integrated' schools in the South, schooling is for the most part, as in Northern Ireland, divided on religious grounds. Of course the speaker may have been speaking about de-facto Catholic community schools, where most local people do attend the same school, because there is no choice. One

Southern participant, speaking about education in the North, said 'Their education is supposed to be like the second best in the world now' (S1,2). It is not clear from the conversation how they came to this conclusion, but it has no basis in fact, and education outcomes in Northern Ireland are in reality quite poor compared to the Irish republic.[17] In a similar vein, a Southern participant stated that people from Northern Ireland 'might feel a little bit like our roads are shocking. Our infrastructure isn't great, you know, Look at their train services, bus services, everything, we don't have anything like they have' (S1,2). This view belies the infrastructure deficits whereby roads and rail in Northern Ireland are widely acknowledged to be in a worse condition than the Southern equivalents.

There were occasional examples that did not correspond to these trends. There was a fairly widespread and general awareness that pensions and benefits, and minimum wages, were higher in the South (but not of the precise amounts). One person from Northern Ireland said 'You know, the benefits system down South is a lot more generous than in here because, you know, I know people who work over the border and if they're all sick, like, they're getting sickness benefit for something like something euros a week. 180 euros or something crazy' (N2,7). It was interesting that they thought €180 per week was 'crazy', when the actual payment in the Republic of Ireland at the time was €220 per week for a single person, suggesting there was both interest in and some knowledge of the higher level of benefits, but not the actual amounts paid or comparative prices and cost of living.

Only a few participants demonstrated any detailed, accurate knowledge of an aspect of public policy in the other jurisdiction. Two issues in particular were mentioned. Firstly, in response to fears that people who had paid British taxes and national insurance would get nothing in a united Ireland, one person responded that 'I know from talking to people who work cross-border, those systems already exist and you would never have known it. So, you know, say you were a cross-border worker and you didn't have pension paid up or whatever, the Irish government or tax people can bolster your pension here in the UK and stuff like that, you know. So, there's a lot of commonality already' (N1,7). There were also a few comments from Southern participants

[17] Anne Devlin, Seamus McGuinness, Adele Bergin and Emer Smyth, 'Education across the island of Ireland: examining educational outcomes, earnings and intergenerational mobility', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 34 (2) (2023), 30–47; Martin Brown, Chris Donnelly, Paddy Shevlin, Craig Skerritt, Gerry McNamara and Joe O'Hara, 'The rise and fall and rise of academic selection: the case of Northern Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 477–98.

that Northern Ireland would benefit from the overflow of economic congestion in Dublin. One argued that 'Well like Dublin is full of businesses, they can't, there's nowhere else really for them to go, there's Cork, it's full of businesses … Belfast is already there and built city with good infrastructure. Might be a good way to bring other international businesses into the country with all that infrastructure there for them already. Something that we wouldn't have to start from scratch with' (S2,1; and similar from S1,2). There was a similar comment on Derry and the north-west of the island. However, these participants were a small minority in the groups and the general trend was one of knowing very little about public policy provision on the 'other side' of the border.

In each focus group, an explicit question was posed about whether devolved institutions should continue in Northern Ireland after a vote for Irish unity. Participants were better informed about this issue, in particular about some of the challenges experienced in the power-sharing institutions. Most, but not all, participants in Northern Ireland, along with a few in the South, initially responded that they thought a devolved Northern Ireland structured within a united Ireland would be better from a transitional point of view—'a stepping stone' (N2,7), 'may be more bearable' [to unionists] (N2,8), 'a halfway house' (N1,3), 'It helps to sell the idea, I suppose' (S1,6). However, as the discussion progressed a lot more criticism emerged of the substance of a devolved region inside a united Ireland. Participants said that a devolved model would mean 'You're still left with a dysfunctional executive' (N1,3), 'We have an assembly, we have a devolved government with the UK at the minute, it's not blooming working' (N2,7), 'It's similar to what they have now but they can't even form a government' (S2,1). One Southern participant said it would be 'like Munster having its own assembly' (S1,2) and another added that the devolution model 'would be too much conflict with two governments because I think the two governments would be fighting against each other as far as any decision making' (S1,1). Going to the heart of what devolution might mean for public policy, one Southern participant said 'if it was devolved and they had the NHS or whatever it was going to be called and we didn't, that would annoy me. We are paying for it to be there and not here' (S2,1).

The question of devolution post-unity, therefore, provided a good insight into the state of play on deliberation about the institutional form of a united Ireland, for those who had indicated in the survey that they did not know how they would vote. There was a general sense, especially in the Northern Ireland groups, that continued devolution would be the best means by which a transition to a united Ireland could be facilitated in the short run, or by

which the consent of unionists might be facilitated to something which they oppose, combined with very critical comments about the current model and in particular the non-operation of the Northern Ireland executive over long periods and the problems posed by petitions of concern, which amounted to party vetoes (N1,3; N1,6; N2,13). In the South, there was questioning of the wider purpose of devolution, including whether a devolved region would operate different health, welfare or education systems (e.g. S2,4).

The focus groups offered compelling evidence that while surveys can give us a snapshot of declared opinion at a point in time, they are much weaker in capturing strength of conviction or willingness to consider alternatives. It was clear that participants had not thought about or discussed many of the issues previously. In these focus groups, even where people initially expressed preferences, they were open to dialogue and to changing their mind (N1,5; S1,1,2,7; S2,1). Deliberations, therefore, will be an important aspect of preparing for referendums on Irish unity: they offer an opportunity for reflection and information sharing, in a context where many people are open to change and are self-aware about their lack of knowledge and information.

THE FOCUS GROUPS: IDENTITY

The causal role of identity in the Northern Ireland conflict, and its place in deliberations about a united Ireland, are matters of scholarly disagreement. It is common to say that 'identity' (for some, 'ethnic identity') is at the heart of conflict, that it is an issue on which compromise is not possible, and a key to conflicting views about a united Ireland. From this perspective, neither unionists nor nationalists, nor most cultural Protestants and Catholics, are likely to change their preferences about a united Ireland. However, there is also evidence that 'identity' is more complex and negotiable than this implies.[18] The focus groups give us an interesting perspective on this issue. But the evidence is not straightforward: the very concept of 'identity' and the markers of it—what statements are relevant to identity—are themselves highly contested.[19]

[18] Todd, *Identity change after conflict*.

[19] Identity can be seen as categorisation, or as belonging, or as meaning or perspective, or as all of these: on the Irish cases, see John Coakley, 'National identity in Northern Ireland: stability or change?', *Nations and Nationalism* 13 (4) (2007), 573–97; Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: same difference* (New York, 2008); Claire Mitchell and Gladys Ganiel, *Evangelical journeys: choice and change in a Northern Irish religious sub-culture* (Dublin, 2011); Jennifer Todd, 'Unionism, identity and Irish unity: paradigms, problems and paradoxes', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 53–77.

In this article, we take identity as a grammar or frame of interrelated concepts through which the meaning of social and political relations between self and other is understood. We read the transcripts for what they show about people's understandings of group relations on the island—which groups they identify with, who they see as different, and how this affects their view of future relations on the island.

In the two Northern Ireland focus groups, most of the participants were clear that the issue of Irish unity was not, and should not be, a matter of traditional identity politics: participants explained that 'the population has become more diverse' (N2,7). There was considerable agreement that 'I don't think it's as simple as Catholics voting for a United Ireland and Protestants not. I think it's become a much more open debate now' (N2,12). They were keen to distance themselves from these group identities: 'I know I want to be past all of this orange and green. It doesn't matter to me anymore' (N1,5). However, they recognised that there was still, for some, a strong sense of group identity, even among the young: 'We're still quite orange and green, aren't we?' (N1,3); 'These groups haven't gone away on both sides' (N1,2); 'You see young people on the festivals over the summer, you know, chanting songs and everything else' (N2,13).

Several of the respondents volunteered their own 'cultural background' and national identity: for example, 'Like, I come from a more Catholic culture, Gaelic games and sports and so on. I would definitely feel more of an affiliation to Ireland in terms of culture' (N1,3) or 'We're part of the UK. But at the same time when the Ireland rugby matches are on, I'm supporting Ireland. It's swings and roundabouts, but in my head I'm British' (N1,2). Identity was presented as complex, intersectional, negotiated, and this complexity allowed for some flexibility in response and emphasis. When the moderator asked one participant 'You had mentioned earlier about a British identity. That's very firmly where you feel you are?', they responded 'Yes, although I think that identity in this part of the world it's very complicated' (N2,12) and went on to talk positively about the sense of being Northern Irish.

For these participants, identities were complex and multi-stranded and changeable.[20] Most participants preferred to speak about their culture, background and beliefs rather than about their 'identity', and this allowed them to emphasise movement from one perspective to another over time: 'Like

[20] This was true of the constitutionally undecided in focus groups, but it has also long been argued that identity in Northern Ireland is nested. John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1990).

I was raised to believe that we were a part of the United Kingdom, and I come from that background. But since being an adult and since seeing how the political culture has been for Northern Ireland, I think that we've been, I think we could do better' (N1,1). Movement was also seen as collective, not just individual: 'Recently there's been a lot of footage about the Queen and so on. Like, those couple of incidences that she was involved in, I actually think moved the needle, for me, those were cultural moving points' (N1,3). These are examples of the boundary renegotiation and identity change that have been a topic in the wider scholarly literature. What is remarkable is that the participants themselves volunteer the discussion: tropes of change and negotiation have filtered into everyday discourse.

'Unnegotiable' identities were in general attributed to others, and particularly to unionists, rather than to themselves: 'Well the unionist population would be afraid of their identity being lost completely' (N1,5). These Northern participants did not associate identity with history; indeed, there was little mention of history at all. The relation of identity and state belonging was mentioned, but it was seen as only one aspect of identity even for those who would prefer the Union to continue. These participants did not reify identity but rather took a decidedly flexible, negotiable stance towards it—theirs was 'identity as perspective', not 'identity politics'.[21]

What was perhaps most surprising of all, given the literature that suggests that 'Northern Irish' is a relatively weak and highly varied identity, was the strong and unprompted sense of pride in 'my wee country' (for example N1,2).[22] This was connected to a sense of distance from the South, even by those who otherwise are open to a united Ireland: 'My brother has been living in Dublin, for maybe two decades now and he still gets the Northie label down there. Suddenly we're going to integrate, like, we're going to be a part of Ireland. I think just on a cultural level, we might still have that Northie label on us, you know' (N1,1). For some this sense of identity and distinction led to views on flags, anthems and devolution, but not in a predetermined way 'You know, you're still keeping Northern Ireland as its own identity, to

[21] On the dangers of reification, see Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society* 29 (1) (2002), 1–47.

[22] This pride was also articulated by N1,1,5; N2,8. On Northern Ireland identity, see Kevin McNicholl, 'Political constructions of a cross-community identity in a divided society: how politicians articulate Northern Irishness', *National Identities* 20 (5) (2017), 495–513; Jonathan Tonge and Raul Gomez, 'Shared identity and the end of conflict? How far has a common sense of "Northern Irishness" replaced British or Irish allegiances since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement?', *Irish Political Studies* 30 (2) (2015), 276–98; Karen Trew, 'The Northern Irish identity', in Anne J. Kershan (ed.), *A question of identity* (Aldershot, 1998), 60–76.

a degree, as it's continuing to exist' (N1,5). There was a lot of openness as to how that would be managed.

Southern participants were definitive about their sense of belonging and commitment to the symbolism of 'their' state. Intuitively they resisted any change in flag or anthem, in contrast to the Northern groups: 'Oh God no I don't think so' (S1,7); 'No' (S1,3); 'No, no' (S1,all); 'No' (S2,1); 'No' (S2,6); 'Wouldn't like one, no' (S2,5). These views are intrinsically linked to participants' sense of history: 'Like why on earth would we change our anthem? Why on earth would we change our flag?' (S2,2). That sense of history is highly personal, and linked to the very foundation of the state. If there were never a united Ireland, 'I actually think it would be tragic' (S1,4), 'It's like spitting on your ancestors' graves for everything that they fought for' (S1,6).

Research in the mid-2000s showed that national identity in the Republic of Ireland involves an unquestioned sense of belonging, a 'we-consciousness' that is totalising over state, nation, family and history.[23] The focus groups show that this remains the case. The contrast with the more detached and even reflexive approaches among the Northern respondents is clear.

What is of greatest interest, however, is the way even some of the most assertive Southern participants reconsidered their stances at the end of the focus group. It was as if hearing their own conversation allowed them to critically assess their own immediate intuitions. One older man was 'very I suppose taken aback' (S1,5). A very assertive respondent commented self-critically: 'I suppose before this I would have been very one-track-mind … Sure that's never going to work. We have to be more democratic' (S1,4). S1,3 concurred: 'We have to be more openminded, ready for some change as well.' Some realised for the first time at the end of the focus group that North–South dialogue was necessary: 'I would have thought that I looked at things fairly well balanced. But actually when it came around to like the national anthem changing and I actually think I just figured they would join us and that would be it' (S2,6). And once the issue was raised, more constructive dialogue appeared possible, although still the Southern 'we', their ownership of the 'country', remained unquestioned: 'Just one last thing to say but like *we* are a country that is open to change' (S2,3).

The focus groups highlight that participants' self-understandings are nuanced and compatible with a range of policy preferences. Their identities should be considered not as given and unchangeable but as complex,

[23] Todd, *Identity change after conflict.*

intersectional and negotiable. Even when identity seems to determine initial responses in a highly emotional and uncompromising way—as in the immediate Southern responses to flags, emblems and history—by the end of the session, openness to dialogue and deliberation on these issues was evident.

THE FOCUS GROUPS: PRIORITIES

In the growing discussion on potential constitutional change on the island, a key question concerns the priorities of diverse voices in the debate. Given the scale of change that would be involved in creating a new, united Ireland, inclusion in pre-referendum deliberation needs to go beyond creating an opportunity to participate, and needs to be designed to try to maximise actual engagement.[24] There is considerable potential for radical inclusion in this process by affording space not just for different voices, but also for diverse perspectives. Such engagement, with participants defined transversally, e.g. in terms of gender, minority ethnicity and generation, may promote mutual understanding among those from conflicting political groups.[25] Existing research with transversally defined organisations and networks (women's groups, ethnic minorities and youth) has found that citizens express a clear intention to shift the agenda away from contentious constitutional issues towards everyday 'bread-and-butter' concerns.[26] The focus groups we report on here provide further insight into the priorities for citizens in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland in the constitutional discussion. There were important similarities and differences between the Northern and Southern participants, but in each focus group, participants gave considerable unprompted priority to expanding the range of issues they wished to include, beyond formal political institutions and constitutional forms. Participants in the North were more vocal about needing lots of information about what change would mean across policy sectors, largely due to their experience of Brexit. A worry about political instability and potential for violence was more prevalent in the North, though present in the Southern focus groups too in terms of the Irish state potentially having to manage that risk in the future.

[24] McEvoy and Todd, 'Constitutional inclusion in divided societies'; Todd and McEvoy, 'Obstacles to constitutional participation'.
[25] Nira Yuval-Davis, 'What is "transversal politics"?', *Soundings* 12 (1999), 94–8.
[26] McEvoy, Todd and Walsh, 'Participatory constitutionalism and the agenda for change'.

In the Northern Ireland focus groups, participants gave significant priority to emphasising that discussion about change has to be very different from the uncertainty of the Brexit experience. There was a common view that discussion about potential constitutional change needs to be 'mature and do the process right and get all the questions and the answers all sorted in advance of a referendum' (N1,2). Participants brought their views on the Brexit process into the discussion, saying it 'was very poorly handled' and based on a great deal of 'spin' (N1,6). One participant commented that the Brexit process was 'completely bizarre' in having the vote to leave the EU without details on what would come next: 'So for the Ireland debate it has to be the other way round', with a need to know the 'terms of leaving' before a vote (N1,3). There was an overwhelming view on the need for 'a lot of facts' in advance of a popular vote (e.g. N1,5).

Participants' emphasis on the need to have 'the facts and figures' on what change would mean for daily life centred on socio-economic issues. The most important issues for participants included the health service, education, pensions, cost of living and whether citizens would be better off financially in a united Ireland. The health service was emphasised as a priority, as discussed above and as confirmed by the survey results, principally around cost at point of delivery. In emphasising these bread-and-butter issues, participants stressed they should take priority over identity issues, by recognising that people have shared concerns and even a 'common purpose' (N2,12). There was a view that 'Everybody is looking for the same answers to the same questions' (N2,7).

Participants in Northern Ireland also emphasised that maintaining peace is a key priority in the discussion about potential change. Some commented that it is important not to rush the process, that an imminent move to a referendum 'could cause a lot of turmoil in our country at the moment. I don't think we're maybe stable enough to deal with it at the moment' (N1,3). There was also concern expressed that 'violence could raise its ugly head again, and that would be my concern' (N1,6). To alleviate some of these concerns, participants suggested that the best way forward is to prepare the 'groundwork' with plenty of information and to help ensure people are fully informed (N2,9). There was convergence around the need to manage the process in a measured way, and that the debate needs to evolve slowly. Most participants who raised the issue of timing argued that referendums should not be held in the 'short term', but they went on to propose a relatively short timeframe. One Northern Ireland participant even said that 'It's at least four or five years

away' (N2,11)—as if four or five years was quite a bit away—while others suggested 'two to five years' or 'five to ten years' in a similar manner (N2,8).

The discussion in the Southern focus groups took a very different tone. Southern participants initially emphasised that the decision about a united Ireland was primarily for the North; they fully accepted the 'principle of consent' enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement and previous British–Irish agreements. But, paradoxically, this position led to them putting the brunt of decision-making onto the people of Northern Ireland and viewing themselves almost as bystanders. For example, it's for 'the people up there … it's their choice' (S 1,2); 'I do think it's their choice' (S1,4); 'it's not us, we don't have the problem, I suppose' (S1,3). However, when probed about what concerns they might have about potential constitutional change, Southern participants expressed their main concern as having to do with stability in the Irish republic, a worry about violence and financial implications, i.e. the potential cost of unification. Participants were generally concerned about whether the Irish republic could afford the North (S1,4; S1,1; S2,12; S2,10). There was also a worry that people in Northern Ireland 'get a lot more for their money than we do' and that maintaining that level in the event of unity could even lead to a financial 'crash' (S1,7). Others feared that taxes would have to increase in the South to cover the financial cost of unification (S1,3; S1,4). Overall, the impression was one of people not knowing what change might mean and wanting reliable information before being asked to vote in a future referendum.

When considering new political structures (e.g. devolved system versus integrated united Ireland), a concern about cost also came into play. One participant suggested that maintaining a devolved assembly in the North would 'cost us a lot in the long run, and it's going to drain us' (S1,5); another even felt that 'It's like buying a pig in a poke' given uncertainty (S1,7). Some concern was also expressed relating to the history of conflict in Northern Ireland and the worry that moving to a referendum could unsettle the delicate peace, even leading to a return to violence. This concern about potential civil unrest (S1,3; S1,5) led to a worry about how the South could cope with that problem (S1,4). Another participant expressed a worry about 'absolute chaos' and 'absolute mayhem' (S2,11). Relatedly, and echoing views expressed in the North, a priority for participants in the Southern focus groups was for political stability in the North given the difficulties over power-sharing and the confusion over Brexit (S1,S2).

On policy issues, the Southern participants expressed similar concerns to those in the Northern focus groups regarding the lack of information on

what constitutional change might mean for public services, principally health and education, but also for direct inward investment, given the potential cost of unification, and for the euro. There was a strong sense that participants wanted 'expert' advice on these issues during the deliberation, and not just in the heat of a campaign. In this regard, like their Northern counterparts, they wanted the process to evolve slowly (S1,6; S2,1; S2,5; S2,6).

In the discussion about potential models (devolved and integrated united Ireland), some surprise was expressed in the Southern groups that a devolved model was even a possibility. One participant saw the devolved model as akin to partition: 'It just seems no better than when they went to sign the treaty in '21 … "that's the best we can do"' (S1,3). Several referred to the devolved model as 'pussyfooting around' (S1,1; S1,4) and 'for the snowflakes … Trying not to upset people (S1,2), 'a little bit of tokenism … To me that's not united Ireland' (S2,12). There was also a general sense of participants assuming that the institutional choice would be integrated 'or nothing' (S2,9). The integrated model was described as 'a sense of completion' (S1,4), though concerns were expressed about the consequences for stability of having more political parties taking seats in the Dáil (S1,3; S1,7).

Participants in the Northern focus groups appeared to prioritise certain principles for the way in which discussion should progress. There was discussion about the need for 'truth and honesty' on the part of those leading the process and criticism of the Northern Ireland political parties, given the absence of power-sharing government for some time. Expressing a view that political parties should not lead the discussion, participants emphasised that independent experts should be brought in to provide information on different policy areas (N1,3). Independent experts would provide 'the pros, the cons, right across every aspect' (N1,1) and potentially an ombudsman role would be established (N1,5).

Participants also prioritised the need for ordinary people and communities to be involved and they put forward ideas on how the public should be included in widespread deliberation. They agreed on the need for more discussion around norms of inclusion (all communities, age groups, genders) and mutual respect for different opinions. As one participant commented, 'We've had discussions here tonight, open, everyone has respected each other's decisions. That's the way forward' (N2,10). There was a broad welcome for a polite and engaged conversation without rancour, with quite a few participants saying that they had changed their mind over the course of the 90-minute conversation. There was some enthusiasm for more discussions in

settings like the focus groups, perhaps larger meetings in local communities, even citizens' assemblies. Participants prioritised the need to bring multiple voices from different communities together, the important role of 'ordinary people' and that conversations should be respectful of different viewpoints. There was agreement that the focus groups experience was very positive, and that the discussion about controversial topics had been open and reasonable: 'I think it's positive, with all the different views that we've spoken about, and respecting each other's views, and hearing the different thoughts that we've had on it' (N2,10); 'We're all very respectful about it' (N2,9); 'I've really appreciated people's views and the conversation' (N2,8); 'Even though everybody is coming from different directions, everybody is kind of in agreement about a lot of the stuff which—yes. That's nice' (N1,1). One participant concluded by saying that the experience gave her 'a lot of hope' for the future (N2,7).

In exploring how focus groups and other participatory forums can facilitate deliberation, there was evidence of some shifts of thinking in several areas. Some participants were initially enthusiastic about proceeding to put a vote 'to the people'. The discussion then progressed more cautiously around the need to slow things down, to do a lot of 'groundwork' over several years and to let the discussion evolve over time. From an initial standpoint of seeming to be unsure of how the conversation would proceed, participants ended up with an appreciation of shared goals and commonalities, that 'Everybody is looking for the same answers to the same questions' (i.e. what life would be like for my family) (N2,7). The emphasis in the Southern groups on cost, the economy and stability, along with knee-jerk reactions to questions on devolution and flags, sometimes immediately softened in debate, suggesting a group of people who had not spent much time thinking about North–South relations, or a united Ireland, before.

There was evidence of some shifts in thinking after initial consideration of the two institutional models presented (integrated and devolved). In talking through the models, the Northern participants explored and reflected on the relative merits and drawbacks. They ended up with a fairly nuanced expectation as to what the models would mean for governance and the future polity. As we have noted in relation to the lack of knowledge about potential institutional structures, participants in all four focus groups expressed some surprise that there could be two potential models and, interestingly, viewed the devolved model as transitional, a potential stepping-stone to an integrated united Ireland, recognising that it would be far from clear how to transition

from one to the other. Interestingly, Southern participants were quite vocal about their lack of enthusiasm for a devolved structure. These shifts in thinking highlight the benefits of the focus group method and the potential of participatory and deliberative forums, which can facilitate and capture this exploration of different ways forward, regarding both institutional models and wide-ranging policy issues.

CONCLUSION

The heightened post-Brexit debate on a united Ireland has created a near-consensus that holding referendums North and South on the island of Ireland on the principle of unity, without a detailed plan as to what happens afterwards, would be a disaster. As a result, it has been suggested that the Irish government should set out a model for a united Ireland that details its institutional structure. The responses from the attitude surveys conducted by Ipsos for ARINS and the Irish Times showed that unionists and 'others' in Northern Ireland had lower negativity towards a united Ireland that maintained the devolved institutions in the 'Northern Ireland region' after unity.[27] This is not a surprising finding. But it is mistaken to argue that the Irish government should therefore commit to a model of unity, with the current territory of Northern Ireland having a devolved assembly and executive. Even if such a commitment made the outcome of a referendum more likely to be in favour of a united Ireland, and that is by no means certain, the discussion in the focus groups indicates that people's views are not fixed or well informed. A firm commitment to a devolved model offers no clear path by which those institutions would operate in accordance with the clear wishes of the populations—in a manner that ensured peace and increased the welfare of people North and South. The evidence from the survey was a snapshot in time, and the focus groups indicate that in the absence of a widespread informed debate with a wider range of alternatives on offer, it cannot be seen as a measure of firmly held opinions.

The focus groups demonstrated the degree of flux in people's declared opinions, as even the immediately expressed views on the institutional model

[27] Pat Leahy, 'North and South methodology: how we took the pulse of Ireland on unity', *Irish Times*, 3 December 2022.

of a united Ireland were open to reflection and even change, after a relatively short period of discussion. These focus groups were composed of people who said they did not know how they would vote in a referendum on Irish unity, but the transcripts show that notwithstanding this position, the participants did in many cases express clear and strong views, but even those individuals were open to reflection. The evidence of these focus groups is that firstly people want, indeed they welcomed, the opportunity to discuss controversial issues around the possible creation of a new and united Ireland in a professional and safe environment. Although some people in the Northern Ireland groups, when presented with the two alternatives in a visual format, expressed very strong preference for a devolved Northern Ireland in the context of Irish unity, they began to question their prior assumptions as the discussion took a critical and reflective turn.[28] The participants were uneasy about the options presented to them and participants in the Northern Ireland groups, without prompting, proposed a third option—devolution in Northern Ireland as a stepping stone to an integrated Ireland. The experience of these focus groups strengthens the argument that the next phase should be one of scoping out the range of acceptable ideas, and allowing the public to help form the agenda, narrowing down to defined options later in the process. It was also clear that, unprompted, the participants' priorities for deliberation about a united Ireland were issues such as the economy and the health service, rather than institutional design.

The focus group participants wanted information about economic impacts and about proposals for public service delivery on healthcare, benefits, housing and transport, but they also wanted to discuss those issues as part of a process to develop a vision of what a united Ireland would look like before referendums are called. The evidence of these focus groups is that the public's demand for more detailed information, and more widespread debate, in order to allow them to develop their opinions on the future of the island of Ireland is likely to be very wide-ranging, but that the economy, public services (in particular healthcare) and the threat to peace will be priorities. The ARINS project, within which these focus groups were planned, has already set out a

[28] This critical reflection was also evidenced in mini-deliberative sessions organised by Brendan O'Leary and John Garry (separately), North and South. John Garry, Brendan O'Leary, John Coakley, James Pow and Lisa Whitten, 'Public attitudes to different possible models of a United Ireland: evidence from a citizens' assembly in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies* 35 (3) (2020), 422–50; John Garry, Brendan O'Leary, Paul Gillespie and Roland Gjoni, 'Public attitudes to Irish unification: evidence on models and process from a deliberative forum in Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33 (2) (2022), 246–86.

significant body of peer-reviewed research, and further work is under way.[29] However, that work needs to increase in scope and needs to find a means of wider dissemination in a manner that facilitates and enables deliberation.

The focus groups also confirm that 'identity' is not an uncompromising adherence to a set-package Irish or British cultural toolkit, but is more nuanced, allowing participants to interact and discuss policy issues. The focus groups add to other evidence that identity, as a set package of British and Protestant or Irish and Catholic, is less central to conflict than some analyses have suggested. What may be more difficult, as discussion evolves, is the grammar—the ways Southern participants intuitively referred to their identification with history and with the state, while Northern participants had a more distanced and reflective relation to each. But this can be engaged with through dialogue.

Of course the participants in the focus groups were not representative of the entire population. Their initial preferences, however, were in important respects akin to those expressed in the surveys. Northerners in the focus groups favoured a devolved model, Southerners an integrated one; Northerners wanted change in flags and anthems in a possible united Ireland while southerners did not; and the priorities of all, in surveys and focus groups, were for peace and good health provision and public policy. Were the focus group participants more likely to change their preferences than others? Were they more complex in their identity than many? That is much less clear, and judgement will have to depend on the results of much wider discussion and deliberation.

These findings also have implications for the 'how' of deliberation. Participants showed enthusiasm for discussion as a positive experience; they were surprised at the way the discussion unfolded and the ease with which people reconsidered and shifted their thinking. The findings call for future research on the modes of deliberation, on how to sequence different types of deliberative event across the island, and on how to join up the results of different types of research and relay findings to multiple publics. One important area for practical research is how to create a systemic form of deliberation

[29] The academic research response to this public debate can be best seen in the ARINS project, which is committed to an evidenced-based engagement, without any collective view as to the best constitutional outcome. It has produced a very significant programme of published peer-reviewed research, along with podcasts and short-form articles. See www.arinsproject.com and the opening editorial, which sets out its objectives and approach: John Doyle, Cathy Gormley-Heenan and Patrick Griffin, 'Editorial: Introducing ARINS—Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), vii–xvii.

that joins up different areas of people's lives and different marginalised groups with policy-makers.[30]

The Irish government is of necessity a key actor in supporting and facilitating such a programme of structured, multi-layered and island-wide deliberative events, as it is clear that the British government is very unlikely either to organise deliberation or to draw up a model for a united Ireland, prior to a poll. Therefore only the Irish government and parliament have the capacity and credibility to outline a pre-referendum model for a united Ireland, which would strike an appropriate balance in setting out with authority what would happen if the referendums were passed in the two jurisdictions. Presentation of a pre-referendum model should be done in a way that secures engagement with civic unionism and reaches out to unionist parties, even though some have made clear their reluctance or opposition to engagement. But what that model will be, and whether it might be more complex than suggested in the binary choice of devolution vs integration, or if it will be phased, as some participants suggested, remain open questions.[31] To argue that the Irish government needs to adopt a model of a united Ireland that retains devolution for Northern Ireland and provides unionists with some form of veto on developments in order to achieve losers' consent for change is premature. It fudges the long-term problems that this short-term solution will create.

The task for the Irish government is more complex and, at the initial stages, one of listening and of facilitating a widespread programme of deliberation. For a pre-referendum model of a united Ireland to have broad support, it needs to be developed through a planned and structured deliberative process that discusses the full-range of public policies for a new and united Ireland including, but not limited to, its institutional form. That process also needs to have a strong cross-border dimension. This is important pragmatically, in order to increase information and highlight shared experience across jurisdictions. It is also important politically, so that deliberation takes place for a future island, not simply for the future of each jurisdiction.

Such a process, properly managed, is capable of including the views of civil society in Northern Ireland, not solely nationalist identifiers but also those

[30] John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (eds), *Deliberative systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale* (Cambridge, 2012); Jane Suiter, 'A modest proposal: building a deliberative system in Northern Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 32 (2) (2021), 247–70.

[31] Phasing was used in the South African settlement, where an interim constitution was agreed in advance of a new constitution that would later be put up for public approval. See Adrian Guelke, *Peace settlements and political transformation in divided societies: rethinking Northern Ireland and South Africa* (Abingdon, 2023).

who identify as unionist and/or British and/or Protestant, and those who do not identify as either nationalist or unionist or with either conventional bloc. Identity in Northern Ireland, as one focus group participant commented, is 'very complicated' (N2,12). It is important to ask ordinary people for their views on different policies, rather than to assume set-package identities that preclude negotiation.

We argue for a sustained and systemic process of discussion and deliberation on the basis of the findings of both the survey and the focus groups, which collectively point to lack of knowledge, lack of prior awareness and lack of prior discussion, and—for the focus groups—to openness to discussion. It is our view, therefore, that it is too early to provide an expert political blueprint for a united Ireland; it is, however, time to engage the public in participation and deliberation about the future. A deliberative process, bringing people together on an all-island basis and involving diverse voices, including unionist civil society, can play a very important role in building not only 'losers' consent', but also positive and widespread engagement with the challenges of change. An open deliberative process can build a greater degree of acceptance, whatever the outcome of referendums, by those who end up on the 'losing side'.

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