# BRINGING THE PUBLIC BACK IN: PUBLIC OPINION AND POWER-SHARING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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# CONTENTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our survey of 840 respondents in Northern Ireland indicates that the principle of power-sharing still retains some public appeal. Citizens are:

- More likely to agree than disagree that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for the region,
- More likely to agree than disagree that power-sharing has been 'good for Northern Ireland'.

When it comes to the day-to-day operation of the power-sharing institutions, however, there are signs of public disillusionment:

- Only a minority of citizens take the view that power-sharing works better now than it did in the past,
- Most people are not convinced that the Assembly does a good job in holding ministers to account,
- Most people are not convinced that the Executive functions well as a government.

There is, however, public appetite for further institutional reform, which would suggest the public do not consider these issues insurmountable.

The survey reveals low levels of public satisfaction in the Assembly, Executive, and in the UK Parliament. Citizens do, however, tend to be slightly less critical of their local representatives. Unionist respondents are consistently more dissatisfied with Northern Ireland's political institutions and elected representatives than nationalist and non-aligned respondents. A more varied (and somewhat more positive) picture emerges when it comes to levels of public trust in Executive ministers:

- Although public trust in the First Minister and deputy First Minister is low, public trust in other Executive ministers is noticeably higher,
- A high level of public trust in Health Minister Robin Swann, for example, is evident among unionist respondents, among nationalist respondents, and among non-aligned respondents,
- Other ministers, such as Naomi Long and Nicola Mallon, are more trusted than distrusted.

Findings related to political knowledge are suggestive of a relatively politically aware electorate. Perceived levels of knowledge in Northern Ireland politics and in the Assembly and Executive are high and, indeed, have increased from levels of knowledge recorded in 2009. On average, respondents correctly answered six (out of ten) true/false questions pertaining to Northern Ireland's politics and institutions, with those claiming 'a great deal' of knowledge of Northern Ireland politics scoring highest. As such, it would be difficult to dismiss unfavourable views of Northern Ireland's institutions and representatives on the basis of political ignorance. The electorate appears to be relatively well-informed and, moreover, increasingly politically engaged. Comparison with data from 2009 reveals increases in participation in petition signing, in political campaigning, and in the expression of political opinions online (particularly among unionist respondents). There is, however, a clear gendered dimension to political participation in Northern Ireland, with women less likely than men to contact their MLA, less likely to watch the proceedings of the Assembly, and less likely to express their political opinions online.

## INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland has had an on-off experience of devolution since executive and legislative powers were transferred from London to Belfast with the passing of the Northern Ireland Act in 1998. This is because the region's power-sharing Assembly has only twice served a full parliamentary term (2007-2011 and 2011-2016) without formal or *de facto* suspension. Even when operational, criticism of the institutions has been frequent.[1] Common complaints include, *inter alia*, abuse of the Assembly's Petition of Concern (a minority veto), recurring stalemate over policy issues to do with Northern Ireland's past, languages, and cultures, and government dysfunction in the Executive.[2] The case for institutional reform to address some of these problems gathered momentum during the most recent period of institutional collapse, lasting from January 2017 to January 2020. To that end, a package of institutional reforms was included in *New Decade, New Approach* (NDNA), the agreement which restored devolved government to Northern Ireland in January 2020.[3] Since NDNA, amidst challenging circumstances occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Assembly and Executive have functioned without suspension or serious disruption, even eliciting some praise for their initial handling of the public health emergency.[4]

Nevertheless, debate about the future and sustainability of power-sharing has continued. Recent calls from some party leaders for more fundamental reforms are suggestive of growing dissatisfaction among political elites with how the devolved institutions function.[5] The views of the Northern Ireland public, however, have not been a major feature of these debates thus far. This deficit is worth redressing given that, ultimately, the Assembly and Executive owe their existence to the citizens of Northern Ireland, who endorsed the power-sharing blueprints in 1998 via the Good Friday Agreement referendum. To that end, this report analyses new public opinion data covering citizen views on a range of pertinent topics, including: levels of public support for power-sharing; public perspectives on the performance of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Northern Ireland Executive; levels of public trust and satisfaction in political institutions and representatives; levels of perceived and actual political knowledge, and levels of political participation. The findings provide the most up-to-date assessment of Northern Ireland's democratic institutions and elected representatives from a citizen's perspective and should help discussions about power-sharing – and potential institutional reform – proceed in a manner which is in tune with contemporary public opinion.

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[1] A. Clark and R. Wilford (2012) 'Political Institutions, Engagement and Outreach: The Case of the Northern Ireland Assembly', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65 (2): 380–403.

[2] S. Haughey (2019) 'Worth Restoring? Taking Stock of the Northern Ireland Assembly', *The Political Quarterly*, 90 (4): 705–712.

[3] See S. Haughey (2020) 'Back to Stormont: The New Decade, New Approach Agreement and What it Means for Northern Ireland', *The Political Quarterly*, 91: 138-139.

[4] J. McCullough (2021) 'A citizen's account of Stormont's response' in *Parliaments and the Pandemic*, report of the Study of Parliament Group, pp.155-160. Accessed on 28th October 2021 at file:///C:/Users/haughey1/Desktop/Covid%20&%20Parliaments.pdf.

[5] Three of the five parties comprising the current Executive have called for an end to the system of so-called 'mandatory coalition', an integral component of the power-sharing system endorsed in the Good Friday Agreement. These parties being the Democratic Unionist Party (see here), the Ulster Unionist Party (see here), and the Alliance Party (see here) (accessed respectively on 28.10.21).

## METHODOLOGY

This report is based on survey data collected via Ipsos Mori's 'UK KnowledgePanel'. Respondents were recruited using random probability unclustered address-based sampling. All KnowledgePanel surveys are conducted online. To include digitally excluded households, those who are unable to access the internet are provided with tablets, free data and technical support to help them complete surveys online. The fieldwork for this survey was completed from 30th September to 6th October 2021. The survey received 840 responses. Design and calibration weights have been applied to correct for differences in selection probabilities and response rates between subgroups of the Northern Ireland population. Results are accurate to a margin of error of 3.4% at 95% confidence. The basic characteristics of the survey sample are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of the survey sample

| Total | Gender | | Age | | | | Urbanity | | Community background | | |
|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|-------|----------|-------------|---------|
| | Male | Female | 16-34 | 35-54 | 55-74 | 75+ | Urban | Rural | Unionist | Nationalist | Neither |
| 840 | 414 | 424 | 128 | 340 | 334 | 38 | 571 | 269 | 271 | 203 | 337 |

## PERSPECTIVES ON POWER-SHARING

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements pertaining to power-sharing in Northern Ireland. The results are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Perspectives on power-sharing in Northern Ireland
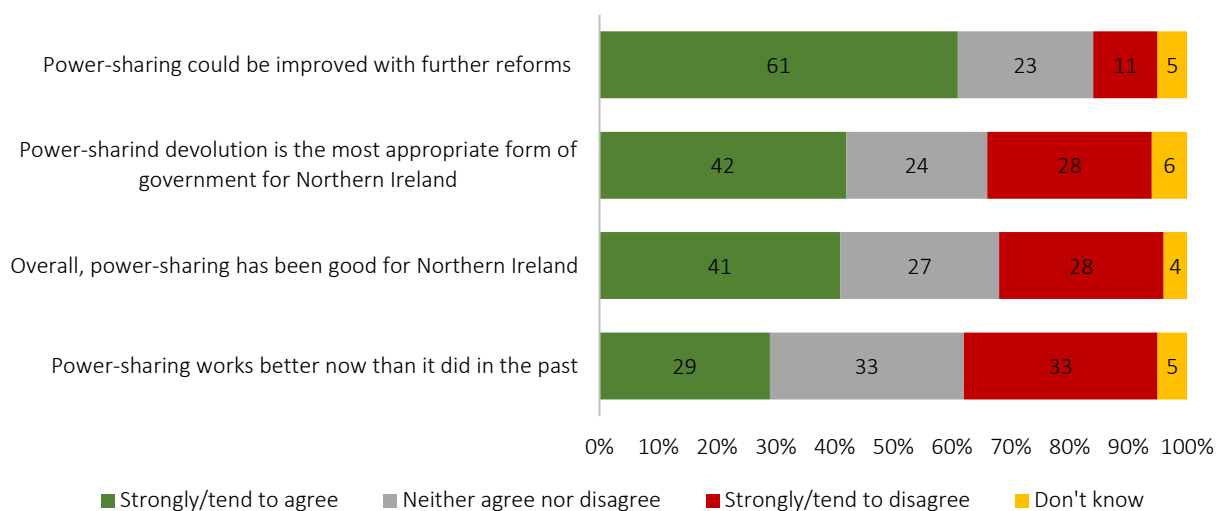


For advocates of power-sharing, there are some positive findings in that more people agree (42%) than disagree (28%) that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for Northern Ireland. Likewise, more people agree (41%) than disagree (28%) that, overall, power-sharing has been 'good for Northern Ireland'. On the other hand, only a minority of people (29%) agree that power-sharing works better now than it did in the past, with a higher proportion of respondents (33%) expressing disagreement on this. Although this latter finding is suggestive of a deterioration in the performance of power-sharing (or perceptions thereof), there is some public optimism that this could be remedied, with over 60% of respondents in agreement that power-sharing could be improved with further institutional reforms. As has been noted elsewhere, the public is not supportive of closing down the institutions altogether.[6]

Support for power-sharing varies across Northern Ireland's ethno-national communities. A majority of nationalists believe that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for Northern Ireland and, overall, that power sharing has been good for Northern Ireland (56% and 53% respectively). Unionists, on the other hand, are almost evenly split over whether power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for Northern Ireland, with 39% agreeing with this proposition and 38% disagreeing. On the question of whether power-sharing has been

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[6] *The Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol: Consensus or Conflict?* (2021). Report by the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool. Accessed on 9th November 2021 at
https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/The,Ireland-Northern,Ireland,Protocol,Consensus,or,Conflict,v2.pdf.

good for Northern Ireland, more unionists disagree (42%) than agree (37%) with this proposition. Citizens who are neither nationalist nor unionist – non-aligned respondents – are more likely to agree than disagree that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for Northern Ireland (38% and 26% respectively) and are more likely to agree than disagree that power-sharing has been good for Northern Ireland (40% and 26% respectively).

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE ASSEMBLY

When asked about its performance vis-à-vis the key functions of a legislature, most people in Northern Ireland are not convinced the Assembly is doing a good job. On the issue of representation, only 15% of people believe their views are represented in the Assembly. It is worth noting, of course, that this sense of disconnect between citizens and their democratic institutions is not unique to Northern Ireland, nor is the Assembly the only UK legislature perceived to be falling short in terms of representing the views of ordinary people.[7] Nonetheless, the Assembly clearly faces a significant challenge if it is to improve public perceptions of its representativeness. Citizens who are neither nationalist nor unionist feel particularly unrepresented, with only 10% agreeing that their views are represented in the Assembly (compared with 19% of nationalists and 20% of unionists).

Figure 2: Perspectives on the Assembly
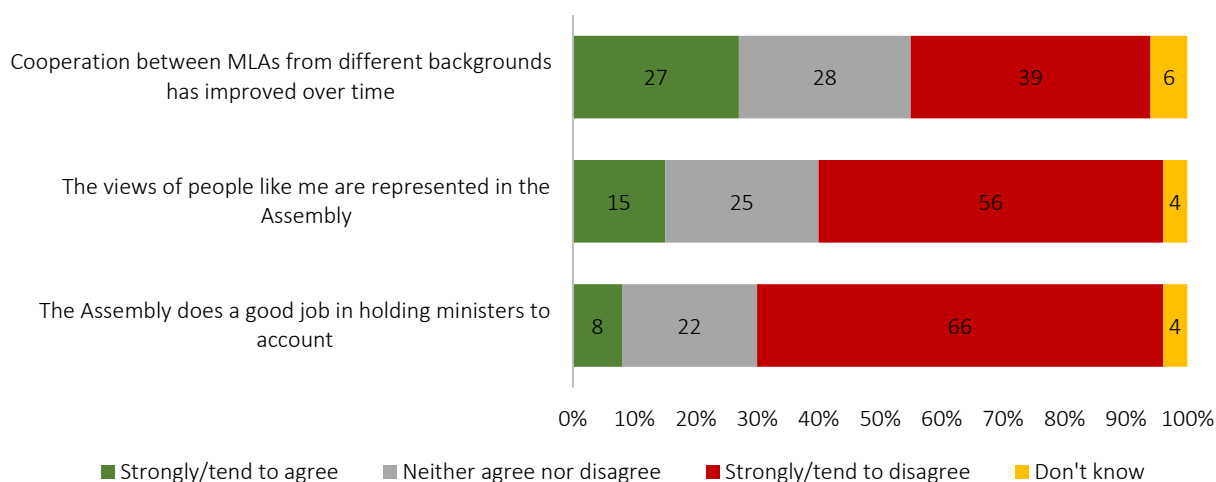


The public also takes a pessimistic view of the Assembly's performance as a scrutiny body. Whilst it should be acknowledged that power-sharing legislatures face particular challenges when it comes to fulfilling their scrutiny function,[8] it is still likely to give cause for concern that two in three people in Northern Ireland do not believe the Assembly is doing a good job in holding ministers to account. Opinion is split on whether cross-community cooperation between MLAs has improved over time: 27% of respondents believe that it has, 34% neither agree nor disagree or don't know, and 39% disagree.

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[7] The UK Parliament, for example, has a net negative rating when it comes to public views on whether it represents 'the interests of people like you'. See Hansard Society (2017) *Audit of Political Engagement 14: The 2017 Report*, London, Hansard Society, p.48.
[8] Responsibility for scrutiny of government primarily rests with the parliamentary opposition, however parliamentary oppositions in power-sharing systems tend to be small (or virtually non-existent) and lack substantial powers. See R.B. Andeweg, L. De Winter and W.C. Müller (2008) 'Parliamentary Opposition in Post-Consociational Democracies: Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 14 (1-2): 77-112.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE EXECUTIVE

Similar to the Assembly, the Executive does not fare well when it comes to public perceptions of how it operates. Cohesion in the Executive (or lack thereof) is clearly an issue for the public, with fewer than one-in-ten people agreeing that there is good cooperation between ministers (see Figure 3). In terms of Executive performance overall, the data paints an unfavourable assessment, with 70% of respondents disagreeing that the Executive functions well as a government.

Figure 3: Perspectives on the Executive
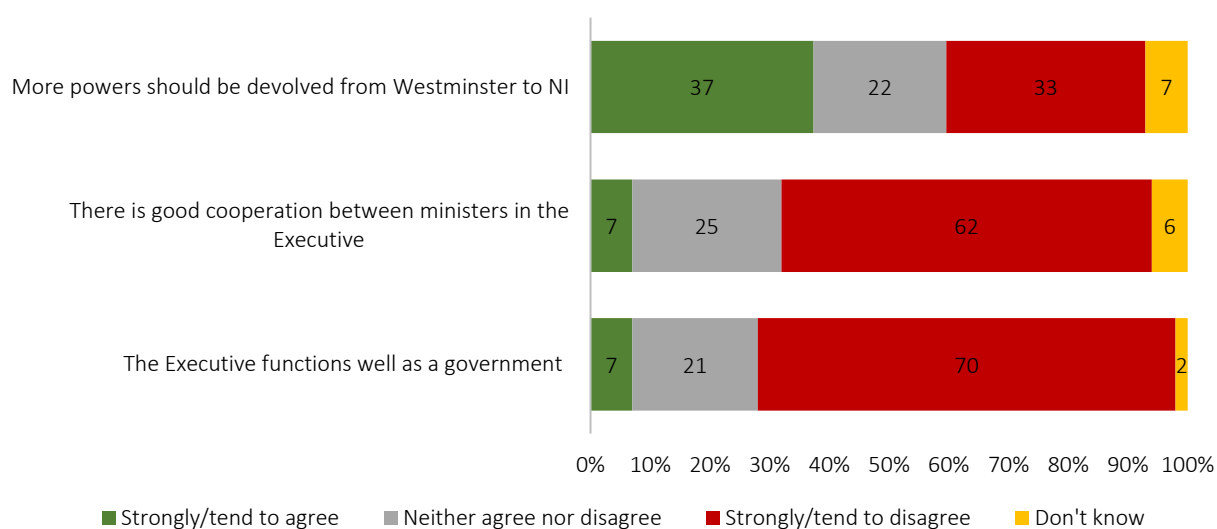


Despite these findings on Executive performance, people are still more likely to agree (37%) than disagree (33%) that further powers should be devolved from Westminster to Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland public is more distrustful of the UK Parliament than it is of the region's devolved institutions (see below), which might help to explain this latter finding. It is also worth noting that there is a clear ethno-national divide on the question of whether further powers should be devolved to Northern Ireland: the majority (56%) of nationalist respondents are supportive of further powers being devolved whereas the majority (53%) of unionist respondents are unsupportive of this. Non-aligned respondents are almost evenly split on the question of further devolution of powers, with 32% supportive of this proposition and 31% unsupportive.

## SATISFACTION WITH POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND REPRESENTATIVES

Respondents were asked to rank their levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a range of political institutions and representatives on a 5-point scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Figure 4 displays the percentage split of respondents who expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with each institution.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with Political Institutions
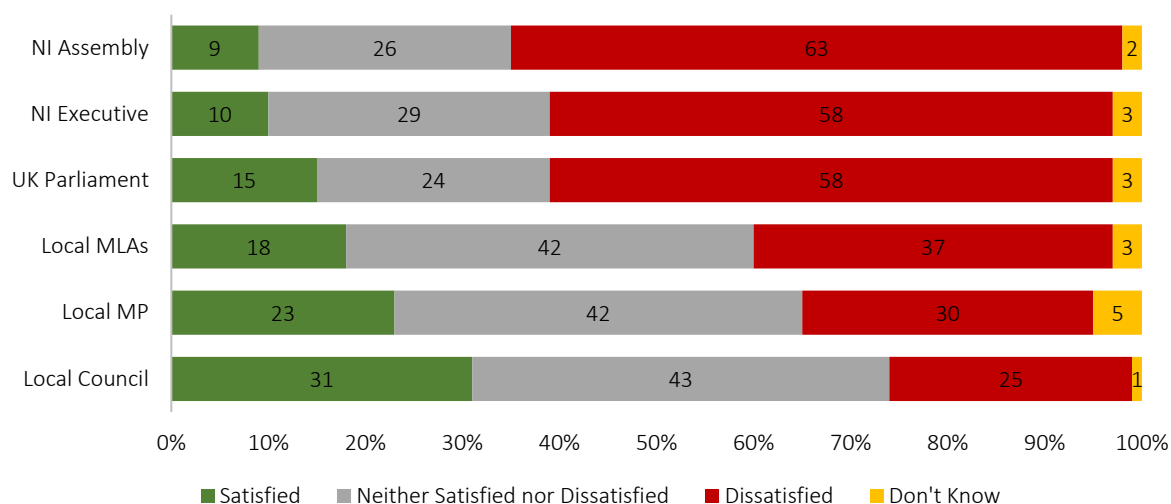


The overall picture on levels of satisfaction with political institutions is one of dissatisfaction. Levels of dissatisfaction are higher than levels of satisfaction for the Assembly, the Executive, and the UK Parliament. Local councils are the exception in this regard, as more people are satisfied (31%) than dissatisfied (25%) with their councils. One notable finding is the sizeable proportion of people who express neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction with political institutions, with around one-in-four people positioning themselves in this way vis-à-vis the devolved institutions and the UK Parliament, and over 40% of people positioning themselves in this way for local councils. A slightly more positive picture emerges from respondents' views of their local representatives. People are more satisfied with their local MLAs than they are with the Assembly (18% and 9% respectively) and are more satisfied with their local MP than with the UK Parliament (23% and 15% respectively). This would suggest there is scope for local representatives to cultivate positive relationships with their constituents even if public perceptions of political institutions are, on the whole, negative. Comparing our findings with similar data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey reveals a 7-point increase in public satisfaction with MLAs, rising from 11% in 2014 to 18% in 2021. Dissatisfaction with the Assembly, although remaining high, has fallen from 66% in 2014 to 63% in 2021.[9]

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[9] Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey (2014). Accessed on 4th November 2021 at https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2014/Political_Attitudes/SATMLAS.html.

Unionists are consistently more dissatisfied with Northern Ireland's political institutions and elected representatives than nationalists. 69% of unionists express dissatisfaction with the Assembly compared to 59% of nationalists and 62% of unionists express dissatisfaction with the Executive compared with 56% of nationalists. However, levels of satisfaction with these institutions are equally low among both groups, thus it is not the case that nationalists are more likely to be satisfied – simply that they are less likely to be dissatisfied than unionists. Unionists are also more likely than nationalists to be dissatisfied with their local council (28%-21%), their local MP (38%-24%) and, most strikingly, their local MLAs (45%-30%). Only in regards to the UK Parliament is this pattern reversed, with nationalists more likely to be dissatisfied than unionists (71%-50%). Non-aligned respondents consistently record the lowest levels of satisfaction in political institutions among any group in our data (with the unsurprising exception of low rates of satisfaction in the UK Parliament among nationalist respondents).

Surprisingly, given previous findings in this area, education appears to have little effect on levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. There appears to be a small gender effect with female respondents recording higher net satisfaction scores than male respondents for local councils (+2% and +11% respectively), MLAs (-15% and -23% respectively), and MPs (-2% and -12% respectively). There is also an age effect, with older people consistently more likely to be dissatisfied than younger people with political institutions and elected representatives.

## TRUST IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND REPRESENTATIVES

Respondents were asked to place their levels of trust in a range of political institutions and in Northern Ireland Executive ministers on a 10 point scale, from 'No Trust at all' to 'Trust Completely'. Figure 5 presents a percentage breakdown of these findings recoded so that a response of 1-4 = low trust, 5-6 = Medium Trust and 7-10 = High Trust.

Figure 5: Levels of Trust in Political Institutions and Executive Ministers
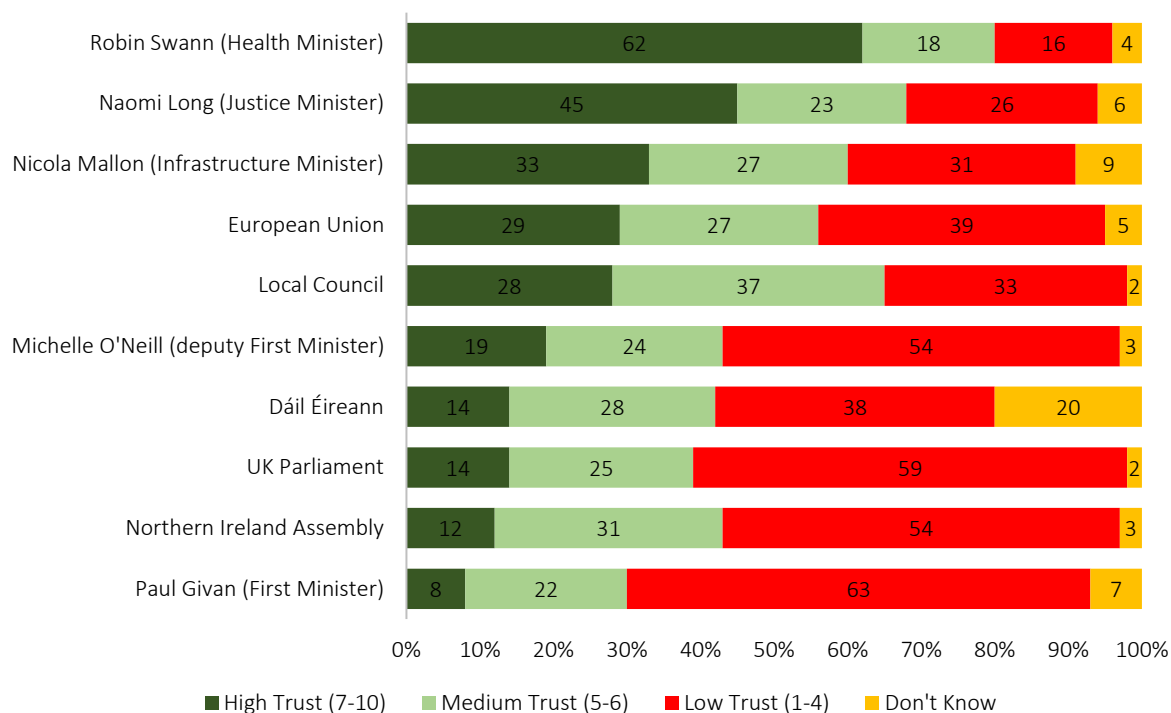


As Figure 5 demonstrates, there is a more varied picture regarding levels of public trust in political institutions and representatives than there is vis-à-vis levels of public satisfaction. Political institutions at the devolved and national level do not fare well, with the majority of respondents expressing low levels of trust in the Northern Ireland Assembly (54%) and the UK Parliament (59%). Councils in Northern Ireland fare much better, with 65% of respondents expressing medium-high trust in their local council. Interestingly, the European Union (of which the UK is no longer a member) emerges as the most trusted political institution in Northern Ireland, with the majority of respondents (56%) expressing medium-high trust in this institution. Dáil Éireann, the Dublin Parliament, elicits higher levels of trust among the Northern Ireland public (42% express medium-high trust) than the UK Parliament (39% express high-medium trust).

Trust in both the First Minister (Paul Givan) and the deputy First Minister (Michelle O'Neill) is generally low. Nearly two thirds of respondents (63%) expressed low trust in the First Minister and over half (54%) expressed low trust in the deputy First Minister. A more positive and nuanced picture emerges when looking at trust in other members of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Health Minister Robin Swann recorded an impressive level of trust, with 63% of respondents expressing high trust in him (and a further 18% of respondents expressing medium trust in him). Justice Minister Naomi Long (45%) and Infrastructure Minister Nicola Mallon (33%) have a plurality of respondents expressing high trust in them and, when their medium and high trust scores are combined, both emerge as more trusted than distrusted by the Northern Ireland public (68% of respondents express medium-high trust in Long; 60% of respondents express medium-high trust in Mallon). It is noticeable that very few respondents selected 'don't know' when asked for their assessment of Executive ministers, suggesting that ministers in Northern Ireland have a high enough profile to be recognised (and judged) by most members of the public.

Figure 6: Levels of High Trust in Political Institutions and Executive Ministers by Ethno-national Identity
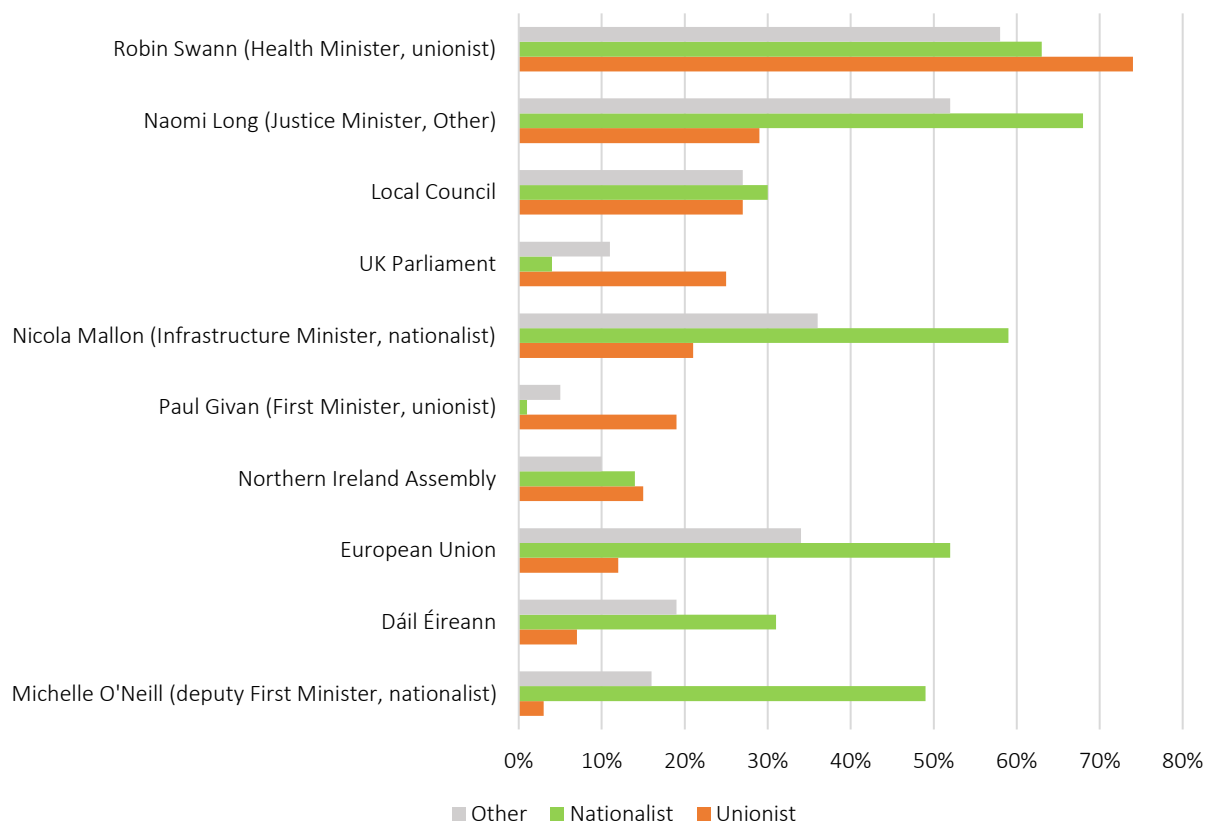


Figure 6 above displays the proportion of respondents expressing high levels of trust in political institutions and Executive ministers, broken down by ethno-national identity. The findings pertaining to Robin Swann, who has served as Minister of Health throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, have potentially significant implications in that they suggest ministerial performance may be able to partially mitigate the deficit in cross-community trust in political actors usually observed in Northern Ireland. Swann, a unionist MLA, is trusted to a high degree by the majority of unionist respondents, by the majority of nationalist respondents, and by the majority of non-aligned respondents. As unique an event as Covid-19 is, high levels of cross-community trust in

the Health Minister illustrate that politicians in Northern Ireland can, in some circumstances, win respect and trust for their political performance beyond their traditional ethno-national support base.

Figure 6 also alerts us to the limitations of relying on ethno-national labels as proxies for political opinion in Northern Ireland. Whilst there are some unsurprising findings – e.g. that trust in the UK Parliament is highest among unionists or that trust in Dáil Éireann is highest among nationalists – other aspects of the data might elicit surprise. Even within their respective ethno-national communities, high levels of trust elude both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, neither of whom reach the 50% high trust threshold among respondents who share their ethno-national background. The fact that only 18% of unionist respondents express a high level of trust in the unionist First Minister, whilst a potentially concerning issue in other respects, does imply that performance is being assessed on more than communal loyalty.  Another interesting finding relates to trust towards non-Northern Ireland political institutions in the post-Brexit era.  Unsurprisingly, unionists and nationalists are strongly split in terms of trust in Dáil Éireann, with 31% of nationalist respondents expressing high trust in this institution compared to 7% of unionist respondents.  Likewise, attitudes to the EU echo divisions laid bare in Northern Ireland's Brexit vote, with 52% of nationalists expressing high trust in the EU compared to only 12% of unionists who do the same. A high level of distrust towards Westminster is evident among unionist respondents, the plurality of whom (43%) express low trust in the UK Parliament.

## PERCEIVED POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND ACTUAL POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Respondents were asked to rank their levels of knowledge of political issues and institutions within and beyond the UK, ranging from from 'A great deal' to 'Nothing at all'. The results are presented in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Levels of Self-Reported Political Knowledge
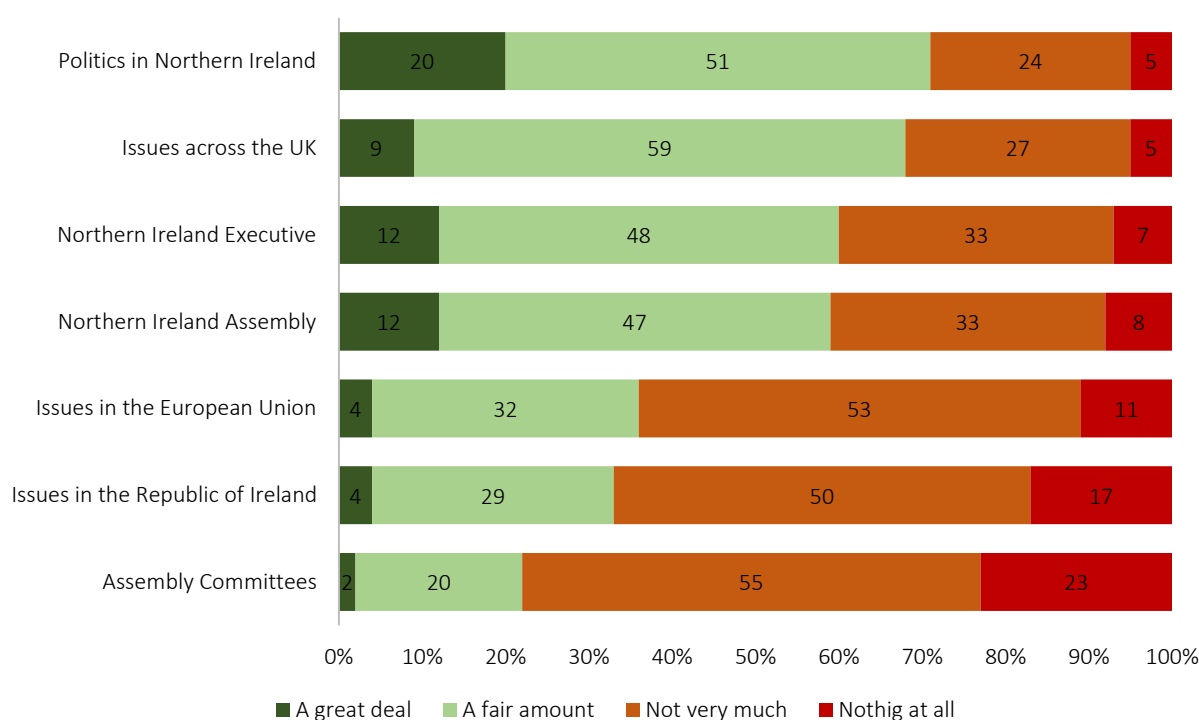


The results in Figure 7 are suggestive of a relatively politically aware Northern Ireland electorate. Over two-thirds of respondents report having either 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of knowledge in Northern Ireland politics and in issues across the UK. A majority of respondents also report having 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of knowledge in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. These findings represent a noticeable increase in the public's perceived political knowledge when compared alongside data from an earlier Ipsos-Mori public opinion survey.[10] The proportion of respondents reporting a great deal/fair amount of knowledge in Northern Ireland politics has risen from 25% in 2009 to 71% in 2021. Likewise, the proportion of respondents reporting a great deal/fair amount of knowledge in the Assembly has risen from 25% in 2009 to 59% in 2021. Even perceived knowledge of Assembly committees has increased, with the proportion of respondents claiming a great deal/fair amount of knowledge in committees rising from 11% in 2009 to 22% in 2021.

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[10] See Ipsos Mori (2009) Public Attitudes Survey, Research report prepared for COI/Northern Ireland Assembly. Accessed on 8th November 2021 at www.niAssembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2010/general/15710.pdf.

Research on self-reported political knowledge is often caveated with the observation that perceptions of knowledge may not accurately reflect reality since citizens might overestimate (or underestimate) what they know. In Northern Ireland's case, however, it would appear that citizens have a good handle on what they know (and don't know) about political issues and institutions. To test actual political knowledge, respondents were asked to answer 10 true or false questions covering a range of topics related to the Assembly, the Executive and Northern Ireland politics more generally. Respondents, for example, where asked about the correct number of MLAs, the rules around triggering a Petition of Concern, the powers of the First and deputy First Minister, the correct voting age, and the next Assembly election date. The average number of questions answered correctly was 5.9, with a clear trend indicating that political knowledge increases with age and educational attainment. Importantly, as Figure 8 illustrates below, citizens who perceive themselves to be knowledgeable about politics in Northern Ireland do indeed score higher in the political knowledge test than citizens who perceive themselves to be less knowledgeable.

Figure 8: Perceived and Actual Political Knowledge



Perceived Political Knowledge ('How much, if anything, do you feel you know about politics in Northern Ireland?')
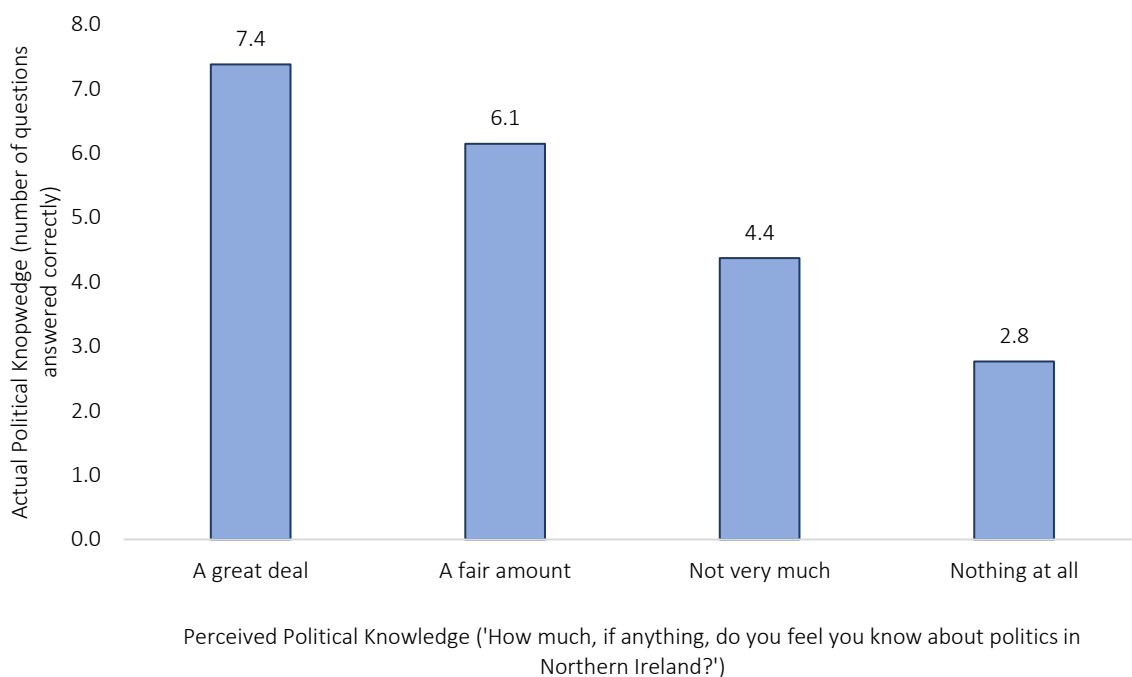
## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Figure 9 details the proportion of respondents who have taken part in a range of political activities during the last two or three years. Participation levels are highest for low-cost political activities, such as discussing politics with others and petition signing, and lower for activities that involve greater commitment, such as donating money to a political party, attending political meetings, and taking part in political campaigns. Comparison with a survey of political engagement in Northern Ireland conducted in 2009 reveals an increase in political participation in a number of areas.[11] Around one-in-three people reported discussing politics or political news with someone else in 2009, however this has doubled to two-in-three people in 2021. Similarly, whereas 26% of people reported signing a petition in 2009, this has increased to 38% in 2021. This latter figure indicates that participation in petition signing is now marginally higher in Northern Ireland than it is in Great Britain,[12] which is a reversal of the situation in 2009. There has also been a noticeable increase in the expression of political opinions online, rising from 4.3% in 2009 to 15% in 2021, and in participation in political campaigns, rising from 2.9% in 2009 to 9% in 2021.

Figure 9: Political participation in Northern Ireland
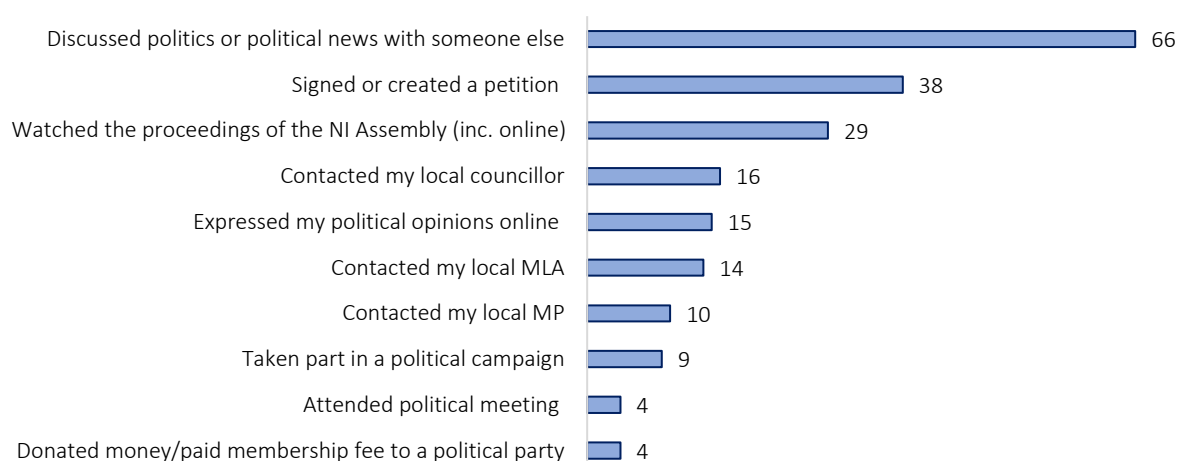


*Note:* Figures note % of respondents indicating participation in activity during the past two or three years.

There is a clear gendered dimension to political participation in Northern Ireland: women are less likely than men to express their political opinions online (9% and 21% respectively); less likely to contact their MLA (10% and 18% respectively); less likely to watch the proceedings of the Assembly (25% and 34% respectively); and less likely to attend a political meeting (1% and 7% respectively). In terms of an ethno-national dimension, unionists share their political opinions online (20%) more so than nationalists (11%) and the non-aligned (14%), and participate in petition signing (45%) more so than nationalists (31%) and the non-aligned (38%).

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[11] For figures relating to the 2009 survey see Clark and Wilford (2012), p. 394.
[12] Hansard Society (2019) *Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report*, London, Hansard Society, p.23.

Citizens are more in contact with local councillors than they are with MLAs or MPs, perhaps indicating that representative-constituent interaction in Northern Ireland is driven most by local (rather than regional or national) issues. Almost 30% of respondents report having watched the proceedings of the Northern Ireland Assembly (either online or in person) and it is these people who are most likely to indicate knowing 'a great deal' about the Assembly and 'a great deal' about Assembly committees.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The public offers a mixed verdict on Northern Ireland's political institutions and actors. The principle of power-sharing continues to retain some public appeal, which is perhaps surprising given the region's recent experience of a prolonged period of institutional collapse. This is suggestive of a sense of public attachment to power-sharing in Northern Ireland, which might offer the Assembly and Executive a basis for engaging citizens in conversations about the future of power sharing and, potentially, about institutional reform.

Citizens would now appear to be drawing a clear distinction between the idea of power-sharing, broadly conceived as an approach to governing a divided society, and the practical realities of how the power-sharing institutions function on a day-to-day basis. Whilst a plurality of people agree that power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government and that, on the whole, it has been good for Northern Ireland, there are low levels of public confidence in the Assembly's ability to hold ministers to account and in the Executive's ability to govern effectively. High levels of support for the proposition that power-sharing could be improved with further institutional reforms would suggest the public do not consider these issues insurmountable.

Low levels of satisfaction and trust in the devolved institutions warrant further research. It is open to question whether these findings are simply a local manifestation of a wider phenomenon – that being widespread disillusionment with political institutions in Western democracies – or if there is something particular to the arrangements in Northern Ireland which lead citizens to be unimpressed. Levels of trust in some of Northern Ireland's ministers paint a slightly more positive story, especially the strong levels of cross-community trust placed in the Health Minister. Even if only in exceptional circumstances, there is a case to be made that elected representatives in Northern Ireland can win trust and support for their performance beyond traditional ethno-national boundaries.

Finally, we would caution against explaining away low levels of satisfaction and trust in Northern Ireland's political institutions in terms of general political apathy and/or political ignorance. Our findings reveal an increasingly politically engaged and relatively well-informed citizenry. Whilst increases in political engagement could be partially explained in terms of Brexit and its associated impacts on Northern Ireland politics, moderate levels of public knowledge in non-Brexit issues – the Petition of Concern, the powers of the First and deputy First ministers, Executive competencies etc. – would challenge the notion that citizens in the region pay no attention to the devolved institutions. Our findings suggest that citizens *do* pay attention and, as such, their views on power-sharing should be taken seriously.

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