

Criteria for calling a border poll in Northern Ireland

Submission to the Constitution Unit Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland.

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8. Averaging all 12 polls conducted from June 2016 until the end of 2019, 35% of respondents backed Irish unity with 52% opposed.
9. Based on the contradictory survey evidence outlined in points 5 to 8 above, how is the Secretary of State to decide whether it is likely that a majority of those voting would support a united Ireland?
10. Part of the explanation of very divergent survey results may lie in different survey methodologies. Low support for Irish unity was apparent in the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) 2018 survey (only 19% in favour) and in other university-based studies which used face-to-face interviews. Queen's Belfast (using Ipsos MORI) found 21% support for unity in 2018, whilst the 2017 ESRC Northern Ireland general election study undertaken by the universities of Liverpool, Aberdeen, Leeds and the LSE (using Social Market Research, Belfast) found 27% in favour of unity with a further 23% saying "don't know". These findings contrast with much higher support for Irish unification recorded in recent surveys conducted online, such as those undertaken by LucidTalk.
11. It is beyond the scope of this contribution to discuss which is the better and more accurate survey methodology. There are risks with either. Face-to-face interviewees may be influenced by the tone of their interviewer, no matter how well-trained and professional the survey researcher. Respondents may wish to give what they think is the "correct" answer. Such surveys also elicit a high number of "don't know" responses. Online surveys over-sample the politically committed and understate the don't knows. If their results are factored into deliberations on whether a border poll should be called, political parties may encourage supporters to sign up to online polls to skew results, given the importance of the outcome.
12. Question phrasing and options may also affect survey outcomes. For example, the NILT surveys ask respondents what the "long-term policy" should be for Northern Ireland and include direct rule, devolved government within the UK, reunification and an independent state. In 2018, the power-sharing in the UK option attracted 41% backing compared to only 19% for reunification.

16. The adoption of clear criteria should be debated and agreed by the parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.
17. The process may involve the Northern Ireland Assembly, or Northern Ireland Office, or the Constitution Unit, commissioning its own survey work – acknowledging the risk would be that such surveys could be seen as surrogate/mini border polls.
18. Once a new set of objective criteria for a border poll is agreed, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 should be amended.
19. As mere,