



Institute for British-Irish Studies
UCD



Mini-Public Deliberative Forum on Constitutional Futures (a mini-citizens' assembly) held on April 24 2021.

Executive summary of its findings on Irish unity, reconciliation and possible policy implications

Project Background

In 2019, IBIS established Constitutional Futures after Brexit (CFaB) as a three year project to conduct research on the implications of the UK's decision to withdraw from the EU for the constitutional futures of these islands. The project addresses the principal levels of possible constitutional change in Ireland, Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the EU and is implemented across three substantive pillars: 1) analysis, 2) deliberation, and 3) public policy proposals.

To advance the deliberation pillar – aimed at ensuring greater citizen engagement in public policy and political decisions through an inclusive, fair and accurate consultation process open to multiple perspectives - IBIS organised a “Mini-Public Deliberative Forum on Constitutional Futures” (a mini-citizens' assembly) composed of a cross-section of 50 citizens of the Republic, broadly representative of the wider population on a range of demographic criteria. The forum was designed and implemented by an IBIS-led expert team consisting of deliberative democracy specialists and constitutional futures experts from UCD, Queen's University Belfast, and the University of Pennsylvania.

It took place online for three hours on 24 April 2021. Funding was provided by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The four researchers were: John Garry, Professor of Political Behaviour and Democracy Unit, Queen's University Belfast; Dr Paul Gillespie, director of the constitutional futures after Brexit project, UCD-IBIS; Brendan O'Leary, Lauder Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania and Fulbright Fellow at National University of Ireland-Galway; Dr Roland Gjoni, Newman Fellow in Constitutional Futures, UCD.

The online launch event on September 23 2021 was organised by UCD-IBIS and the Democracy Unit of QUB. Major findings from the study were presented by the authors of the research papers and accompanied by copies of the expert briefings made to participants. The draft paper on which the main findings are based is available on the UCD-IBIS website, as is a recording of the launch event. When published, this paper and another being developed by the authors will be accompanied by these briefings and by anonymised transcripts of the moderated discussions which followed them.

Our Republic of Ireland study is a replication and extension of a study conducted by Garry, O'Leary and colleagues in Northern Ireland in 2019:

Details: John Garry, Brendan O’Leary, John Coakley, James Pow & Lisa Whitten (2020) Public attitudes to different possible models of a United Ireland: evidence from a citizens’ assembly in Northern Ireland, *Irish Political Studies*, 35:3, 422-450, DOI: 10.1080/07907184.2020.1816379

freely available here: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2020.1816379>

Executive summary of main findings

We gathered evidence from a deliberative forum that we planned, which brought together (virtually) a cross-section of 50 citizens of the Republic, broadly representative of the wider population on a range of demographic criteria. As a group we had prepared and agreed slides of presentations to the forum. The 50 participants listened to the presentations on two feasible models of Irish unification, analysis of the process in which they could be chosen, and on the timing of referendums. They then discussed them in moderated sessions.

We found a super-majority of participants favoured Northern Ireland uniting with Ireland rather than staying in the United Kingdom.

Given the choice between two feasible models of Irish unification most preferred an integrated model in which Northern Ireland would be dissolved to one in which Northern Ireland becomes a devolved entity within a united Ireland.

Participants also much prefer to have detailed knowledge of which model is going to be applied *before* voting in a referendum. After deliberation, however, they moved sharply from wanting a referendum vote within two years to preferring a five-to-ten year time frame.

Having found that participants strongly preferred Irish unification to the status quo, we then focused on examining people’s views on the two most feasible possible models of Irish unity, if Ireland’s Constitution and the Good Friday Agreement continue to constrain outcomes.

Quantitative evidence, generated from a survey of participants conducted before and after the deliberations, enabled us to identify views before and after briefings and discussion, and let us assess whether learning about and reflecting on the models and processes led to opinion shifts. Qualitative evidence from the transcripts of the discussions that participants engaged in at the deliberative forum was also gathered, by Ipsos MORI.

The quantitative data identify the issues on which opinion changed and where it remained constant over the course of the deliberations, while the qualitative data help unpack *why* some people’s views remained constant, and others changed. Most participants felt better and more fully informed about these issues after the deliberations. There was a nearly unanimous feeling that everyone showed respect for others’ views and had ample opportunity to air their own views.

The considered views of the participants were sought on issues relating to possible referendums, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, and on the core choice between Northern Ireland remaining in the United Kingdom or unifying with Ireland. We then examined people’s views on the two most plausible possible *models* of Irish unity – an

integrated model of Irish unity under which Northern Ireland would be dissolved and a model of Irish unity under which Northern Ireland continues to exist as a devolved entity in a united Ireland.

Before the deliberation, participants preferred the integrated model to the devolved NI model, scoring the former 5.2 on a 1-7 support scale, and the latter at 3.8. The participants continued to prefer the integrated over the devolved NI model after deliberation, indicating robust preferences. Some felt, however, that recognising a devolved Northern Ireland could be a useful compromise, a transitional step towards an integrated Ireland.

Second, we examined people's views on questions of *process*. At what point should the particular model of Irish unity under consideration be specified – *before* any referendum or *after* the referendums (if there is a pro-unity result in the referendums)? And when, if ever, should the referendums be held?

Participants were surprised to learn there are different possible versions of a united Ireland. They typically thought that if a united Ireland occurred, it would be strongly in line with how the integrated model was described. Participants were much less familiar with the idea of a united Ireland which contained a devolved Northern Ireland. Some reacted with scepticism and incredulity to the idea, especially as they believed it would be divisive, and contrary to the notion of unity and togetherness they associated with the integrated model.

Being able to deliver a single consistent and comprehensive approach to economic policy, health policy and education across the whole island was seen by many participants as an important and very sensible beneficial feature of the integrated model. Some participants did, however, recognise that negotiating and achieving such all-island policies could be difficult, and time-consuming. Political symbols, flags, political identities and policing are recognised as complex issues requiring time to negotiate.

Regarding process, the deliberations led to a substantial increase in support for specifying the particular model of a united Ireland on offer *before* any referendum. Discussion led to a substantial increase in support for specifying the particular model of a united Ireland on offer before any referendum: 28 out of the 50 participants thought this was a good idea before our forum while 42 out of 50 did so after discussion.

And when, if ever, should the referendums be held? After deliberation, there was a sharp decrease in support for holding an immediate referendum within two years (a decline from 24 participants to 3 participants), and substantially increased support for a five-to-ten-year time frame (from 22 to 43 participants).

There was a strong awareness of how Brexit has affected Ireland North and South and of how ill-defined choices in the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership should be avoided in Ireland.

One problem is that unionist leaders are reluctant to engage on which model is best—until they have lost. It would be better if they engaged, but our participants thought that the South should nevertheless define a specific model of unification before the future referendums

rather than having a simple vote on the principle—leaving everything to be decided by a future constitutional convention.

Some participants were alarmed by this difficulty as it was felt the impact of unification would fall most on people in Northern Ireland, and so it was seen as unfair that northerners would not influence the shape of a united Ireland while southerners would. Although not many participants favoured the post-referendum constitutional convention approach, a major advantage was that citizens in Northern Ireland would indeed be able to have a say in the type of united Ireland that would be established.

While most participants were in favour of Irish unity, a smaller proportion favoured the status quo or felt that reunification may ignite political unrest and could initiate violence in the North. Despite their concerns about the magnitude of change and the need to prioritise post-Covid recovery, most participants agreed that unity would allow for a return of Northern Ireland to the EU and would overcome some of the governance challenges which have characterised Northern Ireland historically.

An Irish government that acted in line with the considered views of its citizens - as observed in this study—would explicitly indicate, significantly before any referendum, that an integrated united Ireland would follow from affirmative referendums in favour of unification.

We suggest that the Irish government—and the opposition parties—should be conscious of the arguments which our participants, upon considered reflection, found persuasive: the dangers of people not knowing what they are voting for; and the danger of a model of a united Ireland emerging (a devolved NI) with much less support and enthusiasm among citizens of the existing Republic than the Integrated model.

An Irish government intent on recognising a continuing devolved Northern Ireland, consistent with Article 15.2.2 of our Constitution, will have to prepare Irish public opinion for this unexpected outcome.

While our participants preferred careful planning in facing potential constitutional change, they also strongly prefer broader, inclusive and all-island conversations on, and preparation for Irish unity over the status quo. There is overwhelming support for North-South cooperation; this is combined strongly with support for starting 'detailed preparation for a possible referendum on Irish unity which may be held by 2030'. Reconciliation in the North is similarly backed.

We believe such privately organised deliberative events and citizens' assemblies have a valuable role to play in such preparation for potential constitutional change, whether organised North or South, linked or on an all-island basis. This event was a significant contribution to that discussion.

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