# Northern Ireland border poll criteria and political landscape spark debate on Irish unity



Ms Shona Robison Anderson, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, recently addressed the criteria for triggering a border poll on Irish unity, sparking renewed debate amid ongoing calls from Sinn Féin for a referendum by 2030. Her comments, published initially in the AgendaNI website and featured in the Belfast Telegraph, have highlighted the complex political landscape surrounding Northern Ireland's constitutional future.

Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, responsibility for calling a border poll lies solely with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The relevant legislation mandates that a referendum must be held "if it appears likely" that a majority voting would favour Northern Ireland leaving the United Kingdom to join a united Ireland. However, the legislation does not define specific thresholds or criteria to determine when this condition is met, and previous Secretaries of State have typically refrained from detailing such requirements.

When questioned about what would prompt a referendum, Ms Anderson replied: "It would be based on opinion polls." The Northern Ireland Office (NIO), however, sought to clarify the government's official position following her remarks. An NIO spokesperson stated, "The responsibility for a referendum sits solely with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. This is clearly set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which gives effect to the Good Friday Agreement and the principle of consent. This has been — and remains — the only condition. The Secretary of State has been clear that there is no evidence that this condition has been met."

Asked if she would personally campaign to maintain the Union in the event of a referendum, Ms Anderson said: "That is up to the people of Northern Ireland. We want to support all communities. If it ever came to a vote, we would support the democratic process." On whether she considers herself a unionist, the Putney MP responded: "I am not sure" and described herself as "not one community or another. I am not one side or another." However, she affirmed her belief in the strength of the Union, stating: "Yes, I think the Union is a strong way of supporting everyone across the United Kingdom."

The political momentum for a border poll has been given impetus by recent electoral and polling trends. Earlier this year, a LucidTalk poll published by the Belfast Telegraph indicated that 48% of Northern Ireland voters preferred to remain in the UK, with 41% supporting constitutional change towards a united Ireland. The margin has narrowed somewhat compared to prior years. In the 2023 Westminster election, unionist parties collectively garnered just over 43% of the vote, while nationalist parties accounted for a little over 40%.

Opinion polls show significant generational differences; amongst those under 35, 50% favour Irish unity compared to 44% supporting the Union. Nationalist communities largely support a border poll within the next decade, with 86% endorsing one, whereas 74% of unionists believe such a poll should never be called.

The discussion around the terms of a future referendum remains fraught. In 2023, former Northern Ireland Minister Steve Baker suggested any border poll should require a "super-majority" rather than a simple majority to pass, although Secretary of State Chris Heaton-Harris later reaffirmed no change in government policy on this matter.

Northern Ireland's political leaders have also weighed in on the potential for a border poll. Speaking to The Herald on Sunday following a British Irish Council summit in Edinburgh, Sinn Féin's First Minister Michelle O’Neill expressed confidence in the prospect of a vote on Irish reunification by 2030, emphasising lessons drawn from the Scottish independence referendum held in 2014. She said: "I believe we are in a decade of opportunity and I do believe it is time for the question to be put to the people. That is the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement itself. We the people will decide when there is constitutional change. For me the lessons we learned from the Scottish situation and the Scottish independence referendum [is] you need to have the facts on the table, you need an inclusive conversation."

Emma Little-Pengelly, Deputy First Minister and member of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), agreed that while lessons could be learned from Scotland, her party does not desire a border poll and contends that the conditions for one have not been met as set out by the Good Friday Agreement. She also referenced the outcome of the recent Irish general election, won by Fianna Fáil under Micheál Martin, who during the campaign suggested a border poll was unlikely within five years.

These developments come amidst sustained political dialogue in Northern Ireland concerning its constitutional position and the method and timing by which such significant decisions might be made, reflecting the continuing evolution of the region’s political landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/185_a_northern_ireland_border_poll.pdf> - Explains the legal framework for border polls under the Good Friday Agreement and Northern Ireland Act 1998, including the Secretary of State's authority to call a referendum if a majority for unity appears likely.
* <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9705/CBP-9705.pdf> - Provides context on UK government use of legislative veto powers (Section 35) in devolved matters, illustrating the central government's role in constitutional decisions affecting Northern Ireland.
* <https://constitution-unit.com/2019/03/06/holding-a-border-poll-in-northern-ireland-when-does-it-need-to-happen-and-what-questions-need-to-be-answered/> - Discusses polling trends, political risks, and criteria for border polls, including debates about majority thresholds and generational divides in support for Irish unity.
* <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=13853> - Relevant to broader constitutional debates in the UK, including Scottish perspectives on Brexit and self-determination, which parallel discussions about Northern Ireland's status.
* [https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/foi-eir-release/2024/10/foi-202400426989/documents/foi-202400426989---information-released---annex/foi-202400426989---information-released---annex/govscot:document/FOI+202400426989+-+Information+released+-+Annex.pdf](https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/foi-eir-release/2024/10/foi-202400426989/documents/foi-202400426989---information-released---annex/foi-202400426989---information-released---annex/govscot%3Adocument/FOI%2B202400426989%2B-%2BInformation%2Breleased%2B-%2BAnnex.pdf) - While focused on COVID-19 inquiries, this document highlights intergovernmental restrictions on sensitive information - relevant to broader discussions about transparency in constitutional matters.