# The PEOPLE'S peace process

# **SPECIAL REPORT:**

By Dr Colin Irwin, Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University

IGHT surveys of public opinion were conducted in support of the Northern Ireland peace process between April 1996 and May 2000. With an average of over 100 questions or options in each poll and 1000 people being interviewed a total of nearly one million answers were given. One answer for almost every person with a right to vote in Northern Ireland.

The results of these polls should not be dismissed lightly. They represent the views of the people on their peace process, the people's peace process, and perhaps the time has come to try and take stock of what, collectively, the

## PARTY POLITICAL **SUPPORT AND ELECTIONS**

OW people will vote for a given candidate, on a given day, in a given constituency is a very complex question depending on whether, for example, the candidate is anti-Agreement or pro-Agreement, how they feel about that particular candidate, if they wish to register some sort of protest vote by abstaining and last, but by no means least, the voting system used on the day (which varies a lot in Northern Ireland) and the chances of any particular candidate actually getting elected.

So who someone votes for, particularly in Northern Ireland, can often be very different to the party and policies a voter may

As a consequence the which one of these Northern Ireland political parties do you support?' question from the polls tells a sometimes very different story to the results of the various elections covering the same period.

The trends in the polls are quite revealing, for example, although people have tended to slightly inflate their support for the Alliance party for the four polls conducted between March 97

and March 98, at 10% this support has dropped to only 6 or 7% for the three polls conducted between February 99 and May 2000 after Lord Alderdice gave up his

party's leadership.
Although Sinn Féin support tends to be a little under reported, it increased from 9% to 17 % in 1997 when they went into the Stormont talks while DUP support fell from 16% to 11% when they withdrew from the talks. But DUP support has been restored to as much as 17% or 18% as implementation of the Belfast Agreement has gone through its various difficul-

Support for the major pro-Agreement unionist and nationalist parties seems to be far more steady with the SDLP av-

eraging about 22% and the UUP 25% As for the smaller parties, the UKUP dropped from 4% to 1% when their leader, Bob McCartney, broke ranks with his other Assembly members. The Loyalist PUP and UDP have consistently held on to about 5% of the voters' support with the PUP out-performing the UDP when the UDA/UFF have been associated with increases in sectarian violence. Support for the Woman's Coalition holds firm at about 1% or 2%

These trends in party support are significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the coming General Election, with its 'first past the post' system of voting, it is strategic voting and electoral pacts that will most likely win the day — not simple party support

For example the UUP could strike a deal with the DUP, as they have done in the past, or with Alliance by running pro-Agreement candidates. Perhaps the PUP should also be factored into such calculations. Additionally the SDLP and Sinn Féin might also start to enter into

endless. But perhaps they should not be. restrained.

If, as is the case in some other countries, the electoral system returned canthe Belfast Agreement to work and, in the both far more predictable and stable.

# SUPPORT FOR THE BELFAST AGREEMENT

settlement for the political future of Northern Ireland'
But when the outline of a real agreement was tested a year later in March 1998 only 77% said they would vote 'Yes' (74% Protestant and 81% Catholic) and just two months later, in the referendum of May 1998, the 'Yes' vote fell to fall again.

"Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and Catholic) although it fell back again in the most recent Belfast Telegraph poll of October 2000 to saying they wanted the Agreement work (72% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and Catholic) although it fell back again in the most recent Belfast Telegraph poll of October 2000 to doubts, want to see it work.

69% 'Yes' (47% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and Catholic) although it fell back again in the most recent Belfast 70% (47% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and Catholic) although it fell back again in the most recent Belfast 70% (47% Protestant and 93% for those who, in spite of their doubts, want to see it work.

Clearly, come the elections, any pro-Agreement party or parties who can be seen to make the to work but when the Executive also asked how they would vote if the referendum was held again.

1% of an 81% turnout. But support for the Belfast

UBLIC support for an agree— Agreement was higher in the Revote, only 65% said 'Yes' (49% did not happen Protestant support for an agreement) was public at 94% and when, in Febru-Protestant and 88% Catholic).

first tested in March 1997 ary 1999, the people of Northern But in May 2000, shortly after Conversely, when all appears to when 94% (93% Protestant and Ireland were asked 'Do you want the IRA said they would 'put their be going well with the Agreement, 97% Catholic) said they did 'supthe Belfast Agreement to work?' arms beyond use', support for the support for it has risen, for a brief

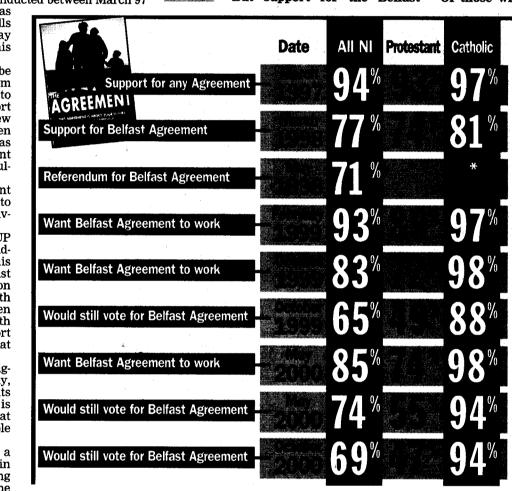
the referendum was held again.

Of those who said they would

support was only 88% (down from playing the 'blame game' may not prove to be the best of strategies.

port the principle of a negotiated 93% said 'Yes' (89% Protestant settlement for the political future and 97% Catholic).

Agreement rose to a high of 74% few weeks, above the referendum 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% level of 71% to as much as 74% and 'Yes' (55% Protestant and Yes' (55% Protestant and Yes') (55% Prot

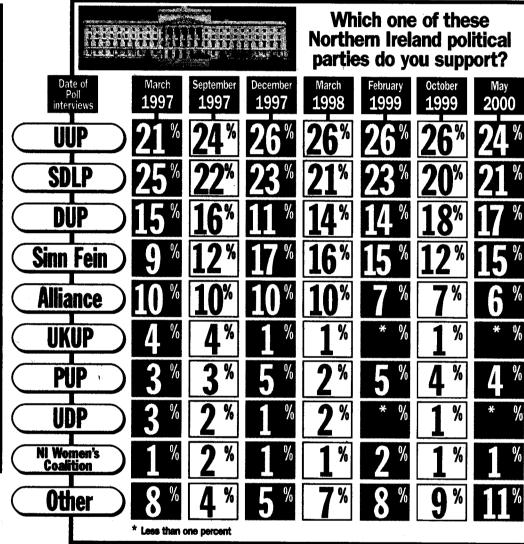


The smaller centre parties and loy-alists would be assured of their influence, The possibilities and their implications for the future of the Belfast Agree-pro-Agreement parties would be assured ment and peace process seem to be almost of their political power, albeit slightly

didates that reflected simple party sup- absence of effective pro-Agreement port then, like the polls, the political pacts, this may yet require a reformed landscape of Northern Ireland would be electoral system that will better support the peace process — not undermine it.

### **FOOTNOTE**

 Dr Colin Irwin is a Fellow in the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University, Belfast. His research is supported with grants from the Queen's University of Belfast Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The fieldwork for the public opinion polls was undertaken by Market Research North-



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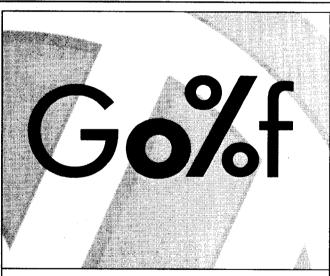
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