

The PEOPLE'S peace process

SPECIAL REPORT :

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EIGHT 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 people have said.

PARTY POLITICAL SUPPORT AND ELECTIONS

HOW 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 support.

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 difficulties.

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

The possibilities and their implications for the future of the Belfast Agreement and peace process seem to be almost endless. But perhaps they should not be.

If, as is the case in some other countries, the electoral system returned candidates that reflected simple party support then, like the polls, the political landscape of Northern Ireland would be both far more predictable and stable.

The smaller centre parties and loyalists would be assured of their influence, however limited, and the larger pro-Agreement parties would be assured of their political power, albeit slightly restrained.

The people of Northern Ireland want the Belfast Agreement to work and, in the absence of effective pro-Agreement pacts, this may yet require a reformed electoral system that will better support the peace process — not undermine it.

SUPPORT FOR THE BELFAST AGREEMENT

PUBLIC support for an agreement (any agreement) was first tested in March 1997 when 94% (93% Protestant and 97% Catholic) said they did 'support the principle of a negotiated 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 71% of an 81% turnout.

But support for the Belfast

Agreement was higher in the Republic at 94% and when, in February 1999, the people of Northern Ireland were asked 'Do you want the Belfast Agreement to work?' 93% said 'Yes' (89% Protestant and 97% Catholic).

But by October 1999, at the time of the Mitchell Review, support started to fall again with only 83% saying they wanted the Agreement to work (72% Protestant and 98% Catholic).

On this occasion people were also asked how they would vote if the referendum was held again. Of those who said they would

vote, only 65% said 'Yes' (49% Protestant and 88% Catholic).

But in May 2000, shortly after the IRA said they would 'put their arms beyond use', support for the Agreement rose to a high of 74% 'Yes' (55% Protestant and 94% Catholic) although it fell back again in the most recent Belfast Telegraph poll of October 2000 to 69% 'Yes' (47% Protestant and 94% Catholic).

People do want the Agreement to work but when the Executive was not up and running Catholic support was only 88% (down from 94%) and when decommissioning

did not happen Protestant support fell to 47% (down from 55%).

Conversely, when all appears to be going well with the Agreement, support for it has risen, for a brief few weeks, above the referendum level of 71% to as much as 74% and has the potential to go as high as 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 Agreement work will receive the thanks of their electorate while playing the 'blame game' may not prove to be the best of strategies.

| | Date | All NI | Protestant | Catholic |
|--|------|--------|------------|----------|
| Support for any Agreement | | 94% | | 97% |
| Support for Belfast Agreement | | 77% | | 81% |
| Referendum for Belfast Agreement | | 71% | | * |
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | | 93% | | 97% |
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | | 83% | | 98% |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | | 65% | | 88% |
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | | 85% | | 98% |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | | 74% | | 94% |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | | 69% | | 94% |

Which one of these Northern Ireland political parties do you support?

| Date of Poll interviews | March 1997 | September 1997 | December 1997 | March 1998 | February 1999 | October 1999 | May 2000 |
|-------------------------|------------|----------------|---------------|------------|---------------|--------------|----------|
| UUP | 21% | 24% | 26% | 26% | 26% | 26% | 24% |
| SDLP | 25% | 22% | 23% | 21% | 23% | 20% | 21% |
| DUP | 15% | 16% | 11% | 14% | 14% | 18% | 17% |
| Sinn Fein | 9% | 12% | 17% | 16% | 15% | 12% | 15% |
| Alliance | 10% | 10% | 10% | 10% | 7% | 7% | 6% |
| UKUP | 4% | 4% | 1% | 1% | *% | 1% | *% |
| PUP | 3% | 3% | 5% | 2% | 5% | 4% | 4% |
| UDP | 3% | 2% | 1% | 2% | *% | 1% | *% |
| Ni Women's Coalition | 1% | 2% | 1% | 1% | 2% | 1% | 1% |
| Other | 8% | 4% | 5% | 7% | 8% | 9% | 11% |

* Less than one percent

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 Northern Ireland.

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| | 26 | £280 |
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| | 14 | £230 |
| | 21 | £220 |
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