

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

RESEARCH UPDATE

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Better, worse, or just the same? Public attitudes towards the Northern Ireland Assembly

By Roger Mac Ginty

The infancy of the Northern Ireland Assembly has been traumatic. In large part, this has been due to wider political and constitutional problems rather than the activity of the Assembly itself. Results from the 2001 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey provide an early opportunity to gauge public perceptions of Northern Ireland's Assembly. The results concentrate on Assembly performance away from the wider constitutional questions and contain both encouraging and discouraging news for Assembly members.

Encouragingly, the survey records strong levels of public faith in the Assembly. Respondents were asked to identify the institutions that have, and ought to have, the most influence over how Northern Ireland is run. Half of respondents

(51%) said the UK government at Westminster and 28% said the Northern Ireland Assembly currently have most say. There is little difference between Catholic and Protestant opinion. But on the question of which institution *ought to* hold most power on the way Northern Ireland is run, a strong majority – 65% - opted for the Assembly, as against 17% for Westminster. While majorities of both Catholics and Protestants favour the Assembly, Catholic support is stronger. Just under a quarter of Protestants and only 7% of Catholics would award primacy to the 'Mother of all Parliaments'.

Other options such as local government or the European Union attracted minimal support. So the survey indicates a willingness to see more power devolved to Northern Ireland. This is a remarkable public endorsement of a relatively untested form of government and stands in contrast to people's actual experience of devolution in key policy areas – as we shall see later on.

Table 1: Which of the following has the most influence/ought to have the most influence over the way Northern Ireland is run?

	%					
	Protestant		Catholic		All	
	Has most influence	Ought to have most influence	Has most influence	Ought to have most influence	Has most influence	Ought to have most influence
Northern Ireland Assembly	29	61	28	74	28	65
UK government at Westminster	50	24	53	7	51	17

On whether the Northern Ireland Assembly is giving people in Northern Ireland more or less say on how Northern Ireland is being governed, 40% said more, 8% said less, and 44% said that it is making no difference. A 20 percentage point difference exists between the numbers of Catholics and Protestants who said that the Assembly is giving people more say. In other words, substantially more Catholics than Protestants feel empowered by the Assembly. But this does not translate into a widespread Protestant feeling of disempowerment. Protestants tend to hold a reserved rather than a negative judgement, with 50% saying that the Assembly is ‘making no difference’.

Table 2: From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that having a Northern Ireland Assembly is giving ordinary people more say in how Northern Ireland is governed, less say, or is it making no difference?

	%		
	Prot	Cath	All
More say	31	51	40
Less say	12	3	8
Making no difference	50	39	44
Don't know	7	7	8

While the survey shows a strong degree of public faith in the Assembly, attitudes on how issues such as health and education have been dealt with under the Assembly are mixed. Perceptions of how healthcare in particular has been handled post-devolution reflect a sense of public disappointment. Comparison with the *Northern Ireland Life and Times survey* in 2000 shows a distinct public view that healthcare is getting worse under the Assembly. In 2000, 28% said healthcare was getting worse, by 2001 this had increased to 39%. Only 9% in 2000 and 11% in 2001 thought that healthcare was improving. Protestants are more inclined than Catholics to hold negative perceptions of healthcare under the Assembly. While it is likely that a ‘Sinn Féin factor’ is at work in explaining some of the negative Protestant opinion in relation to health only 15% of Catholics believe healthcare has improved under devolution.

Table 3: Has healthcare become better under the Assembly?

	%					
	Prot 2000	Prot 2001	Cath 2000	Cath 2001	All 2000	All 2001
Better	5	8	17	15	9	11
Worse	33	49	17	28	28	39
Same	51	30	59	42	52	35
Don't know/ Too early to say	11	12	8	15	10	15

Perceptions of education under the Assembly are slightly more encouraging than those on health. 24% say education has improved under the Assembly – double the 12% who say that it has become worse. The largest proportion, 43%, say it is the same as before, and 13% say it is too early to say. Again sectarian differentials are noticeable, with twice as many Catholics than Protestants saying that education has improved under the Assembly.

Table 4: Has education become better under the Assembly?

	%					
	Prot 2000	Prot 2001	Cath 2000	Cath 2001	All 2000	All 2001
Better	9	15	32	37	16	24
Worse	10	19	1	5	8	12
Same	61	46	55	38	59	43
Don't know/ Too early to say	20	20	13	20	18	21

Certainly there are few illusions on the capacity of different parties to work together in the current political dispensation. While 43% think that the Assembly parties will work together ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’, 50% think that the parties will cooperate ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’. 60% of Protestants and 40% of Catholics take the view that there will be a lack of cross-party cooperation in the Assembly.

Table 5: How much would you say that members of the Northern Ireland Assembly from different parties work together to help solve Northern Ireland's problems?

	%		
	Prot	Cath	All
A great deal	6	8	6
A fair amount	33	47	37
Not very much	36	32	35
Not at all	24	8	15
Don't know	4	6	6

On the question of whether the Northern Ireland Assembly represents good value for money, 35% say that it definitely or probably does, as against 44% who say that it definitely or probably doesn't. 53% of Protestants feel the Assembly is poor value for money. But a relatively high proportion of people in Northern Ireland – 21% - register as 'don't knows'. Perhaps this suggests an issue of public presentation for the Assembly.

Table 6: On balance, do you think that the Northern Ireland Assembly is good value for money?

	%		
	Prot	Cath	All
Yes, definitely	5	9	6
Yes, probably	23	35	29
No, probably not	29	25	26
No, definitely not	24	11	18
Don't know	19	20	21

Despite this the *Northern Ireland Life and Times* survey in 1999 revealed that people were prepared to consider tax increases to fund better public services. Some 90% of people said they would pay more income tax to fund the health service. In 2000 the survey found support for the Assembly to have its own tax-raising powers similar to those held by the Scottish Parliament. Majorities of both Catholics (68%) and Protestants (52%) supported the proposition.

Table 7: Should the Assembly have the power to raise or lower income tax like the Scottish Parliament? (Life and Times, 2000)

	%		
	Prot	Cath	All
	%	%	
Yes	52	68	57
No	33	13	27
Don't know	15	18	16

Despite a backdrop of the delayed implementation of devolution, and then a number of suspensions of the Assembly, majorities in both communities believe that the Assembly will still be in place in three years time (52% of Protestants and 69% of Catholics). Moreover, if compared with the survey in 2000, the political optimism in both communities seems to be rising. Whether this optimism will survive the official review of the Agreement and the forthcoming Assembly elections is another matter.

Table 8: Do you think that the Assembly will still be in place in 3 years time?

	%					
	Prot 2000	Prot 2001	Cath 2000	Cath 2001	All 2000	All 2001
Yes	41	52	65	69	50	58
No	27	19	9	8	21	14
Don't know	32	30	26	23	28	28

The questions reported on here were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The project was entitled 'Public attitudes to devolution and institutional change in Northern Ireland' (L219252024) and was funded under the ESRC's Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme.

The 2001 Life and Times Survey involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 1800 adults in their own homes. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

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KEY POINTS

- Public faith in the Assembly as the most appropriate body to govern Northern Ireland is strong. But faith in the Assembly is just that – a faith that has yet to be realised.
- There are strong sectarian differentials on attitudes to the Assembly and its performance, with Catholics displaying more positive attitudes than their Protestant counterparts.
- People are more likely to hold neutral or conditional views of Assembly performance than outright negative views. In other words, survey respondents are more likely to say that the Assembly is ‘making no difference’ or that it is ‘too early to say’ rather than say that the Assembly is making things better or worse.
- Both Protestants and Catholics are more likely to trust the Assembly than they are to trust the UK government, though Protestants are generally less trusting of both.
- Majorities of both Protestants (61%) and Catholics (74%) believe that the Northern Ireland Assembly as a body ought to have most influence over how Northern Ireland is run (rather than the Westminster government or any other body). But about half of both Protestants and Catholics feel that it is actually the Westminster government that holds the power.
- A third of Protestants and half of Catholics believe that the Assembly is giving people more say in how Northern Ireland is governed. Most of the rest feel that it is making no difference.
- Just 11% of people say that healthcare has improved under the Assembly. 39% say that it has deteriorated. The proportion who think healthcare has got worse under the assembly has risen from 28% in 2000 to 39% in 2001.
- However the proportion of people who think that education has become better under the Assembly has risen from 16% in 2000 to 24% in 2001.
- Most people believe that the Assembly will still be in place in 3 years time and this figure has risen from 50% in 2000 to 58% in 2001.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2001, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The *Life and Times Survey* is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.