

What our Politicians Should Know

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For the framers of the Belfast Agreement in London and Dublin, a key aim was to put constitutional issues to bed and allow local politicians to concentrate on the day-to-day governing of Northern Ireland. The attempt to transcend the politics of constitutional absolutes (in the form of a united Ireland or a United Kingdom) faced stiff opposition from local politicians' apparent willingness to simultaneously attempt to work the new devolved institutions *and* engage in constitutional politics. Calls for a referendum on the border and intense speculation surrounding the release of the 2001 census data illustrated that constitutional politics retained a currency in the devolved era. This Research Update looks closely at intragroup rather than intergroup differences in Protestant and Catholic opinion - particularly in the context of constitutional preferences and support for the institutions of devolution. The main politico-religious groups in Northern Ireland are often viewed in an over-homogenised way, as mono-dimensional and consistent in their opinions. Survey evidence suggests a more complex picture.

The consent principle takes concrete form in the Belfast Agreement through the provision for a referendum on Northern Ireland's constitutional status. While Northern Ireland's post-Agreement Secretaries of State were able to resist the temptation to call a referendum, Northern Ireland's politicians showed no such restraint, with the UUP, Sinn Féin and SDLP either making or supporting calls for a constitutional referendum.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT)** included some questions on a referendum for the first time in the autumn of 2002 - immediately after the spectacular collapse of devolution in October 2002.

The survey asked respondents if they thought that there should be a referendum held within the next six months on whether Northern Ireland should unify with the Republic of Ireland. Despite the apparent enthusiasm among some of Northern Ireland's politicians for a constitutional referendum, the idea left potential voters in



that referendum cold. Overall, 22% of respondents were in favour of the idea - comprising of 26% of Catholics and 18% of Protestants. Majorities in both communities - 54% of Catholics and 72% of Protestants rejected the idea. Clearly a small sectarian differential is in evidence, with Catholic respondents more positive about a referendum than Protestants but there is general consensus that a referendum at this point is not desirable.

Of course it is the question of how people would actually vote in such a referendum

that reveals the most interesting patterns of attitudes.

From UUP leader David Trimble's point of view the good news is that only 27% of the population would definitely vote to unify with the Republic; the slightly more worrying news is that only 54% are sure that they would vote 'no' (Table 2). If the remaining 20% would indeed not vote (as they say they would), or fail to make up their minds *how* to vote then clearly the future of the Union is entirely safe at present. But a constitutional referendum would most probably radicalise opinion and minimise the space for those who would opt for passive or centrist stances.

From Sinn Féin's point of view it is worth noting that 20% of Catholics are quite definite that they would vote no in such a referendum. This challenges the seemingly intuitive notion that all Catholics are automatically nationalist. Instead, the survey points to fluidity within the Catholic population in relation to constitutional preferences - a point that is worthy of further investigation.

Figure 1 is a time-series showing Catholics constitutional preferences from 1989-2002. It tracks three positions: the proportion who think that the long-term future of Northern Ireland should be for it to remain part of the UK, those think it should unify with the Republic of Ireland, and those who gave some other response. It is the last category that is perhaps the most interesting here - with respondents offering answers other than the

Table 1: Do you think that there should be a referendum within the next six months on whether Northern Ireland should unify with the Republic of Ireland?

	Protestants %	Catholics %	None %	All %
Yes	18	26	22	22
No	72	54	65	64
Other	-	1	2	1
Don't know	9	20	11	14

Table 2: Suppose there was a referendum tomorrow on the future of Northern Ireland and you were being asked to vote on whether Northern Ireland should unify with the Republic of Ireland. Would you vote 'yes' to unify with the Republic or 'no'?

	Protestants %	Catholics %	None %	All %
Yes	3	58	18	27
No	83	20	52	54
Would not vote	6	5	16	6
Not eligible to vote	-	-	2	-
Refused	1	1	1	1
Other	1	2	2	1
Don't know	6	15	9	10

two stark constitutional options (i.e., don't know; independence; joint sovereignty; and devolution arrangements that are seen as distinct from remaining part of the UK). Two distinct time-trends are discernible - the first from 1989 to 1996 and the second from 1998 and the post-Agreement years. Up until the Agreement was reached in 1998 there was little support for anything other than either major constitutional option.

Devolution brought a radical change to Catholic attitudes to constitutional issues. We can see the acceleration of support for a 'third way' appearing in the time-trends as the 'something else' immediately overtook the option of remaining part of the UK. With support for the Union on the wane and support for alternatives on the rise - what was happening to the desire for unification with the Republic? The overall trend of support for unification has been broadly downhill up until 2001 when it suddenly surged upwards again. This almost certainly coincides with the height of the Holy Cross dispute (with which the survey fieldwork

coincided) and the subsequent radicalisation of Catholic opinion.

Catholic support for unification with the Republic has always displayed significant variation. While consistently the most popular option among Catholics, it is clearly prone to variation according to political contingencies. For example, the time-series records highest Catholic support for Irish unification in the months after the 1994 IRA ceasefire - a highpoint of nationalist political optimism. The key point to make though, is that on constitutional issues, Northern Ireland's Catholics do not make the homogeneous or stable community more shallow interpretations may suggest. The fluctuation in support for Irish unification between 2001 and 2002 is instructive.

For the sake of comparison it is worth looking at the same chart for Protestants, that is their constitutional preferences between 1989 and 2002. It is worth noting that this community has been under enormous political pressure during the

period of the time-series. Unionism, politically 'smarting' from the Anglo-Irish Agreement of the 1980s, was then bombarded with a series of challenges in the 1990s. Politically unionism has been volatile, with intense competition between the two main parties and the prospering and waning of smaller pro-Union parties. Yet, despite this backdrop of at times seismic political change, constitutional preferences among Protestants show enormous stability when compared with Catholics.

Support for the Union is by far the most popular choice, although it is under steady decline. Support for Irish unification is flat-lining - resolutely refusing to rise beyond low single figures. Support for a 'third way' - that is an option other than the united Ireland/United Kingdom binary choice - has shown some growth, but is much more muted than for that of the Catholic community.

It is worth pursuing this line of enquiry into the subtleties of intragroup differences in attitudes within the Protestant community. The NILT survey sought to gauge attitudes on power-sharing - a central tenet of the Belfast Agreement.

For Protestants as a group there appears to be a very clear acceptance of the role that power-sharing must play in any Northern Ireland government; 80% support the proposition (Table 3). The results are also shown for different groups within the Protestant community: the first are those people who would vote 'no' if they could vote on the Belfast Agreement again today; the second group are those who are not sure how they would vote or who would not vote at all and the third group are those who are supporters of the Agreement. Clearly survey respondents may have been on their guard against giving socially unacceptable or bigoted answers, but the results do indicate a widespread internalisation or acceptance of the idea of

Figure 1: Constitutional Preferences among Catholics from 1989 to 2002

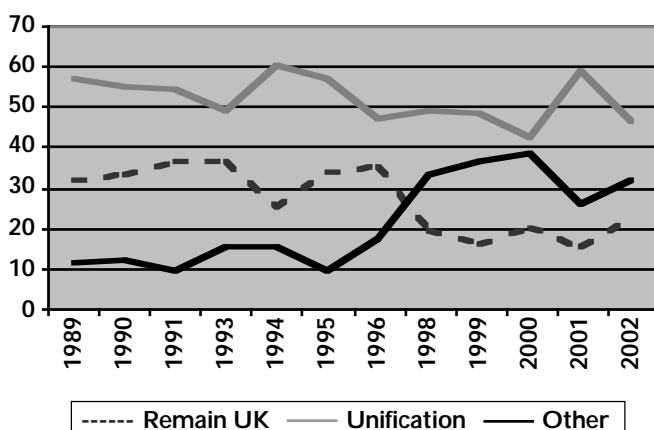


Figure 2: Constitutional Preferences among Protestants from 1989 to 2002

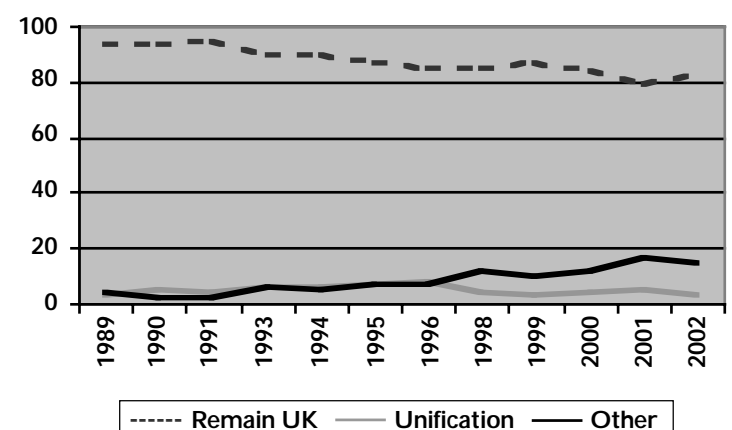


Table 3: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?
Any Northern Ireland government should have to ensure that Protestants and Catholics share power.

	Protestants			
	Anti-Agreement %	Who would not vote or DK how would vote %	Pro-Agreement %	All Protestants %
Agree	68	78	94	80
Neither agree nor disagree	14	10	3	9
Disagree	15	4	3	8
Don't know	3	7	-	3

power-sharing across the Protestant community. The acceptance of this principle is crucial if any consociational or power-sharing peace accord is to survive, and even for Protestants who now state that they would vote against the Agreement only 15% disagree with this principle.

It would be reasonable to expect scepticism towards the Northern Ireland Assembly. The institution has had a faltering start, reflecting a profound mistrust between many unionists and republicans and an uncertain security situation. As a working institution of government, the Assembly - already hamstrung with limited powers - has made a relatively slight impact in terms of public policy delivery. Thus far, time and energy has been spent on preparing for policy change rather than actual policy change.

Yet, when asked to judge the achievements of the Assembly, NILT survey respondents were surprisingly positive. This survey was also carried out in the aftermath of the suspension of devolution. Somewhat counter-intuitively, 77% of respondents said

that the Assembly had achieved either 'a lot' or 'a little'. Eighteen percent said that the Assembly had achieved 'nothing at all', a relatively low figure if taken in the context of the collapse of devolution amid recriminations. Strong majorities in both communities, 86% of Catholics and 70% of Protestants, held positive opinions (that the Assembly had achieved either a lot or a little). While 10% of Catholics felt that the Assembly had achieved 'nothing at all' a quarter of Protestants shared this view, a factor that cannot be overlooked. This points to an uphill struggle for any reincarnated devolved government among a substantial segment of the Protestant population. Nonetheless, Table 3 shows the responses for anti and pro-Agreement Protestants and the results are interesting. Anti-Agreement Protestants are most likely to say that the Assembly achieved nothing at all (37%) but still, 62% feel that it has achieved something. Exactly the same percentage of Protestants who see themselves as neither particularly for nor against the Agreement would also say that the Assembly achieved something (and this group are rather less likely to say

that it achieved nothing at all). And of course supporters of the Agreement are unsurprisingly the most positive with 85% endorsing at least some achievements.

Of course the response that the Assembly has made some achievements, whether minor or major, should not be interpreted as wholehearted approval for the institution. It is perfectly possible for opponents of the Agreement to admit that the Assembly has made some achievements but to hold deep misgivings about both the Agreement itself and the power-sharing form of government.

The survey went on to ask respondents if they thought that the Assembly and Executive did a good job in the *day-to-day* running of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the most noticeable finding here was the relatively low figures (6% of Catholics and 15% of Protestants) who said that the Assembly and Executive had performed poorly (Table 4). Survey respondents were much more inclined to opt for positive or neutral responses than for a definitively critical position. However there are very large intra group differences among Protestants on this question. While 54% of pro-Agreement Protestants feel that the institutions did a good job, only 18% of anti-Agreement and 13% of 'doubters' would agree. The most popular response is still however, a neutral one and while nearly a quarter of anti-Agreement Protestants feel that the institutions did a bad job, only 13% of the 'doubters' would agree.

A final question sought to ascertain if respondents would be pleased or disappointed by a long-term suspension of devolution. The question aimed to gauge 'affective' or emotional responses to the collapse of devolution. Again, the low level of those in both communities who said they would be pleased was noticeable: only 14% of Protestants and 6% of Catholics said they would be pleased at the loss of institutions. Overall a majority (53%) said that they would be disappointed, with this figure reflecting a strong majority of Catholics (67%) and 42% of Protestants. Reflecting the cautious 'wait and see' approach substantially represented throughout the survey, 21% of Catholics and 37% of Protestants said they would be neither pleased nor displeased by long-term suspension. Table 5 shows, unsurprisingly, that anti-Agreement Protestants are most likely to be pleased at the prospect of a long suspension, but even then, the figure is only 27% and exactly the same proportion would actually be disappointed. A big majority of pro-Agreement Protestants would be disappointed (71%) while the 'doubters' fall somewhere in between with 26% being disappointed and only 8% professing that they would be pleased.

Table 4: Overall, do you think that the Northern Ireland Assembly achieved a lot, a little, or nothing at all?

	Protestants			
	Anti-Agreement %	Who would not vote or DK how would vote %	Pro-Agreement %	All Protestants %
A lot	5	6	37	17
A little	57	56	48	53
Nothing at all	37	24	12	25
Don't know	1	14	3	5

Table 5: And how good a job do you think the Assembly and Executive did in the ordinary day to day running of Northern Ireland?

	Protestants			
	Anti-Agreement %	Who would not vote or DK how would vote %	Pro-Agreement %	All Protestants %
A good job	18	13	54	30
Neither a good nor a bad job	55	57	38	49
A bad job	24	13	7	15
Don't know	4	16	1	6

Table 6: Some people would be pleased and others would be disappointed if the Northern Ireland Assembly were to be suspended for a number of years. Would you yourself be...

	Protestants			
	Anti-Agreement %	Who would not vote or DK how would vote %	Pro-Agreement %	All Protestants %
Pleased	27	8	4	14
Neither	40	50	23	36
Disappointed	27	26	71	42
Don't know	6	16	3	7

Conclusion

The survey material shows that devolution has complicated the traditional either/or constitutional preferences in favour of a united Ireland or the United Kingdom. Instead, a more variegated picture of the main ethno-religious blocs is revealed. Northern Ireland's post-Agreement political development has been very much dependent on Protestant political opinion towards the peace accord and the devolved institutions. The survey sheds some light on this important constituency and reveals that a majority of Protestants support the principle of power-sharing - a foundation stone of any political accommodation in Northern Ireland. In addition, despite the difficult security context and the slight legislative footprint left by the devolved institutions, a majority of Protestants believe that the Assembly achieved either a lot or a little.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT)** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2002, 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 at Queen's University (028 90 273034) with any queries.

Key Points

- Devolution has complicated the traditional constitutional preferences in Northern Ireland.
- Protestants and Catholics are not homogenous communities in terms of their political attitudes.
- There is little support for a constitutional referendum within six months.
- A majority of Protestants support the principle of power-sharing.
- A majority of Protestants and of Catholics believe that the Assembly has achieved either a lot or a little.
- However, only 18% of anti-Agreement Protestants thought that the Assembly and Executive did a good job in day-to-day running of Northern Ireland.

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