

Briefing Paper for the Constitutional Convention

Topic: Northern Ireland Citizens' Voting Behaviour in an Irish Presidential Election

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If people living in Northern Ireland were allowed to vote in an Irish Presidential election, what impact would this have on the outcome of the election?

In order to shed some light on this question, this briefing paper uses information from a survey of the political views of people who live in Northern Ireland. The survey was conducted in 2009, directly after the election to the European Parliament (full details of how the survey was conducted are reported in the Appendix). Included in the survey were questions which measured the level of political support that Northern Ireland citizens had for a range of political parties. First of all, the parties that regularly compete in Northern Ireland elections were focused on and respondents were asked, in relation to each party, how likely it is that they would ever vote for that party. The full question wording is:

We have a number of political parties in Northern Ireland each of which would like to get your vote. How likely is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please use this scale to indicate your views, where '1' means 'not at all likely' and '10' means 'very likely'. [In turn each of the following parties are asked: Alliance, Democratic Unionist Party, SDLP, Sinn Féin, Ulster Unionist Party]

Also, parties from the Republic of Ireland were focused on, parties that could (in theory at least) compete in elections in Northern Ireland. Again, respondents were asked - in relation to each party in turn - to say how likely it is that they would ever vote for that party. The full question wording is:

There are a number of political parties in the Republic of Ireland who may at some stage run candidates in a Northern Ireland election. If the following parties took part in a Northern Ireland election, how likely is it that you would ever vote for each party. Please use this scale to indicate your views, where '1' means 'not at all likely' and '10' means 'very likely'. [In turn, each of the following parties are asked: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour]

For present purposes, I focus on responses to the questions relating to Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Irish Labour party. These are parties that are likely to field, or support, candidates running in an Irish presidential election. Northern Ireland citizens' responses to the questions on likely support for each of these four parties can provide some indication of the likely behaviour of Northern Ireland citizens in a presidential election.¹

¹ The limitations of these data should be stressed. The survey questions were fielded in 2009 and opinion may have moved somewhat since then. The survey questions do not mention anything about a Republic of Ireland presidential election. Rather the questions simply measure likelihood of voting for each of the parties that are likely to field presidential candidates. However, the advantages of the data should also be stressed. The author does not know of any other systematic attempt to gauge Northern Ireland citizens' likely support for parties they may run candidates in the next Irish presidential election.

The responses are re-categorised into four groups in order to simplify the discussion: 1=very unlikely to support the party, 2-5=fairly unlikely to support the party, 6-10=likely to support the party and respondents who indicated 'don't know' are kept as a separate category.

Before reporting how people answered these questions, we should consider that if Northern Ireland citizens were allowed to vote in a Republic of Ireland presidential election not *all* of them would do so. As is well known, many citizens abstain at election time, and in Northern Ireland participation levels at Assembly elections are on the decline. Voting in an Irish presidential election may well be regarded by some people in Northern Ireland as an exciting opportunity to indicate their preferences at the ballot box, but an Irish presidential election is likely to be generally regarded in Northern Ireland as of less importance than, for example, an Assembly election. Hence, we here focus on voters who are particularly likely to turn out to vote. Specifically, those respondents who reported that they had participated in the Northern Ireland election to the European Parliament 2009 are focused on, the assumption being that such respondents are the type of people who are particularly likely to make the effort to turn out to vote at election time (and especially to turn out to vote in a non-crucial election).

Table 1: Northern Ireland citizens' likelihood of ever voting for...

	<i>Sinn Féin</i>	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>
Very unlikely	50.1	44.6	41.8	43.1
Fairly unlikely	19.3	21.0	24.1	23.6
Likely	29.3	9.6	8.3	9.4
Don't know	<u>1.3</u>	<u>24.7</u>	<u>25.8</u>	<u>23.9</u>
total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The results reported in Table 1 suggest that almost all Northern Ireland citizens who are likely to vote have a clear opinion on Sinn Féin. Only one percent indicated that they did not know how likely they were to support the party. Exactly half indicated that they were very unlikely to ever support the party, one fifth were fairly unlikely and almost three out of 10 indicated that they were likely (i.e. between 6 and 10 on the 10-point scale). The responses to the Republic of Ireland parties indicates that Northern Ireland citizens do not distinguish terribly much between Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour. About one quarter simply do not know what to think about these parties, perhaps unsurprising given the hypothetical nature of the question. Between eight and 10 percent were likely to support each of these parties. Thus, the overall pattern to emerge is that the amount of people in Northern Ireland who are positively disposed to Sinn Féin is at least three times greater than the proportion who are likely to support any of the three main Republic of Ireland parties.

It is highly likely that there are stark differences between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland regarding likelihood of supporting Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour. In Table 2 support levels are broken down by the Catholic/ Protestant distinction.

Table 2: Northern Ireland citizens' likelihood of ever voting for...

	(Protestants Only)			
	<i>Sinn Féin</i>	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>
Very unlikely	76.4	63.2	57.9	62.8
Fairly unlikely	19.0	14.5	17.8	12.8
Likely	2.9	2.1	3.3	4.5
Don't know	<u>1.7</u>	<u>20.2</u>	<u>21.1</u>	<u>19.8</u>
total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

	(Catholics Only)			
	<i>Sinn Féin</i>	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>
Very unlikely	14.6	22.5	23.0	19.7
Fairly unlikely	17.4	29.2	32.6	38.8
Likely	66.9	20.8	15.2	15.2
Don't know	<u>1.1</u>	<u>27.5</u>	<u>29.2</u>	<u>26.4</u>
total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Unsurprisingly there is very little support for Sinn Féin among Protestants (three percent) and Protestant support for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour is equally low (between two and five percent). In contrast, two thirds of Catholics are likely to support Sinn Féin. Catholic support levels for Republic of Ireland parties are much higher than Protestant levels (between 15 and 20 percent) but are much lower than Catholic support for Sinn Féin. Hence, the overall picture to emerge from Table 2 is that Protestants are very unlikely, and equally unlikely, to support Sinn Fein, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or Labour. Catholics are highly likely to support Sinn Féin: two thirds would do so compared to one fifth for Fianna Fáil and less than one fifth for Fine Gael and Labour.

In further analysis of the nature of Catholic support for these four parties, the difference between people who voted Sinn Fein in the Northern Ireland (European Parliament) election and people who voted for the SDLP is examined in Table 3. Unsurprisingly, this shows that Northern Ireland Sinn Féin voters are highly likely to be supportive of Sinn Féin, while SDLP voters are much less likely to be supportive. Much more interestingly, there is a substantial difference between SDLP and Sinn Féin voters regarding likelihood of ever voting for the Irish Labour party. Almost a quarter of the Social Democratic and Labour Party voters in Northern Ireland are likely to support their 'sister' party in the Republic, compared to only eight percent of Sinn Fein voters. Only marginal differences are evident regarding Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael: SDLP voters are slightly more favourably disposed than Sinn Féin voters to Fine Gael (and the reverse regarding Fianna Fáil).

Table 3: Northern Ireland citizens' likelihood of ever voting for...

	(Sinn Féin voters only)			
	<i>Sinn Féin</i>	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>
Very unlikely	2.6	21.9	22.8	21.1
Fairly unlikely	7.9	28.9	33.3	40.4
Likely	88.6	19.3	13.2	7.9
Don't know	<u>0.9</u>	<u>29.8</u>	<u>30.7</u>	<u>30.7</u>
total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

	(SDLP voters only)			
	<i>Sinn Féin</i>	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>
Very unlikely	41.7	27.8	26.4	25.0
Fairly unlikely	30.6	30.6	33.3	31.9
Likely	26.4	19.4	16.7	23.6
Don't know	<u>1.4</u>	<u>22.2</u>	<u>23.6</u>	<u>19.4</u>
total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Appendix

Technical description of the survey methodology

A post-election telephone-based election study was conducted by Market Research Northern Ireland (MRNI) of 1013 respondents directly following the European Parliament election 2009, with sampling quotas set for age, sex and social class. The post election survey performs extremely well in capturing real world electoral behaviour. The turnout rate in the 2009 European Parliament election in Northern Ireland was 42.8 percent (reported as 45.1 percent in the survey). In term of party choice, in the election 26.0 percent voted for Sinn Féin (24.9 percent in the survey), 18.2 percent voted for Ulster Unionist Party (17.1 percent in the survey), 17.1 percent voted for the DUP (17.7 percent in the survey), 16.2 percent voted for the SDLP (15.8 percent in the survey), 13.7 percent voted for the TUV (12.9 percent in the survey), 5.5 percent voted for the Alliance (7.7 in the survey), 3.3 percent voted for the Green party (3.9 percent in the survey).

The representativeness of the survey is further investigated by comparing distributions on key variables to the results of the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) 2009 survey which is based on random sampling. The NILT 2009 survey yields the following distribution on the political ideology question: unionist 32 percent, nationalist 24 percent, neither unionist nor nationalist 43 percent. This compares to 33 percent, 24.8 percent and 42.3 percent respectively in the survey analysed in this paper. On national identity the 2009 NILT survey yields the following percentages (with comparable figures from this paper's survey in brackets): Northern Irish 27 (28.5), British 35 (37.2), Irish 32 (29.2). In terms of constitutional preferences the 2009 NILT also offered 'independent state' as an option. When the frequencies are generated in relation to the three main and directly comparable options the NILT percentages are as follows (with comparable figures from this paper's survey in brackets): Direct rule 18 (20.4), Devolved Assembly 56.7 (60.2), United Ireland 23.3 (19.3). Gschwend (2005: 88) argues that in order to demonstrate the validity of using a quota based sample (rather than a random selection based sample) 'scholars should gather as much external evidence as possible to argue that their achieved sample represents the population on as many dimensions as possible. The more evidence they are able to compile, the more confidence there is that their estimation results are robust even based on quota sample data.' The survey analysed in this paper, while based on quota sampling, replicates well real world voting behaviour and independently generated frequencies on a range of ethno-national issues derived from a random sampling based survey. Further analysis of the survey is reported in Garry (2012).

References

- Gschwend, T. (2005) 'Analysing quota sample data and the peer-review process' *French Politics* 3: 88-91.
- Garry, J. (2012) 'Consociationalism, regional integration and vote choice: Northern Ireland and the 2009 European Parliament Election' *Acta Politica* 47 (2): 113-128.