

The Belfast Agreement: How to win a referendum and the next election

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Dr. Colin Irwin

Office Address 1: The Institute of Irish Studies
 The University of Liverpool
 1 Abercromby Square
 Liverpool
 L69 3BX
 United Kingdom

Tel: UK code + (0)151-794-3831
Fax: UK code + (0)151-794-3836
e-mail: colin.irwin@liv.ac.uk
Web site <http://www.peacepolls.org>

Office Address 2: Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research
 63 University Road
 Queen's University Belfast
 Belfast
 BT7 1NF
 Northern Ireland

Tel: UK code + (0)28 – 9097 2549
Fax: UK code + (0)28 – 9097 2551
e-mail: c.irwin@qub.ac.uk
Web site <http://www.peacepolls.org>

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Abstract

In Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Palestine and almost anywhere there is a peace process politicians are very reticent to sign agreements in fear of losing the next election. All too frequently peace processes are held hostage to electoral politics. But in Northern Ireland the politicians who 'signed up' to the Belfast Agreement knew from a public opinion poll published on 31 March 1998, 11 days before the deal was struck on Good Friday, 10 April, 1998; 53 days before the referendum on 22 May, 1998; and 87 days before the elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly on 25 June, 1998, that they could win.

To lose the referendum would have been political and electoral suicide for any party supporting the agreement but a programme of public opinion research had been undertaken to refine and test the agreement at each stage of its development to make sure it would be both a political and electoral success. This paper details this process and suggests that if similar programmes of research were put in place in support of, for example, the proposed European Constitution or even the Final Status Agreement for Israel and Palestine then referendums on these contentious issues might meet with similar success and the parties to such agreements might also enjoy electoral success next time their constituents are asked to vote for them.

Nine surveys of public opinion were completed in support of the Northern Ireland peace process between April 1996 and February 2003. The focus of this paper will be on polls four and five that refined and tested the agreement as follows:

Poll 4 - In Search of a Settlement

This questionnaire was the most complex one of them all. It had to deal with all the elements of an agreement for which options had been in the drafting process for nearly a year. In this case the informant had to provide 273 responses on a wide variety of matters. The other polls were conducted as 'face to face' interviews but this one was a 24 page take home booklet (almost an exam!) that had to be filled out. The first important question in this survey asked the interviewee to rate the significance of 19 causes of the Northern Ireland conflict and 17 steps that could be taken towards a lasting peace. The second section contained 29 questions on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and the third section 25 questions on police reform. The questionnaire then went on to deal with the major political/institutional elements of the Belfast Agreement with 39 questions on Northern Ireland regional government, 56 questions on relationships within the island of Ireland, 20 questions which covered relationships between the British and Irish governments and an additional 16 questions on constitutional issues. By employing a method of analysis based on the voting system used in the talks a summary of what an acceptable agreement would look like was produced. This solution or 'package' proved to be very close to the deal struck on Good Friday and was used as a basis for testing a comprehensive settlement 'package' in poll number five.

Poll 5 - A Comprehensive Settlement

In this survey two simple questions were asked about the 'package'. Firstly, *'If a majority of the political parties elected to take part in the Stormont talks agreed to this settlement would you vote to accept it in a referendum?'* Seventy seven percent said 'Yes'. But secondly, when asked *'If you said 'Yes' would you still accept these terms for a settlement even if the political party you supported was opposed to them?'* the 'Yes' vote dropped to 50%. These results were taken very seriously by both the parties and two governments. If the parties could agree a deal they could 'carry the day'. But if they could not agree then it was very unlikely that the two governments would be able to push a deal through against the opposition of a majority of the parties. Everyone needed everyone else. It was a 'united we stand divided we fall' situation. Unfortunately the Pro-Agreement Parties did not hold together as well as they might have after the signing of the Belfast Agreement while the 'No' or Anti-Agreement Parties campaigned with a single voice. Percentage points were lost and by the time the Assembly elections took place in June support for the Pro-Agreement Ulster Unionists was reduced to a working majority.