

**FRAMEWORKED FUTURES: INTRANSIGENCE AND
FLEXIBILITY IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND
ELECTIONS OF MAY 30 1996**

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Abstract: The elections of May 30th 1996 were a precursor to potentially extensive negotiations over the future of Northern Ireland. However, the rejection of compromise by even their chosen representatives among Protestant voters may effectively shackle attempts at negotiation. Protestant inflexibility over constitutional change, or the proposals for revised electoral procedures, power sharing, parity of esteem, or a North-South body contained within the Framework Document likewise contrasts markedly with the wide range of options endorsed by Catholics. The explanation for this intransigence derives from the threat posed by any compromises to the position of the unionist community. It provides a significant but not insuperable constraint on prospects for negotiated solutions to the Northern Irish conflict.

At a joint prime-ministerial summit on February 28 1996, the British and Irish governments committed themselves to convening all-party and inter-governmental negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland. They would commence on June 10. The presence of political parties at the negotiations was to be decided by an election which John Major declared, in a statement to the House of Commons, would be held on May 30. As specified in the *Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc.) Act* the election would determine parties' shares of delegates for a peace forum, and their rights to nominate delegates to participate in separate and substantive multi-party negotiations. The ten best placed parties would have their rights to participate in the forum guaranteed.

The two governments made their announcement within twenty days of a bomb in London's Docklands that had terminated the IRA's cease-fire of August 1994. Sinn Féin's participation in the prospective negotiations was made conditional upon a renewal of the IRA's cease-fire. The end of that cease-fire reflected republicans' impatience with the UK government's failure to convene and specify a date for all-party talks, despite eighteen months of calm, and their

belief that Major's government had played fast and loose with the report of the International Body chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell, published on January 24. Established to mediate a dispute about whether republican and loyalist paramilitaries should 'decommission' their weapons before or after their party-political representatives engaged in negotiations, the International Body had split the differences. Decommissioning, it declared, should occur during, rather than before or after, the negotiations, and the process 'should suggest neither victory nor defeat' (Mitchell et al 1996: pars. 33-50). The International Body also remarked that 'If it were broadly acceptable, with an appropriate mandate, and within the three-strand structure, an elective process could contribute to the building of confidence' (par. 56). John Major seized on this paragraph to call for elections to a peace forum. He thereby, unknowingly, helped send the IRA back to war.

Calling an election was not authorised by the Mitchell Report because the elective process was not 'broadly acceptable', i.e. acceptable to both nationalists and unionists, let alone both governments. Nationalists in Northern Ireland, in the SDLP and Sinn Féin, opposed any elective process because they believed that it would (i) further delay inclusive and substantive negotiations made possible by the republican and loyalist cease-fires; (ii) spoil the atmosphere by enabling unionist leaders to seek mandates opposing any meaningful concessions during negotiations; and (iii) merely demonstrate what is well known - that unionists presently have a demographic and electoral majority in the region. Elections to a forum presented a further problem for Sinn Féin. As an abstentionist party it did not want to recognise any Northern assembly unless it had consented to its existence during negotiations. Consequently, Sinn Féin immediately declared it would boycott the forum - though it made it plain that abstentionism would not apply to the election or the substantive negotiations. The opposition of northern nationalists to an elective process was supported by the Irish government, but to no avail.¹

Increasingly dependent upon the Ulster Unionists in critical parliamentary votes at Westminster the British prime minister had bowed to the demands for an election from the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), David Trimble, and from the Reverend Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Trimble sought an election to strengthen his hands in any new negotiations; Paisley to help prevent any 'sell-out'. Elections were not, however, unanimously sought amongst unionists. The smaller loyalist parties, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), the political fronts for the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence

¹ For discussions of the origins of the peace process and its evolution during 1994-6 see *inter alia* Mallie and McKitterick (1996), McKitterick (1996) and O'Leary and McGarry (1996).

Association respectively, had feared elections, because they were ill-prepared for them, and because they wanted to negotiate early rather than later on issues affecting loyalist prisoners.

The elections duly took place. They provided Sinn Féin with its most successful performance in its modern incarnation at the ballot box in Northern Ireland. The party sought and won a significant 'vote for peace' amongst nationalist voters. The election simultaneously resulted in the lowest share of the vote obtained by the UUP in a comparable election - it has performed worse in European parliamentary elections, but not in the functional equivalent of a local assembly election. The relatively poor performance of the UUP was more surprising because the electoral process and formula were partly designed to address its concerns. The UUP and the Alliance party had sought a formula similar to previous elections to a Northern Ireland Assembly, i.e. election by the single transferable vote, using the Droop quota, in five-seat districts based on Westminster constituencies. The UUP particularly wanted to prevent Paisley's DUP benefiting from the reverend's larger than life charisma in an at-large election, such as that used to elect Northern Irish MEPs. The SDLP and the DUP, by contrast, wanted a party-list system, with the d'Hondt divisor. They hoped to do well from lists headed by John Hume and Ian Paisley respectively. The Alliance wanted to avoid being squeezed by the two ethno-national blocs, and thought its chances would be served better in eighteen districts rather than one. The DUP and the UDP thought they would do best from a list system, provided that the district magnitude was large enough. Sinn Féin was not invited to, and did not express, a view on the electoral formula.

When pushed into corners on all aspects of public policy John Major habitually split the differences between the parties pressurising him, and not always to coherent effect. He did in this case, to almost comic effect. The chosen formula is unique in the UK's electoral history. Its novel complexity represented a compromise; some styled it, a dog's breakfast; Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats, called it the best dog's breakfast available in the circumstances. The design was based on the eighteen newly created Westminster parliamentary constituencies, each of which would elect five members by party list. Independents had to stand as 'parties' and voters had one 'X' vote. In the first stage of counting the Droop quota was deployed ($1/M + 1$, where M is the district magnitude) to allocate seats to parties achieving a quota or multiple quota. In the second stage the d'Hondt divisor (1, 2, 3 ...) was used to allocate the remaining seats.² In total 90 seats were allocated in this way.

² The chosen method was in fact identical to pure d'Hondt: 'full quota allocation followed by a switch to d'Hondt in the same district is exactly equivalent to straight d'Hondt allocation, provided that the quota is not smaller than the Droop quota. Electoral systems (for example, France 1986)

Table 1. The Results of the Election to the Northern Ireland Forum, May 1996.

Party	Seats won	Votes (Total)	% Seats (S)	% Votes (V)	S - V	
UUP	30	181829	27.3	24.2	3.1	
DUP	24	141413	21.8	18.8	3	
SDLP	21	160786	19.1	21.4	-2.3	
SF	17	116377	15.5	15.5	0	
APNI	7	49176	6.4	6.5	-0.1	
UKUP	3	27774	2.7	3.7	-1	
PUP	2	26082	1.8	3.5	-1.7	
UDP	2	16715	1.8	2.2	-0.4	
NIWC	2	7731	1.8	1	0.8	
Labour	2	6425	1.8	0.8	1	
GP	0	3650	0	0.5	-0.5	
Con	0	3595	0	0.5	-0.5	
WP	0	3530	0	0.5	-0.5	
UIM	0	2125	0	0.3	-0.3	
DL	0	1215	0	0.2	-0.2	
DP	0	1046	0	0.1	-0.1	
IMcM	0	927	0	0.1	-0.1	
IC	0	567	0	0.1	-0.1	
NLP	0	389	0	0	0	
IDUP	0	388	0	0	0	
ATI	0	350	0	0	0	
UIV	0	204	0	0	0	
CPI	0	66	0	0	0	
UCDP	0	31	0	0	0	
Total:	24	110	752391	100	100	115.71

Note: Deviation from proportionality (D) = $(1/2) \sum |s_i - v_i| = 7.85$ for all parties; for the first ten parties D = 6.75. Key to Parties: UUP = Ulster Unionist Party; DUP = Democratic Unionist Party; SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party; SF = Sinn Féin; APNI = Alliance Party of Northern Ireland; UKUP = United Kingdom Unionist Party; PUP = Progressive Unionist Party; UDP = Ulster Democratic Party; NIWC = Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; GP = Green Party; Con = Conservative Party; WP = Workers' Party; UIM = Ulster Independence Movement; DL = Democratic Left; DP = Democratic Partnership; IMcM = Independent McMullan; IC = Independent Chambers; NLP = Natural Law Party; UIV = Ulster Independent Voice; CPI = Communist Party of Ireland; UCDP = Ulster Christian Democratic Party

which follow the above procedure are often erroneously described as using quota allocation or a 'mixed formula' (Traeger and Shugart, 1989: 275). Shortly after the system for the Forum was announced O'Leary rang the NIO's relevant officials to enquire whether this fact was known. It became plain that it was not. Leaving plausible cock-up theories to one side, the complex procedure seems to have been devised either in direct imitation of the French election of 1986, or as a misunderstood compromise between Droop and d'Hondt which was seen to split differences between the UUP and the SDLP.

Lastly, the ten parties receiving most votes across Northern Ireland as a whole received two members each from a regional list, creating in total a 110 seat forum. The latter provision ensured the inclusion in the negotiations of the smaller loyalist parties whom it was correctly thought might not win places in the five-seat constituencies (each of which had an effective quota of 16.7%), and who were incapable of creating an electoral alliance.

The results of the election are presented in Table 1. The novel system produced a rather wide deviation from proportionality in certain constituencies - e.g. no unionists were returned in Foyle or West Belfast (where Sinn Féin took four of the five seats with 53.4 % of the vote). It also reversed the appropriate number of seats won by the second and third largest parties: the SDLP with a regional total of 160,000 votes won three seats less than the DUP with 141,000 votes. The overall regional deviation from proportionality (7.85) was not appalling, though it was not impressive - had the Sainte-Laguë formula been applied for a party-list election across the region the results would have been more proportional; and the SDLP, SF and the smaller unionist and loyalist parties would have won more seats, while the UUP and DUP would have won less (Gallagher 1996). The principal impact of the election was to highlight the greater fragmentation within the unionist bloc (UUP, DUP, UKUP, PUP, UDP, Con) compared with the nationalist bloc (SDLP and SF).

One of the two ostensible functions of the election, creating a Peace Forum, rapidly appeared redundant. The SDLP withdrew from it in protest at unionist support for marches by the Orange Order through nationalist districts, making the Forum a hollow if noisy irrelevance. The other function was to (re)start constitutional negotiations. They began, but without Sinn Féin, and soon appeared entrapped in proceduralism at the expense of meaningful dialogue. Whether the talks will be made meaningful by Sinn Féin's entry after a renewed IRA cease-fire in late 1997, or whether that will simply occasion a unionist walk-out, remains to be seen.

However, the election, and the survey-opportunity it provided, presented useful information on the likely acceptance by the relevant publics of the negotiating procedures to be pursued, the extent to which mutual compromise is seen as acceptable, and expectations about what negotiations would achieve. In short, the election opened windows on the futures made possible by any renewal of the peace process. To gather information on popular perceptions of the election, and the envisaged negotiations, the authors commissioned a poll, undertaken by Ulster Marketing Surveys (UMS) on May 29-30 1996. It was a quota sample of 1,000 persons, obtained from 50 sample points, randomly selected from 300 wards, and representative of the population of Northern Ireland in age, sex, class and religion. Field-work was jointly-funded by RTE's

Prime Time and BBC's *Newsnight*.³ Given the inevitable sampling variation to which estimates of population parameters derived from all such data are subject, all patterns of association between social groups and the attitudes and perceptions discussed below have been tested for statistical significance at a probability of at least 0.05.

The distribution of intended or reported voting amongst our respondents differed from the votes recorded at the ballot box in, by now, familiar ways. The most noticeable difference was the higher turn-out (or intended turn-out) among our respondents - a common feature of election surveys. Also familiar is the tendency to obtain lower levels of support in surveys for Sinn Féin than would be expected given their support at the ballot box. In this respect, however, our survey performed rather well, recording over 8% support for Sinn Féin compared with the figure of just over 10% of the electorate in the official voting figures. This discrepancy is far less than has been found in other surveys in Northern Ireland (e.g. Evans and Duffy, 1997).

Consider first the responses to the idea of negotiations. The degree to which the positions of party elites mirror those of their supporters, and of nationalist and unionist constituencies more generally, can be seen in Table 2. It displays reactions to the prospective negotiations by several different indicators of respondents' political and social identity. Religious background, clearly, is a standard characteristic in any consideration of Northern Ireland's conflicts, but we also considered more discriminating indicators of citizens' political identities, including information on levels of self-professed 'sympathy' with 'nationalism' (17% of the sample) and 'unionism' (28%) - which we take as useful indicators of the more 'hard-line' elements on both sides of the constitutional divide (49% of the sample were unwilling to use either of these labels). Lastly, we describe the reactions of the supporters of the main parties using a measure of 'party identification'.

³ The authors thank both broadcasters, and Richard Moore of UMS, for showing alacrity in facilitating socially relevant research. We are engaged in more detailed analysis of the survey than that presented here. We noted with amusement but reject the allegation made by John Taylor MP, deputy leader of the UUP, on *Newsnight* (BBC 2, May 30 1996), that the poll was 'rigged'. Our question-design benefited from UMS's internal procedures as well as from appraisal by our academic peers at LSE and Nuffield College.

Table 2.

Q. As things stand, do you think the negotiations which begin on 10th June should take place or not?

	Religion					Party Support					Political Sympathy		
	Total	Prot	RC	Oth	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	
Yes	81	76	89	80	66	79	92	91	92	91	71	83	
No	11	14	6	9	24	12	3	5	4	6	17	9	
Don't know	9	10	6	11	10	9	4	4	5	4	12	9	

N = 1041. All figures in %.

Catholics and nationalists were significantly more likely to support the proposed negotiations than Protestants and unionists. The supporters of the two principal unionist parties stand out: levels of support for negotiations among Alliance supporters are similar to those of Sinn Féin and SDLP. The general impression is that the more unionist (broadly conceived) a respondent is, the more likely he or she is to reject negotiations. The group most clearly antipathetic to negotiations was the DUP's supporters, but supporters of the UUP showed less enthusiasm than nationalists and others. That said, there was still widespread support for negotiations.

Why should moves for discussion be rejected in disproportionate numbers by unionists? The natural answer is that for some unionists negotiations represent a path to compromise, and thus to unwanted concessions. This is clearly indicated, in Table 3, by the greater tendency among Protestants, unionists and, most firmly of all, DUP supporters, to reject compromise on the part of their elected representatives. Even 'hard-line' nationalists express greater willingness to allow compromise by their elected representatives than do any of the categories of unionist respondent. UUP supporters are as hard-line (40 % insist that their leaders should stick to their principles) as Sinn Féin supporters on this question. Fear of unwanted compromise would also appear to explain the greater unwillingness of Protestants, unionists and supporters of the two principal unionist parties, by comparison with Catholics, nationalists, and supporters of the SDLP, SF, and APNI, to endorse 'any settlement' made by their preferred representatives at the talks (see Table 4). That said, there was majority support across all the five major parties' supporters for accepting a settlement including things 'strongly disliked' by respondents.

Table 3.

Q. Do you think that the leaders of the political party you support should be willing to compromise, or should they stick to their principles?

	Religion			Party Support			Political Sympathy					
	Total	Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
willing to compromise	61	52	74	70	36	57	88	76	60	69	42	69
stick to principles	37	46	26	24	63	40	12	23	40	31	57	29
No reply	2	2	1	7	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	2

N = 1041. All figures in %.

Table 4.

Q. Would you be willing to accept any political settlement that the leader of your preferred party agreed to even if it included things that you strongly dislike?

	Religion					Party Support					Political Sympathy													
	Total	Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	Total	Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Yes	58	56	65	49	59	53	64	69	68	76	56	54	22	24	17	36	26	25	24	18	15	14	27	22
No	22	24	17	36	26	25	24	18	15	14	27	22	19	20	19	16	15	22	12	13	17	10	17	23

Know

N = 1041. All figures in %.

The tendency for a more pronounced antagonism to negotiating among unionists was accompanied by greater pessimism regarding the prospects of attaining any agreed settlement arising from the negotiations - only a fifth of them thought agreement could be reached, just more than half of the proportion of nationalists who took such a view (see Table 5).⁴ DUP supporters were not only much more pessimistic, they were also less uncertain than supporters of all the other parties.

⁴ When asked what the main obstacles to successful negotiations would be, large majorities of both Catholics (68%) and Protestants (74%) chose the decommitment of paramilitaries' weapons. Views on the second most important obstacle differed in more predictable ways, with 40% of Protestants opting for the Irish state's territorial claim on Northern Ireland, but even here, 20% of Catholics (and 15% of self-declared nationalists) were in agreement. Other preferences of both groups were scattered across options including withdrawal of British troops, the establishment of a North-South body, and power sharing. When questioned about *who* - as opposed to *what* - was the biggest obstacle to agreement, 50% of both sides refused to attribute blame in partisan ways - attributing blame to the attitudes of both nationalists and unionists.

Table 5.

Q. Do you think that these talks will lead to agreement between the parties which attend the negotiations?

	Religion					Party Support					Political Sympathy		
	Total	Prot	RC	Oth	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	
Yes	30	26	38	24	21	24	30	42	39	37	20	34	
No	42	49	31	49	64	49	46	27	42	36	57	37	
Don't know	27	24	31	28	15	28	24	31	19	27	23	29	

N = 1041. All figures in %.

A natural way to interpret this greater pessimism on the part of unionist respondents is to see it as a reflection of their intransigence: if they are less willing to compromise, then they presumably hope and expect their representatives not to compromise. Our data suggest that this is reasonable reasoning. Unionists have a greater tendency both to refuse to condone compromise by their representatives, and to reject settlements which they feel may be too compromising.⁵

This fear of compromise helps account for the asymmetry in levels of distrust expressed by unionists and nationalists with respect to the likely conduct of the Irish and British governments in the talks. Although they are a little less distrustful of the British government - 19% of Protestants compared with 31% of Catholics distrust the British government 'a great deal', a gap of 12% - the difference between the groups is far less marked than it is with respect to trust in the Irish government, for whom the equivalent figures are 41% compared to 6%, a gap of 35%. When questioned about which external bodies should be involved in negotiations, unionists, especially UUP supporters, warmly accepted British governmental involvement but showed far greater wariness of any other external involvement in the negotiations than did nationalists. Unionists who opposed compromise were most likely to reject external involvement - e.g. 36% of Protestants who were willing to accept compromise by their elected representatives agreed that Senator George Mitchell should be involved in the negotiations, compared with 19% of those who were not willing to accept such compromise (see Table 6).

⁵ Similar differences in expectations between nationalists and unionists have been observed in the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys conducted before and during the cease-fire. They find far greater levels of positive appraisals of the prospects for community relations among Catholics than Protestants (Evans, 1996).

Table 6. *Which of these parties or governments, if any, do you think should be involved in the forthcoming negotiations? You may choose as many as you like.*

	Religion				Party Support					Political Sympathy		
	Total	Prot	RC	Oth	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Brit Govt	78	88	73	89	71	87	70	82	69	73	78	79
Irish Govt	38	6	85	48	-31	21	44	91	95	36	-12	48
EU Govt	-22	-39	2	-17	-64	-32	-16	8	-14	-1	-50	-16
USA Govt	-36	-57	1	-50	-77	-54	-50	10	5	-4	-64	-32
George Mitchell	-7	-31	31	-13	-57	-28	20	38	33	37	-39	-4

N = 1041.

Notes.

(I) In this Table cells record the surplus of 'yes' over 'no' responses for each possible external agent (don't knows are excluded).

(II) Respondents were offered 'The British Government', 'The Irish Government', 'Governments from the European Union', 'The American Government', and 'Former American Senator George Mitchell'.

Table 7. *Do you trust the leaders of your preferred party to represent your point of view in the negotiations?*

	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF
Strongly trust	65	37	42	51	73
Trust	29	52	44	43	21
Distrust	4	4	6	0	2
Strongly distrust	1	1	3	1	1
Don't know/No reply	1	6	6	4	2

Data not reported here show that opposition to the involvement of the Irish and British Governments is, unsurprisingly, strongly linked to distrust of their likely conduct. Issues of trust were also tapped with respect to the internal parties involved in the negotiations, and here, once again, the omens for compromise by unionists look grim. Table 7 shows answers to a question on how much respondents trust their preferred party to represent their point of view in the negotiations.

The implications of these patterns need a little unpacking. We have seen that DUP supporters are less compromising - a fair proportion of them would not accept 'any settlement' agreed to by their party, and would not want the party to compromise. But they also clearly believe, sensibly, that the DUP is unlikely to compromise, otherwise they would not have expressed faith in the DUP to

represent their interests. With the UUP, however, there is a different picture. Once again, a quarter or so of their supporters say they would refuse to back their leaders on an unpopular agreement but, unlike the DUP, only 37% of the UUP's supporters express strong levels of trust that the party will represent their views in negotiations. With this combination of uncertainty about the party leadership's trustworthiness, and willingness amongst their supporters to desert it in the face of unpopular outcomes, it is unlikely that the supposedly more moderate UUP leadership could feel that it could engage in risky compromises without jeopardising its strategic position as the largest unionist party. The implication is clear: unionist popular opinion provides marked constraints on unionist party involvement in negotiations. If unionist parties want to represent the views of their supporters - and hence keep them as supporters - they will be tempted to reject significant compromises. Without palpable evidence of considerable change - which we do not rule out - unionist public opinion is likely to have a stultifying effect on any future cross-communal negotiations. Note that in our survey the leadership of the SDLP enjoys greater trust from its supporters than the UUP, but also that the leaderships of the two more moderate parties have less trusting followers than the parties on their flanks, Sinn Féin and the DUP. This evidence confirms the arguments advanced by O'Leary (1989), Mitchell (1991, 1995) and McGarry and O'Leary (1995), on the constraints on consociational bargaining in Northern Ireland.

We do not wish to overstate the case for pessimism. All of the differences observed are a matter of degree rather than type, but we cannot escape the evidence of considerably greater flexibility among the various groups of nationalists. Whether we consider Catholics as a whole, moderate SDLP supporters, or more significantly, even Sinn Féin partisans and, what we have termed, 'hard-line nationalists', there is a greater willingness to accept compromise than there is among *any* of the equivalent unionist groups. The sources of this inflexibility among Protestants and unionists have been charted and debated by others, including ourselves. In his ethnographic account Steve Bruce comments that 'for unionists the crucial point of the last twenty years has been loss' (1994: 53; see also Bruce, 1986). Competition between Protestants and Catholics is seen as a zero-sum game; as one of Bruce's respondents commented, 'if we are losing, it must be because Catholics are gaining' (1994: 61). These sentiments are not easily incorporated into negotiations.⁶

⁶ The loyalist parties which made some showing in the elections, the PUP and UDP, have been seen as giving a voice to secular working class Protestants inadequately represented by the two main unionist parties (Duffy and Evans, 1997; McGarry and O'Leary, 1995; ch. 10; Price, 1995). Should their leadership prove moderate it will advance the prospects of a settlement, but it may cost them votes.

Let us now consider indicators of the intensity of unionist aspirations for continuity in the governing arrangements for the region: Table 8 displays answers to a question about 'the different ways in which Northern Ireland might be governed in the future'. The question allowed a choice from a wide range of potential arrangements. Respondents were offered four major options: maintenance of the Union; incorporation into the Republic; joint sovereignty; and independence. In a supplementary, respondents had a choice of whether or not to have a Belfast parliament with any of the first three major options. This array completes the feasible set of futures regarding constitutional settlements - repartition was not considered (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995; O'Leary and McGarry 1996: ch. 8).

Table 8

Q. Here are a number of different ways in which Northern Ireland might be governed in future. Please state which one you prefer.

	Total	Religion				Party Support				Political Sympathy			
		Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	
Should remain part of the UK	55	88	15	61	85	83	49	15	2	6	86	54	
Should become part of the RoI	13	1	31	12	1	0	9	25	60	50	0	7	
Should become part of both the UK and the RoI	16	5	34	13	3	3	25	36	25	31	2	18	
Should become an independent state with its own parliament	10	10	11	8	11	10	13	12	11	11	10	10	
Don't Know/Can't decide	6	3	10	7	1	3	3	13	2	2	1	9	

N = 1041.

On examining the answers we found that even with the inclusion of options which introduce elements of compromise into the choices with which they are confronted, unionists - whether defined as Protestants, unionist party supporters, or as hard-line sympathisers - do not take them up. Protestants opt overwhelmingly for the Union (more often than not with a Belfast parliament), while Catholics are split fairly evenly between the national unification and the joint sovereignty options, which together account for 65% of their preferences, with smaller, but still noticeable groups of 15% opting for the Union, and 11% for an independent Northern Ireland. *Almost no Protestant chose the compromise option of joint sovereignty, whereas more Catholics chose this than*

any other outcome - for further examination of these issues see O'Leary (1992) and Evans (1996).

The commitment of Protestants to the Union contrasts markedly with the wider range of options endorsed by Catholics - a difference in attitudes echoed, although in a somewhat less pronounced way, by the persisting differences between the two communities in openness to social integration. To understand this unionist 'intransigence', and its antithesis nationalist 'flexibility', we need only consider the ethno-national context. Prospective negotiations all point to one future: one in which the dominant position of the Protestant and unionist community will be 'compromised', if not terminated. In such a future Protestants and unionists have to concede to nationalists; Catholics and nationalists, hitherto, the weaker community, have the 'luxury' of diverse preferences about the present and the future. In a comparative context the intransigence of unionists and the flexibility of nationalists is no surprise: one community presently has acceptable national and statal arrangements, the other does not.

This reasoning helps explain the divergent responses of unionists and nationalists to the content of the Framework Documents, *A Framework for Accountable Government in Northern Ireland* and *A New Framework for Agreement*, that were recommended to the parties respectively by the British government, and by the Irish and British governments in February 1995. (The texts are analysed in O'Leary (1995)). These texts remain politically significant, not least because they were explicitly supported in the Labour Party Election Manifesto of 1997. The jointly published *Frameworks for the Future* contain a range of possible options for establishing a political settlement, covering North-North, North-South and East-West dimensions. Key features include the construction of acceptable governmental arrangements in Northern Ireland, parity of esteem for the two national traditions, a bill of rights for the region, and promises of 'rigorous impartiality' from the British government. They also include proposals for constructing North-South institutions, amending articles two and three of the Republic's constitution, and the expansion and partial reconstruction of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The public acceptability of the items specified in *Frameworks for the Future* will be a major constraint on their viability, but they are the inter-governmental agenda for cross-party negotiations (with or without Sinn Féin).

To examine the nature of public reactions to these issues we designed a series of questions which, given the constraints of mass survey polling, presented the most significant options to our respondents. They then had the possibility of registering their agreement, their disagreement or their inability or unwillingness to decide on the issues. These responses provide a unique insight

into the workability of the proposals contained in the Framework Documents and any related voluntary formulations that are likely to emerge in the foreseeable future - though we stress that the responses here are a 'snapshot', and do not suggest that the views they express are fixed in concrete.

Table 9.

Q. On the subject of an assembly in Northern Ireland, please tell me whether each of the following possibilities is acceptable to you?

	Religion				Party Support			Political Sympathy				
	Total	Prot	RC	Oth	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
An assembly like the Westminster parliament elected by majority rule	60	80	29	59	92	79	58	32	12	20	86	60
An assembly elected by PR	47	54	34	54	52	57	62	36	29	33	56	46
An assembly elected by PR, but with a PSG*	40	39	41	42	28	41	57	47	33	43	35	42
An assembly with PR, with a PSG and with the Irish government having some say	31	16	54	32	8	15	45	57	56	61	8	33

Key: * Power Sharing Government

The options for government presented in Table 9 are structured in the format of the classic Guttman scale, with a hierarchy of options increasing in the extent to which nationalist ambitions are realised.⁷

Protestant endorsement of these options declines dramatically by 64 points from 80% to 16% as we move from the most favourable arrangement to the least. Catholics preferences, by contrast, are less clearly structured, increasing by only 25 points from 29% to 54% over the four options. Catholics are also more uncertain - registering over 10% more 'don't know' responses across the board than do Protestants. Supporters of the SDLP are noticeably more in

⁷ When asked whether they thought it was acceptable for Northern Ireland 'not to have its own parliament or assembly' 26% of Protestants and 24% of Catholics expressed agreement.

agreement with each of the first three options than are Sinn Féin supporters; they are also generally more likely to indicate uncertainty. This uncertainty may, in part, flow from the fact that the question partly 'de-couples' the issue of a Northern Irish assembly from other parts of the Framework proposals - a difficulty that also attaches to other questions. Differences between the two unionist parties' supporters are less marked. Alliance supporters are very evenly split over the final question on Irish government involvement in a power-sharing assembly elected by proportional representation, which places them much closer to the nationalist supporters.

Table 10: Views on parity of esteem

	Religion			Party Support				Political Sympathy			
	Prot	RC	Other	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
<i>Both nationalists & unionists should have:</i>											
Parity of esteem*	71	76	76	71	71	87	80	75	83	72	71
Equal rights as individual citizens to the full protection of the law	68	75	72	67	69	85	77	79	83	66	69
Use of their own national anthem	26	56	38	22	25	39	57	64	62	19	40
Dual language provision in schools and public settings	24	68	46	17	28	43	69	76	77	18	42
The RUC should change its name to the Northern Irish Police Service	10	51	30	7	11	27	50	65	61	7	25

*Key: * This table combines answers to two questions. The first was as follows: The British government has promised that in future it will be rigorously impartial in its government of Northern Ireland, and that it will guarantee parity of esteem between the two traditions. What is your point of view? Following this was a further series of questions which asked respondents which measures they thought were 'needed to ensure parity of esteem'.*

As Table 10 shows, the options with respect to parity of esteem are also structured in a hierarchy. Parity of esteem is acceptable to Protestants, whether hard-line unionists or not, until it is given meaningful substance in the form either of separate anthems or dual language provision, although the 45 point fall in agreement as these notions are introduced is as much to do with uncertainty as it has with outright opposition - evidenced by the 34% who opt for 'don't know/can't choose' in both cases. The renaming of the RUC is predictably unpopular across all categories of unionist response, although even here one third express an equivocal 'don't know'. Interestingly, a minority of Catholics also balk at the prospect of separate anthems or changing the name of the RUC, while many more are uncertain. Dual language provision receives more consistent support despite the small proportion of Catholics who currently speak Gaelic, presumably testifying to its powerful symbolic resonance.

A North-South body (Table 11) receives strong support among Catholics, is opposed by a majority of Protestants, but not by a majority within Northern Ireland. Divisions between UUP and DUP support are most marked on this issue, but supporters of both parties are far removed from even the Alliance party's non-U unionists. That said, a quarter of Protestants actively endorse a North-South body and there are 16% more who might be swayed. This level of 'don't know' responses is higher than among Catholics - a reversal of the usual pattern. The North-South body has obviously been more considered and is more salient in the eyes of Catholics. The degree of polarisation between the two communities is palpable on the subject, but there is room for political persuasion of the unionist community by the British government and others. Winning majority-support for the option within Northern Ireland is not impossible, though winning majority support amongst unionists seems a much more difficult task.

Table 11.

Q. In the Joint Framework Document the British and Irish governments proposed the establishment of a North/South body, which would have to work on the basis of joint agreement. This body would have representatives from a Northern Ireland Assembly and from the Irish parliament. Are you opposed to the creation of a North/South body, or do you support the creation of a North/South body?

	Religion			Party Support			Political Sympathy					
	Total	Prot	RC	Other	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Opposed to the creation of a North-South body	39	59	9	34	78	59	24	13	6	9	70	32
Support the creation of a North-South body	46	26	78	46	13	23	62	77	89	85	17	49
Can't choose/don't know	15	16	13	20	9	18	15	11	5	6	13	19

The designed responses to the question on a Bill of Rights introduced three substantive options rather than the usual agree/disagree format (see Table 12 below). This design alone might be expected to reduce the tendency to answer 'don't know', but levels of 'don't know/can't choose' responses were still high. Clearly, this level of uncertainty is likely to be a reflection of the abstract nature of the question, ignorance (or suspicion) of the constitutional niceties involved, and the rather contentless nature of the question - what might such a Bill contain? Nevertheless, there is plurality endorsement among Protestants for the general idea that the same Bill of Rights should be adopted for North and South, with substantially more remaining uncertain. *Policy-makers clearly have room for initiative in this domain - institutionalising the same protections of individual and national and ethnic minority rights. North and South, would help cement a political settlement.*

Table 12.

Q. In the Joint Framework Document the British and Irish governments consider that it might be a good idea to protect people's individual, national and religious rights in constitutional law. One way to do that would be to have the same Bill of Rights made law in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Which of these statements best expresses your view on the idea?

	Religion			Party Support					Political Sympathy		
	Prot	RC	Other	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Oppose any B o R	28	5	9	38	24	7	6	5	5	34	15
Oppose the idea of the same B o R being established in RoI and NI	18	5	20	21	18	15	4	11	8	22	12
Support the idea of the same B o R being established in RoI and NI	35	66	54	23	38	69	67	69	69	26	52
Can't choose/don't know	18	24	17	18	20	10	23	15	18	18	22

We have seen that levels of uncertainty, or 'don't knows' are high across many of the issues probed by our survey. On articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, however, this uncertainty disappears: 'no reply' and 'don't know' responses amount to a trifling 3% (see Table 13). There is much less room here for mobilisation of some sort of consensus from a pool of uncertain responses. Thus *prima facie* there is little prospect here of a majority of Protestants endorsing a compromise settlement in exchange for amendment of the territorial claim even though, as with the North-South body, there is a core of approximately one quarter of Protestants who opt for compromise. Such a package could conceivably win majority support in Northern Ireland, but not majority support across both communities. It is of course the only option presently on offer. On the whole, the subject of articles 2 and 3 splits nationalists to a far greater degree than unionists. SDLP supporters are far more in favour of compromise - over 60% opt for either conditional or unconditional

amendment of the Irish constitutional claim - than are Sinn Féin's, while Catholics as a whole are fairly evenly split.

Table 13.

Q. Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland make a territorial claim to Northern Ireland. In the Joint Framework Document the Irish government has indicated that it will propose amending Articles 2 and 3 as part of a comprehensive settlement. Which of the statements on this card best describes your view on this issue?

	Religion			Party Support				Political Sympathy			
	Prot	RC	Other	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
The Irish Government should unconditionally amend its claim	65	11	51	78	69	35	13	6	8	75	41
....should amend its claim as part of a comprehensive settlement	25	46	37	14	25	49	48	25	34	19	41
.....should not amend its claim	7	39	11	6	3	15	35	68	57	4	14
No reply/don't know	3	4	1	1	3	1	4	1	2	2	4

READING THE RUNES: GROUNDS FOR CONCURRENCE?

To interpret the implications of these patterns of response we can develop the idea first advanced by Rose, McAllister and Mair (1978) of looking for the presence, or otherwise, of 'concurring majorities' across the two main groups in Northern Ireland. Our additional step is this: given the presence of sizeable proportions of 'don't know/can't choose' responses among our sample, a simple majority is likely to be an unnecessarily harsh test of concurrence: 'don't know' and 'can't choose' indicate an openness on the part of respondents that is clearly not the same as a straightforward rejection - though it may mask many things other than 'openness'.

Table 14. Prospects for consensus: the distribution of majority agreement (*), plurality agreement (**), and majority non-rejection (*), across relevant sub-groups**

Issues	Religion			Party Support				Political Sympathy			
	Prot	RC	Other	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neih
<i>Support Northern Irish Assembly with:</i>											
Majority rule	***	*	***	***	***	***	*	-	-	***	***
Prop. representation	***	*	***	***	***	***	**	-	-	***	**
PR & power sharing	*	**	**	-	*	***	**	-	**	-	**
PR, power sharing and role for Irish Govt.	-	***	-	-	-	*	***	***	***	-	*
<i>Nationalists & unionists should have:</i>											
Party of esteem	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***
Equal right to protection of the law	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***
Own national anthem	*	***	**	*	*	**	***	***	***	*	**
Dual language provision	*	***	**	-	*	**	***	***	***	-	**
RUC should change to NIPS	-	***	*	-	-	*	***	***	***	-	*
Support creation of North-South Body	-	***	**	-	-	***	***	***	***	-	**
Support same Bill of Rights for North & South	**	***	***	-	**	***	***	***	***	-	***
Oppose any Bill of Rights	-	-	-	**	-	-	-	-	-	**	-
Should unconditionally amend Articles 2 & 3	***	-	***	***	***	-	-	-	-	***	**
Should amend as part of a settlement	-	**	-	-	-	**	**	-	-	-	**
Should not amend Articles 2 & 3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	***	***	-	-

Our argument is simply this: given negotiations and compromises in the formulation of the options for the region it may well be that the 'don't know's' might be persuadable in the direction of compromise, though we recognise that

they may equally be amenable to the intransigents within their own ethn-national bloc. We therefore use two further measures of concurrence to that of majority agreement across both communities:

- (i) the existence of plurality agreement rather than simple majority agreement within both communities; and
- (ii) the presence of a majority that is *not opposed* to an idea across both communities.

To reiterate: the latter category of 'concurrence' rests upon the admittedly controversial view that respondents who answer 'don't know/can't choose' are to some degree open to persuasion. Table 14 summarises the issues where concurrence, however defined, can be observed in the data presented above. As we might expect, concurring majorities are not much in evidence on the most salient questions. On only two questions - on the less contentious aspects of parity of esteem - is there a concurring majority. Even a concurring plurality is only found on the issue of a Bill of Rights - an issue of symbolic and formal significance that has, as yet, little specific content. However, if we change the focus to concurring majorities who do not reject the options presented to them - shown in the final column of the table - there is clearly more room for manoeuvre. Three of the options for an assembly attain this minimal level of concurrence. Two of these are ones unionists can happily live with - an assembly elected through majority voting and an assembly elected by PR - although only the first receives majority support. The option more amenable to nationalists, and the only one feasibly on offer, that of a power sharing assembly elected by PR, is also a runner. This idea has almost as much prospect of support among Protestants as among Catholics. In the context of current public opinion it is the one area of constitutional change that is palpably viable - though our question-context did not ask Catholics or nationalists whether this option would be acceptable on its own, isolated from other changes that they might want. Moreover the importance of this evidence as a sign of positive change should not be exaggerated. Even in the 1970s Rose *et al.* found strong support for power sharing by Catholics and mixed views among Protestants, with evidence of a bare concurring majority in the question most similar to that used here (Rose *et al.* 1978: 14-16, table 5-E, p. 16). We again find mixed views among Protestants. Power sharing is not accepted by a majority of 'hard-line' unionists and DUP supporters. Neither is it accepted, for rather different reasons, by a substantial minority of Catholics - particularly Sinn Féin supporters. These mixed reactions by Catholics were less in evidence in 1978, when only 3% were opposed to power sharing. So the omens on a power-sharing assembly are not obviously more promising than during some of the worst periods of inter-communal conflict; and *if anything, we would predict*

considerable nationalist opposition to the construction of such an assembly if that occurs without a North-South body and other constitutional changes.

An emphasis on the presence of 'concurring non-rejection' also points to some possibility of flexibility on change with respect to implementing parity of esteem measures. Both separate anthems and dual language tuition in schools are not 'beyond the pale', and although changing the title of the RUC is unacceptable to Protestants these findings suggest at least some prospect of public acceptance of discussion about cultural equality between the rival national traditions - evident in the fairly high levels of cross-communal acceptance of formal parity of esteem and a shared Bill of Rights.

Nevertheless, when we move to issues that involve the Irish government there is not evidence, as yet, of a significant albeit slim common ground. On our evidence, narrowly interpreted, articles two and three of the Irish constitution, a North-South body, and Irish involvement in a Northern Ireland assembly, have, considered separately, little hope of attaining immediate concurrence across the two communities. Even if we restrict the search for concurrence to the supporters of the two largest and most moderate nationalist and unionist parties - thereby leaving DUP and Sinn Féin supporters out of the frame - the only common ground gained in addition to that already outlined is with respect to the option of an assembly with proportional representation (but not power sharing), which obtains plurality concurrence across the SDLP and UUP, rather than the already observed majority non-rejection. Naturally this is a narrow interpretation of evidence based on disaggregated components of the Framework documents, and we do not think it is beyond the wit of politicians or policy-makers to bundle the issues considered separately here in such a way that the entirety of the resultant package might meet with majority non-rejection across both communities. But, for that to happen, party leaders in Northern Ireland, must have confidence that it will be worth their careers to sign up to such a package.

PARTY COMPETITION AND THE ELECTORAL BASIS FOR COMPROMISE

Returning to the issue of partisan divisions and their effects on prospects for compromising strategies or flexibility in negotiations, our survey evidence suggests that DUP and UUP supporters differ only to a relatively small degree on most issues. With the possible exception of the subject of a Bill of Rights, Protestant opinion is sufficiently homogeneous to restrict either party from taking much initiative in most issue-areas - in effect, it shackles the UUP leadership from initiating compromise. We surmise that only a UUP leadership

sufficiently worried about the likely conduct of a British government would be willing to lead its supporters away from their current preferences on the grounds that a stitch in time would save nine. The new Labour Government will have a subtle task on its hands: it needs to shepherd the UUP leadership with extreme caution, i.e. give it both sufficient reassurances and sufficient fears to find negotiations worth while.

In contrast, SDLP and Sinn Féin supporters are farther apart on many questions, especially on articles 2 and 3, but also on the details of a Northern Ireland assembly, although not on parity of esteem, however specified. Sinn Féin and SDLP supporters would thus appear to converge on symbolic but to diverge on more explicitly constitutional and political issues. The clearer preference-structure of Protestants and the finding that Catholics are generally less unified in their (still) nationalist preferences reinforces the argument about the differential acceptance of compromise made earlier. Catholics tend to give more 'don't know' responses (an average of 23.6% over the issues examined here compared with 19.8% among Protestants), suggesting that their views, albeit marginally, are more open to negotiated agreements.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from this survey is subject to all the pit-falls of quota-based opinion polls. It provides a snap-shot of public opinion on the day before and the day of the Forum elections of May 1996; and it is subject to other interpretations than the ones we have considered here. The evidence in the survey is, however, consistent with that in the best of other surveys, both recently and over time, and with the conduct of Northern Irish politicians. Protestants and unionists are resistant to multiple forms of constitutional change because it is they who have to do the changing; Catholics and nationalists are more amenable to change because for them most feasible changes would mark a net incremental improvement on the status quo.

The agenda of the Framework documents, endorsed by both governments, provides an institutional blueprint which will require skilled statecraft if its content is to be built into a negotiated political settlement and endorsed within Northern Ireland, let alone the Republic. Such statecraft will have to work on Protestant and unionist opinion in a double manner: positively persuading unionists that a negotiated settlement, along the lines of the Framework documents, offers them the best long-term insurance they can get; and negatively persuading them that the alternative to this package, which contains many things they do not like, may be a series of outcomes which they will like even less. Such persuasion will be more successful if it is plain that nationalists

are not being told, and are not maintaining, that they have established all the necessary stepping stones to achieving a unified Ireland within a decade. These are tall orders; they are not impossible orders.

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