



Northern Ireland
Assembly

25 YEARS A New Beginning

What the Northern Ireland public thinks about power-sharing under current devolution arrangements

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Power-Sharing in Northern Ireland

One of the core components of the 1998 Belfast / Good Friday Agreement relates to the establishment of power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland. In all democratic political systems power is 'shared' to some extent. The sharing is quite obvious in many European countries where proportional representation electoral systems tend to result in multi-party or coalition governments. The sharing is less obvious in the single party governments typically established in the UK, resulting from its plurality election system. Even in the UK, however, multi-party governments have operated, such as the Conservative / Liberal Democratic coalition between 2010 and 2015.

So, sharing power between different political parties in coalition governments is not particularly novel. But there are a number of features of Northern Ireland's 'consociational' power-sharing arrangements, agreed in 1998 and amended in the St Andrew's Agreement of 2006, that make them quite different from typical European coalition systems.

One important difference is that elected politicians are formally categorised in the parliament (Assembly) as belonging to one or other (or neither) of the rival political groups: specifically, either 'unionist' or 'nationalist' (or neither). This 'designation' into one or other group is the basis on which the sharing of power operates: in relation to the premiership, and in relation to making key decisions.

The party with the most seats after the election achieves the 'First Minister' position, and the biggest party in the next biggest grouping secures the (legally co-equal) 'deputy First Minister' position. So, if a unionist party is the largest party it gets the First Minister position, and the leader of the biggest party in the nationalist grouping achieves the deputy First Minister. And vice versa if the biggest party is a nationalist party. And both of these co-premiers (the First and deputy First Ministers) must agree to take up their positions in order for a government to be established.

As well as the premiership needing the support of both political groupings to function, the same applies to new legislation, which needs the support of both the nationalist and unionist parliamentary groupings to pass if a 'petition of concern' is raised by 30 elected representatives (MLAs).

Also, the sharing of power is evident in the way in which the government is generated. In many European democracies, if no single party wins a majority of seats at an election, any party has a chance to be included in a coalition government if it persuades other parties to team up with it in a

multi-party government. But in Northern Ireland all the main parties have the *right*, rather than merely the *chance*, to be involved in the coalition government (or Executive). So, the government can be seen as all-inclusive, involving all the main parties and is generated by running the D'Hondt portfolio allocation system, whereby each party takes turns to choose ministerial portfolios (with more going to the larger parties).

There are arguments in favour and against the power-sharing system in Northern Ireland, and there are debates about how each of these components of power-sharing could possibly be amended or reformed. Supporters emphasise that government in a deeply divided place such as Northern Ireland should consist of both rival groupings, should include rules to protect group interests, and should maximise inclusivity by enabling all the main parties to be part of the government. Criticisms highlighted by opponents of the current arrangement include: the difficulty of achieving political accountability in the absence of a clear distinction between government and opposition; the gridlock that can occur as a result of group veto powers; and the instability of governing arrangements that are dependent on both co-premiers agreeing to share (and continue to share) power.

At this juncture, the 25th anniversary of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, it's useful to reflect on what the public thinks of power-sharing – looking back on how they think it has performed and also looking to the future in terms of any reforms they may possibly wish to introduce. The public's views on the following five questions are examined.

- 1/ Overall evaluations of the 1998 Agreement?
- 2/ Has power-sharing been good or bad for Northern Ireland?
- 3/ Views on the First Minister and deputy First Minister positions?
- 4/ Views on cross-community vote?
- 5/ Views on make-up of the government?

We now describe the evidence we use to address these questions and then report the results, breaking down attitudes by the overall public and also by community background (Protestant, Catholic, or neither).

Survey data

Academics at the Democracy Unit in Queen's University Belfast were awarded funding from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to conduct a survey of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population immediately after the May 2022 Assembly election. The fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos Northern Ireland. A two-stage sampling approach was adopted. First, sampling points were randomly selected from Northern Ireland's 285 electoral wards. Second, within these randomly selected geographical areas, quotas (age, gender, and social class) were used to determine the selection of respondents.

In total, 2,000 respondents were interviewed, and these respondents are representative of the general Northern Ireland electorate in socio-demographic characteristics and political characteristics. In line with many election surveys, our sample was somewhat under-representative of non-voters and so a political weight was applied to accommodate exact turnout level and exact share of first preference votes, as reported by the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland. This weighting ensures that our sample in our analysis is representative of the wider electorate in terms of turnout and party choice.

The survey was conducted between 6th May and 15th September 2022. The average length of the interview was 43 minutes (excluding 33 outliers). Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in-home, and were computer-assisted. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Queen's University Belfast.

Full wording of the relevant questions is provided in the tables in the next section. For full details of the survey and its findings see the report by Garry, O'Leary and Pow published in March 2023: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/the-democracy-unit/NorthernIrelandAssemblyElectionStudy2022/Analysis/> For a full description of the project, the technical details, and full data see the project website: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/the-democracy-unit/NorthernIrelandAssemblyElectionStudy2022/>

Results

Overall evaluation of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement

There is a great deal of public support for the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement (Table 1). Over two thirds of respondents agree that the Agreement 'remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland'. More of these supporters believe that some changes may be necessary to make it work

better (44%) than think it should be left exactly as it is (26%). One in seven respondents have a more negative interpretation of the Agreement: 9% say it needs substantial changes and 5% say it should be removed. One in seven of the public say that they ‘don’t know’.

Table 1
Attitudes towards the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
To stay as it is	26	17	23	36
Some changes	44	44	33	49
Substantial changes	9	15	7	5
To be removed	5	10	6	1
Don't know	15	14	30	9
Net score	+56	+36	+43	+79

Question wording: *There are a number of different opinions on the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, which was signed in 1998. Which one of these statements is closest to your view? The Agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland as it is / The Agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland but needs to undergo some changes to work better / The Agreement is no longer a good basis for governing Northern Ireland and should be substantially changed / The Agreement has never been a good basis for governing Northern Ireland and should be removed / don't know.*

Level of support for the Agreement varies by community background. Catholics are very supportive (85% agree). Among Protestants, three fifths agree and one quarter are negatively disposed. Almost one in three of ‘others’ indicate that they don’t know. So, all three groups are supportive, and Catholics particularly so. In all groups there are more people in favour of at least minor changes than those who thinks it needs no change at all.

Has power-sharing been good or bad for Northern Ireland?

There is a lot more agreement (54%) than disagreement (20%) with the statement that power-sharing has been good for Northern Ireland: a net positive balance of +34 (Table 2). The pattern is similar for respondents from a Catholic and Protestant background, though the former are more positive (net score +41) than the latter (net score +28). Extremely similar findings emerge when the same question is phrased in the opposite way, asking respondents if they agree or disagree that power sharing has been *bad* for Northern Ireland (Table 3).

Table 2
Level of agreement that power-sharing has been good for Northern Ireland (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	13	9	12	16
Agree	41	44	30	43
Neither	17	15	27	16
Disagree	15	19	13	13
Strongly disagree	5	6	3	5
Don't know	9	7	16	7
<i>Net score</i>	<i>+34</i>	<i>+28</i>	<i>+26</i>	<i>+41</i>

Question wording: *Overall, power-sharing has been good for Northern Ireland.*

Table 3
Level of agreement that power-sharing has been bad for Northern Ireland (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	3	3	4	3
Agree	16	20	9	14
Neither	19	18	30	17
Disagree	43	45	32	45
Strongly disagree	11	8	10	14
Don't know	8	7	16	6
<i>Net score</i>	<i>-35</i>	<i>-30</i>	<i>-29</i>	<i>-42</i>

Question wording: *Power-sharing has been bad for Northern Ireland.*

Choosing the First Minister(s)

In terms of the First Minister and deputy First Minister positions, there is overall support for how they are chosen (Table 4). Almost three fifths of the public agree that 'The largest party overall should provide the First Minister and the largest party from the other main community should provide the deputy First Minister'. One quarter disagree and one in ten 'don't know'. This pattern emerges in a very similar way from the responses by Catholics and Protestants. Support is less strong among 'Others' and one in five of that group 'don't know'.

Table 4
Support for current way of choosing First Minister and deputy First Minister (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	11	8	9	15
Agree	46	52	29	47
Neither	17	16	28	14
Disagree	13	13	11	13
Strongly disagree	3	3	2	3
Don't know	11	9	21	9
Net score	+41	+43	+25	+46

Question wording: *The largest party overall should provide the First Minister and the largest party from the other main community should provide the deputy First Minister.*

When presented with the possibility of changing the terms to 'Joint First Ministers' just under two fifths of the public are in favour, just under one third want to keep as is and just under one fifth want to abolish the positions. Catholics are evenly balanced between keeping as is or changing to 'joint first ministers' whereas Protestants are more in favour of change (41%) than the status quo (28%). It is noteworthy that almost one third of 'others' respond that they do not know.

Table 5
Attitudes towards keeping the titles of First and deputy First Minister or changing them to 'Joint First Ministers' (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
'Joint First Minister'	38	41	33	36
Keep as is	31	28	23	37
Abolish and replace	18	18	15	19
Don't know	14	13	29	9
Net score	+7	+14	+10	-1

Question wording: *Currently the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have identical powers, they differ only in their titles. Which of the following options do you prefer? Their titles should be changed, so that both are called Joint First Minister / Their titles should stay as they are, with the First Minister being nominated by the largest party / These positions should be abolished and replaced by something else / Don't Know.*

Cross-community vote

On the cross-community vote, it matters hugely how exactly the question is asked. There is quite strong support for it in general terms and approximately equally so across Protestants and Catholics, though with less support among the ‘others’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the question is phrased in quite negative terms (hampering decision making) there is, on balance, opposition to the cross-community vote.

Table 6
Support for cross-community vote (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	8	7	6	11
Agree	47	53	31	47
Neither	17	15	26	15
Disagree	13	12	11	14
Strongly disagree	4	3	7	4
Don't know	11	9	19	9
Net score	+38	+45	+19	+40

Question wording: *Legislation should require the consent of a majority of Unionist AND Nationalist Assembly Member (MLAs) before it can be passed.*

Table 7
Cross-community vote just blocks decision making (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	7	6	6	9
Agree	34	36	22	36
Neither	18	17	31	15
Disagree	25	27	19	25
Strongly disagree	4	4	3	5
Don't know	12	10	20	11
Net score	+12	+11	+7	+16

Question wording: *There should be no cross-community vote because it just lets one side – either unionist or nationalist – block key decisions being made*

Government formation process

The public, and Protestant and Catholics respondents, are on balance somewhat in favour of a clearer distinction between governing parties and opposition parties. The public – and Protestants, Catholics and ‘Others’ – are very evenly balanced on the question of whether fully flexible coalition formation should be facilitated.

Table 8
Support for clear distinction between government and opposition (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	9	9	7	10
Agree	36	39	25	37
Neither	20	19	31	18
Disagree	16	16	11	17
Strongly disagree	4	3	4	5
Don't know	15	14	21	14
Net score	+25	+28	+17	+25

Question wording: *Instead of all the main parties being in government, we should have a form of government in which there's a very clear distinction between some parties being in government and others being in opposition.*

Table 9
Support for any coalition (%)

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Strongly agree	5	4	7	5
Agree	31	30	20	36
Neither	18	18	29	16
Disagree	26	31	18	24
Strongly disagree	7	6	6	9
Don't know	13	12	21	10
Net score	+3	-3	+2	+9

Question wording: *We should get rid of the power-sharing system of government altogether in Northern Ireland, and instead any combination of parties that together have a majority in the Assembly should be able to form a government.*

Summary of views

In Table 10 the net scores are summarised and rank ordered by all respondents. Net scores for three groups are also reported: respondents from a Protestant background, Catholic background, or other background. (The results are also broken down by ideological self-description ('unionist', 'nationalist', or 'neither') and by national identity self-description ('British', 'Irish', or 'Northern Irish'), and these are reported in Table A in the Appendix.)

Of all the questions asked on this theme of power-sharing, the strongest overall support among the public is for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. As shown in Table 10, there is roughly similar levels of support among the public on the next four questions: support for the current way that FM and dFM is chosen, support for the cross-community vote and agreements that power-sharing is good, and is not bad. These are all pro-status quo positions.

Table 10
Summary of net scores on power-sharing questions

	All	Prot	Other	Cath
Belfast/Good Friday Agreement	+56	+36	+43	+79
Support for FM/dFM	+41	+43	+25	+46
Cross-community vote	+38	+45	+19	+40
Power-sharing bad	-35	-30	-29	-42
Power-sharing good	+34	+28	+26	+41
Govt & opp distinct	+25	+28	+17	+25
Anti cross-community vote (blocks)	+12	+11	+7	+16
Change to 'joint first ministers'	+7	+14	+10	-1
Support for any coalition	+3	-3	+2	+9

The three questions focusing directly on changes to power-sharing attracted lower levels of support among the public, being opposed to power-sharing when asked in the context of its blocking decisions making, changing to 'joint first ministers' and changing to any coalition being able to form.

The notion of having a clearer difference between government and opposition is something that could arguably be achieved within the current rules. This idea attracts equal overall support from the public (net score +25, Protestants +28, and Catholics +25).

Overall, these findings suggest a lot of public support for the 1998 Agreement, though many supporters are open to minor changes. There is general agreement that power-sharing has been good rather than bad for Northern Ireland. And there is no firm consensus on what minor changes to power sharing might be made to make it work better: the current components are reasonably well supported, and the strongest change relates to making the distinction between government and opposition more clear (and this does not translate into strong support for any flexibly agreed coalition government).

	Prot	Other	Cath	Unionist	Neither	Nationalist	Brit	NI	Irish
Belfast/Good Friday Agreement	+36	+43	+79	+27	+60	+83	+28	+58	+83
Support for FM/dFM	+43	+25	+46	+44	+24	+51	+40	+43	+45
Cross-community vote	+45	+19	+40	+48	+31	+43	+42	+42	+38
Power-sharing bad	-30	-29	-42	-25	-31	-54	-22	-40	-47
Power-sharing good	+28	+26	+41	+23	+30	+51	+24	+35	+47
Govt & opp distinct	+28	+17	+25	+30	+20	+27	+25	+21	+26
Anti cross-community vote (blocks)	+11	+7	+16	+17	+14	+16	+7	+19	+18
Change to 'joint first ministers'	+14	+10	-1	+13	+14	-12	+11	+19	-4
Support for any coalition	-3	+2	+9	-9	+10	+5	-4	+6	+9

Appendix Table A

Net scores broken down by religious background, ideological self-identification and national identity self-description