



ARK Feature

Surveys and polls: How does the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey differ from opinion polls?

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is an attitudinal survey which has been carried out annually since 1998. NILT asks the opinion of a random sample of adults (18 years or older), representative of the population in Northern Ireland. The survey is run by ARK, Northern Ireland's social policy hub, which is a joint Ulster University - Queen's University organisation whose primary goal is to increase the accessibility and use of academic data and research (<http://www.ark.ac.uk>).

Each year when we release the NILT survey results there is a debate about why our results sometimes differ from opinion polls. In this short paper we explain the differences in methodology between NILT and polls that may explain different findings. Full details on NILT methodology are available in each year's technical report. The technical report for 2017 is available at <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2017/tech17.pdf>

However, it is important to note that while there are methodological differences, some of the variation in results may actually be caused by (slightly) different question wording, different placement of questions within other questions, different context of the overall questionnaire, or when the survey/poll was carried out.

	NILT	Opinion Polls
Funding – who pays to ask these questions?	NILT is externally funded through research grants from a range of funders each year. A full list of funders over the years is available at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/about/funders.html	Range of funders, including individuals, political parties, or academic researchers. The list of funders is usually made available
Sampling – how do we select who is invited to take part?	Random sample of adults (18 years or older). Households are selected at random from the Postcode Address File and then an individual (18 years +) is selected at random using the next birthday method. NILT is a cross-sectional survey, which means that a new sample is randomly selected each year. NILT is not a longitudinal survey. (In a longitudinal panel survey, the same group of people takes part in every year or wave of the survey).	Some polls work from a panel, that is, a list of people who have agreed they can be contacted about surveys. This is not a random sample. Other polls use quota samples which achieve a good cross section of the population by selecting participants to fit the demographic profile. This is not a random sample.

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Mode – how is the survey carried out?	Interviewer calls to the person's home. Computer assisted personal face-to-face interview with short self-completion supplement.	Online, postal, telephone or face-to-face (possibly on street or at home). It is sometimes suggested that people who will not agree to take part in a survey like NILT may feel more comfortable taking part in an online survey which offers more anonymity.
Achieved sample size – how many people take part?	Approximately 1,200 each year (1,203 interviews completed in 2017).	Various – depends on the survey.
Timing – when do the interviews take place?	Every year, between October and December. This interviewing period may pose problems when the context changes for example, if an election is called or a major incident occurs that may affect public opinion.	Usually over a shorter time period such as 5-7 days.
Content – what questions do we ask?	NILT includes questions on four main topics each year, which reflect current public and policy debates. NILT also incorporates a detailed background section, recording demographic and socio-economic information about the respondent.	Uses a smaller set of questions, focusing on a specific topic.
Time series – do attitudes change over time?	NILT has run annually since 1998. The exception was 2011 when funding was not secured. Some questions are asked every year, which means that we can explore if and how attitudes change over time.	Some polls also run on a regular basis but generally they tend to be more ad hoc.
Fieldwork - who carries out the interviews?	This is a transparent process. Currently the fieldwork goes out to public tender every two years and the fieldwork agency is appointed. Perceptive Insight carried out the survey between 2011 and 2017. The 2018 survey will be carried out by Ipsos Mori. Details on the fieldwork agency are contained in the technical notes each year.	Usually the fieldwork agency is named but on occasion, for whatever reason, that information is not made available.

Notes:

For more information about the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, visit <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>, where you can find tables of results, questionnaires, datasets, technical notes, publications, and more.