

## An age of change? Community relations in Northern Ireland



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With the restoration of devolution to Northern Ireland in May 2007, the Northern Ireland Executive committed itself to the development of a new strategy for community relations in Northern Ireland, which would replace the direct rule initiated *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland* (OFMDFM, 2005) policy plan. After much delay, in July 2010, a new policy framework *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (OFMDFM, 2010) was released for public consultation, sparking considerable debate and discussion at both political and community levels.

It is, therefore, timely to explore changes in public attitudes towards relations between Catholic and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Previous Research Updates have looked at various aspects of attitudes towards community relations issues, including analysis of the entire sample, or of a particular age group, such as 16 year olds (see Hughes and Donnelly, 1991; Fullerton, 2004; and Schubotz and Robinson, 2006). This Research Update seeks to examine general changes in attitudes of adults towards community relations in Northern Ireland since 1989, and then to explore if these changes are consistent across people of different religions and/or age groups. We have used data from two annual attitudes surveys: the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey**, which ran between 1989 and 1996, with the exception of 1992, and the **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey**, which has run since 1998.

### Context of the survey

Over the past 40 years, Northern Ireland's public image was defined by the violent conflict which dominated it from the late 1960's to the late 1990's. A crude indicator of the human impact of the so-called 'Troubles' is the number of conflict-related deaths each year. Information from CAIN ([www.ark.ac.uk/cain](http://www.ark.ac.uk/cain)) shows that from 1989-1991 there were 253 deaths, with an almost similar number in the period 1992-94. More recently following the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, there was a general – and considerable - downward trend. More recently, between 2007-9 there were five deaths (see Table 1).

Twelve years have passed since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998. After a frustrating stop-start period, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive have been functioning in its present form since May 2007. Whilst there have been radical political changes, with former enemies sharing power at Stormont, has this translated into improved perceptions of relationships between the two main communities in Northern Ireland? Two, often contrary,

positions have been expressed about future relations in the region. The first is that, with the passage of time, community differences and divisions will diminish, particularly in the lives of young people who did not live through the height of the violent conflict. The second is that people's political, cultural and religious differences are deeply embedded and not easily changed – with the implication that segregated lives and sectarian views will continue regardless, and that the best that we can hope for is a non-return to violence and a 'separate but equal' existence. However, is either of these views borne out in the survey results captured over the past twenty years?

It is important to note that 'community relations' was historically seen to be about relationships between the two main communities in Northern Ireland. More recently, reflecting the changing demographic and cultural context, it is now taken to be about wider relations and has been redefined as 'good relations' to encompass this broader understanding in recent years. However this Research Update will focus on relationships between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

### Perception of relations

Two key indicators have been consistently used to monitor the state of community relations in Northern Ireland: people's

Table 1: Troubles-related deaths

1989-91	1992-4	1995-7	1998-2000	2001-3	2004-6	2007-9
253	241	49	82	37	15	5

Source: CAIN

perception of relations between the two main communities over the previous five years, and their perception of relations in the future five years. In general terms, the responses to these questions point to increasingly positive perceptions about relations between 1989 and 2009. However, notable dips in 1996 and the early years of the new century reflect the influence of external events, such as the tensions relating to the issue of parading and associated unrest, and the Holy Cross School dispute in 2001/2.

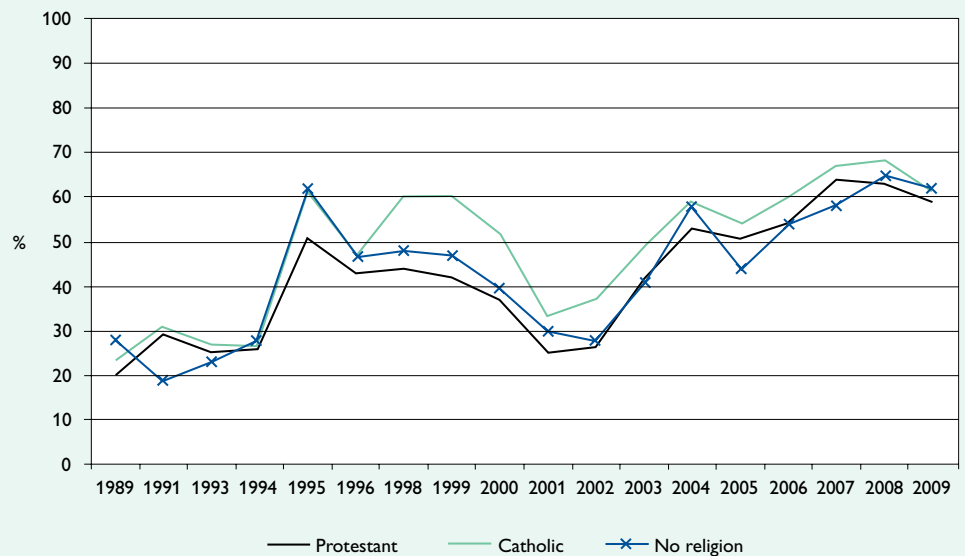
In the most recent survey in 2009, the proportion of respondents who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than five years ago is 60 per cent, a slight drop from the higher level of 65 per cent recorded in 2008 (which was the highest level ever recorded in either the NILT or NISA surveys). This compares dramatically to the general pessimism of the early 1990s (pre-ceasefires) when the proportion of respondents who felt that relations were improving was a mere 24 per cent.

So, are we moving towards a more normal society, where differences between various groups within society are increasingly viewed as irrelevant? Can we assume that Catholics and Protestants will have increasingly similar positions on different statements over time, or are the opinions of one group changing at a different rate or direction to that of the other? Moreover, if opinions are changing, do the views of particular age groups drive this change?

## Differences by religion

Figure 1 shows that the upward trend is experienced by both Catholic and Protestant respondents. However, it is worth noting that while Catholics have been consistently more positive over the years, the figure for Protestants in recent years has risen to nearly that recorded for Catholics. Interestingly, for several years between 2005 and 2008, the least positive perception was from respondents with no religion. This may reflect a general concern that the peace process and resultant Agreement predominantly focused on relations

Figure 1: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago, by religion



between Protestants and Catholics, without giving due regard for the one in ten who do not identify as Catholics or Protestants. It could also be argued that people identify as having no religion precisely because of their pessimism with Catholic and Protestant identities or the relationship between them. However, in 2009, respondents with no religion (62%) are now the most positive of the three groups, if only by a few percentage points.

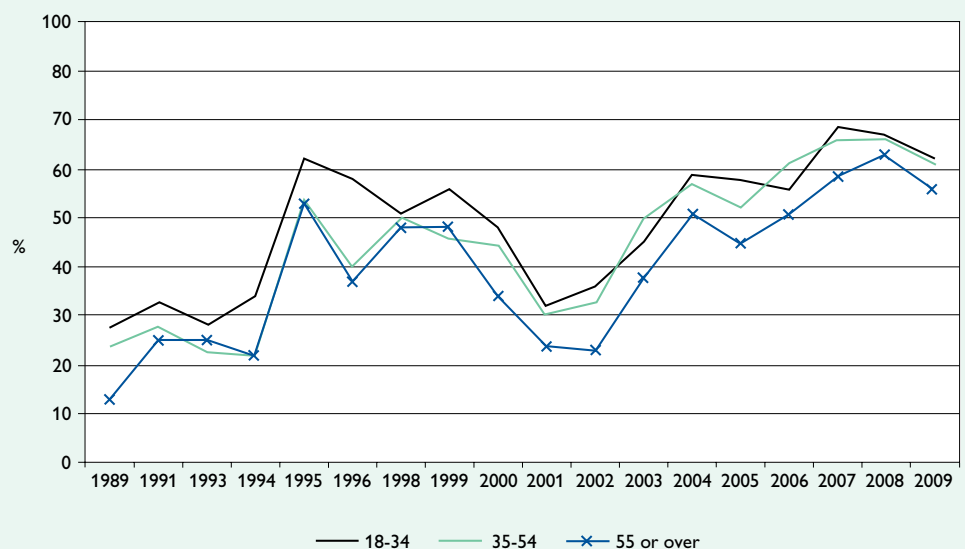
respondents together into three age bands: 18-34 years; 35-54 years; and 55+.

Focusing on the same question, we can see from Figure 2 that over the years the younger age group has generally been more positive than the other two groupings (with the exception of 2003 and 2006), although there has been a convergence with the 35-54 age group since 2008. Perhaps this reflects the transference of respondents from one age bracket to another, reflecting the nature of this time series data. But this is not to say that the 55+ age group think that things have got worse – rather, there is an increase in the proportion thinking that things have stayed about the same.

## Differences by age

Having identified changes by religion, it is also useful to look at changes in attitudes by age. To do this, we have grouped

Figure 2: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago, by age group



## Age by religion

Whilst Figure 2 indicates that 18-34 years olds are generally more positive than older respondents, can we presume that all young people are optimistic? To address this question, we looked at age groups within particular religious categories. Due to the smaller number of respondents with no religion, we cannot disaggregate this group by age. Therefore, we have focused on Catholic and Protestant respondents, and examined attitudes across the six groups.

A general trend was evident for all six groups – that is, a peak after the Good

Friday/Belfast Agreement, followed by much more negative feelings around the time of the Holy Cross dispute, with a general upturn after that. Interestingly, in more recent years, the 2009 figures show a decline in optimism across most groupings, most notably among Catholics aged 35-54 years, and Protestants aged 18-34 years. The exception is Protestants in the middle age band, amongst whom the level of optimism remained similar to 2008. In general terms, however, for Protestants within all three age groups, attitudes in 2009 are more positive than in 1998 – particularly among the youngest age band. Among Catholic respondents, however, figures in 2009 are

approximately the same as in 1998.

Until 2002, younger Catholics tended to have the most positive views, although there have been shifts in attitudes since then. From 2006 to 2008, young Protestants aged 18-34 actually nudged past their Catholic counterparts, although this pattern was reversed in 2009. The 35-54 cohort of Protestants has shown some movement in relative attitudes: from being the second least positive group in 2008, it is now the most positive. Since 2000, the least positive groups have consistently been older Protestants and older Catholics.

Figure 3: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years time, by religion

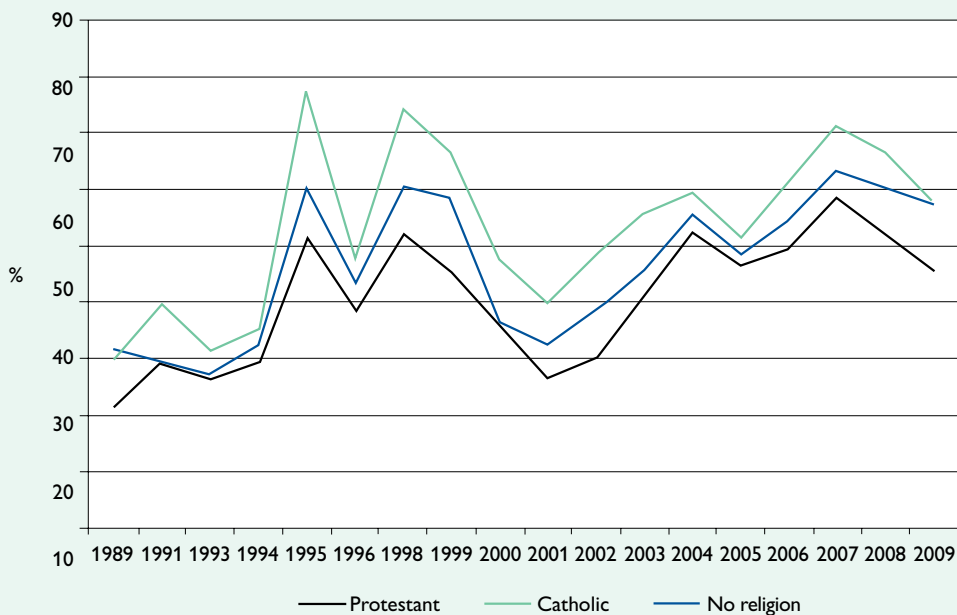
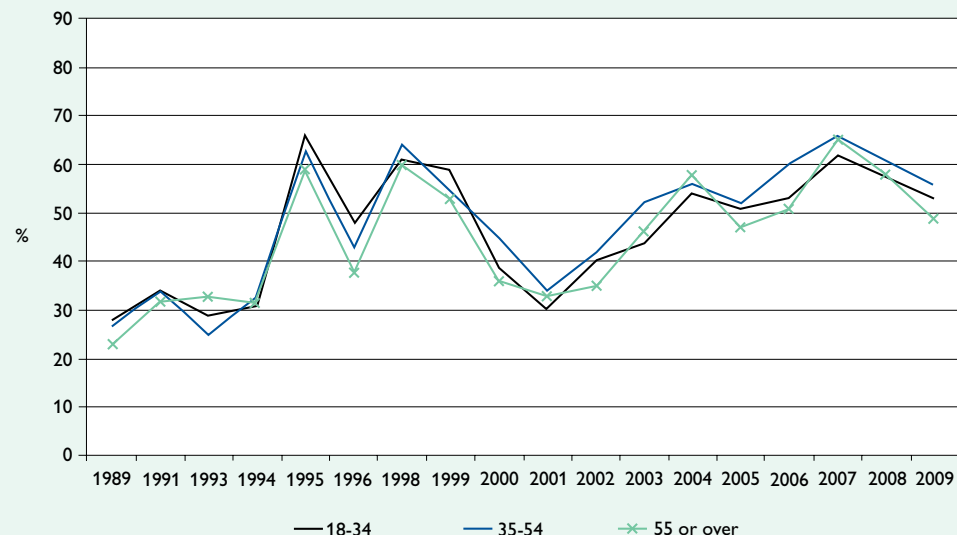


Figure 4: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years time, by age group



## Back to the future

Turning now to the future, Figure 3 relates to perceptions of relations between Protestants and Catholics in five years time. This indicates a general upward trend, albeit with peaks and troughs in the 1990s, and again in 2002. Catholics have consistently been the most optimistic group, followed by respondents of no religion, with Protestants being the least optimistic group. However, the gap between these groups has been decreasing over time. In 1998, there was a difference of 22 percentage points between the proportion of Catholics and the proportion of Protestants believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years time. In 2009, this gap had narrowed to 12 percentage points. The attitudes of the no religion group have generally been between the views of Protestants and Catholics, but, in the 2009 survey, they match those of Catholic respondents.

Looking now at respondents by age, after a shaky time in the 1990s, the general trend is upwards for respondents of all ages, until 2007. Figure 4 indicates that the middle age group (35-54 years) is the most optimistic. The older and younger age groups have changed position over the years, and in 2009, the oldest age group is least optimistic that relations between Catholics and Protestants will improve over the next five years.

In terms of age and religious breakdown, Catholic respondents are consistently more optimistic than Protestant respondents across all age groups. However, levels of optimism have fallen

over the past three years, particularly noticeably among the oldest Catholic age group who had quite consistency indicated more confidence in future relations than others, looking at the overall time series.

## Conclusion

The survey data presented in this Research Update suggest a general upward trend in perceptions of community relations since 1998, albeit with a slight reversal in the most recent results. However, within this overall picture, there are important changes by particular sub groups over time. When one compares the results from 1998 - when there was a general

air of hopefulness in the air following the conclusion of negotiations which led to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement - with today, it appears that the relative optimism that Catholics historically held is falling. Looking at the responses by age, the survey results indicate that younger Protestants have maintained their optimism both in terms of how things have improved and how they believe they will in the future, whilst older Catholic respondents have been more pessimistic about the future.

While this long view of the two surveys over the past twenty years demonstrates a greater sense of optimism about the state of relations between Catholics

and Protestants, there is little room for complacency. The most recent results appear to indicate that respondents have some concern that relations between the two main communities have become as good as they can get and that further improvement is unlikely - or perhaps undesirable? With considerable debate and discussion ongoing about the future strategies for the development of a 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' policy programme for Northern Ireland, the onus is now placed on locally elected politicians to demonstrate their commitment to the continued improvement of relations between Catholics and Protestants in the years to come.

## Key Points

- Perceptions of relations between Protestants and Catholics have become more positive since 1989, although changes in attitudes have been affected by events at certain times.
- Perceptions of relations between the two groups over the previous five years were more positive among Catholics than Protestants, and among younger respondents than older respondents.
- Catholics of all age groups are most positive than Protestants about relations in the next five years, although Catholics aged over 55 years are becoming less optimistic.
- Among Catholics and Protestants, 35-54 year olds are most optimistic about relations in the future.

## References

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Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has supported the inclusion of questions on community relations within the NILT survey. The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues.

The survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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