



## Do social attitudes to abortion suggest political parties in Northern Ireland are out of step with their supporters?

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The comprehensive vote to change the constitution in the Republic of Ireland to allow for reform of abortion law has cast the spotlight firmly on Northern Ireland (NI). In NI, access to abortion is only permitted if a woman's life is at risk or there is risk to her mental or physical health that is long term or permanent. Foetal abnormalities, even if fatal, rape and incest are not circumstances in which abortions can be performed legally. Responsibility for abortion policy was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2010 as part of wider policing and justice powers under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement and while the reform of abortion policy in Northern Ireland became a major area of debate the Assembly failed to legislatively address the issue. There have been calls for the Westminster government to legislate in the absence of the devolved Assembly which has not functioned since January 2017. Pressure for Westminster intervention has gathered pace for a range of reasons including a legal case taken by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission arguing that restrictions on abortion in NI amount to a violation of human rights, the prosecutions of women from NI who have purchased abortion pills online and strong criticism of the UK government in a report of an

inquiry into reproductive rights in NI published by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 2018).

### Public support for change

An ESRC funded study at Ulster University using data from the 2016 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey shows the NI public favour reform of abortion law (Gray, 2017). This comprehensive test of public opinion based on a representative survey of over 1200 adults showed that the strongest support was where the life or the health of the pregnant woman is at risk with 82 per cent of people believing abortion should be legal in these circumstances. A large majority of respondents believe that abortion should be legal where there is a fatal or serious foetal abnormality (81 per cent and 75 per cent respectively) and in cases of rape or incest where 78 per cent say that abortion should be legal. Most respondents (63%) feel that "It is a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion". As with all social surveys there is a mix of opinion with opposition in NI to abortion being allowed due to the loss of a job or not being able to afford another child.

### Support for political parties and attitudes to abortion

What the NILT findings also reveal is strong support for abortion reform in Northern Ireland across voters for all the main political parties here. In cases of fatal or serious foetal abnormality, where the life or health of the mother is at serious risk and in cases of rape and incest the overwhelming majority of supporters of each of the main parties said that in their view abortion should definitely or probably be legal. Where there is a fatal foetal abnormality 88 percent of Alliance Party supporters said that abortion should be legal with 86 per cent of UUP voters, 80 percent of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) supporters and 75 and 74 per cent of Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein (SF) supporters respectively agreeing that it should be legal. Where the pregnant woman was likely to die as a result of the pregnancy, 96 per cent of Alliance supporters thought that abortion should be legal, as did 90 per cent of UUP supporters, 81 per cent of DUP supporters, 79 per cent of SF supporters and 74 per cent of SDLP supporters.

Across the range of scenarios Alliance supporters were the most likely to support legalisation of abortion followed by UUP supporters, and the views of SF and SDLP supporters were often closely aligned. SF and SDLP supporters were the least likely to say that abortion should definitely be legal in the seven scenarios posed in the Life and Times survey. While the DUP has said it will not support

any change in the law in NI, its supporters believe abortion should be definitely or probably be legal in six out of the seven scenarios showing a higher level of support for reform of abortion law than SF or SDLP voters.

Northern Ireland currently has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Women who are viewed as infringing these laws and those

who assist them are subject to harsh criminal penalties. These findings, based on the views of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland public, show that abortion legislation in Northern Ireland is out of step with public opinion. They also suggest that in some cases the views of political parties are out of step with those of their supporters.

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### **References:**

- Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (2018) *Report of the inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, [http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared\\_Documents/GBR/INT\\_CEDAW\\_ITB\\_GBR\\_8637\\_E.pdf](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared_Documents/GBR/INT_CEDAW_ITB_GBR_8637_E.pdf)
- Gray, Ann Marie (2017) *Attitudes to abortion in Northern Ireland*, ARK Research Update 115 <http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update115.pdf>

### **Notes**

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Full details about the 2016 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey are available on the survey website at: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>