



Mixed Messages: Community Relations in 2014

Duncan Morrow

Introduction

Since the inception of the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey in 1989, two key indicators have monitored the public perception of the state of community relations. While they can only ever provide a snapshot of public mood, the series over time gives some insight into changing levels of optimism and pessimism about the future as well as disappointment and satisfaction about achievements in the recent past.

The results of the 2014 survey show a slight improvement in the public mood since the significant dip in optimism in 2013. While Protestants are consistently more pessimistic than Catholics, the slightly improved climate is evidenced among both, and among people with no religion. Nonetheless, with the exception of 2013, the numbers believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics had got better was lower in 2014 than in any year since 2003, and has dropped fifteen percentage points since 2007 when devolution was restored. The evidence also suggests (Figure 1) that, while perceptions have varied with political events, the peace process since 1998 has not yet created a watershed in overall perceptions of relationships – indeed devolution has been accompanied by greater pessimism.

Levels of optimism about the future reflect a similar pattern. (Figure 2). Greater optimism is evident in 2014 in comparison to 2013. Nonetheless, the optimism of 1994 and 1998 has never been exceeded and the downward trend since 2007 is not yet reversed by the small improvement in 2014. Whereas in 2007, 64% of all respondents believed that relations would be better in 5 years, that figure had declined to 46% in 2014, a fall of eighteen percentage points.

Optimism about the future and a sense of

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

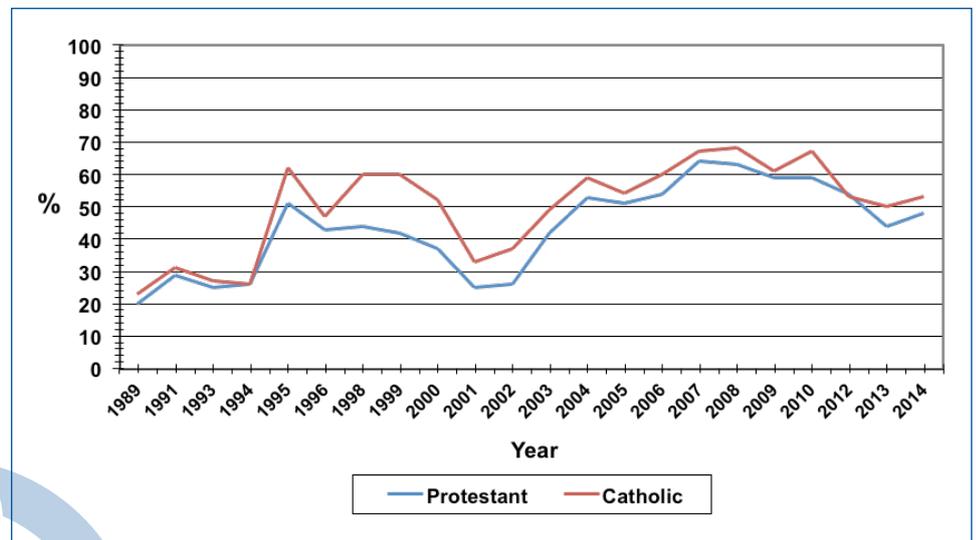
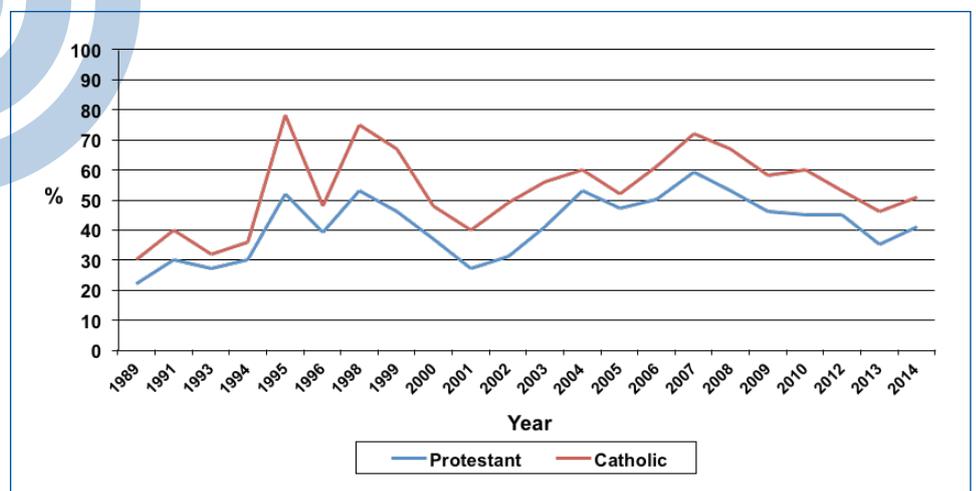


Figure 2: percentage believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years time, by religion



progress in relation to the past may well have been affected by feelings towards markers of community identity or affiliation in Northern Ireland. Thus there was a sharp

upturn in annoyance at Loyalist murals, kerb painting and flags particularly among Catholics in 2012 which appears to have diminished somewhat in 2014. There was a

measurable but less marked increase in the level of annoyance within the Protestant community towards Republican markers of identity in the same period, although in this case there also appears to have been an increase in the proportion of Catholic respondents annoyed at Republican displays from 15% in 2013 to 24% in 2014.

Divisions over flag-flying and the role of parades appear more polarising, however. Asked about parades for the first time in the 2014 survey, 75% of Protestant respondents felt that parading was a legitimate form of cultural celebration but only around 40% of Catholic respondents agreed. Indeed 35%

support flag-flying on lampposts for particular celebrations, 39% disagree, many strongly. Furthermore, Protestants (51%) are much more supportive than Catholic respondents (25%). At the same time, in a separate question, 52% of Catholics and 33% of Protestants agreed with the statement that “*If flags appear on lampposts I would like them all taken down straight away even if this causes trouble*”, while 41% of Protestants and only 23% of Catholics disagreed. This is a slight reduction in the strength of feeling reported in 2013 when 40% of Protestants and 57% of Catholics reported preferring that all flags should be taken down straightaway.

30% of Catholics do not wish the flag to be flown at any time, compared to only 3% of Protestants. Interestingly, the people who showed least consensus on this issue were those with no religion.

Integration and segregation

Since the beginning of NILT Surveys clear majorities have expressed a desire for greater sharing and integration. One of the more marked changes in the results for 2014, following on from 2013, has been emergent evidence of a softening in support for specific areas of inter-community engagement.

NILT 2014 found that 87% still supported the general view that peace was best pursued through sharing rather than separation. Just under a half of respondents (45%) in 2014 thought that most people in Northern Ireland would mind (a lot or a little) if a close relative were to marry someone of a different religion. Repeating a pattern found in previous years, the proportion of respondents who say that they *personally* would mind if a close relative married someone of a different religion is much lower (19%). But while Protestant attitudes have remained steady, the proportion of Catholics who would mind a mixed marriage in the family has risen from 12% in 2013 to 16% in 2014, the highest percentage of Catholics expressing this view since 2001.

When respondents were presented with six different aspects of life and asked if they supported more or less mixing within each one, it became clear that support for mixing has declined slightly over a number of areas simultaneously (Table 2).

This pattern is confirmed by the changing personal preferences for mixed and shared settings. The results of the 2014 survey broadly confirm that the drop measured between 2010 and 2013 has been sustained, although it may have remained largely unchanged in the past year. Thus, while the majority of respondents would still prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, the level of support for this has fallen from 82% in 2010 to 71% in 2013 and remains static at 70% in 2014. A similar pattern is seen in relation to preference for working in a mixed-religion workplace, which has fallen from 94% in 2010 to 78% in 2013 and is broadly unchanged at 80% in 2014.

In 2014, NILT asked specific questions

Table 1: Views on flying of the union flag on public buildings, by religion

	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
	%	%	%	%
The union flag should be flown from all public buildings <u>all the time</u>	4	43	31	24
The union flag should be flown <u>on designated days only</u> from all public buildings	56	51	42	51
The union flag should <u>not be flown at all</u> from any public building	30	3	16	17
Don't know	10	3	12	8

Table 2: Support for more mixing (2012-2014)

	% saying 'much more' or 'a bit more' mixing		
	2012	2013	2014
Primary school	82	81	79
Secondary school	84	82	80
Where people live	83	83	78
Where people work	87	85	82
Sports/leisure	87	86	83
Marriages	72	72	67

of Catholic respondents actively disagreed with this statement. Perhaps unsurprisingly around three quarters of Catholic respondents felt that parades should only be allowed if there was an agreement between organisers and local residents, although only 57% of Protestants felt the same way.

The potential for polarisation around flag-flying is also reflected. While 38%

As in 2013, the most popular view among both Protestants and Catholics (51%) in 2014 was that the union flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings (Table 1). This may hide a significant difference between the communities about the alternative, however, as 43% of Protestants feel that the union flag should be flown at all times, compared to only 4% of Catholics, while

about perceptions of safety for people of all backgrounds. Almost two-thirds (63%) believe that their neighbourhood is one where Protestants and Catholics share shops and services, although 34%, almost equally divided between Protestant and Catholic, expressed doubts. Likewise, 54% of respondents agreed that towns and city centres in Northern Ireland are safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life, and 21% disagreed. But considerations of safety permeate past neighbourhoods and town centres to encompass different feelings about specific venues. Asked about how they would feel if an event was to be held in one of four different premises, 76% of Protestants said they would feel safe in a Catholic School, while 78% of Catholics felt similarly about a Controlled (Protestant) Secondary school. However, only 49% of Catholics would feel safe in an Orange Hall (compared with 79% of Protestants) and only 51% of Protestants would feel safe in a Gaelic Sports Club (compared with 85% of Catholics). Even in the context of a survey where 63% believe that on balance, sport in Northern Ireland breaks down barriers between Protestants and Catholics, this suggests that culture remains an area of uncertainty for many.

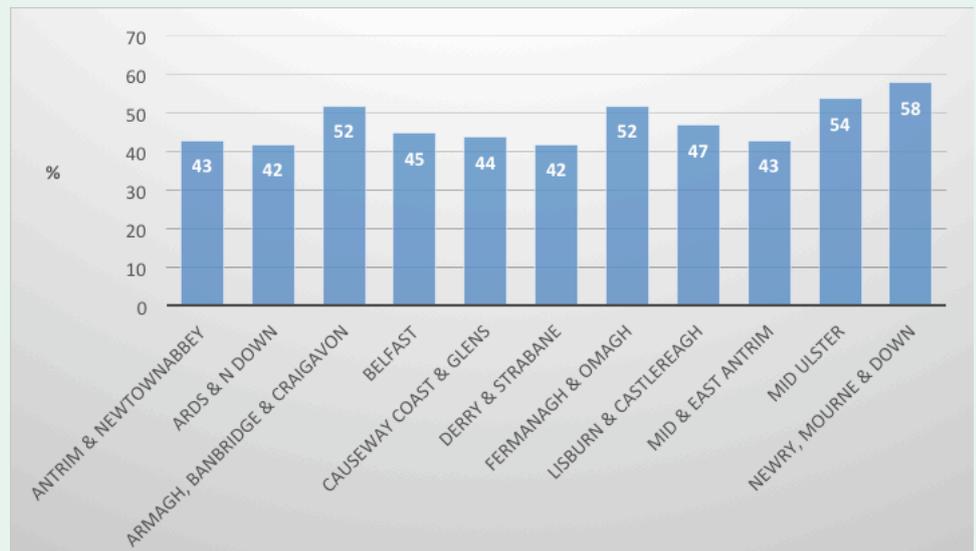
Alongside this, the proportion of respondents preferring to send their children to a mixed-religion school has also fallen since 2010, with Catholics in this case, remaining more reluctant than Protestants. In 2014, Catholic support remained constant at around 50%, while Protestant preference for mixed religion schools showed a slight rise since 2013 to 61%. There is some evidence that the notion of 'shared' education rather than integrated schooling has an appeal among respondents who said that they preferred single-religion schools with 64% indicating that they favoured greater sharing. Interestingly, opposition to sharing among Protestant parents in this category appears to have declined sharply in the past year.

Local Variations

Now that the number of Councils has been reduced from 26 to 11, it is possible to gain some insights into how the resident populations of the eleven new council areas differ in terms of attitudes on key indicators of community relations. By analysing the data from 2013 and 2014, a number of important findings emerge.

In relation to overall optimism, the survey suggests only a moderate degree of

Figure 3: Percentage believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than five years ago, by council area

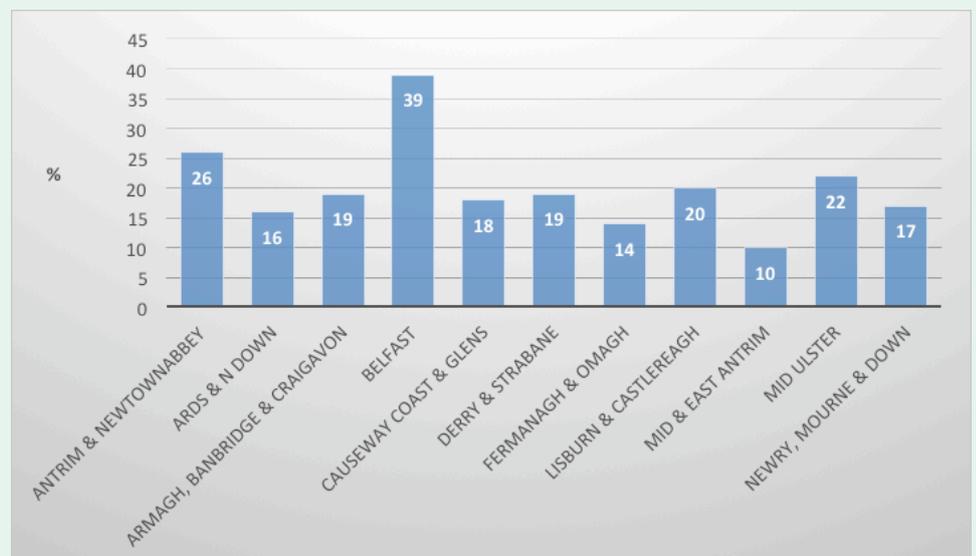


variability between Council areas. As Figure 1 shows, residents of Ards and North Down and Derry and Strabane appear to be the least optimistic while respondents in Newry, Mourne and Down were the most upbeat with 58% thinking that relations have improved. No Council is more than 5% above or below the Northern Ireland average and there is no clear pattern of optimism associated with West-East geography, Urban-Rural differences or Nationalist-Unionist control of Councils.

This general uniformity was not reflected in a number of specific areas, however. Asked whether they would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of only their own religion or in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, Belfast clearly emerges

as having a markedly higher percentage of respondents who, in 2013/14, would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of their own religion. Indeed in every other Council area except Antrim and Newtownabbey (26%) and Mid Ulster (22%) less than 20% stated this preference. This suggests that concerns over residence and residential mixing are considerably greater in Belfast at this time, although it is not yet clear whether this is specifically associated with current disputes over flags and parades or whether the existence of physical barriers has increased the tolerance for and desirability of separation. Belfast also has the largest percentage of respondents who said that they had been personally annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags in the last year, although

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of only their own religion, by council area



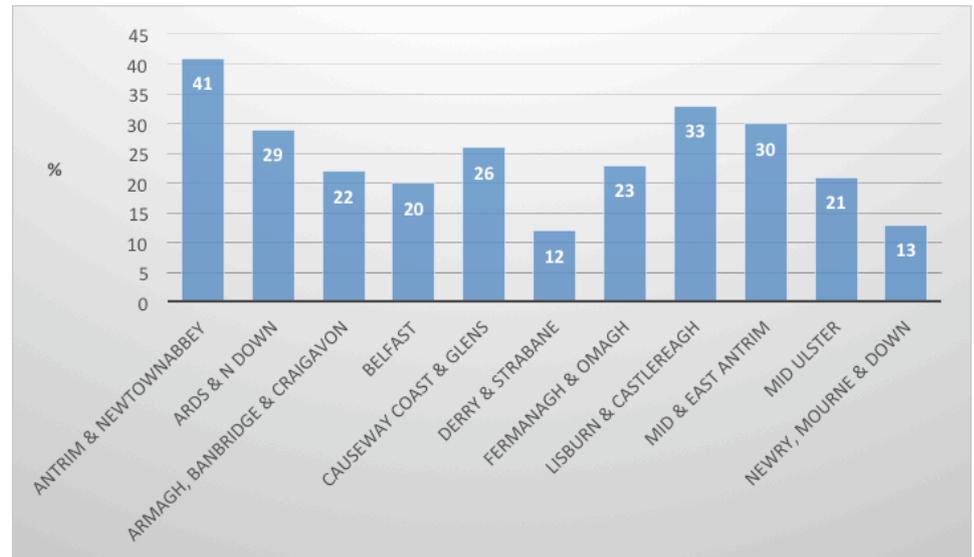
there is also evidence of tensions over both Republican and Loyalist murals and flags in Lisburn and Castlereagh and Derry and Strabane. However it does suggest that efforts to remove interface barriers under the Together: Building a United Community Strategy faces a number of significant hurdles if it is to meet its targets.

Difference between Councils were also evident in relation to the question of flying the union flag from public buildings, suggesting that agreeing policy at regional level may run into significant local difficulties. Although there is no council where residents expressed a majority view for flying the union flag at all times, there are very clear variations. In Antrim and Newtownabbey, 41% supported this position, as did 33% in Lisburn and Castlereagh and 29% in Ards and North Down. On the other hand, only 12% in Derry and Strabane support flying the union flag every day, markedly less than elsewhere. Perhaps most surprisingly of all, however, only 20% supported this view in Belfast where the controversy began.

Conclusion

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey suggests that Community Relations in Northern Ireland have recovered slightly from the tensions evident in 2013. However, it should be stressed that, with the exception of 2013, levels of optimism and sense of progress around community relations remain lower than at any time since devolution in 2007. In the interim, there is some evidence that support for mixing has

Figure 5: Percentage of respondents who feel that the union flag should be flown from all public buildings all the time, by council area



begun to reduce and it will be important to monitor trends in this area. New analysis suggests that this varies considerably by locality, with support for mixed residence markedly less in Belfast than elsewhere. All of these findings are potentially important, underlining the importance of resolving political and cultural disputes for the future of community relations as well as the difficulties in finding accommodation that is acceptable to Protestants, Catholics and those with no religious affiliation and has popular support in all Council areas.

Duncan Morrow is a lecturer in politics within the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy at Ulster University.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** (NILT) is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT 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.

Key points

- With the exception of 2013, the numbers believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics had got better was lower in 2014 than in any year since 2003, and has dropped fifteen percentage points since 2007 when devolution was restored.
- While the majority of respondents would still prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, the level of support for this has fallen from 82% in 2010 to 71% in 2013 and remains static at 70% in 2014.
- As in 2013, the most popular view among both Protestants and Catholics (51%) in 2014 was that the union flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings.
- Belfast emerges as having a markedly higher percentage of respondents who, in 2013/14, would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of their own religion.
- Belfast also has the largest percentage of respondents who said that they had been personally annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags in the last year.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

Magee campus, Ulster University
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 7137 5513
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 3943
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk