



## STANFORD UNIVERSITY

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### **Northern Ireland's First "Deliberative Poll" Shows Views of Informed Parents**

#### **Results on Shared Education and Community Perceptions**

For the first time ever, a scientific random sample of parents in Northern Ireland deliberated about a serious public policy issue—their children's educational future. The occasion was a Deliberative Poll, held in Omagh on 27 January 2007. The random sample brought together Protestants and Catholics of all shades of opinion, who then deliberated in small-group discussions and plenary sessions with panels of experts representing different policy perspectives. This was the first Deliberative Poll in a deeply divided society.

The polling firm Ipsos-MORI interviewed close to 600 parents in the Omagh area, of whom 127 attended the deliberations and were polled again at the end of the day. Their post-deliberation opinions provide a picture of what people would think about the future of education in Northern Ireland if they knew and thought more about it.

The results will also be discussed on BBC Northern Ireland's Hearts and Minds programme tomorrow night (Thursday 1 February 2007) at 7.30pm on BBC TWO Northern Ireland—and later at 11.35pm on BBC ONE Northern Ireland.

Community Perceptions: Deliberation changed the sample's perceptions of both communities. The percentage believing Protestants "open to reason" increased from 36% to 52%, and the percentage believing Catholics "open to reason" increased from 40% to 56%. The percentage viewing each of the two communities as "trustworthy" also increased dramatically. For Catholics, the percentage rose from 50% to 62%; for Protestants, it rose from 50% to 60%. The percentage believing that most Protestants support schooling with a balanced enrolment of Catholics and Protestants increased significantly from 21% to 43%, while the percentage believing that most Catholics do so increased from 26% to 40%.

Educational Sharing: Support for shared education was initially substantial and generally increased. For example:

- \* Agreement that schools needing to partner to deliver the curriculum should “be required to partner with their closest neighbouring school, even if it is not of the same religious composition,” increased from 60% to 72%. The increase was roughly the same for both Protestants and Catholics.
- \* Agreement that changes in the Omagh area’s education system “can equally benefit both communities” increased from 40% to 51%. (The alternative was that “changes that are good for one community will necessarily be bad for the other community.”) Among Protestants the percentage agreeing that changes “can equally benefit both communities” started and finished at close to 50%, while among Catholics, it rose from 34% to 51%.
- \* Agreement that “better relations will come about only through more mixing of the two communities” started high at 61% and moved to an even higher 69%, although in this case the change was not statistically significant.
- \* Support for increasing the number of Integrated Schools was high both before at 72% and after deliberation at 69%.

Openness to Change: The participants clearly became more open to change. Support for “Retaining all types of schools in the Omagh area (controlled, maintained, voluntary, special and Irish Medium)” declined from 60% to 43%.

Knowledge: There were massive gains in knowledge. On average, the sample answered only 22% of seven questions about Northern Ireland’s education system correctly before deliberation but answered 50% correctly after deliberation. For example, the percentage knowing that schools receive more funding for older pupils increased from 21% to 79%, and the percentage knowing that the new entitlement curriculum requires that “every school provide all 14-year-olds with a choice of at least 24 subjects” increased from 21% to 74%.

Representativeness: The random sample is socio-demographically representative of the Omagh area, except for gender. The participants were 76% female, an over-representation inherited from MORI’s initial interview sample. This would not appear to have affected the results, however, since the male and female participants changed in the same way for 37 of the study’s 39 policy issues. On all other socio-demographics, the participants and nonparticipants were very similar. For example, the proportions of single versus married people, of those having a university degree or postgraduate qualification, and of Unionists and Nationalists were about the same for interviewees who attended the deliberations and those who did not. The participants and nonparticipants also averaged about the same number of children. While there were somewhat more Protestants and fewer Catholics among the participants than among the nonparticipants, the percentage of each community was about the same as in the Omagh area as a whole. The participants were 65% Catholic while the area’s population, according to official government census figures, is 63% Catholic.

Dr. Ian O’Flynn, Lecturer in Politics at Newcastle University, pointed out that “In a context in which the views of politicians often seem so deeply polarised, it is wonderful to see parents deliberating together in an effort to build shared solutions to common problems. With a real prospect of a return of devolution, the point should not be lost on local politicians.”

Dr. David Russell and Professor Tony Gallagher, from the School of Education, Queen’s University Belfast said that “The Deliberative Poll has, for the first time, allowed the voices of parents who had the opportunity to learn about the educational choices facing them and their children to be heard. In keeping with the recent recommendations of the Bain Review, this process has shown that the vast majority of parents clearly envisage a shared future for their children.”

Professor James Fishkin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, one of the partners in the project, said that “We put a scientific microcosm of the two communities in one room where they could think together about issues confronting their common future. They became more informed, they changed their views and they found a greater basis for mutual understanding. This is the first time “deliberative democracy has been applied in a deeply divided society.”

Professor Robert Luskin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Opinion Research at the University of Texas, remarked that “The changes in both policy attitudes and perceptions of the two communities were especially impressive considering that the deliberations were only for one day. A more extended period of civil, thoughtful, balanced deliberation, not to mention a world in which it became part of everyday life, would presumably do much more.”

The research team was led by Dr. Ian O’Flynn of Newcastle University in conjunction with Dr. David Russell of the School of Education, Queens University, Professor Tony Gallagher, Queens University, Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University, and Professor Robert C. Luskin of Stanford University and the University of Texas at Austin.

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**Notes to Editors**

For more on Deliberative Polling® see <http://cdd.stanford.edu>