

Party and election finance - public opinion research

Research report prepared for the
Electoral Commission

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Background and objectives

1. Background and objectives

The Electoral Commission is the regulator of party political funding in the UK. Its role is to ensure integrity and transparency in party and election finance.

The Commission is currently reviewing its administration of the Northern Ireland political parties' donations and loans scheme. This scheme requires political parties in Northern Ireland to submit information to the Commission on the donations and loans they receive. This information is held confidentially by the Commission to avoid any backlash against those who donate to specific parties. However, from October 2010 the confidentiality requirement could end, and donors' details may be released into the public domain.

As part of its review, the Electoral Commission commissioned Ipsos MORI to gauge the views of the general public on issues relating to the funding of political parties in Northern Ireland. Qualitative research was commissioned to allow an in-depth exploration of attitudes towards the current party funding system. Specifically, the research investigated:

- Awareness of how political parties are funded in Northern Ireland;
- Willingness of participants to donate money to political parties;
- Views on releasing the details of donors to the public;
- Awareness of how funding to political parties is regulated;

Methodology

2. Methodology

Eight focus groups were conducted between 15th – 17th June 2009 in Belfast, Newry and Derry. The breakdown of the group structure is as follows:

Group	Location	Age	Social class	Political opinion	Urban/rural	No of participants
1	Greater Belfast	18-29	ABC1	Nationalist	Urban	8
2	Greater Belfast	45-60	C2DE	Unionist	Urban	8
3	Greater Belfast	30-44	ABC1	Unionist	Urban	6
4	Greater Belfast	61+	C2DE	Unionist	Urban	8
5	Newry	45-60	ABC1	Nationalist	Rural	8
6	Newry	30-44	C2DE	Nationalist	Urban	8
7	Derry	61+	ABC1	Nationalist	Urban	7
8	Derry	18-29	C2DE	Unionist	Rural	8

A similar proportion of men and women attended each group.

A number of factors/considerations were taken into account when deciding the group structure:

- Half the groups were held in Belfast to reflect the fact that a significant proportion of the population in Northern Ireland is concentrated in this area.
- Given the sensitive and political nature of the groups it was agreed to split the groups according to political opinion. It was not felt necessary to split the groups according to affiliation to a political party but a mix of party political support within each Nationalist/Unionist group was recruited.
- At least one of Derry and Fermanagh/Tyrone needed to be included as previous quantitative research indicated that compared to the other parts of Northern Ireland, residents in these areas have quite different attitudes towards whether information about who donated money to political parties should be made available. They are far more likely to say they don't mind whereas residents of other counties feel more strongly that the information should be made available. Derry was selected as it allowed an appropriate balance overall in terms of the number of urban and rural groups, and Nationalist and Unionist groups.
- All participants were selected on the basis that they had at least some interest in politics in order to effectively contribute to a discussion on these issues.
- Party members or people particularly active in politics were excluded to avoid those who may have had superior knowledge of the party funding system potentially alienating others in the groups and biasing results.

- A mix of voters and non-voters was included in each group (splitting the groups by voting behaviour in addition to other criteria would have made the structure too complex).
- A topic guide was designed in consultation with the Electoral Commission. The Commission also provided background information to be used as prompts during the course of the discussions. These are included in the appendices.
- Where necessary the discussions were deliberately steered away from the MPs expenses scandal.

Summary

3. Summary

Where do parties get their money from?

- There was relatively little knowledge of or interest in how political parties in Northern Ireland are funded, but some participants knew that parties were funded through private donations from businesses, individuals and state funding. The majority of this information, it was claimed, was picked up through newspapers and news on television. Of greater interest to participants, however, was how political parties spend their money, particularly in light of the recent MPs expenses scandal.

Why do people donate to parties?

- Overwhelmingly, people thought that private donations and loans from businesses were generally made to buy favours or to influence policy. The Seymour Sweeney/Ian Paisley Jnr. case¹ was frequently used as an example to illustrate this point. Individuals were seen to be more likely than businesses to make a donation because they believed in the principles of the party.

Should parties get money from the state?

- There were mixed views about whether political parties in Northern Ireland should receive money from state funding. Some participants viewed it positively because it would limit the influence that private donors would have over parties and it would give a chance to smaller parties with less access to other sources of funding. However, other participants were concerned that state funding would have to be paid for through higher taxes.

Would you give money to a political party?

- The vast majority of participants would not personally donate money to a political party. Reasons given included not being able to afford to donate, a preference for donating money to a charity if they did have spare cash and a lack of trust in politicians and political parties and how the money would be spent.

Confidentiality – yes or no?

- No one knew with any certainty whether donors' details were kept confidential or not, in part reflecting a lack of interest in the subject.
- In six of the eight groups the weight of opinion was in favour of lifting the confidentiality arrangement. While these participants acknowledged that the threat of intimidation remained an issue, many felt that Northern Ireland has moved on sufficiently to make donors' details public without major repercussions. Some did think there was a possibility that businesses may lose custom if it became known that they were funding a particular political party. However, the need for openness and transparency in the

¹ This was a high-profile case from 2007 in which it was alleged that a property developer, Seymour Sweeney, received a contract to build a new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway because he was a member of the DUP.

political system in Northern Ireland outweighed this. While it seems few would actively seek out this information if it were available, the general view was that parties would be more accountable if donations were made public.

- In the two remaining groups, both in Belfast (one Nationalist, one Unionist), the majority of participants were against the confidentiality arrangement coming to an end. In these groups there was concern that the threat of intimidation was still too great. Another argument put forward for maintaining confidentiality was that party political support was a personal matter and donations, like voting, should be anonymous.

Who regulates the finances of parties?

- There was very little knowledge of the regulation of party and election finance, hence there was little firm opinion as to whether party finance rules were adhered to or regulated. Where there was it tended towards the negative – that parties probably did break the rules or find some means of getting around them.
- Wide ranging sanctions were suggested for parties if funding rules are broken, from fines to criminal prosecutions. Not all felt that financial penalties were sufficient for breaking funding rules. For repeated offences and accepting large amounts of money from inadmissible sources, politicians should be subject to prosecution, as would anyone else who committed fraud.

Detailed findings

4. Detailed findings

4.1 Funding of political parties

4.1.1 Awareness of sources of funding

While participants across all of the eight groups were able to mention at least some of the sources of party funding it was evident that much of this was a case of guess work rather than being well informed about the system of party funding. It was apparent throughout the discussion that this was an area where participants had little knowledge and for the majority there was also little genuine interest.

The most commonly mentioned sources were government or 'public' money and private donations from wealthy individuals and businesses. Some were aware that Sinn Fein MLAs/MPs gave a portion of their salary to the party (mainly from Nationalist groups) and there was limited awareness of fund raising drives through raffles, door-to-door collections and fundraising events.

When prompted on whether parties could receive money from overseas, a number were adamant that donations, for Sinn Fein in particular, did come from business and individuals in the United States (and the 60+, ABC1 group in Derry also mentioned Columbia). Several references were made to connections the party has in that country. Even when informed that money could not be accepted from overseas donors, there was disbelief that this was really the case or that the party could get round the rules with large donations being made via contacts in UK and ROI.

Donations from businesses or individuals in ROI were not mentioned spontaneously, but when told that this was permissible and did happen none of the participants seemed surprised that this was the case. Party member subscription fees and conference fees were other sources of which there was very limited awareness.

4.1.2 State funding

There seemed to be an assumption that government or public money made up the majority of party funding, again this was led by a lack of knowledge and interest in the subject and for what party funding is used. For example, comments were made that politicians already receive their salaries from the Government and therefore should not receive any other state funding.

A number of arguments were put forward as to why parties should not receive state funding, or at least a significant amount of state funding. Income tax was commonly raised by participants, particularly C2DEs, with concerns about how state funding impacted them directly.

"Income taxes are high enough without giving it to parties. They must have some other way of making it rather than getting the money from the public purse"

Female, Belfast, 45-60, C2DE, Unionist, Urban

There were also some questions about how the money from state funding was being spent and whether there were more beneficial causes than party funding. A few people were

concerned that state funding would not be distributed fairly and therefore give the larger parties an advantage. This view tended to be voiced more often in the ABC1 groups.

One of the Unionist groups in Belfast and the Unionist group in Derry felt that state funding could mean that individuals end up providing support (through income taxes) for parties that they are opposed to.

Some participants felt that a reduction in state funding would mean that parties would have to work harder to earn their money through other means such as fundraising which could perhaps lead to greater engagement with communities.

Reactions to state funding were not entirely negative and some participants did feel that it was acceptable for at least some to be made available for the following reasons: sustaining the party system (Belfast, 18-29, ABC1, Nationalist), assisting those parties with less access to private donations (Newry, Urban, 30-44, C2DE, Nationalist) and reducing the influence of private donors on parties (Belfast, 61+, C2DE, Unionist). Parties should, however, have to account for how any state funding is spent.

4.1.3 Private donations

Many participants were surprised that private individuals would *want* to make donations to political parties and assumed it would only be the very wealthy who would do so. Business donations were assumed to be more common place. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that such donations were made in order to influence party policy or buy favours, and this was consistent across all of the groups.

"These people that are supporting them can afford to do it, but they're definitely not getting it for nothing"

Female, Belfast, 61+, C2DE, Unionist, Urban

Several references were made to the Seymour Sweeney case, in Newry in particular but also by individuals in Derry and Belfast, regarding money being donated to obtain planning permission. This was assumed to be quite a widespread practice and few believed many businesses would make a donation purely because they believed in the party's values. As such, there was some concern over whether such donations should be permissible without more regulation or transparency than participants currently believe exist.

The same arguments also applied to loans made by businesses. There was an added concern here that loans were probably not repaid and were just effectively donations in disguise.

While there was a degree of this scepticism around donations from individuals also, participants were more willing to believe these could be made because of personal political beliefs. Ultimately it was agreed that an individual has the right to choose how to spend their money and should be free to make donations or loans to political parties should they wish.

"If I had disposable income I can give it to whoever I want. I could give it to a political party or a charity. It's my choice"

Female, Newry, 45-60, ABC1, Nationalist, Rural

4.1.4 Party members

There were no objections over MLAs/MPs donating a portion of their salary back to their parties. Indeed some felt that more funding should come from MLAs themselves and showed true commitment to the party. The only question this raised with a minority was that perhaps they were getting paid too much in the first place if they were able to afford to do this.

4.1.5 Motivation to donate

The vast majority of participants had no inclination to personally donate money to political parties. There are three key reasons that underpin people's reluctance to donate money to a political party: deep cynicism and a lack of trust in politicians and their motives; not being able to afford to; and preferring to donate money to charities or other more 'worthy' causes if they did have spare money. It was clearly something that the majority of participants had just not thought about doing.

"I would rather chew off my own hand [than donate]...some politicians can be incredibly sleazy"

Male, Belfast, 30-44, ABC1, Unionist, Urban

A few individuals said they might consider it if they had more disposable income, believed passionately in what a party said and had more trust in politicians themselves.

"It wouldn't be something at the top of my list but I would if there was something I felt strongly about"

Female, Belfast, 45-60, C2DE, Unionist, Urban

Participants claimed they get information about party funding from newspapers and to a lesser extent TV news. If they wanted to look for information most said they would use the internet, though none mentioned any specific sites. Some said this sort of information should be available from party offices or websites for those who wish to access it.

4.2 Confidentiality

4.2.1 Awareness and understanding

Generally participants were not sure whether information about donations and loans were currently kept confidential or made available to the public. While some assumed that the information was available, others thought the opposite. Among those who thought the information was kept confidential the main reason given was that neither donor nor party would want it to become available so that it would not be apparent what favours were being bought and at what cost. None of the participants spontaneously suggested that the confidentiality arrangement was in place due to potential intimidation of donors.

There was no awareness that donations and loans of over £5,000 had to be declared to the Electoral Commission (or any organisation at all). On presenting this information to respondents the immediate response from many was 'well how many donations are made for £4,999?'

4.2.2 Views on current arrangements and the future

There was a fair amount of scepticism towards the reason for the confidentiality arrangement (preventing intimidation). In six of the eight groups the majority view was this was a less serious issue than it has been previously and that Northern Ireland politics had moved on substantially in recent years. There was some sentiment in these groups, in Newry and Derry in particular, that if the confidentiality arrangement remains in place it would have more to do with politicians and businesses wanting to keep their dealings with each other secret than it would fear of intimidation.

"At this stage it shouldn't matter. 5, 10, 15 years ago you might have understood better why it is confidential...a person making a donation shouldn't have that fear now"

Female, Derry, 18-29, C2DE, Unionist, Rural

"Most areas are mainly Nationalist or mainly Unionist, and the businesses in the area are also mainly one or another. I don't know how much of a problem it would be [if it was clear that businesses were donating to a particular party], but it shouldn't be anything being kept from the people"

Female, Newry, 30-44, C2DE, Nationalist, Urban

Two of the groups in Belfast (18-29, ABC1, Nationalist and 45-60, C2DE, Unionist), however, were more inclined to agree that the threat of intimidation was a valid reason for keeping donor information confidential and the majority in both groups felt that this should be maintained for the foreseeable future. The older group felt that they could not see the situation changing enough in their own lifetime for it to become safe to release donors' details into the public domain. Another reason for these two groups' reluctance to have details made available was they felt political support was personal; in the same way that one's vote at elections was confidential so should any financial support given to parties.

"Peoples' business and livelihood would be at risk. It's too big a risk to take"

Female, Belfast, 45-60, C2DE, Unionist, Urban

"I don't see how you could ever justify giving someone's name. Whose business is it except the party and the person giving the money"

Male, Belfast, 18-29, ABC1, Nationalist, Urban

The other six groups were in favour of the confidentiality agreement coming to end in the near future. The most common argument for this was that more openness and transparency was needed to build trust in political parties and crack down on any possible corruption.

"This cloak and dagger atmosphere needs to end. There needs to be a certain level of transparency to inspire public confidence"

Male, Belfast, 30-44, ABC1, Unionist, Urban

Other arguments put forward included that Northern Ireland should not be treated any differently from Great Britain – this came from participants with both Nationalist and Unionist backgrounds - and that the public has a right to know as political parties work on behalf of them.

A number of participants in the six groups that wanted the confidentiality arrangement to come to an end accepted there could be some reaction against businesses in terms of boycotting. This view was particularly strong in Derry, but was also mentioned in Newry. They felt that if it became known that businesses were supporting certain parties that they could lose custom. However, despite acknowledging this the majority view was still to bring an end to the arrangement as openness and transparency is more important.

"It can affect your business if you support one side or another [through donations]...then they would lose their customers"

Female, Derry, 61+, ABC1, Nationalist, Urban

For the reason given above it was thought that businesses and to a lesser extent individuals might stop making donations to parties. However, participants, especially in Newry, thought it just as likely that businesses would stop making donations because they would not want it to be common knowledge they were trying to buy influence.

"[Intimidation argument] is a perfect excuse for the big industries to hide behind a cover that they are funding a political party"

Male, Newry, 45-60, ABC1, Nationalist, Rural

"In 2010 if the EC decide the donations have to be made public, the people who are genuinely donating for the cause of the party will not be swayed by that...the people doing it for dishonest reasons aren't going to want that revealed"

Female, Newry, 30-44, C2DE, Nationalist, Urban

These participants were not clear about what impact the loss this funding might have on political parties and also did not want the shortfall in funding to be made up with public money.

In reality it is unlikely that the participants in these groups would actually seek out any information on party donations themselves or be particularly interested in it (with a few respondents saying that they would not want this sort of information to dominate the news should it become available). Rather they felt that if it was available to the public, parties would then be more accountable. Of more interest to many was how the money was spent, though besides media coverage of the recent expenses scandal, none gave the impression of having sought out this type of information previously.

4.3 Regulations

4.3.1 Awareness

There was limited awareness of the regulations regarding party finances. As such it was difficult for participants to comment on how well they thought these regulations were adhered to or policed.

A minority of participants thought that the regulations were probably being enforced. Others were more sceptical and did not feel that there would be much interrogation of the accounts submitted and believed that parties and donors would find means of getting around the regulations. The general tone and content of the discussions suggested that participants felt that the regulations would often be broken, and there were no major demographic and

regional differences underlying this sentiment. The MPs expenses scandal feeds into this but it is apparent there is significant mistrust of politicians and their motives.

4.3.2 The Electoral Commission

In the light of mistrust in politicians and the desire for more transparency, most said that there was a need for a regulatory body, but only one respondent across the eight groups spontaneously mentioned the Electoral Commission as fulfilling this role. However, when told that the Commission was responsible for the regulation of party finances, most participants claimed to have heard of it before but in association with the running of elections. Given the lack of knowledge about the regulations and the Electoral Commission's role in enforcing them it follows that participants could not comment on how well they thought the Electoral Commission was doing its job.

4.3.3 Sanctions and punishment

Participants were asked what sanctions could be applied to those parties found guilty of breaking the rules on party finance. A range of sanctions and punishments, such as fines and criminal prosecutions were discussed and it was generally agreed that the punishment needed to be proportionate to the offence. However, some were concerned that fines were not a sufficient deterrent for breaking the rules – they were not convinced that this was much of a penalty as the money would just come from the public or taxpayer anyway.

"They should make an example of a few of them if they break the rules"

Male, Newry, 30-44, C2DE, Nationalist, Urban

Removing people from political parties was one suggestion put forward as a punishment for more serious or repeated breaches of the law.

Criminal prosecutions and possible jail terms were thought appropriate - especially among respondents in Newry and Derry - if the 'crime' was severe enough, though not many thought this would actually happen. Ultimately participants were very strongly of the opinion that politicians should be subject to the same forms of punishment as everyone else is.

"Regardless of who they are or what they do fraud is fraud. If Joe Public commits fraud, they can be hit with a suspended sentence, or a fine, or a penalty or would be named and shamed...there should be no special cases [for parties]"

Female, Belfast, 30-44, ABC1, Unionist, Urban

4.4 Conclusion

Party funding and the regulations surrounding it were not of particular interest to the great majority of participants and this was reflected in the limited knowledge possessed by most people. It was not a subject any had sought information on, or seemed likely to do so, but there was a fair amount of cynicism surrounding these issues, stemming from a general distrust in politicians and politics.

There was clear support for more openness and transparency on matters relating to party and election finance. Six of the eight groups supported the confidentiality arrangement being lifted in the near future. This is not to say, however, that such a move will not meet with some objections; some felt party political support is a personal matter and should remain

anonymous and there was still some concern about potential repercussions for donors should their details be made available.

While some had heard of the Electoral Commission, most were unfamiliar with its role in regulating election and party funding. There is clearly scope for the Electoral Commission to raise its profile, particularly in relation to party funding. While it is true that these issues are not of key concern to many, raising awareness of the organisation, its role and being seen to uphold regulations could help establish more trust in the party funding system.

Appendices

5. Appendices

5.1 Appendix 1: Topic guide

<u>Key Questions</u>	<u>Time</u>
1. Introduction	5 mins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Welcome and introduce self and any others - Introduction to Ipsos MORI - Explain market research - Explain topic in broad terms - “Getting views and attitudes political party funding” - Format and length of group - Talking to all sorts of people at various locations across Northern Ireland - Describe viewing facility, explain that there may be clients watching (Belfast only) and explain use of video/audio tape - Assure respondents of Security/Confidentiality/Anonymity and MRS Code of Conduct - Used only for research purposes - Emphasise fact that it is an open discussion (no right/wrong answers, you may agree/disagree with others) and that we want to hear from everyone – but one at a time! ▪ Introduction of respondents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce selves – first name, working status, family status, interests 	
2. Funding of political parties	30 mins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From which sources do you think political parties get their funding? RECORD UNPROMPTED ANSWERS THEN PROBE FOR. Public funding, private donations, money from businesses, party members money from abroad - From where did you get your information about party funding? - How could information about funding be made available to you? - From which sources do you think political parties should get their funding? Why is that? - What are the benefits/potential drawbacks of each of these sources of funding? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public funding (for example money provided by Parliament) - Private donations/loans - Donations/loans from businesses - Party members - Would you consider making a donation to a political party yourself? Why/why not? - What would encourage you to make a donation to a political party? - AS NECESSARY PROVIDE INFORMATION ON CURRENT SOURCES OF PARTY FUNDING FROM FACT SHEET 	

3 Confidentiality	30 mins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you know whether donor's details are released into the public domain or not? - Do you think details should be made available? Why/why not? - For what reasons do you think they are kept confidential? Do you think these reasons are still valid in Northern Ireland? - <i>If believe that information should not be made available ask</i> When do you think would be an appropriate time in the future to make this change? - Do you think people/businesses would stop donating money if their details were made available? Why do you say that? - Would you personally be more or less likely to make a donation to a party if your details were made available to the public? - What would be the benefits of making this information available? - Do you think there is a need for more openness and transparency regarding party funding? Why do you say that? What benefits do you think it could bring? What are the potential drawbacks? - AS NECESSARY PROVIDE INFORMATION ON CONFIDENTIALITY FROM FACT SHEET 	
4 Regulation of party and elections finance	20 mins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which of the regulations around party funding are you aware of? RECORD UNPROMPTED THEN PROMPT WITH DETAILS FROM REGULATIONS FACT SHEET - How well do you think party finances are regulated? How about election finances? Which aspects do you think are properly regulated? Which areas do you think there is room for improvement? - Do you think parties are held to account if they break the rules? What makes you think this? - Which organisation do you think is responsible for the regulation of party and election finance? RECORD UNPROMPTED THEN PROMPT WITH ELECTORAL COMMISSION - What do you think the EC does? How effective do you think it have been in keeping a check on party finances? • What actions do you think the Electoral Commission can take when party funding rules are broken? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think there should be different types of punishment for different offences when the party funding rules are broken? (For example, should some offences result in a fine only and others a stronger penalty such as a criminal prosecution?) 	
5 Summary and close	5 mins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the one key message you would like us to take back to our client regarding party funding and confidentiality - Thank and close 	

NOTE: If the issue of expenses scandal is raised during the groups, allow participants to discuss but explain this is a separate issue and steer respondents back to focus of this topic guide.

5.2 Appendix 2: Prompt sheets

Sources of funding factsheet

Political parties in Northern Ireland are funded through a variety of sources which include

- Private donations from individuals, businesses and trade unions
- Party membership subscriptions fees
- Contributions from MLAs/MPs salaries
- Public funding generated through personal income and business taxes
- Income from party conferences
- Private loans from individuals and businesses
- In Northern Ireland (unlike the rest of the UK), donations and loans can be made by permissible Irish sources. (This reflects the Republic of Ireland's special place in the political life of Northern Ireland)

Confidentiality factsheet

Donations and loans must be declared to the regulatory body but unlike in Great Britain this information must be kept confidential

- The confidentiality arrangement was put in place due to concerns that donors could face intimidation if their details became known
- This arrangement is due to expire in October 2010 but it could be extended following consultation

Regulations Factsheet

- Since 1 November 2007 political parties in Northern Ireland have been required to submit returns declaring donations received
- They must declare any donations exceeding £5,000
- Parties must provide details of the value for the donation and the name, address and other relevant details of the donor
- Parties must report any donations they have been given that were returned because the donor was unidentifiable or impermissible
- Since 1 July 2008 they have also been required to submit returns declaring any loans entered into. The thresholds and requirements that apply to donations also apply to loans
- Expenses and accounts must be submitted
- There is a limit on the amount a party can spend on an election campaign
- Party funding and finances are regulated by the Electoral Commission