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the full report First published: 25 February 2021 Last updated: 25 February 2021  
Summary We ran research on public attitudes towards the transparency of political  
party and campaigner finance in Northern Ireland. This included views on the  
publication of information about donations and loans made between 2014 and 2017. The  
research, carried out by Ipsos Mori, is based on responses from a series of online  
focus groups conducted across Northern Ireland. Respondents were asked questions  
about their awareness of, and attitudes towards, the financing of political parties,  
as well as the arrangements for reporting and publishing such information, and how  
confident they were in the transparency of that regime. Key findings Support for  
transparent, unbiased information There is strong public support for transparent,  
unbiased information about how political parties are funded in Northern Ireland.  
However, there is limited awareness of and knowledge about how the system of funding  
and regulation currently works. This means that perceptions can be based largely on  
assumptions and instinct. Existing perceptions of party politics may contribute  
negatively to attitudes towards political party funding and donations. Public  
perceptions about the transparency of the system of funding and regulation can  
improve when people become aware of the controls and regulations in place around  
political finance. We play an important role in ensuring transparency and confidence  
in that system and will consider what more can be done to improve confidence and  
trust. Support for the publication of donations made between 2014 and 2017 The  
majority of research participants felt that information on donations made between  
2014 and 2017 should be published, to help to improve transparency in the political  
finance system and to improve political accountability. We continue to call on the UK  
Government to change the law to allow us to publish this information. Concerns around  
the current political finance system in Northern Ireland For some participants,  
getting more information about party finance rules improved their perceptions of the  
transparency of the system. However, the majority of participants do not consider the  
current system in Northern Ireland to be transparent even once they know more about  
it. They gave various reasons for this, including the following. Giving an amount  
under £500 to a party or campaigner is not classed as a donation. This created a  
perception among the public that this is a 'loophole', adding to the perception that  
the current regime is malleable. The current thresholds at which donations need to be  
reported to the Commission for publication are seen as too high. Donations made  
between 2014 and 2017 cannot be published for Northern Ireland. These negative  
perceptions damage confidence in the regulatory system. While some of the attitudes  
are linked to wider issues around trust in politics, we will be considering what more  
can be done to improve public confidence. Research methodology Research methodology A  
qualitative approach was used for this research based on a focus group methodology.  
Given the low awareness on the subject in question, the focus groups were designed  
with a deliberative approach, involving 'drip-feeding' participants with information  
throughout the course of the session in order to aid in the development of informed  
opinions. Fifteen online focus groups were conducted, using both online discussion  
boards and video groups, engaging a total of 118 participants. A spread of  
participants from across Northern Ireland was included to ensure the data generated  
was broadly reflective of the Northern Ireland population. Fieldwork was carried out  
in August and September 2020. Download the full report Northern Ireland political  
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