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# **Northern Ireland Political Transparency Research**

**A report prepared for the Electoral  
Commission**

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# **Executive summary**

# Executive Summary

## Introduction and methodology

Ipsos MORI was commissioned by The Electoral Commission to undertake a dedicated qualitative research study to understand public awareness around political party finances and attitudes towards transparency of political party funding in Northern Ireland, including views on the publication of information on donations and loans made between 2014 and 2017. In order to meet this objective, a programme of qualitative research was designed which utilised a focus group methodology. Given the low awareness on the subject in question, the focus groups were designed with a deliberative approach. Fifteen online focus groups were conducted, using both online discussion boards and video groups, engaging a total of 118 participants.

## General awareness and perceptions of political donations

Initial perceptions on political donations indicated that there are clear negative connotations surrounding political party funding and donations, and that a perception of corruption is evident.

General awareness on political party finances was limited, with opinions expressed being linked to assumptions rather than factual or inherent knowledge. There was a lack of interest in the issue of political party funding, which seemed to be driven by a general sense of disengagement in Northern Ireland politics, combined with a perceived lack of public discourse on the issue. In line with initial negative perceptions, people were sceptical about the information provided to them by political parties, with some believing that information is deliberately withheld from them by parties whose interest it is in that such information remains hidden.

Knowledge on donations was similarly limited, and donations were viewed through a negative lens. Many associate donations with 'back-handed' deals or political favours, reinforcing the perception of corruption and fostering a sense of scepticism as to whether party dealings are legitimate. People tended to think of donors as wealthy individuals or businesses, neither of which they perceived to be the 'average Joe'. Generally, most were content for parties to receive donations as a means to operate, but this was conditional on the knowledge that donations could be tracked, and that there was accountability in how such donations were spent.

There was a clear appetite for transparent, unbiased information from neutral sources. There is a lack of trust in parties themselves and people are largely sceptical of the media, despite the fact many rely upon it to provide them with relevant information. People seem to want maximum transparency with minimal effort on their part to seek out information on political party finances.

## Funding and donations

A pervasive sense of scepticism was evident towards political party funding and donations to political parties in Northern Ireland. Surprise about the sizeable amount of money donated to political parties by individuals in particular, fuelled the expectation of corruption within the current regime. The surprise was also a result of the perception that donations made by businesses would have been more likely to outweigh those of individuals<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note the overall individual donations figure was influenced by a number of large donations made by a bequest to a registered political party in Northern Ireland



It was apparent that political donations are perceived to be inherently linked with political favours and backhanded deals. Participants could not identify with someone who would donate to a political party and perceived individuals as only motivated to donate in order to receive reciprocal economic or political benefits. The overall amount of money donated to political parties led many to question whether particular individuals are being given the opportunity to shape the political landscape and pull societal strings in Northern Ireland.

There was a strong consensus across the groups that the current donation thresholds are too high as they would allow individuals or businesses to donate a significant sum without being subject to public scrutiny. For many, the current donation reporting threshold<sup>2</sup> combined with the legal definition of a donation as any amount over £500, constitutes a loophole within the current regime, leaving it vulnerable to corruption. This caused the majority to believe that the regime is not transparent. Rather, they view it as a regime that is malleable to the desired political and economic ends of the wealthy and powerful.

There was unanimous agreement that the current donation thresholds should be lowered so that more donations would be reported. Participants thought this would deter corruption, enhance transparency and reinstate trust in the political process in Northern Ireland, which could in turn increase political engagement and voter turnout. A range of lower thresholds were suggested, ranging from £1 to £2,000. Some believed the threshold should be £500, in line with the legal definition of a donation. Others maintained that every donation should be reported. Further research into donation reporting thresholds may help to consolidate these findings and determine a lower reporting threshold which would command widespread public support.

Participants were relatively unfamiliar with the Electoral Commission and its role but were reassured to know that there is an organisation who oversees and regulates political party finance. However, some expressed concern that the Commission's ability to ensure transparency is undermined by the current regime. Additionally, people were dubious about whether the Commission could enforce compliance. There is a clear appetite for clear, unbiased information with many commenting that the Electoral Commission should enhance its public profile and regularly communicate information about political party finances to the general public.

It is important to highlight that while these findings relate to Northern Ireland, some of the rules which were questioned by participants apply to the whole of the UK and so further research could ascertain whether public opinion is aligned in other parts of the UK.

## Transparency and proposed changes

Transparency was considered an essential public good, the main beneficiary of which is the general public themselves. There was surprise that it has taken such a long time for legislative changes to improve transparency to its current level (from the introduction of controls on donations in NI in 2006<sup>3</sup>, to 2018 when information on donations could be published from 1 July 2017<sup>4</sup>). There was a recognition that progress has been made, but consensus that this does not go far enough to ensure transparency within political party funding.

Most participants agreed that the current regime cannot be regarded as transparent due to the lack of information on political party funding and donations within public discourse and the high reporting

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<sup>2</sup> Political parties must report donations of more than £7,500 from a single source or multiple small donations of £500 or more from a single source which together add up to over £7,500.

<sup>3</sup> The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions Act) 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018

thresholds which could lead to significant sums being donated without being subject to necessary scrutiny.

There was debate on the issue of whether donors should be able to remain anonymous. Despite some concerns about potential backlash and donor intimidation, participants agreed that if an individual or business is prepared to donate to a political party, they should do so publicly.

There was some contention about whether donations reported to the Electoral Commission between 2014 and 2017 should be retrospectively published. Some were concerned about the potential political instability that could ensue, and others considered dwelling on the past to be a futile exercise. These individuals tended to support moving forward with full transparency, which was connected to lowering the current donation reporting thresholds.

Despite some strong concerns, particularly in the Derry/Londonderry, Belfast and Newry groups, the majority across the 15 sessions were in favour of this information being made public. For those in favour publishing this information, this constituted an important step to enhancing transparency in Northern Ireland. Participants reflected that it is the public's right to know this information about their elected representatives and that there should be public accountability for any misdemeanours which occurred during this period.

There was strong agreement that the role of the Electoral Commission is crucial in making information on donations made between 2014 - 2017 available in a trustworthy way. To achieve this, there was a perception that the Commission should enhance its public profile by contributing to public discourse on this issue in a more visible way.

## Recommendations for future research

Based on the findings above, we recommend that the following areas could benefit from future research.

- Views on the acceptability of the legal definition of a donation which is £500 (in monetary value, goods or services).
- Views on the acceptability of the current donation reporting thresholds for political parties, regulated donees and accounting units.
- Differences in views on transparency of political party finance between those in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, potentially incorporating the further research recommended above in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain.



# 01

## Introduction

# Introduction

## Background context

The Electoral Commission is an independent public body, established under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission's primary aims are to ensure integrity and public confidence in the democratic process. To achieve this, it regulates political finances including party and election finance and it sets the standard for well-run elections.

The Commission is dedicated to increasing transparency around political finance, and as part of this it provides advice and guidance to political parties to ensure they understand party and election finance rules, and their obligations to uphold these rules.

The Commission has been allowed to publish information about donations and loans reported by Northern Ireland political parties and other regulated entities since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2017, under The Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018. Before the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2017, the Commission was prohibited by law from publishing this information.

Information on donations and loans reported to the Commission before 1<sup>st</sup> July 2017 are still prohibited from publication. In accordance with the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014, this information could be published in the future, subject to parliamentary approval. This would involve the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland laying a necessary Order in the United Kingdom (UK) Parliament.

The Commission has continually called on UK Government to bring forward legislation that will enable it to publish information on donations and loans from January 2014 onwards. The Commission feels that this is of particular importance for transparency and public confidence to voters in Northern Ireland, when considering the political context and the political events which took place in Northern Ireland from 2014. During the period from 2014-2017, major political events occurred, including elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the UK Parliament, the European Parliament, local Councils and the European Union (EU) referendum.

While the UK Government has committed to reviewing current legislation and has stipulated that the legislation could be extended in the future to allow for the publication on donations and loans made between January 2014 and July 2017, the prioritisation of this review may be impacted by the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Previous public opinion research commissioned by the Electoral Commission has found that overall knowledge around political party finance is low, but that there is broad support for information on donations and loans reported from 2014 to be made available<sup>5</sup>. More recent research found low awareness of the Electoral Commission<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ipsos MORI, 2009. Party and election finance – public opinion research. Research report prepared for the Electoral Commission. [https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/82126/Ipsos-Mori-Research-Report-On-Party-And-Election-Finance-In-Northern-Ireland.pdf](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/82126/Ipsos-Mori-Research-Report-On-Party-And-Election-Finance-In-Northern-Ireland.pdf) [Accessed 20 November 2020]

<sup>6</sup> GfK, 2018. Political Finance Regulation and Digital Campaigning: A Public Perspective. [https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf\\_file/Electoral-Commission-political-finance-regulation-and-digital-campaigning-a-public-perspective.pdf](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Electoral-Commission-political-finance-regulation-and-digital-campaigning-a-public-perspective.pdf) [Accessed 20 November 2020]

## Project objectives

The primary aim of this research project is outlined below.

**To explore public awareness and attitudes about transparency around political finance in Northern Ireland and to explore views on the publication of information relating to donations and loans made between 2014 and 2017.**

Some of the wider research objectives included the following:

- Gauge awareness and knowledge around the existing regime of rules regarding political parties;
- Identify areas of the current regime which are a cause of public concern and highlight any proposed changes;
- To investigate understanding of political donations, including what is considered 'permissible'; and,
- To test online qualitative methodologies.

# 02

## Methodology

# Methodology

In order to meet the aforementioned objectives, a programme of qualitative research was designed, which utilised a focus group methodology. Given the low awareness on the subject in question, the focus groups were designed with a deliberative approach. Deliberative research involves ‘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.

## Online focus groups

Twelve live online discussion boards were conducted across Northern Ireland, using Ipsos MORI’s in-house, online, qualitative platform, Adobe Connect. Given the current context with the COVID-19 pandemic, discussion boards facilitated the generative forum of traditional face-to-face discussion groups.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the research, online discussion boards facilitated a more open and honest discussion as this methodology helps overcome social desirability bias due to the anonymous nature of the platform.

## Sampling

While qualitative research does not seek to be representative, but rather seeks to target particular populations or sub-groups of interest, a spread of participants from across Northern Ireland was included to ensure the data generated was broadly reflective of the Northern Ireland population. Given the political sensitivity of the topics under discussion, groups were split by community background. Five Protestant groups and five Catholic groups were conducted. A further two groups were conducted with those who do not identify with either community, to reflect the growing middle ground in Northern Ireland.

We recruited a spread of participants across all political constituencies in Northern Ireland. Further to this, we also recruited a spread of political engagement, measured by a number of behavioural statements on people’s voting behaviour and interest in political issues more generally. The group composition is outlined below.

## Discussion Board Group Composition

Location	Constituency	Age	SEG	Community background	Political party support
<b>Belfast</b>	N/S/E/W Belfast, N Down, Strangford, Lagan Valley (min 1 each)	18-44	C2DE	Catholic	Spread of political parties
<b>Belfast</b>	N/S/E/W Belfast, N Down, Strangford, Lagan Valley (min 1 each)	18-44	ABC1	Neither	Spread of political parties
<b>Ballymena</b>	N Antrim, E Antrim, S Antrim (min 3 each)	18-44	ABC1	Neither	Spread of political parties
<b>Ballymena</b>	N Antrim, E Antrim, S Antrim (min 3 each)	45+	C2DE	Protestant	Spread of political parties

<b>Derry/Londonderry</b>	Foyle, E Londonderry <b>(min 4 each)</b>	18-44	ABC1	Protestant	Spread of political parties
<b>Derry/Londonderry</b>	Foyle, E Londonderry <b>(min 4 each)</b>	45+	C2DE	Catholic	Spread of political parties
<b>Fermanagh</b>	Fermanagh & S Tyrone	18-44	C2DE	Protestant	Spread of political parties
<b>Fermanagh</b>	Fermanagh & S Tyrone	45+	ABC1	Catholic	Spread of political parties
<b>Newry</b>	Newry & Armagh, S Down, Upper Bann <b>(min 2 each)</b>	18-44	ABC1	Protestant	Spread of political parties
<b>Newry</b>	Newry & Armagh, S Down, Upper Bann <b>(min 2 each)</b>	45+	C2DE	Catholic	Spread of political parties
<b>Omagh</b>	W Tyrone, Mid Ulster <b>(min 4 each)</b>	18-44	C2DE	Catholic	Spread of political parties
<b>Omagh</b>	W Tyrone, Mid Ulster <b>(min 4 each)</b>	45+	ABC1	Protestant	Spread of political parties

## Video focus groups

An additional three online video focus groups were conducted on Microsoft Teams, upon completion of the twelve discussion board groups. The aim of these groups was to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the two distinct online methodologies. A detailed methodological reflection is provided in Chapter 6. The video focus group composition is provided below.

### Video group composition

	Location	Community background	SEG	Age
<b>Video group 1</b>	Belfast	Neither	ABC1	18-44
<b>Video group 2</b>	East of the Bann	Protestant	C2DE	45+
<b>Video group 2</b>	West of the Bann	Catholic	ABC1	45+

## Pre & Post task exercises

In order to capture unbiased views before each session, participants were asked to complete a pre-task exercise, using Ipsos MORI's in-house app 'App Life'.

Participants were asked questions on their views on key issues around political party finances, political transparency and donations. They were then asked the same questions again at the end of the discussion board session, to identify any changes in views as a result of information learned throughout the session. An example of one of the questions asked in the app exercises is provided below. The remainder of the pre-task and post-task questions are appended to this report (see Appendix 1).

### AppLife example

App Store 12:01 57%

**Transparency question**

How much would you say you know about political party finance - that is the way in which parties raise money to pay their staff and fund election campaigns?

A lot	0 %
<input type="text"/>	
A little	0 %
<input type="text"/>	
Hardly anything	0 %
<input type="text"/>	
Nothing at all	0 %
<input type="text"/>	
Don't know	0 %
<input type="text"/>	

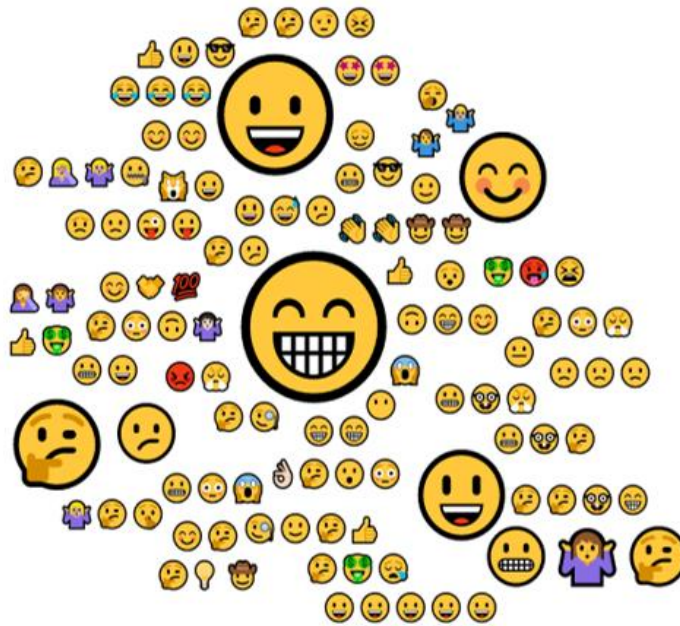
Total: 0 votes

< + >

To ease participants into the app-based task, and the subject matter, they were asked to either take a photo of their reaction when thinking about taking part in a group discussion on financial transparency in political parties or to share an emoji which best represented their feelings. Responses were generally positive, with some participants sharing emojis which indicated a sense of confusion or apprehension. A visual overview of the emojis participants shared is provided below.



## Emoji Cloud



### Discussion guide and stimulus materials

A discussion guide was developed in conjunction with The Electoral Commission, to include all major lines of enquiry and to answer the key research objectives. The main sections of the guide are outlined below, and the full discussion guide is appended to this report (see Appendix 2).

1. General awareness and perceptions
2. Funding and donations
3. Transparency
4. Proposed changes
5. Final reflections

To facilitate a deliberative approach, participants were presented with information using stimulus material in the format of PowerPoint presentation to generate knowledge and to enable them to develop informed opinions. To ensure the discussion remained focused on the key research objectives, some general information was presented earlier in the discussion before moving on to present more focused information on funding and donations, donation thresholds, the role and position of the Commission and a timeline of key legislative events. Below is an example of a stimulus slide presented during the group discussion. The full stimulus slide deck is appended to this report (see Appendix 3).

## Stimulus example

### Political party funding proportions

In the year leading up to UK General Election 2019 (13<sup>th</sup> December 2018 – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019), Northern Ireland Political Parties received the following:

	Amount from source	% of total donations	No of reportable donations
<b>Individual</b>	£2,087,216	57%	55
<b>Public fund</b>	£1,461,207	40%	199
<b>Company</b>	£84,000	2%	6
<b>Total</b>	£3,632,423	100%	260

5 © Ipsos | 20-050249 Electoral Commission Transparency Research stimulus | August 2020 | Version 4 | Public

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## Analysis

Unlike traditional quantitative survey research, qualitative research does not aim to produce a quantifiable or generalisable summary of a representative population's views on a particular topic. Rather, it seeks to identify and explore in-depth the issues and themes relating to the subject matter under study.

The transcripts produced from the online discussions were used as the basis for subsequent analysis. Each participant was given a unique identifier which was tied back to their demographic information in order to identify any consistencies or divergences in views by sub-group. For the video groups, detailed notes were made and then subject to the same analytic process. Each research activity was incorporated into an analysis grid in Microsoft Excel. The qualitative data were then subject to an analytic process underpinned by grounded theory.

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory refers to an analysis model in which theory is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed. This approach ensures that theory is developed from data, rather than the other way around. In grounded theory, coding involves three distinct stages, which are detailed below. The research team applied this coding framework to the analysis grid.

#### 1. Open coding

Open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing and categorising data and it consists of assigning a label or 'code' to each distinct phenomenon within the data. For each session conducted, key themes were identified by assigning each phenomenon with a unique code.

## 2. Axial coding

This is the second stage of the process and involves linking concepts into conceptual families by making connections between the categories identified at the open coding stage. It involves linking relevant categories together and identifying the conditions that give rise to it as well as the context in which it is embedded. Based on the open coding completed for the individual sessions, the research team deployed axial coding based on the research question. During formal analysis sessions, more analytic codes and descriptions were generated as the explanatory narrative developed.

## 3. Selective coding

The final stage of the analysis process involves the selection of the core category for each research question upon which the final analysis is based. At this point, the story line is explicated further, and an analytic description of the core category is developed. This stage involved the research team reviewing all analytic content to ensure the core categories directly answer the research questions.

# 03

## **General awareness & perceptions**

# General awareness & perceptions

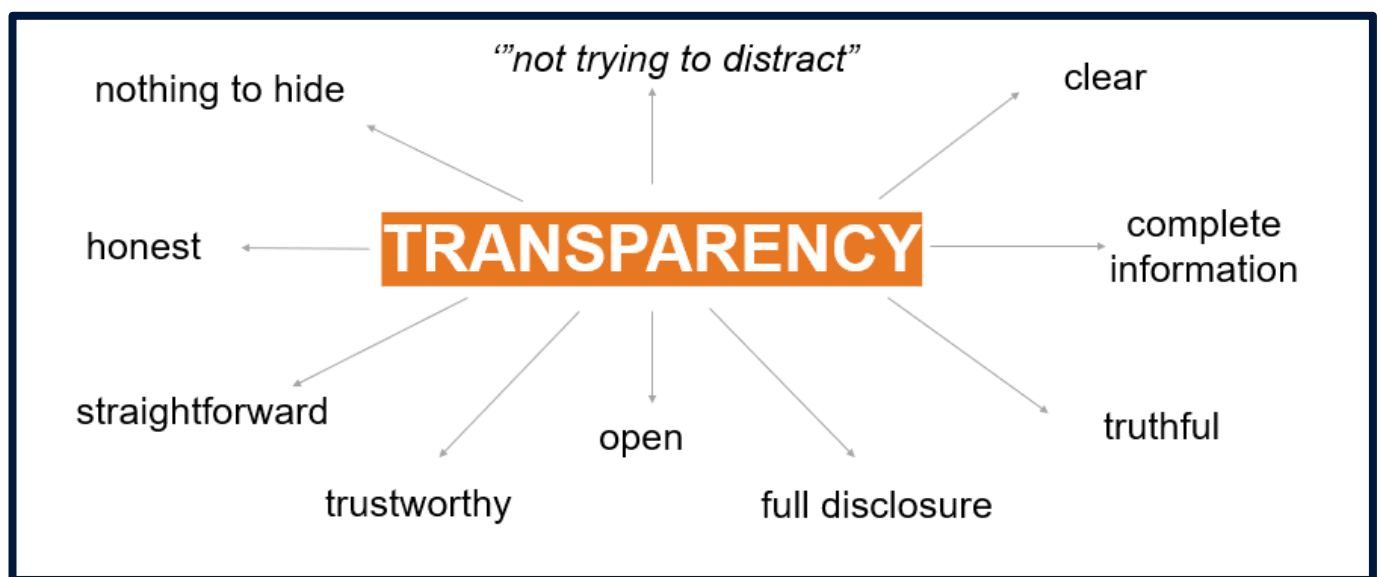
This chapter aims to provide an overview of the general awareness and perceptions of political party funding in Northern Ireland. This includes overall awareness on how political parties raise their funds and awareness of donations. We explored participants' key sources of information on political party funding and their perceptions more generally of how political parties are funded.

## General awareness of political party funding

At the beginning of the discussion, we asked participants to take part in a word association exercise. The aim of this exercise was to not only ease participants into the conversation, but to also gain a snapshot of their initial views and perceptions on the subject of political party funding and transparency.

We first asked each group to tell us what words or phrases came to mind when they heard the word 'transparency'. Many offered words or phrases which are synonymous with openness and honesty, and these views did not differ across groups. An overview of the most common themes produced from this exercise is provided below.

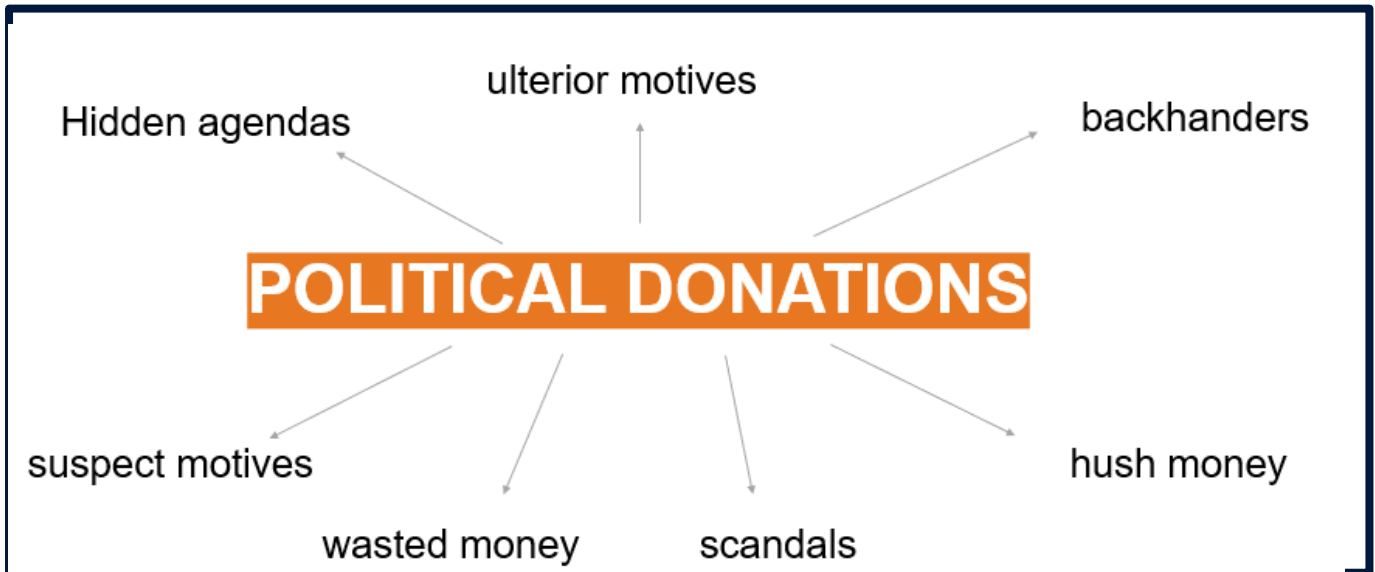
### Word association: 'Transparency'



Secondly, participants were asked to tell us what words or phrases came to mind when they heard the phrase 'political donations'. At this early stage, negative associations arose, with many providing words and phrases associated with dishonesty and corruption. These immediate negative perceptions were consistent across the majority of groups, with the exception of one group (Omagh, Catholic, 18-44, C2DE) who collectively provided more neutral responses.

An overview of the most common word associations in relation to the phrase "political donations" is provided overleaf.

## Word association: 'Political Donations'



## Knowledge of political party funding

Generally, knowledge on political party finances was limited and opinions expressed tended to be based on assumptions rather than factual knowledge. Many participants assumed that political parties were largely funded by government – or by taxpayers, while some felt that they had insufficient information to be able to discuss the subject. For those who felt that parties were funded by the government or by taxpayers, some positioned this as a question rather than a statement, highlighting a sense of uncertainty or guesswork.

*"I assume the taxpayer foots the bill."*

*Belfast, C2DE, Catholic, 18-44*

There was a notable lack of interest and engagement with political party finances, which seemed to be driven by a sense of disengagement in the political process in Northern Ireland. This was somewhat tied to the extent to which participants felt unable to enact change as individual members of the electorate. This sense of helplessness seemed to fuel political disenfranchisement.

*"I think there is a lot of 'well there's nothing that I can do as one person to change the situation.'"*

*Belfast, C2DE, Catholic, 18-44*

Low interest in this area also tended to be influenced by a perceived lack of public discourse on the issue of political party funding. Many participants commented that this was not a subject matter that they usually heard about in the media, unless there is a 'scandal'. Some also felt that the issue of political party funding is not as salient in the media in Northern Ireland as it is in other countries.

*"I don't see it mentioned much, and it doesn't seem to draw as much media attention as the same issues in UK or US politics."*

*Ballymena, ABC1, Neither, 18-44*

More broadly, there was an over-arching theme of perceived dishonesty among political parties in Northern Ireland, leading some to believe that their lack of knowledge about political party funding may be a direct result of political parties' own actions. Some felt that information about funding and donations is deliberately withheld from them and that to some extent it is in political parties' interests for this information to remain hidden from the public.

***"It's not in the political parties' interest to say where their funding comes from."***

*Ballymena, C2DE, Protestant, 45+*

While the majority agreed that it was important for the public to know how political parties were funded, many admitted that this was not information they would seek out for themselves, or that it was not something they would regard to be of personal interest, highlighting a sense of cognitive dissonance.

***"It should be available to the public but personally I don't think I would have in interest in going looking for it."***

*Newry, C2DE, Catholic, 45+*

### **Knowledge of donations to political parties**

Some participants spontaneously suggested that political party funding came from donations received, however, as with political party funding, there was generally limited knowledge about donations to political parties in Northern Ireland. When asked more specifically about political donations, it was clear that they were largely viewed through a more negative lens, evoking connotations of 'back-handed' deals, 'hush money' and political favours. Many felt that those who made donations, were doing so for personal gain or to influence a political agenda, which fuelled a perception of scepticism and speculation among the majority as to whether or not donations were made – or used – in a legitimate manner. Irrespective of demographic differences, people seemed to have an expectation of corruption in relation to political donations.

***"Anyone can take a donation, but it usually comes with a favour or condition."***

*Fermanagh, ABC1, Catholic, 45+*

***"It's a necessary evil for the upkeep of the party, but it is open to underhand goings on."***

*Omagh, C2DE, Catholic, 18-44*

Political donations tended to be strongly associated with either businesses or wealthy individuals – neither of which particularly resonated with participants, who considered themselves to be more aligned with the 'average Joe'. These perceptions are driven by some extent to what participants may have seen in the media but are largely based on assumptions for the majority.

***"I think of a millionaire in a tweed suit giving a few hundred thousand."***

*Derry/Londonderry, ABC1, Protestant, 18-44*

Generally, people were content with parties' receiving donations as a source of funding, with some participants commenting that there is a need for parties to receive funds from somewhere in order to be



operational and to communicate their policies. Even for those who were more supportive of donations, there was still a sense of cynicism around donor motives and the process of making a donation. This further reinforces the overarching perception of corruption.

***“They have to be fund themselves some way, but I am cynical about how they abuse the system.”***

*Derry/Londonderry, ABC1, Protestant, 18-44*

While the majority of participants were content that parties receive donations, it was clear that this agreement and support was conditional upon two key factors. Firstly, participants want to be able to track the donations to be able to identify donors with a potential vested interest. Secondly, people felt strongly that they should know how donations are spent in order to ensure there is no opportunity for corruption and that parties are ‘playing by the rules.’

***“They need to get funding from somewhere but there does need to be visibility of who is giving the money to whom.”***

*Ballymena, ABC1, Neither, 18-44*

Some participants suggested that political donations could result in maintaining political hegemony in Northern Ireland, which was driven by the belief that a majority of donations would go to the larger parties, this keeping “the big two” in power. Some explicitly linked this to the dominant public profiles of Sinn Féin and the DUP in comparison to the minimal presence of some smaller parties. This sparked discussion and led to some suggestions that limitations should be placed on donations to prevent political dominance of individual parties.

***“There should be a limit, otherwise parties with the most money will retain all the power.”***

*Belfast, C2DE, Catholic, 18-44*

## **Sources of information on political party funding**

When asked which sources participants would trust to give them reliable information on political party funding and donations, it was evident that people do not feel there are many trustworthy sources available to them. Most stated that they tend to rely upon the media for this kind of information, yet there was a collective sense of mistrust around information provided by the media. Some suggested that media outlets may have an agenda, depending on the organisation and that they may not always report the full story.

Participants were clear that they do not trust political parties themselves, or sources which may be affiliated to a political party, as they are not perceived to provide unbiased information. The majority demonstrated that there was a clear appetite for transparent, unbiased information and that they are more likely to obtain this from neutral, independent sources.

***“It would have to come from a non-political, neutral organisation which accounts for where and when political donations are made. The media would not count in this due to individual tabloids also supporting their own parties.”***

*Ballymena, ABC1, Neither, 18-44*

Despite the assertion that this topic is of public importance, there was a low appetite to seek out information on political party funding themselves. It became evident that people expected this information to be clearly communicated to them, with many commenting that this should be done regularly via mainstream media.

Again, this highlights a sense of cognitive dissonance, as despite a stated lack of trust in the media, people continue to also state a preference for obtaining their information from this source. People seem to want maximum transparency with minimal effort required on their part. This can be explained by cognitive miser theory<sup>7</sup>, which suggests that people are reluctant to expend cognitive resources and will seek opportunities to avoid engaging in effortful thought as a means to save time and effort.

***"I would only read the information if it was provided to me, I wouldn't really go looking for it."***

*Omagh, C2DE, Catholic, 18-44*

For the minority of participants who stated that they might be interested to find out more about political party funding and donations (for example to help them decide who they may vote for), they commented that they would not know how to do this – or where they should look for information.

***"Even if I was interested, I wouldn't know where to find reliable information."***

*Omagh, ABC1, Protestant, 45+*

## Chapter summary

Initial perceptions on political donations indicated that there are clear negative connotations surrounding political party funding and donations, and that a perception of corruption is evident.

General awareness on political party finances was limited, with opinions expressed being linked to assumptions rather than factual or inherent knowledge. There was a lack of interest in the issue of political party funding, which seemed to be driven by a general sense of disengagement in Northern Ireland politics, combined with a perceived lack of public discourse on the issue. In line with initial negative perceptions, people were sceptical about the information provided to them by political parties, with some believing that information is deliberately withheld from them by parties whose interest it is in that such information remains hidden.

Knowledge on donations was similarly limited, and donations were viewed through a negative lens. Many associate donations with 'back-handed' deals or political favours, reinforcing the perception of corruption and fostering a sense of scepticism as to whether party dealings are legitimate. People tended to think of donors as wealthy individuals or businesses, neither of which they perceived to be the 'average Joe'. Generally, most were content for parties to receive donations as a means to operate, but this was on the conditional upon the knowledge that donations could be tracked, and that there was accountability in how such donations were spent.

There was a clear appetite for transparent, unbiased information from neutral sources. People do not trust parties themselves and are largely sceptical of the media, despite the fact many rely upon it to provide them with relevant information. People seemed to want maximum transparency with minimal effort on their part to seek out information on political party finances.

<sup>7</sup> Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.

# 04

## **Views on funding & donations**

# Views on funding and donations

This chapter discusses views on funding and donations to political parties in Northern Ireland, including political party spending, political party funding proportions, donation thresholds as well as views on the role of the Electoral Commission in regulating political party finances.

## Views on political party spending

In order to anchor conversation on political parties' need to fundraise for necessary activities, participants were presented with the following information on what political parties in Northern Ireland need to spend the money they raise on.

### Stimulus one

#### What do political parties need to spend money on?

- To get their message to the public so they know what they are voting for (advertising/ rallies/ other events);
- Research on what policy positions to take;
- Canvassing;
- Overheads/ Administration & travel.

Participants generally did not feel that this information communicated anything unexpected and many commented that they felt this spending was reasonable. This information prompted some discussion around the necessity for political parties to fundraise. When people were exposed to this information there was a general recognition of need for parties to fundraise to some extent.

*"Seems like essential costs for the industry...I suppose if they didn't get donations how would they exist?"*

### Ballymena, C2DE, 18-44, Protestant

However, there was a sense of scepticism among some that a lot of money is 'wasted' by political parties on things the public do not consider essential, like election posters and campaign leaflets. Some participants were cynical as to whether money that is raised is spent on legitimate party activities rather than extravagant or unnecessary personal expenses. This view tended to be driven by pervasive negative associations with politicians personally living lavish lifestyles.

While people understood that political parties needed to cover their running costs, some questioned the worthiness of this spending activity. Some thought that the spending priorities were too focused on administration and the day-to-day running the party, and not aligned with initiatives that would benefit the local community, which people thought should be a key priority for political parties in Northern Ireland.

*"It is really to cover the day-to-day tasks not community things."*

### Belfast, ABC1, 18-44, Neither

## Views on political party funding proportions

Participants were presented with the following information about how political parties in Northern Ireland are funded. This information generated considerable discussion across the groups, with the overall amount donated and who donated the most inciting the most conversation.

### Stimulus two

#### Political party funding proportions

In the year leading up to UK General Election 2019 (13<sup>th</sup> December 2018 – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019), Northern Ireland Political Parties received the following:

	Amount from source	% of total donations	No of reportable donations
Individual	£2,087,216	57%	55
Public fund	£1,461,207	40%	199
Company	£84,000	2%	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>£3,632,423</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>260</b>

The majority of participants expressed surprise and shock that individual donations outweigh donations given by a business. This contradicted many initial strong initial perceptions that businesses were most likely to donate to a political party, underpinned by either political or economic motivations.

*"I am really surprised about the amount of company donations compared to the individual, I thought it would have been the other way around."*

#### Omagh, C2DE, 18-44, Catholic

There was some scepticism as to whether businesses donate as individuals rather than under their company name in order to remain anonymous. Some commented that business donations go directly to a party member in a *'brown envelope'* so may not be included within these figures.

The perceived large amount donated by individuals sparked deliberation about the amount each donation may be. Some calculated what the average donation may be and commented that this figure is a significant amount of money – leading some to comment that such 'individuals' are *"not your average joe."* This demonstrates that participants could not relate to the idea of donating to a political party as they repeatedly positioned themselves as outside of this typology. This, in turn, fuelled discussion around backhanded deals and political favours being granted to wealthy individuals, leading some to question the influence these individual donors may have in shaping the political landscape in Northern Ireland. It is important to note, however, that the overall amount of individual donations received by political parties was influenced by one large posthumous donation which accounted for the majority of the individual donation total. Influenced by a number of large donations made by a bequest to a registered political party in Northern Ireland. To ensure that the discussion was not focused on this, but instead on the topic at hand, this was not highlighted to participants throughout the sessions. A very small number of participants spontaneously referred to this themselves.

*"He who pays the piper calls the tune... could mean that individuals are running the country to their own agenda."*

### **Omagh, C2DE, 18-44, Catholic**

Overall, participants were generally surprised at the total amount of funding and many commented that the overall amount received by political parties constitutes a significant sum. This led to some debate as to whether this is worthwhile and caused many to question what else this money could be spent on – again, this was underpinned by views on what constitutes a 'worthy cause.' Many reported that initiatives which benefit local communities should be prioritised over the administration of political parties.

*"There's literally a hundred different/better ways to spend it...so I think it should be put to use in a way that over the long-term, more of these [issues in Northern Ireland] could be reached."*

### **Derry/Londonderry, ABC1, 18-44, Protestant**

Across the groups, the perceived large amount of money received from the various sources of funding seemed to strengthen people's views that corruption in political party donations is not just a likelihood, but an inevitability.

## **Views on the types of political party donor**

Participants were presented with the following information on the types of permissible donors to political parties in Northern Ireland.

### **Stimulus three**

#### **Types of donor**

Donations to a political party can only be accepted from a **permissible donor**. A **permissible donor** is:

- An individual registered on a UK electoral register, including overseas electors and those leaving bequests.
- Irish citizens (including bequests).
- Most UK/Irish-registered companies.
- A UK/Irish-registered political party.
- A UK/Irish-registered trade union.
- A UK/Irish-registered building society.
- A UK/Irish-registered limited liability partnership (LLP) that carries out business in the UK or Ireland.
- A UK/Irish-registered friendly society.
- A UK/Irish-based unincorporated association that carries on business or other activities in the UK or Ireland.

While there were no strong reactions to the permissible donor list, there was surprise that some groups, such as trade unions, could donate to political parties. Some assumed that the long list of potential donors would lead to a large amount of donations being generated, which fuelled a sense of scepticism that some form of corruption is inevitable. While participants were not prompted on their views regarding the permissibility of Irish citizens or organisations, there were no comments relating to their inclusion on the donor list.

Additionally, some participants believed that the designation of a 'permissible donor' would not necessarily preclude an individual or organisation from donating – this again demonstrated the expectation of corruption in political party donation and belief that the current regime is somewhat

malleable and can be ‘*worked around*’ in order to further the political or economic interests of wealthy individuals, businesses and political parties.

*"I think if someone really wants to donate to a party and aren't a permissible donor, they will get their way round becoming one."*

**Belfast, C2DE, 18-44, Catholic**

## Views on types of donations and donation thresholds

Participants were presented with the following information about that constitutes a donation to a political party. This information generated considerable discussion, mostly centred on the designation of a donation as an amount over £500.

### Stimulus four

#### Types of donations

- In law a donation is any amount **over £500** in value. This means that amounts of £500 or less are not legally considered donations.
- A donation can be money, goods or services given to a party without charge or on non-commercial terms, with a value of **over £500**.
- Some examples of donations include:
  - A gift of money or other property.
  - Sponsorship of an event or publication.
  - Subscription or affiliation payments.
  - Free or specially discounted use of an office.

There was significant debate about the £500 figure, with many highlighting that £499 is still a significant sum of money and thus should be considered as a donation. This fuelled the sense of scepticism and expectation of corruption within political parties.

*"I think it's interesting that everything under £500 does not have to be reported even though it would be considered a donation...it just screams corruption."*

**Belfast, ABC1, 18-44, Neither**

Many spontaneously mentioned that the legal definition of a donation could act as a ‘loophole,’ allowing political parties and donors to “*skirt the rules*.” This caused many to question the transparency of the current regime. People generally felt that any sum of money should be considered a donation, to ensure that corruption is avoided, loopholes are closed and to engender greater transparency around political party finances.

Some participants were surprised that donations can be considered as something other than a monetary donation. Some believed it was harder to keep track of, designate and report such donations – thereby constituting another ‘loophole’ which could be exploited.



## Views on donation thresholds

Participants were provided with the following information on donation thresholds in Northern Ireland, covering who is regulated, what they have to report and the corresponding timescales within which they are required to report this.

### Stimulus five

## Donation thresholds

Who is regulated?	What do they have to report?	When do they have to report it?
<u>Political parties</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Any donation of more than £7,500 from a single source, or multiple small donations, over £500, from a single source which add up to over £7,500</li> <li>- Additional donations over £1,500 from a source that has previously given more than £7,500</li> <li>- Any impermissible donations they receive and the action they took regarding them</li> </ul>	Quarterly
<u>Regulated donees</u> (members of political parties and holders of elective office such as MLAs MPs and Councillors)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A donation of more than £1,500 from a single source, or multiple small donations, over £500, from a single source which add up to over £1,500</li> <li>- Any impermissible donations they receive and the action they took regarding them</li> </ul>	Within 30 days of accepting the donation
<u>Accounting units</u> (sections of a party that aren't controlled by the party's headquarters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A donation of more than £1,500 from a single source, or multiple small donations, over £500, from a single source which add up to over £1,500</li> <li>- Any impermissible donations they receive and the action they took regarding them</li> </ul>	Quarterly

There was strong consensus that the current threshold is too high and therefore the existing regime cannot be considered transparent. Many commented that, as it stands, the current rules on donation thresholds would allow individuals or businesses to donate significant amounts of money, and potentially gain influence from this, without this information being scrutinised.

*"I think this all looks too easy to skirt the rules... ALL donations should be reported... how much and where from."*

### Belfast, ABC1, 18-44, Neither

Across the sessions, the majority were aligned that the current donation threshold should be lowered in order to enhance transparency, with suggested lower thresholds ranging from £1 up to £2,000. While some recognised the potential administrative difficulty of reporting every small donation, some maintained that all donations should be reported. Some believed the threshold should be £500, in line with the legal definition of a donation.

*"I understand that it may be unfeasible to declare every small amount that is donated but £7500 or even £500 to me allows a lot of grey area in donations below the threshold."*

### Belfast, C2DE, 18-44, Catholic

Further research into donation reporting thresholds may help to consolidate these findings and determine a lower reporting threshold which would command widespread public support.

A number of advantages were identified to lowering the current threshold, as demonstrated overleaf.

## Advantages to lowering the current donation threshold

- Enhanced honesty
- Enhanced transparency
- Enhanced trust in politicians/political parties
- Deterring corruption
- Enhanced engagement in politics
- Increased voter turnout

The only advantage identified to increasing the current donation threshold was for the political parties themselves in terms of reducing their own administrative burden. Most struggled to think of any advantages to increasing the current donation threshold in Northern Ireland.

There was a sense of suspicion about whether donations are accurately recorded and reported by political parties – even if the donation threshold was lowered, many simply would not trust political parties to report this information accurately and honestly. Some spontaneously questioned whether party finances are regulated, audited or spot-checked and, if so, by whom.

*"I think politicians are the last people I would trust to self-account for the funds they are receiving."*

**Omagh, ABC1, 45+, Protestant**

Many questioned if information on political party finances can be accessed easily. At this stage, some mentioned that they would like to be able to access a website where the public can easily access and digest information on political party finances.

Across the groups, there was a strong consensus that, due to the current reporting thresholds, the current regime is not transparent. The majority of participants agreed that the reporting threshold should be lowered to ensure transparency around political party finances, engender trust between the electorate and political parties, and to restore integrity in politics in Northern Ireland.

*"[The threshold should be lowered] so a party cannot be propped up by a wealthy minority without proper scrutiny."*

**Fermanagh, C2DE, 18-44, Protestant**

## The role of the Electoral Commission

Participants were presented with the following information about the role of the Electoral Commission in regulating political parties in Northern Ireland.

**Stimulus six****The role of the Electoral Commission**

- The Commission regulates political funding and spending under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA).
- They provide advice and guidance to political parties so they understand the rules and their obligations.
- They take enforcement action, using their investigative powers and sanctions, where necessary to do so.
- Publish information on political parties finances.

The majority were unfamiliar with the Electoral Commission's role but were reassured to learn that there is an organisation overseeing political party finance and keeping parties in Northern Ireland accountable. However, some were concerned about the extent of the Electoral Commission's powers and whether it can enforce compliance. They wanted to be sure that the Commission could enact meaningful sanctions to deter corruption. Additionally, some were cynical about the Commission's independence and wanted to know more information about its organisational structure and who it ultimately reports to.

*"I've not heard much about any prosecutions - it's another toothless tiger."*

**Omagh, ABC1, 45+, Protestant**

When considering the Commission's role in ensuring transparency in Northern Ireland, there was a strong sense that the Commission may be somewhat limited by the current regime. This seemed to strengthened views that the current donation thresholds should be lowered to enhance transparency and ensure that the Electoral Commission can effectively hold political parties to account.

*"Does it matter if they don't have to show them anything below 7.5 K... nothing changes if this body doesn't see the info."*

**Belfast, ABC1, 18-44, Neither**

In addition, there was agreement that the public does not know enough information about the Commission and thus it should attempt to raise its public profile. There was a clear appetite for the Commission to communicate clear and impartial information on political party finances in Northern Ireland.

*"They are anonymous I feel."*

**Ballymena, C2DE, 45+, Protestant**

*"I had no idea. They need a marketing director!"*

**Fermanagh, ABC1, 45+, Catholic**

Participants expect to be able to access a website with easily digestible information and some thought that information on political party finance, including details on those who are not compliant, should be featured more regularly within mainstream media. While there is such a website, people were unaware that this existed. Although some were doubtful whether they would regularly access this information, others thought that after finding out more information about the Electoral Commission, they would seek out information about political party finance, especially in advance of an election. This echoes findings discussed in chapter 3 (page 19) that people do not want to have to work too hard to access this information but expect it to be communicated to them in such a way that they are informed, without having to exert effort to find this.

## Chapter summary

A pervasive sense of scepticism was evident towards political party funding and donations to political parties in Northern Ireland. Surprise about the amount of money donated to political parties by individuals in particular, fuelled the expectation of corruption within the current regime.

It was apparent that political donations were inherently linked with political favours and backhanded deals. Participants could not identify with someone who would donate to a political party and assumed that someone would only be motivated to donate in order to receive reciprocal economic or political benefits. The overall amount of money donated to political parties led many to question whether particular individuals were being given the opportunity to shape the political landscape and pull societal strings in Northern Ireland.

There was a strong consensus across the groups that the current donation thresholds are too high as they would allow individuals or businesses to donate a significant sum without being subject to public scrutiny. For many, the current donation threshold combined with the legal definition of a donation as any amount over £500, constitutes a loophole within the current regime- leaving it vulnerable to corruption. This caused the majority to believe that the regime is not transparent. Rather, they viewed it as a regime that is malleable to the desired political and economic ends of the wealthy and powerful.

People unanimously agreed that the current donation thresholds should be lowered so that more donations would be reported. People thought this would deter corruption, enhance transparency and reinstate trust in the political process in Northern Ireland, which could in turn increase political engagement and voter turnout. A range of lower thresholds were suggested, ranging from £1 to £2, 000. Some believed the threshold should be £500, in line with the legal definition of a donation. Others maintained that every donation should be reported. Further research into donation reporting thresholds may help to consolidate these findings and determine a lower reporting threshold which would command widespread public support

People were relatively unfamiliar with the Electoral Commission and its role but were reassured to know that there is an organisation who oversees and regulates political party finance. However, some expressed concern that the Commission's ability to ensure transparency is undermined by the current regime. Additionally, people were dubious about whether the Commission could enforce compliance. There was a clear appetite for clear, unbiased information with many

# 05

## **Transparency & proposed changes**

# Transparency & proposed changes to the publication of donations

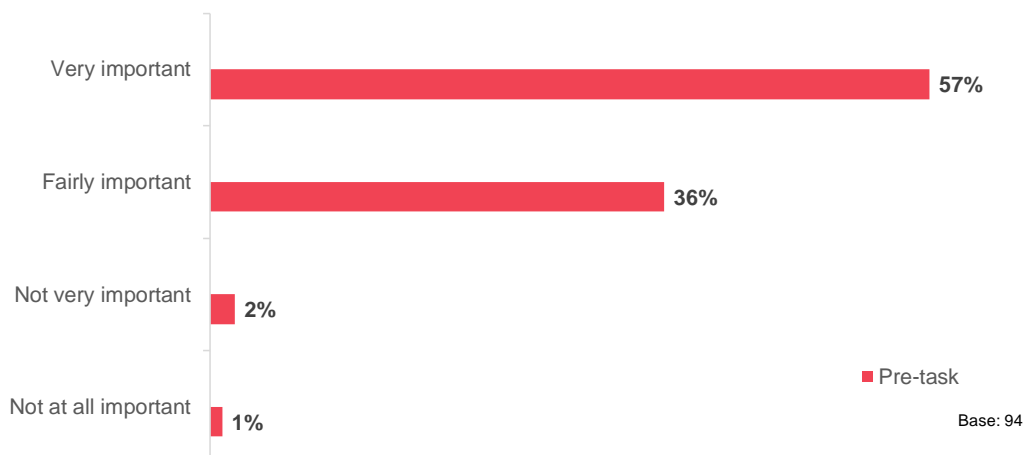
This chapter discusses the importance of transparency in political party finances and views on the legislative changes which have taken place in Northern Ireland over time. Finally, it explores views on proposed changes to the current regime, including publishing information on donations and loans reported to the Electoral Commission between 2014 and 2017.

## Transparency in political party finances

It was evident that transparency in political party finances is of paramount importance. As demonstrated in the findings from the pre-task exercise, even before engaging in sustained discussion about political party funding and donations, the majority of participants (93%) considered transparency to be very or fairly important.

### Pre-task exercise findings: importance of transparency

**To what extent, if at all, do you think transparency is important when it comes to political party finances?**



Participants reported that transparency means that all financial information should be accessible and readily available to the general public. People wanted to know where political party funding came from and how it was subsequently used.

*"Transparency is critical for all aspects of public life."*

### Omagh, C2DE, 18-44, Catholic

There was consensus that the current regime could not be considered as transparent due to insufficient information on donations within public discourse and the high reporting threshold, meaning that many significant donations are not reported. There was a strong sense of collective agreement that transparency should be enhanced in Northern Ireland as this would provide a range of benefits for society, as demonstrated overleaf.

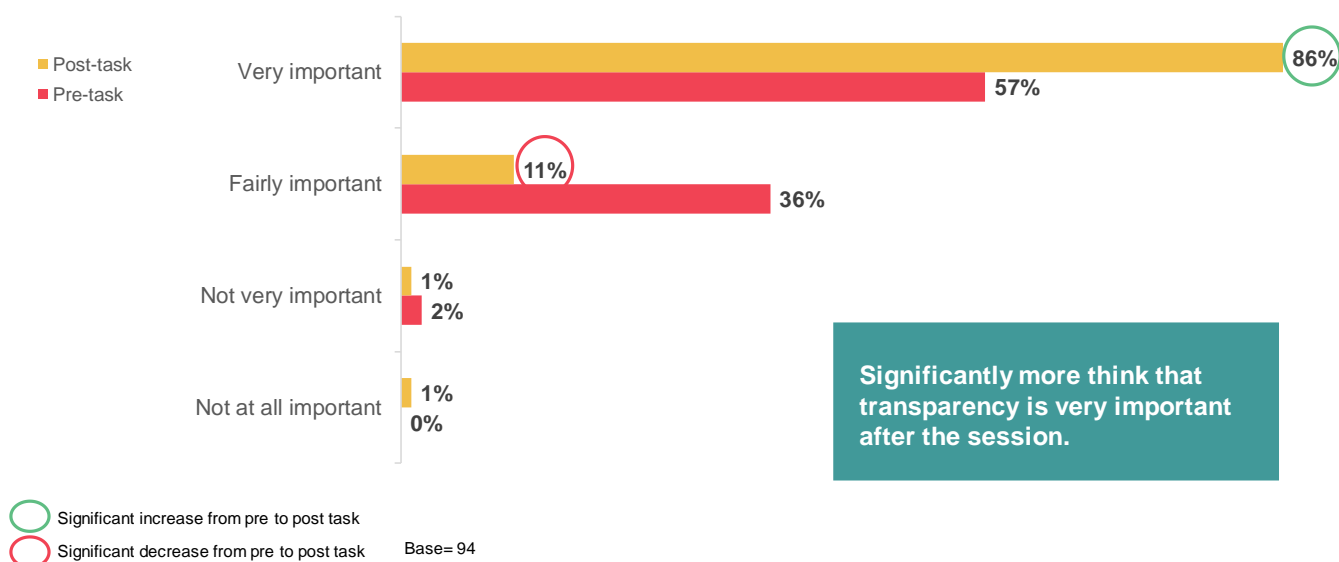
## Benefits of enhanced transparency

- Engender trust
- Enhance political engagement
- Disrupt the political hegemony of 'green and orange'
- Restore integrity to NI politics
- Help the public make informed voting decisions
- Increase voter turnout

As demonstrated below, significantly more (86%) considered transparency in political party finances to be very important after attending the session, compared to before it began (57%).

### Post-task exercise findings: importance of transparency

**To what extent, if at all, do you think transparency is important when it comes to political party finances?**



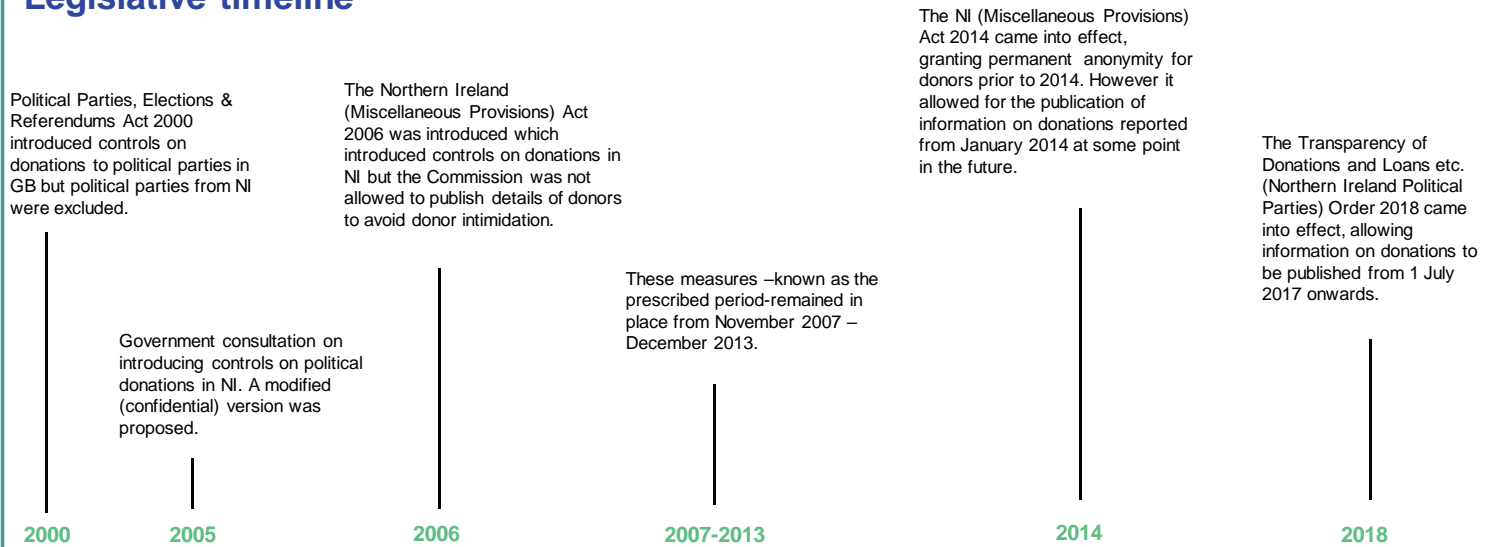
## Legislative changes over time

There have been a number of important legislative changes regarding the transparency of donations and loans in Northern Ireland. Participants were presented with the following information about the timeline and content of these legislative changes.



## Stimulus seven

### Legislative timeline



Generally, participants expressed shock and surprise that it has taken such a long time to achieve the current level of political transparency in Northern Ireland. While people recognised that there had been some progress in securing a more transparent process, there was consensus that more should be done to ensure that full transparency is achieved.

*"I think it's been good the way they have updated it through the years although they could still improve it by showing all donations or loans that have been made available to them."*

#### **Belfast, ABC1, 18-44, Neither**

There was also a sense of surprise that Northern Ireland is currently treated differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. This resulted in many feeling frustrated or becoming suspicious that corruption or mis-demeanours were commonplace prior to the legislation change in 2014.

*"It just makes me wonder what's being hidden and from whom the money has been coming from, again where's the element of trust."*

#### **Ballymena, C2DE, 45+, Protestant**

The enhanced transparency achieved in Northern Ireland was considered to have led politicians and political parties to 'clean up' their behaviour. However, some were dubious about whether this had occurred in practice, given the many perceived 'loopholes' within the current regime.

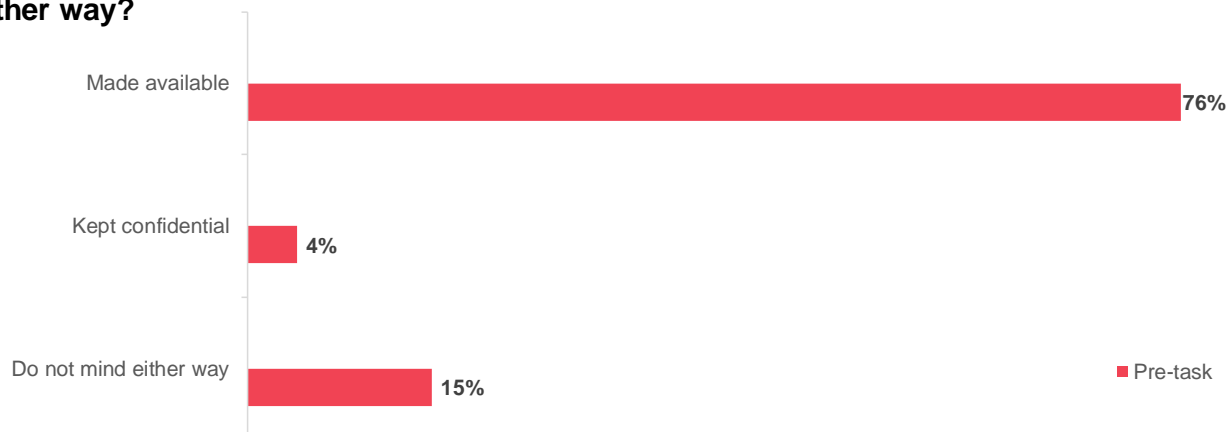
#### Donor confidentiality

The issue of donor confidentiality sparked some debate across the groups. While many thought that donor details should be made public, some were concerned about potential backlash and donor intimidation, especially given Northern Ireland's contentious political history. There was no clear demographic pattern among those who were more principally concerned about donor intimidation and backlash. Rather, it was a minority view across the majority of the groups.

As demonstrated overleaf, prior to the session, the majority (76%) believed that information about who has donated money to political parties should be made public.

### Pre-task exercise findings: donor confidentiality

**In your opinion, should information about who donated money to political parties in Northern Ireland be made available to the public or kept confidential, or do you not mind either way?**



While the majority were in favour of this information being made available, some expressed concern that donor intimidation or harassment towards businesses could occur if donor details are publicised. Some believed that this information *should* be published, but felt that Northern Ireland's history of political instability was too recent for this to come without risk to donors.

*"They should be [published], but we are in a political climate still where intimidation might be a problem."*

### Derry/Londonderry, C2DE, 45+, Catholic

Despite some concerns over donor intimidation, through deliberation participants came to a consensus that transparency was ultimately a more important goal. People agreed that if an individual or a business was prepared to donate, they should do so publicly. Many highlighted that Northern Ireland has come a long way over time and so the threat of donor intimidation should not be as concerning as it may have been in the past.

*"I think if you are willing to donate to a party you should be willing to support that party publicly as well as privately... if you have nothing to hide why would you mind?"*

### Ballymena, ABC1, 18-44, Neither

As demonstrated overleaf, significantly more (95%) agreed that donor details should be made available after the session than before (76%), demonstrating the generative potential of deliberation to change perspectives. There was also a significant decrease in those who did not mind either way (dropping from 15% prior to the session to 3%), indicating that participants were enabled to develop an informed opinion through the information provided during the session.

### Post-task exercise findings: donor confidentiality

Despite some diverging views, there was consensus that the electorate has the right to know information on political party finances and that the main beneficiary of enhanced transparency is the general public themselves. Some also highlighted that parties themselves could benefit from enhanced transparency, as it may increase trust and engagement within the wider political landscape.

*"Political parties may benefit because people will understand what is going on and may trust more."*

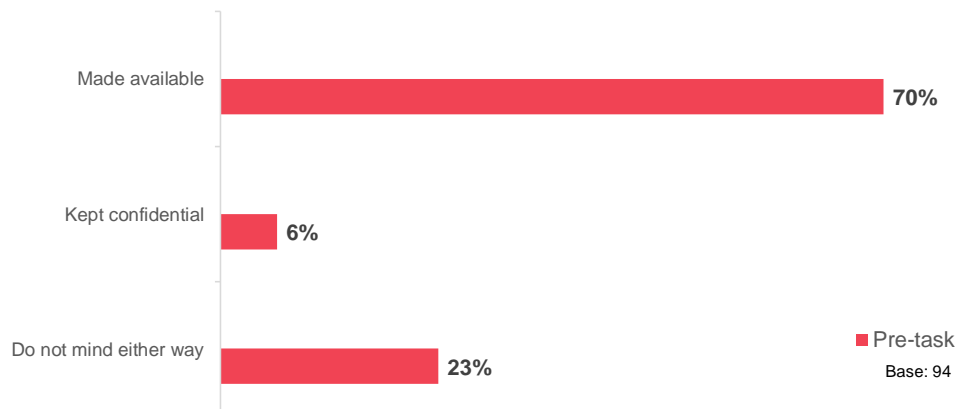
### Fermanagh, ABC1, 45+, Catholic

#### Proposed changes to the current regime

Participants were informed that under the current regime, donations between 2014-2017 remain anonymous, but could be published subject to parliament approval. As demonstrated below, almost three quarters (70%) felt that this information should be made available prior to attending the session. Almost one quarter (23%) did not mind either way.

#### Pre-task exercise findings: proposed changes to the current regime

**In your opinion, should information about who donated money to political parties in Northern Ireland during the last six years (from July 2014) be made available to the public or be kept confidential, or do not mind either way?**



This was a contentious issue throughout the session, with all groups engaging in tangible deliberation and debate about the pros and cons of donations made between 2014 and 2017 being retrospectively published. While there were some strong concerns, the majority were in favour of this information being published as they felt that the public had the right to know this information and that it would hold political parties to account for any misdemeanours.

*"If there is potential fraud and corruption it needs to be investigated regardless of the outcome."*

### Derry/Londonderry, C2DE, 45+, Catholic

*"They should also be published if they still have an impact on decisions being made in the present."*

### Fermanagh, C2DE, 18-44, Protestant

Among those who were less in favour of this information being made public, some expressed concerns that publishing this information could 'open a can of worms' which risks political instability in Northern Ireland and could be used to score political points and cause disruption. For these participants, there

was a palpable sense of anxiety around anything which could impact the seemingly fragile Power Sharing Agreement in Northern Ireland.

*"I feel it would cause the Government to fall again and we can't afford that."*

**Derry/Londonderry, C2DE, 45+, Catholic**

Others simply could not see the benefit of dwelling on the past when decisions from this time period cannot be changed. On the other hand, some believed that only by truly understanding what has occurred in the past, can Northern Ireland move on. Those who did not see the benefit of dwelling on the past, tended to prioritise moving forward with 'full transparency' rather than prioritise issues in the past.

*"What is the point in going back? What's done is done and it is more important to look to the future and change things for the better."*

**Belfast, ABC1, 18-44, Neither**

### The Electoral Commission's position

Participants were presented with the following information about the Electoral Commission's position on publishing information on donations and loans reported to it between 2014-2017.

### Stimulus eight

#### Electoral Commission position

- The Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018 has allowed the Electoral Commission to publish information about donations and loans reported by Northern Ireland political parties and other regulated entities **since 1 July 2017**. Prior to this, they were prohibited by law from publishing this information.
- The Commission **continues to be prohibited from publishing information it holds in relations to donations and loans reported to before 1 July 2017**. However the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 would **allow for the publication of information between 1 January 2014 and July 2017** subject to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland laying a necessary Order in the UK Parliament.
- The Commission have continually called on the UK Government to bring forward legislation that will enable them to **publish information on donations from January 2014**. They believe this is important for transparency and public confidence for voters in Northern Ireland.

Generally, there was strong agreement with the Commission's position. Some people felt that if the Commission supports this information being published, significant events must have occurred for it to push for publication.

*"If they are pushing for donations within that period to be published there must be a good reason to do so."*

**Fermanagh, C2DE, 18-44, Protestant**

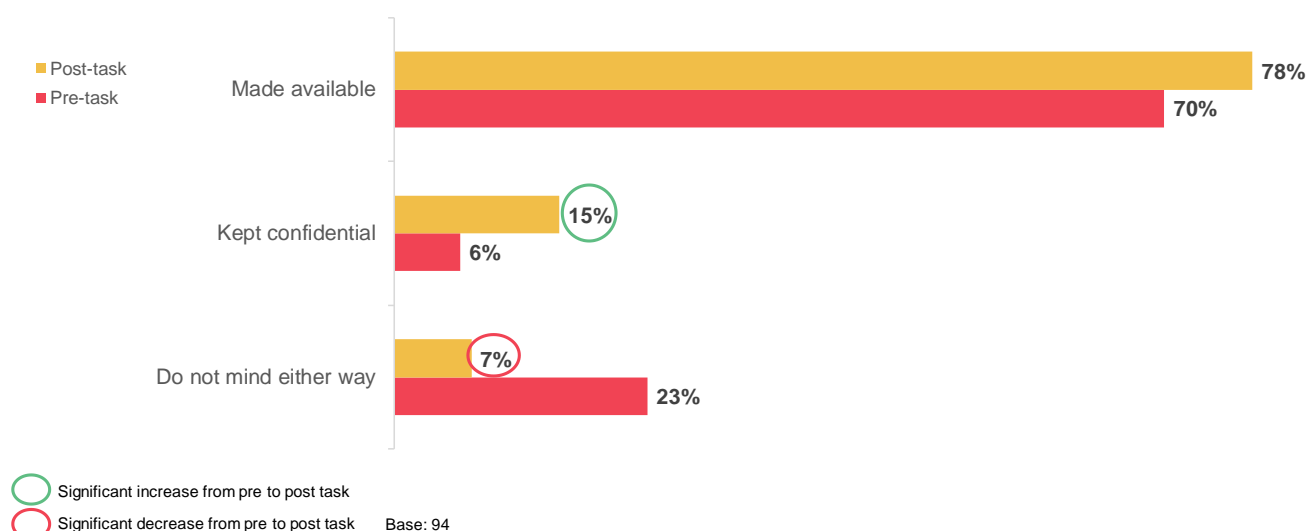
For those who previously had concerns about political instability, or simply consider dwelling on the past as a futile exercise, knowledge of the Commission's position did not seem to change their views. For those who were already in support of donations being made public, this information strengthened their views.

When participants were prompted on the major political events and elections that had occurred between 2014-2017, this seemed to strengthen pro-publishing views. However, some commented that this makes no difference to their views because they cannot go back in time and change their vote.

Through deliberation on this issue, there was a marked change in people's views towards publishing donations between 2014 and 2017. As demonstrated below, there was a significant decrease in the number who stated that they do not mind after the session (dropping from 23% to 7%). This indicates that participants were supported to develop an informed view through debating the nuance of this issue. Significantly more (15% compared to 6%) felt that this information should be kept confidential after attending the session, which is likely to constitute the cohort who felt strongly that this information should not be published retrospectively as it could risk political instability. Although not significant, more people also felt that this information should be made available (78% compared to 70%) after attending the session.

### Post-task exercise findings: proposed changes to the current regime

**In your opinion, should information about who donated money to political parties in Northern Ireland during the last six years (from July 2014) be made available to the public or be kept confidential, or do not mind either way?**



### Demographic differences in views

Throughout discussions, there was evident deliberation about the complexities and nuance of this issue. Three groups in particular expressed a consensus against publishing donations:

**Derry/Londonderry 2 (Catholic, C2DE, 45+)**  
**Belfast 1 (Catholic, C2DE, 18-44)**  
**Newry 1 (Protestant, ABC1, 18-44)**

The Derry/Londonderry and Belfast groups' views were underpinned by concerns about the political instability that could result from this information being published. These views could therefore be attributed to the legacy of political instability in Northern Ireland given the historical political unrest that has occurred in these cities. The views of the Newry group, while different in terms of community

background, could be tied to the heightened political tension common in border areas. Across the remainder of the groups, the majority were in favour of donations being published, with a minority of (1-2) dissenting voices within each group.

## Chapter summary

Transparency was considered an essential public good, the main beneficiary of which is the general public themselves.

People were surprised that it had taken such a long time for legislative changes to improve transparency to its current level. There was a recognition that progress had been made, but consensus that this does not go far enough to ensure transparency within political party funding.

Participants agreed that the current regime cannot be regarded as transparent due to the lack of information on political party funding and donations within public discourse and the high reporting thresholds which could lead to significant sums being donated without being subject to necessary scrutiny.

People debated the issue of whether donors should be able to remain anonymous. Despite some concerns about potential backlash and donor intimidation, people agreed that if an individual or business is prepared to donate to a political party, they should do so publicly.

There was some contention about whether donations reported to the Electoral Commission between 2014 and 2017 should be retrospectively published. Some were concerned about the potential political instability that could ensue, and others considered dwelling on the past to be a futile exercise. These individuals tended to support moving forward with full transparency, which was connected to lowering the current donation thresholds.

Despite some strong concerns, particularly in the Derry/Londonderry, Belfast and Newry groups, the majority across the sessions were in favour of this information being made public. For those in favour publishing this information, this constituted an important step to enhancing transparency in Northern Ireland. People reflected that it is the public's right to know this information about their elected representatives and that there should be public accountability for any misdemeanours which occurred during this period.

# 06

## **Methodological reflections**

# Methodological Reflections

This chapter aims to provide an analysis of the differences between the two methodologies used to facilitate this research project – online discussion boards and video focus groups. Each distinct methodology has its own merits, and this chapter will explore the benefits and drawbacks to utilising each method for this kind of deliberative research.

## Methodological rationale

In addition to the twelve online discussion board sessions, Ipsos MORI facilitated an additional three video focus groups upon completion of the discussion board fieldwork period. The primary aim of including a small number of video focus groups was to understand any of the key differences between the two methodologies and to explore the advantages and disadvantages to facilitating deliberative research using each distinct online platform.

To ensure that any differences observed in the qualitative data were directly attributable to the use of either methodology, the discussion guide and stimulus materials were used for both the online discussion boards and video focus groups. This also meant that any differences observed in the practical application of either approach, or the group dynamics and responsiveness of the participants, could be attributed to the digital platform rather than the research materials.

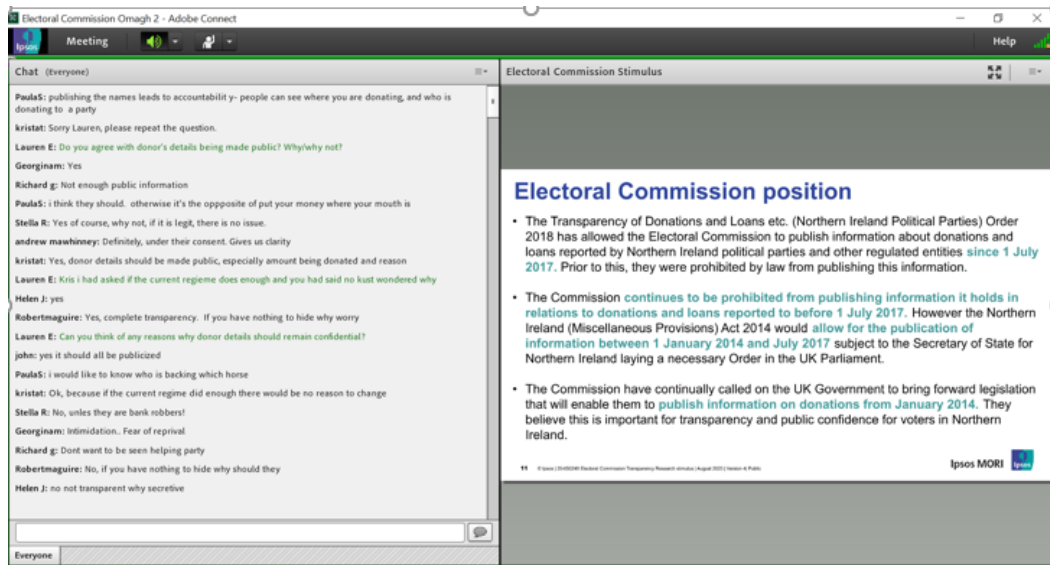
## Discussion board groups

The online discussion board sessions were facilitated using Adobe Connect, Ipsos MORI's in-house platform for qualitative online research. This platform can facilitate up to ten participants at a time. These sessions allowed participants to view PowerPoint stimulus slides, ensuring that information was 'drip-fed' throughout the session, allowing participants to develop informed opinions. Participants were required to type their responses to the moderator's questions in a chat box and they could view their own responses and the responses of the other participants in the group.

While the moderator was presenting the stimulus material, they enabled their microphone to talk participants through the information on screen, ensuring that participants were able to fully engage with the content and better understand what was being presented to them. Participants were not required to use a microphone function to communicate with either the moderator or the other participants in the group. An example of the view that participants would see in Adobe Connect is provided overleaf.



## Adobe Connect: Participant View



While Adobe Connect does offer video functionality, which allows for the facilitation of video focus groups, through learnings from other research projects we found that the platform functionality was not working to an optimal level, with some challenges for participants in terms of connectivity and the ability to enable webcam and audio functions.

### Key advantages of discussion boards

Discussion boards provide a number of distinct advantages. This research revealed that participants take their time to write considered and thoughtful responses in a discussion board format. Participants are encouraged at the beginning of each session to continue answering a question even if another question has been posed, allowing people to answer questions in more detail. As more detailed, reasoned responses are often provided, this generates a richer and more in-depth discussion as participants consider and respond to a wider range of opinions from others.

Participants tend to be more focused and engaged with the topics at hand, including any stimulus material presented. This is particularly beneficial when conducting research on low interest subjects or when people have limited knowledge around a particular topic. It is evident that participants are engaged in the conversation, due to a sustained flow of comments coming through on the chat function.

Throughout a discussion board session, conversation is more equitable across participants. While there are more gregarious characters in both discussion board groups and face-to-face methodologies (both online and in-person), this platform allows those who are more reserved a neutral space to speak up.

Adobe Connect generates automated transcripts of each discussion, which is a distinct output produced by this online platform. This is beneficial for the researchers, as automated transcripts form the basis of detailed analysis and are less costly and less time consuming than using alternative transcription services. This has also been beneficial for The Electoral Commission as we have been able to provide anonymised transcripts throughout our fieldwork period for this research project, which has provided an overview of the emerging themes in real time.

## Key disadvantages of discussion boards

There are a number of potential disadvantages to online discussion boards. In an online discussion board, people are unable to see each other and therefore are unable to read visual cues such as body language, or reactions and facial expressions. Humans are inherently social beings, and learn from one another in a social setting, as they observe how others respond in a particular situation<sup>8</sup>. There is also evidence to suggest that facial perception is a key factor in interpreting other people's reactions and the meaning behind what they are saying (or not saying) in a conversation<sup>9</sup>.

There is also some limitation to the extent to which participants can interact with each other in a discussion board. While participants may be able to accurately understand what a fellow group member has expressed by reading their comments, there is less opportunity for individual participants to engage in one-on-one debate. We have, however, found that participants will challenge or agree with one another in the chat function, by referring to their group members by name and following up on points they have found relevant or interesting.

Another drawback to online discussion boards is there can occasionally be technical glitches with certain multimedia files, especially those which have a larger file size or resolution i.e. video files.

## Video groups

The online video groups were conducted using Microsoft Teams. To ensure optimal data quality and to facilitate an equitable discussion, we recommended including no more than five participants for each of the groups. The moderator was able to share the stimulus material with participants on the call, ensuring that video group participants understood and engaged with the subject matter in a similar way to the discussion board participants. Participants were required to enable their microphone and webcam functions to communicate with the group.

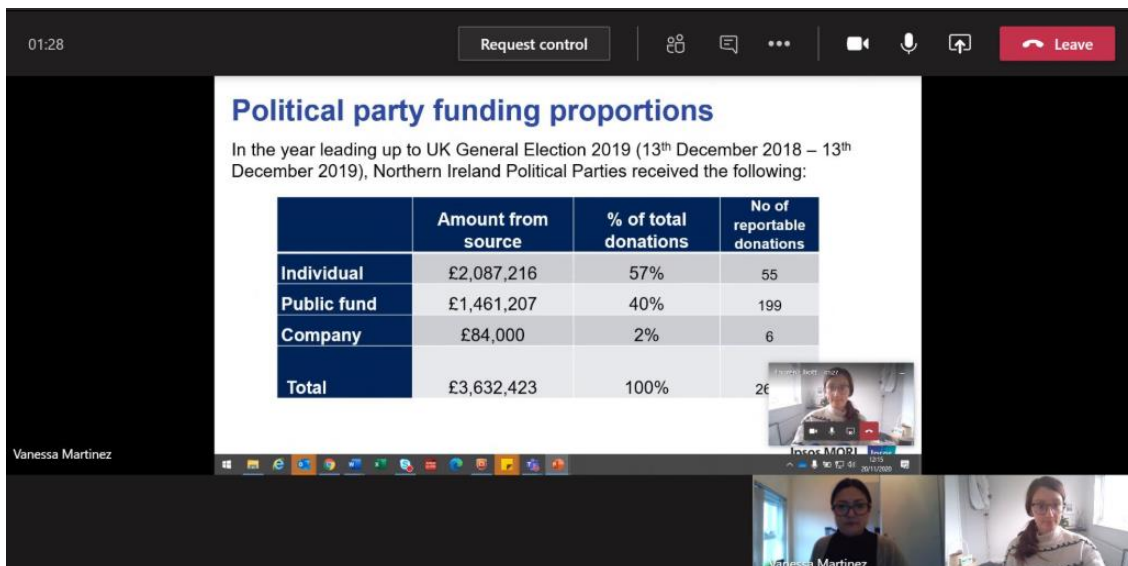
Participants were able to both see and hear the moderator as they presented the stimulus material and were able to see one another on the bottom of their screen. Everyone kept their microphones on for the duration of the session, to facilitate a natural conversation in line with a more tradition in-person face-to-face group. Participants were encouraged to speak and share their views on the topics being discussed. An example of the participant view in Microsoft Teams is provided overleaf.

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<sup>8</sup> Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977). *Social learning theory* (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-hall.

<sup>9</sup> Parkinson, B. (2017). Faces in the wild. *Psychologist*, 30(July 2017).

## Microsoft Teams: Participant View



The screenshot shows a Microsoft Teams meeting interface. At the top, there is a toolbar with icons for 'Request control', chat, a menu, video, microphone, screen sharing, and a 'Leave' button. The main content area displays a presentation slide titled 'Political party funding proportions'. The slide text states: 'In the year leading up to UK General Election 2019 (13<sup>th</sup> December 2018 – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019), Northern Ireland Political Parties received the following:'. Below this is a table with four columns: 'Source', 'Amount from source', '% of total donations', and 'No of reportable donations'. The table has four rows: 'Individual', 'Public fund', 'Company', and 'Total'. To the right of the table, there is a small video thumbnail of a participant. At the bottom of the screen, there is a taskbar with various application icons and a row of three video thumbnails of participants, including one labeled 'Vanessa Martinez'.

Source	Amount from source	% of total donations	No of reportable donations
Individual	£2,087,216	57%	55
Public fund	£1,461,207	40%	199
Company	£84,000	2%	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>£3,632,423</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>260</b>

### Key advantages of video groups

There are some key advantages to a video group methodology. The video method allowed for icebreaking and rapport-building through face-to-face introductions. The beginning of this session mirrored that of a face-to-face focus group in the sense that participants would arrive one by one and there was an opportunity for 'small talk' with the moderator and other group members as they settled in and tested their video and audio settings.

This put participants at ease, especially those who were unfamiliar with using digital technologies. It also allowed them to build a rapport with the moderator and the other participants, facilitating in the creation of a group dynamic before the introduction of the subject of interest.

Participants also felt relaxed in their own home, choosing a comfortable area in their house to take part. This was beneficial as it eased participants into the conversation as they felt comfortable in their surroundings.

### Key disadvantages of video groups

A number of disadvantages to the video group methodology became apparent across the sessions. There was limited engagement with the stimulus materials compared to the online discussion boards sessions. Participants tended to offer reactions to the material presented and were hesitant when stating their viewpoint, indicating that they were either unsure of what was being presented to them or there was a lack of interest in the topic more generally.

Participants posed many more questions in the video groups around the material presented. The extent of the questions raised sometimes disrupted the flow of the discussion and pulled attention away from the questions being asked, which required the moderator to focus the conversation back to certain points raised.

It was evident that participants were distracted by what was happening in their home environment, sometimes by family members or televisions that were on in the background. This made it difficult to

engage participants as they were sometimes trying to split their focus to make sense of what was happening both in the video group session and their home environment.

The session felt longer for participants in the video groups compared to those in the discussion board sessions. Attention seemed to wane a lot earlier in the video groups, with a noticeable sense of frustration coming through from participants. This was strengthened by the nature of some of the questions which were designed for deliberation and felt somewhat repetitive in a video group setting.

Finally, a limited number of participants can be accommodated in a video group, whereas in a discussion board session up to twice as many participants can be included, resulting in a richer set of findings.

### **Methodological reflection**

When comparing the two distinct online methodologies, a number of key factors have been identified, and should be taken into consideration when deciding between an online discussion board and a video group approach.

Technical ability and connection issues were minimal across both methodologies, indicating that this should not be a key concern when choosing a digital platform.

Generally, video group participants were much less engaged and relied upon the more gregarious group members to carry the discussion. While this is comparable with a face-to-face, in-person focus group, it is more challenging for the moderator to draw more reserved participants into the conversation without making them feel uncomfortable.

Discussion board groups produced a much wider and more in-depth set of responses, which allowed for more thorough and detailed analysis. In comparison, video group participants tended to agree with what more confident participants had said. This could be explained by social norming, where people agree with other group members as they feel this is the desired or acceptable response and they also want to avoid appearing foolish. This reinforced the known advantage of discussion boards in helping to overcome social desirability bias. projects.

Video group conversation felt more passive, with participants concentrating less on the stimulus slides and asking more questions which disrupted the flow of the session. The attention of video group participants visibly dipped, with the most responsive group starting to lose attention at one hour. In contrast, the discussion board participants had to “zone in” on their task of typing responses and thus remained focused and engaged.

Video group participants were often visibly distracted by their surroundings (e.g. televisions, family members). While it is positive that participants feel relaxed and comfortable at home, this may have prevented them from taking a more active role in the discussion, leading to fewer insights and less depth.

Findings between the discussion board groups and the online video groups were largely aligned. Participants had generally low awareness of political party funding and donations. They also believed transparency was important and the majority felt that more could be done to increase transparency around how political parties in Northern Ireland are funded. While the findings were similar in content, more in-depth discussion generated by the online discussion boards allowed for a richer dataset.

To summarise, there are a number of key-takeaways to keep in mind when considering the benefits and drawbacks of discussion board and video group online approaches. These are outlined below. An overview of the advantages and disadvantages to each distinct approach is appended to this report (see Appendix 4).



# 07

## **Summary and conclusions**

# Summary and conclusions

## Summary of findings

Across the group discussions, there was very little awareness about how political parties are funded in Northern Ireland.

There was a clear consensus across the groups that the current regime in Northern Ireland is not transparent, underpinned by a more overarching negative view of politics in Northern Ireland in general. Various reasons were identified for this:

- Amounts under £500 not being considered donations thereby creating a perception among the public that this is a 'loophole', adding to the perception that the current regime is malleable.
- Current donation thresholds were considered to be too high. Participants thought that this created the potential for corruption.
- Donations between 2014 and 2017 not being published.

There was a strong belief that transparency is vitally important, and work has to be done to improve this. The majority of the groups agreed that making donations made between 2014-2017 public would enhance transparency. This would allow the electorate to trust the government and could enhance engagement in the political process in Northern Ireland. There was universal agreement that it is important that party finance information in Northern Ireland continues to be made publicly available.

Participants were asked towards the end of the session which of the above identified barriers to transparency the Electoral Commission should prioritise – there were diverging views on how transparency should be achieved, and people generally struggled to choose just one option as they believed all were important. Three groups stated that the Commission should prioritise lowering the donations reporting threshold while the other groups were more divided. Overall, there was majority agreement that party finance information reported between 2014-2017 should be made publicly available.

There was strong agreement that the role of the Electoral Commission is crucial in making this information available in a trustworthy way. To achieve this, there was a perception that the Commission should enhance its public profile by contributing to public discourse on this issue in a more visible way.

## Recommendations for future research

Based on the findings above, we recommend that the following areas could benefit from future research.

- Views on the acceptability of the legal definition of a donation which is £500 (in monetary value, goods or services).
- Views on the acceptability of the current donation reporting thresholds for political parties, regulated donees and accounting units.
- Differences in views on transparency of political party finance between those in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, potentially incorporating the further research recommended above in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

# 08

## **Appendices**



# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Pre & Post Task questions

### 20-050249 Electoral Commission Transparency Research Pre & post task questions

#### INTRO

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an online focus group with us to discuss transparency on how political parties are funded in Northern Ireland.

Before taking part, we would like you to answer some very quick questions. This will provide us with some really helpful information about your views and will also get us warmed up for our discussion later! We would just like you to answer 5 quick questions. You'll see they are each numbered on the homepage. You can click the next arrow at the end of each question to move on to the next one.

#### Snap a selfie!

Firstly, if you are happy to, could you please take a picture of yourself which shows your reaction to attending a group discussion about financial transparency in political parties? Or if you wanted to get really creative you could take a picture of something around your house or out-and-about that represents your feelings towards this discussion.

Task: Space for photo

Task: if you don't want to take a photo, try spelling out how you feel in emojis!

ASK ALL

SINGLE CODE

- How much would you say you know about political party finance - that is the way in which parties raise money to pay their staff and fund election campaigns?**

A lot	1
A little	2
Hardly anything	3
Nothing at all	4
Don't know	99

ASK ALL

SINGLE CODE

- In your opinion, should information about who donated money to political parties in Northern Ireland be made available to the public or kept confidential, or do you not mind either way?**

Made available	1
Kept confidential	2
Do not mind either way	3
Don't know	99

ASK ALL

SINGLE CODE

- To what extent, if at all, do you think transparency is important when it comes to political party finances?**

Very important	1
----------------	---

Fairly important	2
Not very important	3
Not at all important	4
Don't know	99

ASK ALL

SINGLE CODE PER STATEMENT

**4. To what extent to you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
The spending and funding of political parties and candidates and other campaigning organisations at elections is open and transparent in Northern Ireland	1	2	3	4	5	99
If I wanted to, I could easily find out how much political parties, candidates and other organisations spent on campaigning and how they were funded	1	2	3	4	5	99

**Q5.** In Northern Ireland, details of who has made donations to political parties in the last three years (from July 2017) is available to the public.

In your opinion, should information about who donated money to political parties in Northern Ireland during the last six years (from July 2014) be made available to the public or be kept confidential, or do not mind either way?

**SINGLE CODE.**

1. Made available
2. Kept confidential
3. Do not mind either way
4. Don't know

## Appendix 2: Discussion Guide

### 20-050249 Electoral Commission Transparency research

#### Discussion guide

1.INTRODUCTIONS AND BACKGROUND	10 MINS Complete by 6.40
<p>Thanks very much for agreeing to take part in tonight's group discussion. We really appreciate you giving up your time to share your views with us. Tonight's discussion will start at 6.30 p.m. and last up to two hours.</p> <p>Could everyone just confirm they are here and can read what we are typing?</p> <p><b>[MODERATOR WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS]</b></p> <p>Just a little bit about why we have asked you to take part tonight. My name is [name] and I work for the independent research organisation, Ipsos MORI. I will be moderating the group this evening. There is also another moderator present, [name] who will be observing the session and will be on hand to deal with any technical issues, should these arise.</p> <p>Ipsos MORI have been commissioned by the Electoral Commission to organise some research on their behalf. This research will help the Electoral Commission to explore public awareness and attitudes to transparency around political finance in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>[IF REQUIRED] I also need to make you aware that representatives from the Electoral Commission are attending this evening to observe the discussion.</p> <p>Is everyone clear on this?</p> <p><b>[MODERATOR WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS]</b></p> <p>When taking part in discussions like these there are no right or wrong answers – we really are just interested in what you think. Please note that you do not have to share any personal experiences if you do not feel comfortable doing so.</p> <p>Everything you write tonight is completely confidential – no-one will be able to identify who you are unless you reveal personal details about yourself.</p> <p>Does this sound ok to everyone?</p> <p><b>[MODERATOR WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS]</b></p> <p>Before we get started, here are just a few things to bear in mind:</p>	<p><i>Setting the ground rules. Putting participants at ease. Explaining any technical detail relating to use of Adobe Connect.</i></p>

1. When you want to comment, you just need to write your comments in the white space in the centre.
2. Please answer the questions as fully as possible – we really want to know the detail! We have a lot to get through this evening so we may post a new question before you have completed your thoughts on the previous. This is absolutely fine – just keep typing your response and then move on. The system saves all of the things you type so it won't get lost.
3. Don't be afraid to disagree with one another – but please do so respectfully and be mindful of other people's feelings and opinions.
4. We have a set list of questions we need to ask, but there will be a chance for you to raise any issues you think are important towards the end of the discussion.
5. If you have any technical issues or difficulties using the site please email the moderator by replying to the email you received with the URL or call the recruiter.
6. If you want to speak to the moderator privately about an issue, then you can send the moderator a private message.
7. Please stay online until the end of the discussion – we will aim to finish on time.
8. As a thank you for taking part, participants are entitled to £35. We will provide more information about this at the end of the discussion.

Can everybody please indicate whether they are happy to take part in the research on the basis of what has been outlined above?

At various points during our discussion this evening, I will enable my microphone to be able to explain some of the things we will be discussing. I am just going to test that this works now.

Could everyone confirm that they can hear me?

**[MODERATOR WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS]**

**SLIDE 3: define scope**

As you'll see in the slide below, we have provided some more context for the topics we will be discussing this evening.

1. As much as possible, please try to keep to the conversation at hand. While the topics we will be discussing relate to political parties and their funding, we will not be having a political debate.
2. There are some topics that although interesting, are outside of our scope of discussion. As much as possible, please avoid discussing how political parties spend the money they raise.
3. Ipsos MORI are not experts on these issues so we may not be able to answer all of your questions. However, if you would like a particular question to be asked of the Electoral Commission we can pass this on on your behalf, or if they are observing the session, they may be able to answer at the end.

Ok, now that that is all out of the way, we're going to dive in.	
<b>2. GENERAL AWARENESS AND PERCEPTIONS</b>	<b>25 mins Complete by 7.05/ 7.10</b>
<p>To begin with, we're going to do some quick word association exercises:</p> <p>What are the first things that come to mind when you hear the word 'transparency.'</p> <p><b>[MODERATOR probe on responses]</b></p> <p>What are the first things that come to your mind when you hear the phrase 'political donations'?</p> <p><b>[MODERATOR probe on responses]</b></p> <p>What, if anything, do you know about how political parties in Northern Ireland get their money from ?</p> <p><b>Probes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where have you gathered this information from – from what sources?</li> <li>• What kinds of things have these sources provided information on?</li> <li>• What has the tone of the information been?</li> <li>• Do you think that political parties in Northern Ireland are more likely to be underfunded or overfunded? Why do you think this?</li> <li>• For those who do not know, or have not heard anything about how political parties in Northern Ireland are funded, why do you think that is?</li> <li>• For those who do not know: do you personally think this is something that is important to know about?</li> </ul> <p><b>What do you know about donations to political parties?</b></p> <p><b>Probes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where have you gathered this information from – from what sources?</li> <li>• What kinds of things have these sources provided information on?</li> <li>• What has the tone of the information been?</li> <li>• For those who do not know, or have not heard anything about how political parties in Northern Ireland are funded, why do you think that is?</li> </ul> <p><b>How do you feel about political parties receiving donations?</b></p>	<p><i>General introduction to some of the topics being discussed and capturing unprompted views before information is presented.</i></p>

<p><b>Probes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do you feel this way?</li> <li>• Have you always felt this way or have your views on this changed over time?</li> <li>• If your views have changed over time, what do you think was responsible for this change?</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>What kind of donations do you think are received by political parties?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What about any donations that may not be monetary?</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>What sources would you trust to give you accurate information on political party donations?</b></p> <p><b>Probes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why would you trust this information?</li> <li>• What kinds of sources would you not trust and why?</li> <li>• To what extent, if all all, do you think you would seek out this kind information?</li> </ul> <p><b>Everyone who has been recruited to attend this session has not donated to a political party before. Could you tell us why this is?</b></p> <p><b>Probes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would you consider making a donation in the future? Why/why not?</li> <li>• Who do you think makes donations to political parties in Northern Ireland? Why do you say that?</li> <li>• What do you think might motivate people to donate to political parties?</li> <li>• What, if anything, might motivate you to donate to a political party in the future?</li> </ul>	
<b>3. FUNDING AND DONATIONS</b>	<b>35 MINS</b> <b>Complete by 7.40</b>
<p><b>We are now going to move on to discuss funding and donation in more detail. We will present you with some information on these subjects and then ask you for your views.</b></p> <p><b>Firstly, what do you think that political parties need to spend money on?</b></p> <p><b>[Moderator: Capture unprompted views first]</b></p> <p><b>Slide 4- Political party spending</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think of this?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Presenting information on political party funding and donations and current regime to enable informed discussion and deliberation.</i></p>

- How does it differ, if at all, from what you previously thought?
- Does this impact your views on donations to political parties?

#### **Slide 5 – breakdown of funding proportions**

- What do you think of this?
- How does this differ, if at all, from what you previously thought?

**What do you think are the benefits/drawbacks for each of these sources of funding?**

- Public funding?
- Individual donations/loans?
- Donations/loans from businesses?
- Party members?
- Do your views on this differ based on the size of the party?

#### **Slide 6 – information on types of donations**

- What do you think of this?
- Were you aware of each of these types of donations?
- How does this differ, if at all, from what you previously thought?

#### **Slide 7 – Types of donor**

- What do you think about this?
- Were you aware of this?
- How, if at all, does this differ from what you previously thought?

#### **Slide 8- information on donation thresholds**

- What do you think about this?
- Were you aware of this?

**As is shown in the slide, the threshold that above which the source of a donation needs to be named if they donate to a political party is £7,500.**

- **Do you think the threshold should be higher, lower or stay the same?**
  - Why is that?
  - For those who thought it should be higher or lower than £7,500, do you have a particular figure in mind that you think it should be?
- **What do you think the advantages might be of making the reporting threshold higher so that less donations need to be reported?**
- **What do you think the advantages might be of making the reporting threshold lower so that more donations need to be reported?**
- **Do you believe the current regime is transparent?**
- **Aside from the main reporting threshold we have already discussed would you change any of the rules included on the slide?**

**Do you know much about how is political party funding (including donations) is regulated?**

- **Which organisation is responsible for this?**

#### **Slide 9 – Overview of Electoral Commission's role**

- **What do you think about this?**
- **How effective do you think the Electoral Commission has been at regulating party finances?**
  - Why do you say that?
- **Would you trust the Electoral Commission to ensure that party finances are kept transparent in Northern Ireland?**
  - Why/why not?
  - If not: who, if anyone, else would you trust to ensure political transparency?
- **What actions do you think the Electoral Commission can take when funding rules are broken?**
  - What actions should they take if rules are broken?

## **5. TRANSPARENCY**

**15-20 MINS  
Complete by  
8.00**



**Thanks everyone for your comments so far. We're now moving on to discuss transparency in more detail.**

**Firstly, do you think transparency is important in relation to political party finances?**

**Probes:**

- Why/why not?
- What does transparency mean to you in this context?

**To what extent would you say that there is transparency in the way political parties in Northern Ireland are funded?**

**Probes:**

- Why do you say that?
- Do you think this has changed over time?
- What role do you think the Electoral Commission plays in this?

#### **Slide 10 – timeline showing legislative changes in NI**

- **What do you think about this?**
- **Do you now think that now donations are made public, the behaviour of political parties/donors has changed?**
  -
- **Do you think the current regime does enough to ensure transparency in party finances?**
  -
- **Do you agree with donor's details being made public?**
  - Why/why not?
- **Can you think of any reasons why donor details should remain confidential?**
  - Do your views on this differ depending on whether it is an individual or a business donor?
  - Do you think this should differ depending on the size of donation?
  - Do you think this should differ depending on the type of donation?
- **Who do you think would access information on donations to political parties?**
- **Who do you think benefits from this information being made public?**
- **Would you personally access this information?**
  - Why/why not?

*Section to understand if and to what extent transparency is important to them to to what extent the existing regime delivers this.*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Is it important to you that this information is available, even if you wouldn't access it personally?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why/why not?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Do you think there is a need for more openness and transparency regarding party funding, or does the current regime go far enough?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why do you say that?</li> <li>▪ What benefits do you think increased transparency could bring?</li> <li>▪ What are the potential drawbacks?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>6. PROPOSED CHANGES</b>	<b>20 MINS</b> <b>Complete by 8.20</b>
<p><b>Thanks everyone for your conversation so far. We are now on our last section for this evening.</b></p> <p><b>Show slide 7 timeline again</b></p> <p><b>As we have outlined, under the current regime, donations over the threshold have been published from 2017 onwards. Donations between 2014 and 2017 cannot currently be published. However the UK Parliament could pass legislation to allow this.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>What do you think about this?</b></li> <li>• <b>Do you think this information should be made public?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why/why not?</li> <li>▪ What might the benefits be to this?</li> <li>▪ What might the drawbacks be?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Slide 11 –EC position on publishing donations between 2014-2017</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Do you agree with this?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why/why not?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Based on this information, do you think that donor information from 2014-2017 be published?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why/why not?</li> <li>▪ What might the benefits of this be?</li> <li>▪ What might the drawbacks be?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>During the period from 2014-2017, major political events occurred, including elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the UK Parliament, the European parliament, local councils and the EU referendum.</b></p>	<p><i>To culminate the session with a review of the current regime and presenting EC's question/position around 2014-2017 donations.</i></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does this affect your views on whether donations from 2014-2017 should be made public?</li> <li>• Do you think that this is important even though time has passed?</li> <li>• Was this/would this issue have been important to you 5-6 years ago?</li> <li>• Is this important to you now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why/why not?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>5. FINAL REFLECTIONS AND THANK YOU</b>	<b>10 mins Complete by 8.30</b>
<p>Ok everyone, based on everything we have discussed this evening, to what extent do you think transparency in political party finances is important?</p> <p>Do you think that the current regime in Northern Ireland is transparent enough?</p> <p><b>Additional question: *amend as appropriate*</b></p> <p>Ok, so throughout the course of our discussion, people have identified various issues with the current regime: the current reporting threshold of £7, 500 being too high, amounts under £500 not being considered donations and donations between 2014-2017 not being published.</p> <p>Out of all of these things, what do you think the Electoral Commission should prioritise in order to improve financial transparency in NI?</p> <p>Thinking back to the start of the session, do you think your views on this topic have changed at all?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If yes: what in particular has caused your views to change?</li> <li>• If no: why not?</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Thank you so much everyone for taking the time to participate in this group this evening. It's been a great discussion and the findings are going to be really useful to the Electoral Commission.</p> <p>Does anyone have any final thoughts they would like to add on what we have discussed before we finish up?</p> <p>As a thank you for taking part tonight, we would like to offer you £35 for your time..</p> <p>Thanks again! We hope you and your family keep safe and well.</p>	

## Appendix 3: Stimulus presentation slides



## Emoji quiz – enjoy while we're waiting!

Can you name the capital city?

- 1 🐭 🐱
- 2 🗣️ 🎵 🅐 🐾
- 3 🐼 🏠 🅐
- 4 🛍️ 👤
- 5 🐾 🔑 🅐
- 6 📈 🏠
- 7 🆕 📺 🅐
- 8 🍷 🐻 🅐
- 9 🎪 🏠
- 10 @ 🐔

- 11 🤖 🤖
- 12 🕵️ 🅐
- 13 🐱 🐼 🦌
- 14 🛕 🏃 🅐 🗣️
- 15 🗣️ 🅐
- 16 💣 🍆
- 17 🇲🇽 🌃
- 18 🛁 🏆 (🇫🇷 10) 📧
- 19 🔥
- 20 🔔 (🅑 —)

## Scope of our discussions

**1. As much as possible, please try to keep to the conversation at hand. While the topics we will be discussing relate to political parties in Northern Ireland and their funding, we will not be having a political debate.**

**2. There are some topics that although interesting, are outside of our scope of discussion. As much as possible, please avoid discussing how political parties (or individuals within them) spend the money they raise.**

**3. Ipsos MORI are not experts on these issues so we may not be able to answer all of your questions. However, if you would like a particular question to be asked of the Electoral Commission we can pass this on on your behalf, or if they are observing the session, they may be able to answer at the end.**

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## What do political parties need to spend money on?

- To get their message to the public so they know what they are voting for (advertising/ rallies/ other events);
- Research on what policy positions to take;
- Canvassing;
- Overheads/ Administration & travel.

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## Political party funding proportions

In the year leading up to UK General Election 2019 (13<sup>th</sup> December 2018 – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019), Northern Ireland Political Parties received the following:

	Amount from source	% of total donations	No of reportable donations
Individual	£2,087,216	57%	55
Public fund	£1,461,207	40%	199
Company	£84,000	2%	6
Total	£3,632,423	100%	260

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## Types of donations

- In law a donation is any amount **over £500** in value. This means that amounts of £500 or less are not legally considered donations.
- A donation can be money, goods or services given to a party without charge or on non-commercial terms, with a value of **over £500**.
- Some examples of donations include:
  - A gift of money or other property.
  - Sponsorship of an event or publication.
  - Subscription or affiliation payments.
  - Free or specially discounted use of an office.

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## Types of donor

- Donations to a political party can only be accepted from a **permissible donor**.
- A **permissible donor** is:
  - An individual registered on a UK electoral register, including overseas electors and those leaving bequests.
  - Irish citizens (including bequests).
  - Most UK/Irish-registered companies.
  - A UK/Irish-registered political party.
  - A UK/Irish-registered trade union.
  - A UK/Irish-registered building society.
  - A UK/Irish-registered limited liability partnership (LLP) that carries out business in the UK or Ireland.
  - A UK/Irish-registered friendly society.
  - A UK/Irish-based unincorporated association that carries on business or other activities in the UK or Ireland.

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## Donation thresholds

Who is regulated?	What do they have to report?	When do they have to report it?
<u>Political parties</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Any donation of more than £7,500 from a single source, or multiple small donations, over £500, from a single source which add up to over £7,500</li> <li>- Additional donations over £1,500 from a source that has previously given more than £7,500</li> <li>- Any impermissible donations they receive and the action they took regarding them</li> </ul>	Quarterly
<u>Regulated donees</u> (members of political parties and holders of elective office such as MLAs MPs and Councillors)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A donation of more than £1,500 from a single source, or multiple small donations, over £500, from a single source which add up to over £1,500</li> <li>- Any impermissible donations they receive and the action they took regarding them</li> </ul>	Within 30 days of accepting the donation
<u>Accounting units</u> (sections of a party that aren't controlled by the party's headquarters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A donation of more than £1,500 from a single source, or multiple small donations, over £500, from a single source which add up to over £1,500</li> <li>- Any impermissible donations they receive and the action they took regarding them</li> </ul>	Quarterly

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## The role of the Electoral Commission

- The Commission regulates political funding and spending under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA).
- They provide advice and guidance to political parties so they understand the rules and their obligations.
- They take enforcement action, using their investigative powers and sanctions, where necessary to do so.
- Publish information on political parties finances.

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## Legislative timeline

Political Parties, Elections & Referendums Act 2000 introduced controls on donations to political parties in GB but political parties from NI were excluded.

Government consultation on introducing controls on political donations in NI. A modified (confidential) version was proposed.

The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 was introduced which introduced controls on donations in NI but the Commission was not allowed to publish details of donors to avoid donor intimidation.

These measures –known as the prescribed period– remained in place from November 2007 – December 2013.

The NI (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 came into effect, granting permanent anonymity for donors prior to 2014. However it allowed for the publication of information on donations reported from January 2014 at some point in the future.

The Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018 came into effect, allowing information on donations to be published from 1 July 2017 onwards.

2000

2005

2006

2007-2013

2014

2018

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## Electoral Commission position

- The Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018 has allowed the Electoral Commission to publish information about donations and loans reported by Northern Ireland political parties and other regulated entities **since 1 July 2017**. Prior to this, they were prohibited by law from publishing this information.
- The Commission **continues to be prohibited from publishing information it holds in relations to donations and loans reported to before 1 July 2017**. However the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 would **allow for the publication of information between 1 January 2014 and July 2017** subject to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland laying a necessary Order in the UK Parliament.
- The Commission have continually called on the UK Government to bring forward legislation that will enable them to **publish information on donations from January 2014**. They believe this is important for transparency and public confidence for voters in Northern Ireland.

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**THANK  
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TAKING  
PART.**

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## Appendix 4: Methodological reflection Online Discussion Boards vs Video Focus Groups

Methodological reflections		
	Key Advantages	Key Disadvantages
<b>Discussion boards</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants take time to write considered and thoughtful responses</li> <li>• Participants seem to be more focused and engaged with topics at hand (including stimulus)</li> <li>• Participants appear more confident to contribute</li> <li>• Richer and more in-depth discussion</li> <li>• More equitable discussion across participants</li> <li>• Automatic transcripts produced for detailed analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to read visual cues (e.g. participant body language)</li> <li>• Some limitation on the extent to which participants can interact with each other</li> <li>• Can be some tech glitches with multimedia files e.g. video files</li> </ul>
<b>Video groups</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video method allows for ice-breaking through face-to-face introductions</li> <li>• Participants feel relaxed in their own home</li> <li>• Participants can build a rapport with each other and with the moderator</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less engagement with stimulus materials</li> <li>• More questions raised, stifling the flow of the discussion.</li> <li>• Visible distractions in home environment</li> <li>• Session felt longer for participants and attention seemed to wane quite early</li> <li>• Some questions designed for deliberation felt repetitive</li> <li>• Limited number of participants</li> </ul>

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Ipsos MORI's standards and accreditations provide our clients with the peace of mind that they can always depend on us to deliver reliable, sustainable findings. Our focus on quality and continuous improvement means we have embedded a 'right first time' approach throughout our organisation.



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This is the international market research specific standard that supersedes BS 7911/MRQSA and incorporates IQCS (Interviewer Quality Control Scheme). It covers the five stages of a Market Research project. Ipsos MORI was the first company in the world to gain this accreditation.



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## ISO 9001

This is the international general company standard with a focus on continual improvement through quality management systems. In 1994, we became one of the early adopters of the ISO 9001 business standard.



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