



**democratic audit ireland**

# Public Perspectives on Democracy in Ireland

## Topline Results

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**Paula Clancy, Ian Hughes and Teresa Brannick**

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*Acknowledgements*

## Executive Summary

Irish people have a strongly egalitarian concept of democracy. A more equal society is seen as the single most important issue for Ireland today. There is overwhelming support for the enforcement of social and employment-related rights through Irish law. The corollary is that there is a sharp awareness of existing inequalities in Irish society.

Persistent and unacceptably high levels of gender inequality in Irish society are not high in the consciousness of the Irish public: there is a belief that things have improved for women in Ireland in the past five years. However, women politicians are well regarded: they are seen as at least comparable and better by many to their male counterparts. Women are as likely to be active politically as men and very much more likely to be active in the community. Obstacles to their equal representation politically emanate from sources other than popular opinion or women's own propensity to engage.

People demonstrate a significant level of confidence in their own political power. There is a strong level of belief in an individual's ability to influence political decisions, a strong belief in the influence of

their vote at elections and a strong belief in their duty to vote.

This power is however, primarily exercised in participation at elections and in reliance on public representatives. A substantial number of people believe that political activism is a waste of time. This is in turn reflected in the relatively small proportions of people who are active in politics. This is a major preoccupation of all political parties at the present time and is a feature of politics which is not confined to the Irish context.

There is a noteworthy degree of support for politics and political institutions. People believe that both the Government and the opposition matter. Thus the Dail is seen to have an important role in upholding important dimensions of democracy, most notably holding the Government to account. However, on another important dimension, the Dail is seen to mirror inequalities in Irish society. The overwhelmingly male, business sector is far and away seen to be the most represented group, while people living in disadvantaged groups are the least represented.

The media is seen as playing a crucial role in governance, particularly with respect to holding the government accountable for its actions. It is also the institution seen as having more impact on people's everyday

lives than any other player in the political arena. It is interesting to speculate whether direct access to the media by individuals is increasingly coming to be seen as an effective means of influencing political decision-making.

Recent changes in Irish society are seen as positive by the majority of respondents, the exception being the decline in the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland which is seen by the majority of respondents as a bad thing.

There is a high degree of ambivalence towards the law across a range of issues among the general population: tax evasion for example being just a little more strongly disapproved of by respondents than dropping litter. Ambivalence towards the law was also found to be highest among those who have completed third level education.

There are some signposts of concern on the question of citizenship and immigration. While there is strong support for the extension of socio-economic rights to all, regardless of citizenship status, and for the kinds of changes to Irish society brought about by the increase in non-nationals, there is also a worrying number of people who do not share this view.

Overall, our results show a high degree of consensus in Irish society around attitudes to democracy. The variations in response according to age, social class, gender and level of education do not reveal any great fault lines. The most surprising variation is the higher level of ambivalence towards the law among third level graduates than for the rest of the population. The relative consistency of responses from across all levels of Irish society reflects perhaps the frequently commented upon lack of major ideological cleavages in Irish politics and society.

## Introduction

As part of the Democratic Audit project, a survey of public attitudes to democracy in Ireland was carried out using face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1200 adults aged 15 and over. Interviews were conducted during the period 13<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2005 by Lansdowne Market Research on behalf of TASC – a Think Tank for Action on Social Change. The following presents the topline results from this survey.

## 1. Perspectives on Democracy

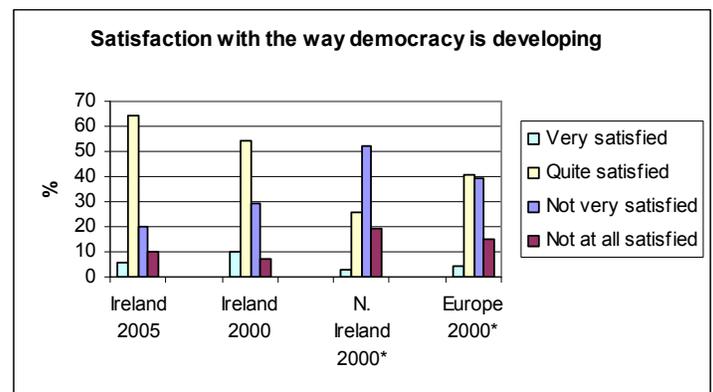
Satisfaction with democracy in Ireland has increased since the last time the public were asked this question five years ago<sup>1</sup>. Seventy per cent of respondents who expressed a view now say they are very satisfied or quite satisfied with the way democracy is developing here, compared with 64% five years ago. Attitudes towards democracy in Ireland thus continue to be more positive than is the case in most other countries in Europe. See Table 1.

However, when the don't knows are included, while we still find a majority

<sup>1</sup> European Values Survey, 1999/2000  
<http://www.europeanvalues.nl>

(60%) of respondents who say they are very or quite satisfied, one quarter say they are either not very satisfied or not at all satisfied, and a further 11% say they don't know. Since most of us would take for granted Ireland's status as a functioning democracy, it has to be taken seriously that almost 2 in 5 respondents are either unsatisfied or feel unable or unwilling to comment.

**Table 1**



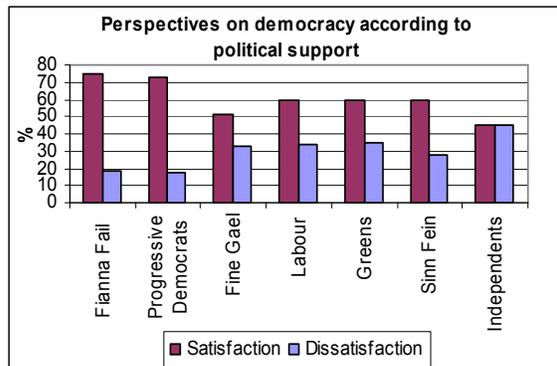
\*Source: Fahey T., Hayes C.H. and Sinnott R., Conflict and Consensus, IPA, 2005, p196

As would be expected, social class is a major determinant of satisfaction. Seventy per cent of the highest socio-economic grouping report being very or quite satisfied, compared with only 53% of the lowest.

Satisfaction with the current state of democracy in Ireland is also higher among those who would intend to vote for the present Government parties and lowest

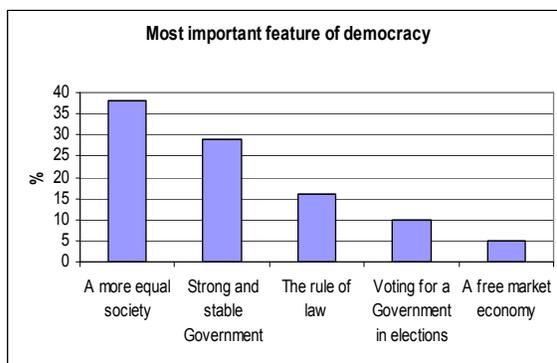
among supporters of opposition parties and independents. See Table 2.

**Table 2**



This correlation between satisfaction with the state of democracy and support for the Government parties suggests a dynamic concept of democracy rather than one which is static. So what is in people's minds when they think about democracy? To find out we asked respondents to choose the most important feature from a range of five options, as outlined in Table 3 below.

**Table 3**



Our finding is that Irish people have a strongly egalitarian concept of democracy. A more equal society is seen by respondents as the single most important issue for Irish democracy today, with 38% choosing this option. By comparison, fewer than 5% name a free market economy as the single most important issue. This provides evidence of strong public support for a more just society over the primacy of the free market alone. A more equal society is the single most important aspect of democracy for all social classes except the highest socio-economic grouping. Women are somewhat more likely to emphasise the need for a more equal society than men, and younger people are substantially more likely to emphasise the need for a more equal society than older age groups.

Governance issues are also regarded by many of the population as of prime importance. Strong and stable government and the rule of law together are seen by almost 45% of respondents as the most important features of democracy. Strong and stable government is more likely to be mentioned by older people and those from the highest socio-economic grouping.

Voting for a government in elections was named by only one in ten of the population as most important, suggesting that this is a

now taken-for-granted feature of Irish democracy.

Making a range of social and economic rights justiciable is central to the argument for a more egalitarian society. When we asked what rights people thought should be included in Irish law we find that there is overwhelming support for the idea of enshrining social rights such as healthcare, education, and housing in Irish law. Around 90% or more of respondents think these rights should be included in law.

See Table 4.

There is also very strong, albeit a reduced, level of support for the concept of employment-related rights, with around 80% agreeing that the right to join a trade union and the right to state support of childcare for children of working parents should be included in Irish law.

Two out of every three respondents supported extending these rights to non-citizens resident here.

**Table 4 Inclusion of Social and Economic Rights in Irish Law**

*Do you think the following rights should or should not be included in Irish law?*

	% Yes
Right to education regardless of income	92
Right of homeless to be housed	91
Right to healthcare regardless of income	90
Right to join a trade union	81
Right to childcare for working parents	79
Equal treatment regardless of citizenship	66

## 2. Political and Community Participation

Our findings show that substantial majorities of Irish citizens want to have a say in how Ireland is run and believe they have a duty to vote. We also find that most people believe that when ordinary citizens make an

effort to influence political decisions they can really make a difference. Only one in five respondents think that being active in politics is a waste of time. See Table 5.

**Table 5**            **Participation in Democracy: Political Activism**  
*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about citizen's participation in politics in Ireland today?*

	Net Agree %	Net Disagree %
It is my duty to vote	79	5
I want to have a say in how the country is run	72	7
When ordinary citizens make an effort to influence political decisions, they can really make a difference	64	14
Citizens being active in politics is a waste of time	21	55

While almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents believe that when citizens make an effort to influence political decisions they can really make a difference, just over half (55%) of the population feel it is worthwhile to be active in politics. We can deduce therefore that a substantial number of people believe either that they can influence politics through means other than political activism or are simply not interested in engaging.

While there is no marked difference between men and women in their attitudes to political activism, age and socio-economic status do play a role. Those who feel most strongly that activism is not a waste of time are somewhat more likely to be aged 35 plus, be from higher social class groupings and have higher levels of education. Similar patterns are evident in relation to both the desire to have a say in how the country is run and a

belief that an individual's actions can make a difference.

Positive attitudes towards the value of political activism of course do not necessarily translate into concrete action.

In order to compare the extent of people's involvement in political and community activities we asked respondents about activities they had taken part in during the past three years. See Table 6.

**Table 6 Political and Community Activism**

*Which, if any, of the following have you done at any time in the past three years?*

	<b>% Ireland</b>	<b>% UK</b>
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or a campaigning organization	61	44
Done voluntary work	39	28
Taken part in a charity/sponsored event	32	22
Helped organise a charity event	28	21
Been an officer of a voluntary organisation or club	17	13
Served on a school committee	10	NA*
Voted in the last general election	69	61
Voted in the last local authority election	67	50
Urged someone outside my family to vote	26	17
Stood for public office	1	1
Discussed politics or political news with someone else	40	38
Signed a petition	26	44
Urged someone to get in touch with a local councillor or TD	20	16
Attended the clinic of a local councillor or TD	16	NA*
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	8	20
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party	8	6
Taken part in a political demonstration, picket, march or political meeting	5	6
Taken an active part in a party political campaign	4	NA*
Taken an active part in any political campaign	3	3

\*NA = Not asked.

Source of UK figures: An Audit of Political Engagement 2, March, 2005, The Electoral Commission, UK

The findings show that levels of community activity are much higher than levels of political activity. Almost 40% of

respondents had done some kind of voluntary work, and more than 28% had helped to organise a charity event. By

comparison, less than 10% had boycotted products, or donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party, the most likely forms of political activism.

To explore degrees of activism a little further we defined a political activist as someone who has engaged in one or more of the following activities: boycotted certain products; donated money or paid a membership fee to political party; taken an active part in a party political campaign; taken part in any political campaign; taken part in a political demonstration. A community activist is defined as someone who has engaged in one or more of the following: voluntary work; helped organise a charity event; been an officer of a voluntary organisation.

Following these definitions, women are more likely than men to be community activists. Political activists on the other hand are equally likely to be women or men. This is a revealing finding in that it demonstrates that the low levels of women's representation in politics is not due to a shortage of grass roots women activists.

Those who are engaged in community activities are significantly more likely to also be engaged in political activism. More than 30% of those who were very active at community level (i.e. at least two of the

three activities) engaged in at least one political activity as well. This compares with just 10% of those who were not active at community level at all.

Community and voluntary groups are regarded by a tiny minority of the population as groups which have an influence either on the decisions which affect people's lives or on political decision-making institutions. See Table 7.

Community activity therefore does not appear in the first instance to be an effort to influence decision-making at the political level.

Comparing the findings from this survey with results from the UK, we find that levels of involvement in community activities are much higher in Ireland than in the UK. While levels of party political activity are similar in the two countries, people's reported propensity to vote is much higher in Ireland than in the UK. The two areas where respondents in the UK are more active than in Ireland are in signing petitions and boycotting goods.

### 3. Public Attitudes to Governance

In order to find out how people view the importance of various individuals and organisations within the political arena, we asked respondents to select

the organisation or individual they believe has the most impact on people’s everyday lives. See Table 7.

**Table 7**      **The organisations or individuals impacting on people**  
*Which of the following individuals or organisations do you believe have most impact on people’s everyday lives in Ireland?*

	%
Media	16
Government Ministers	14
The Dail	14
Civil Service	11
The Taoiseach	8
EU	7
Local Councils	7
Local Councillors	5
Local TDs	5
Community/ Voluntary Groups	3

Our results show that the media is seen by the largest groups of respondents as having most impact on people’s everyday lives, followed by government ministers, the Dail and the civil service. The Taoiseach is identified by fewer people as having most impact .

Local TDs and local councillors are identified by much fewer people as having the most impact on people’s everyday lives. Community and voluntary groups are identified by very few as having a serious impact on people’s everyday lives.

The effectiveness of the Dáil, as the most representative democratic institution, is a key indicator of the health of our democracy. It is interesting to note the perception of its important impact on people’s everyday lives in view of our findings in Table 8. This shows that the Dáil is seen overwhelmingly as best representing the interests of business owners, farmers and men. The group seen as least represented in the Dáil, by a large margin, are people living in disadvantaged communities.

This finding, when taken with the concerns of the Irish public for an egalitarian society, suggests that, in its capacity to represent all

constituents equally, the Dáil is not meeting its democratic task.

**Table 8 Perspectives on representation in the Dail**  
*The interests of which of these groups would you say are most well represented in Dail Eireann? And the interests of which of these groups are least well represented?*

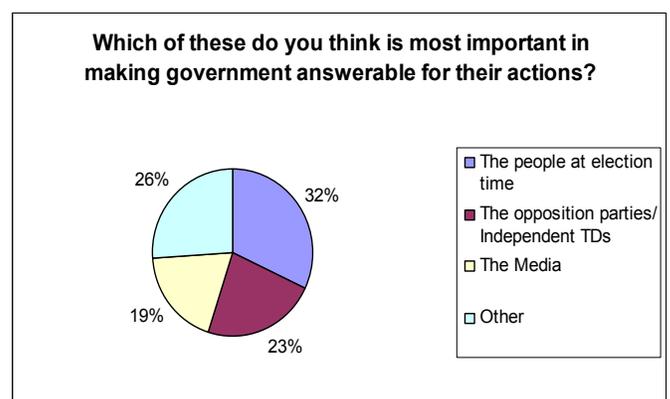
	% Most	% Least
<b>Business owners/managers</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>1</b>
Farmers	10	7
Men	8	1
Older people (over 65)	4	9
People with disabilities	3	9
<b>People in disadvantaged areas</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>
Gays/lesbians/bisexuals	0.5	9
Travellers	1	7
Young people (18-25)	1	7
Carers	0.1	6
Religious minorities	1	5
Women	0.4	4
Children (under 18)	0.3	2

The Dáil is also seen as one of the most important ways of holding Government to account. From a list of options, opposition parties and independent TDs emerge as one of three effective means of government accountability. See Table 9.

significant when viewed alongside the finding that the largest proportion of people believe that the media has the most impact on people’s lives.

The other two are the people at election time and the media. People’s belief in their ability to influence decisions thus appears to take concrete expression through voting. After that, they rely on the opposition parties and independent TDs in the Dáil, and the media.

**Table 9**



The important role given to the media is

Trade unions, the Catholic Church and community and voluntary organisations, long regarded as influential pressure groups in Irish society, are virtually dismissed as having a role in holding government to account by respondents.

Amazingly, the Courts – one of the three pillars of government, along with the Oireachtas and the executive - are not seen by any respondents as playing this role.

Given the important role attributed to the Dail it is interesting to explore the area of representation in more detail. When asked how female politicians compare to male politicians, 82% of respondents believe female politicians are comparable or better than male politicians. More than one in three believes female politicians are better than men, while 44% of respondents regard women and men politicians as equal. See Table 10.

**Table 10 Comparisons between men and women as politicians**

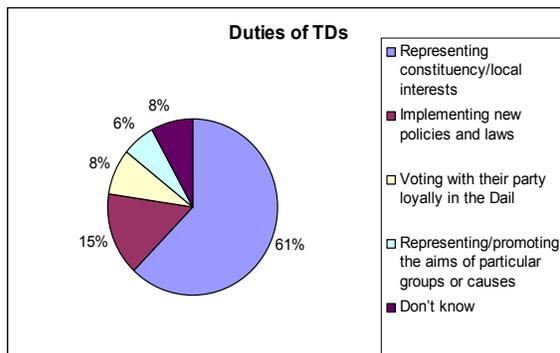
*In general how do you think female politicians compare to male politicians in Ireland?*

	%
A lot better	14
A little better	24
The same	44
A little worse	5
A lot worse	1
Don't Know	9

To find out people’s views on the role of TDs, we asked people which, from a list of TDs’ duties, they thought was the most important. Representing constituency and local interests was seen overwhelmingly by respondents as the single most important duty of a TD. See Table 11. Implementing new laws and policies is seen as the most important duty of a TD by only 15% of respondents. Voting loyally with the party in the Dail and representing particular groups or causes are seen as most important by smaller numbers of respondents.

In contrast to the tight hold on party discipline exerted on all party members in the Dail, the vast majority of people do not rate party loyalty as strongly as they do representing their constituency interests.

**Table 11**



In view of the constitutional role of the Dail to enact new legislation and the duty of government ministers to act in the interests of Ireland as a whole, this is a sobering reflection of the *realpolitik* faced by elected TDs.

## 4. The Rule of Law

In order to gauge people's attitudes towards the law, we asked which actions, from a list of breaches of the law, people approved or disapproved of. We find that across all of the issues tested respondents show high levels of ambivalence towards the law. See Table 12. If we categorise anyone who

does not state that they strongly disapprove of a given breach of the law as ambivalent to some degree (i.e. including those who disapprove but only slightly) we can see that anything between 1 in 10 people to 3 in 10 people demonstrate some ambivalence towards the law on every issue tested.

**Table 12**      **The Rule of Law**  
*To what extent do you approve or disapprove of the following actions?*

	<i>Those Who Categorically Disapprove %</i>	<i>Those Who Show Some Degree of Ambivalence %</i>
Dropping litter	67	28
Evading income tax	69	25
Falsely claiming benefits	75	22
Not reporting damage to parked vehicle	75	20
Taking drugs	76	19
Driving over speed limit	77	19
Buying stolen goods	79	18
Making false insurance claims	83	13
Drinking and driving	85	11

Perhaps our most startling finding is that evading income tax is only slightly more disapproved of by respondents than dropping litter.

This high degree of ambivalence towards the law is even more marked among those who have completed third level education. Table 13 compares the responses for those who completed primary, second level and third level education. With just one exception (falsely claiming benefits), those with third

level education were significantly more ambivalent towards the law than those with primary or second level education only.

Among those with third level education, almost 4 in 10 report something less than outright disapproval towards evasion of income tax, speeding and taking drugs. Thus we find that the most educated in our society are those most ambivalent towards the law on a wide range of issues.

**Table 13**      **Level of education and attitudes to the Rule of Law**

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*Those Who Show Some Degree of Ambivalence*

	<i>% Primary Only</i>	<i>% Second Level</i>	<i>% Third Level</i>
Evading income tax	31	28	39
Dropping litter	30	32	37
Taking drugs	19	21	37
Driving over speed limit	19	20	37
Not reporting damage to vehicle	27	20	36
Falsely claiming benefits	32	21	31
Buying stolen goods	23	18	27
Drinking and driving	17	12	25
Making false insurance claims	16	13	25

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## 5. Building A Better Society

To provide a context for people’s views on Irish democracy we asked people to comment on some of the significant developments in Irish society in recent years.

**Table 14**

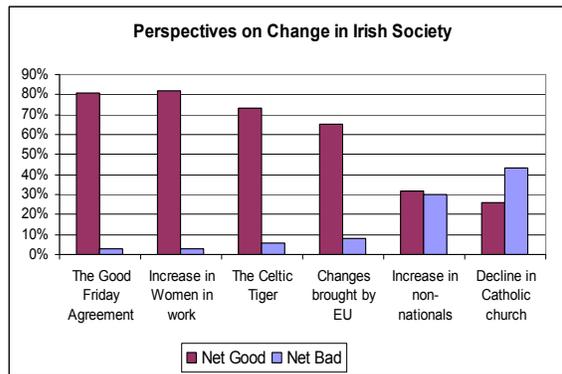


Table 14 shows that the Good Friday Agreement, the increase in the number of women in the workplace, the Celtic Tiger, and changes brought about by Ireland’s membership of the EU are all seen by large majorities of respondents as being a good thing. The Good Friday Agreement still enjoys the support of the vast majority of respondents (81%), with only 3% saying they believe it to be a bad thing. The increase in the number of women in the workplace is also seen by the vast majority as a good thing, with only 3% of respondents saying it is a bad thing.

There is more ambivalence regarding the increase in foreign nationals coming to work

and live in Ireland, with only slightly more respondents (32%) saying it is a good thing compared with those (30%) saying it is a bad thing. Those who believe it to be a bad thing are more likely to be aged over 50, and have completed primary education only.

There is also strong correlation with social class – 40% of the highest social-economic group believe the increased number of non-nationals to be a good thing compared with 21% of the lowest grouping.

The decline in the role of the Catholic Church in Irish society is seen by the majority of respondents who expressed an opinion as being a bad thing – 43% thought it bad compared with 26% who said they believed it to be good. Those who thought it a bad thing were more likely to be older and have completed primary education only. There is also a marked divide between respondents living in Dublin and those in the rest of the country. Twenty-two per cent of respondents from Dublin thought the decline in the role of the Catholic Church to be a very good thing compared with only 7% in Connaught/Ulster and only 1% in Munster.

We say at the outset that a majority of Irish people have an egalitarian concept of democracy and this perspective finds further expression in a series of questions on inequalities in Irish society.

When asked which groups within Irish society they felt were being treated unfairly the most frequently mentioned group is people living in disadvantaged communities, followed by people with disabilities. See Table 15.

When then asked whether people felt that things had become better or worse for each of these groupings over the last 5 years we find that, once again, people living in disadvantaged communities are the group for whom more respondents think things have gotten worse rather than better over the past five years. Less than one in eight respondents believe people living in disadvantaged communities are being treated better than they were five years ago. Carers are the other group for whom things are seen by more respondents to have gotten worse rather than better over the past five years. For all other groups, respondents feel things have remained the same or gotten better.

Selecting the four groups whom people named most frequently as currently being treated unfairly in Irish society, we examined whether those who hold this view believe that treatment of this grouping is worse, the same or better compared with five years ago.

Doing this we find that a higher majority (88%) of those who believe that people

living in disadvantaged communities are the group now being treated most unfairly also think that things are worse or no better than five years ago. Only one in ten think that things have improved.

Similar findings emerge for the other three most frequently mentioned groups - older people, gays, lesbians and bisexuals, and people with disabilities. Among those who believe that older people / gays, lesbians and bisexuals / people with disabilities are the groups currently being treated most unfairly in Irish society, a much higher majority than the population as a whole also believe that that group is being treated the same or worse than five years ago.

**Table 15** Which Groups in Irish Society are Treated Unfairly?

*Equality laws have been drawn up in Ireland to make sure that everyone is treated fairly. In your view, which, if any, of these groups are treated unfairly in Irish society?*

*Thinking about each of these groups in turn, do you think they are generally treated better than they were five years ago, worse than they were five years ago, or are they treated the same as they were five years ago?*

	% Treated Unfairly	% Better	% Worse	% Same
People in disadvantaged communities	18	13	40	34
Disabled people	14	26	25	36
Elderly people (65+)	10	24	23	42
Gays/Lesbians/Bisexuals	10	23	16	34
Carers	8	21	30	31
Travellers	8	29	16	37
Ethnic minorities	6	27	18	32
Young people (under 25s)	4	21	17	49
Women	2	26	10	52
Lone parents	2	35	12	37
Religious minorities	1	15	12	47
Men	0.4	23	4	59

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