



Northern Ireland Poll: analysis of results

ComRes conducted a telephone poll of 1000 Northern Ireland adults from 10th to 15th March 2015. The poll considered attitudes towards freedom of speech generally, as well the specific case of Ashers Bakery and their prosecution by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Overall results

Overall public sentiment in Northern Ireland appears to be robustly behind the rights of businesses to protect their own freedom of speech and religious liberty.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the overall mood of the majority of the public in Northern Ireland is against the Equalities Commission for Northern Ireland taking Ashers Bakery to court.

Freedom of speech

ComRes asked the random sample of 1000 NI adults firstly whether people should be taken to court based on a range of realistic scenarios where offence could conflict with religious liberty. The scenarios offered were rotated in the order in which they were asked throughout the survey, with the scenario closest to the Ashers case fixed in the questionnaire so that respondents were always presented with it last. This was in order not to contaminate or influence attitudes towards the other scenarios by reminding respondents of the Ashers case.

The results are shown overleaf¹.

¹ Excludes % who answer Don't know

Q.1 I would like to ask for your opinion about the balance between the right to require that someone provides you with goods or services, and the right of people in business to their own freedom of speech and religious liberty. In each of the following situations, please tell me whether they should be considered grounds for taking someone to court, or not...

	Should be taken to court (%)	Should not be taken to court
A Muslim printer who refuses to print cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed	16	79
An atheist web designer who refuses to design a website promoting the view that God made the World in six days	15	82
An environmentalist marketing consultant who refuses to work for a company that wants to start fracking in Northern Ireland	20	76
A Muslim film company which refuses to produce a pornographic film	14	84
A t-shirt company owned by lesbians who decline to print t-shirts with a message describing gay marriage as an abomination	20	77
A printing company run by Catholics which declines an order to produce adverts calling for abortion to be legalised	23	74
(FIXED AT END) A bakery run by Christians which refuses to bake a cake with 'support gay marriage' on it	22	77

This question reveals that at least three-quarters of adults in NI believe that under these scenarios no-one should face court action.

There is only modest variation by demographic group. Perhaps most marked is the likelihood of the youngest age group in the study (18–24s) to support taking court action, but even among this age group no scenario attracts more than just over one-third support (37%).



We then tested specific attitudes towards the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland case against Ashers Bakery.

Unsurprisingly given the results to Q1, the mainstream view is that the Equalities Commission is wrong to take Ashers Bakery to court:

Q2. Do you agree or disagree with each of these statements?

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is <u>wrong</u> to take the Christian-run Ashers Baking Company to court for refusing to bake a cake with the words "support gay marriage" on it	66	31
The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is <u>right</u> to take the Christian-run Ashers Baking Company to court for refusing to bake a cake with the words "support gay marriage" on it	27	71
The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland should not be spending public funds on taking Ashers Baking Company to court	77	22
It is important that the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland pursue Ashers Baking Company through the courts in order to set an example	28	71

The results run consistently for each of the positive and negative statements throughout the question: around one in four think the Equality Commission right to prosecute, and almost three times that proportion do not.

Again, younger age groups are the most likely to support court action against Ashers Bakery; for example the proportion who think the Equalities Commission 'right' to take the company to court ranges from 43% among 18-24s down to 17% of those aged 65+.

Finally we tested some wider questions about the balance between protecting freedom of speech and protection from offence:

Q3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
It is more important to protect freedom of speech than to protect people from being offended	73	22
It is more important to protect people from being offended than to protect freedom of speech	26	67
Freedom of speech includes being able to offend people without being punished	49	48
Equality laws should be used to protect people from discrimination and not to force people to say something they oppose	90	8
It is possible to have strong laws against discrimination while also protecting freedom of speech	89	8

When asked to choose between freedom of speech or protection from being offended, by a ratio of around three to one people said that freedom of speech trumps the right not to be offended.

By an overwhelming majority people also believe that it is possible to have strong anti-discrimination laws while also protecting freedom of speech. It flows from this therefore that almost the same proportion believe that equality laws 'should be used to protect people from discrimination and not to force people to say something they oppose'.

Finally, the public do support setting limits to free speech: they are evenly split over whether it should include being able to offend people 'without being punished'.

But this survey suggests that the point of offence where legal action is justified is not where the Equalities Commission for Northern Ireland assumes it to be.

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