



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE: ELECTIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 2005

SYNOPSIS

For decades in Northern Ireland's second-largest city, Derry/Londonderry, violence and voting went hand in hand. The 1921 partition of Ireland that created the British-controlled territory of Northern Ireland created tensions that resurfaced every Election Day as police removed ballot boxes from some polling places. Throwing stones and gasoline bombs, groups of Catholic nationalists demonstrated their opposition to the presence of British-linked, predominantly Protestant police. The repeated violence triggered an uproar by members of the broader nationalist community, some of whom were prevented or deterred from voting as a result. After particularly violent election cycles in 2003 and 2004, police and electoral officials sought a way to quell the disturbances. The success of any changes involving the police role required cooperation by diverse groups with widely varying interests: political parties, community activists, electoral officials and the police. In early 2005, a long bargaining process produced an agreement to remove the police from the polling stations and turn over security functions to the local community and political parties. In the two elections between 2005 and 2010, police reported no incidents of violence.

Michael Scharff drafted this policy note on the basis of interviews conducted in Derry/Londonderry and Belfast, Northern Ireland, in September 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Pondering the adage that death and taxes are the only certainties in life, Tony O'Doherty, a veteran community activist in a Catholic neighborhood in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, commented, "Well, I could've given a third one: that on election night in Derry there would be violence." O'Doherty's comment in 2010 reflected his years of work in Northern Ireland's second-largest city, popularly known as Derry.

One of the root causes of the violence—sectarianism—dated back to 1613, when Protestant plantation owners from London established the city and built walls to keep out the Catholic Irish. The 1921 partition of Ireland by the British and the creation of Northern Ireland as an enclave of the United Kingdom strained an already divided society, as the two sides retreated into separate neighborhoods.

Tensions escalated from 1968 to 1998, a period known as the Troubles, when more than

3,000 people died in acts of violence. During this time, nationalist paramilitaries, the most well known of which was the Irish Republican Army, waged a war against unionists over their respective sides' right to self-determination. Violence was particularly acute in Derry. The "Bloody Sunday" incident of January 1972, in which British paratroopers shot dead 13 unarmed nationalist civil-rights protestors in downtown Derry, thrust the turmoil in Northern Ireland onto the international stage.

Any traces of peaceful coexistence between nationalists and unionists in Derry neighborhoods ended when the Troubles began. The River Foyle, which cut through the center of the city, served as a physical line of demarcation between the two groups. In 2010, the city's west bank still comprised 98% nationalists, while the east bank held mostly unionists.

Violence throughout Northern Ireland abated significantly with the 1998 signing of the so-called Good Friday Agreement, in which both sides pledged to use peaceful means to seek compromise on Northern Ireland's status. However, despite the agreement, sharp divisions left Derry susceptible to violence.

The violence at each election fit a pattern, and the trigger was always the same—the presence of police at polling places. The British-controlled police service was the focal point of ire in the nationalist community. Despite the reforms in 2001 that did away with the Royal Ulster Constabulary and replaced it with a better-integrated force called the Police Services of Northern Ireland (PSNI), most nationalists still viewed the police as an arm of the British government.

Derry's nationalists were particularly angry that police officers were stationed at polling places in their neighborhoods but not in unionist areas of the city. British authorities claimed that police were needed to prevent nationalist political parties from committing election fraud.

For instance, if an electoral official suspected a voter of fraudulent activity, such as impersonation, the official could order the voter's arrest. At the same time, however, the authorities said police were not needed in unionist areas because fraud was not a problem in those areas. Many in the nationalist community already resented the police because of what they saw as a concerted campaign of harassment, including random car searches and raids on the houses of those thought to have links with paramilitary organizations. Nationalists viewed the police presence at polling stations as a heavy-handed move by the British to intimidate people from voting and therefore weaken the nationalists' voting clout.

The episodes of violence followed a recurring story line. As the close of polls neared at each election, crowds of mostly young men numbering in the hundreds would gather outside six of Derry's 32 polling places, all of them schools in nationalist areas. Armed with stones and gasoline bombs, the rioters would take up positions on roads leading to the school entrances.

When the polls closed, police reinforcements would arrive in armored Land Rovers to remove ballot boxes from the polling places. The vehicles, typically four or five per polling place, would maneuver into position near the front door while one would pull directly up to the door. The rear doors of the Land Rover closest to the school would open, and officers in full tactical gear would rush into the school to collect the boxes and usher the electoral staff into the vehicles. With military precision, the entire process would take less than five minutes, according to election officials. The police vehicles were attacked as they drove away.

One of the six polling places, called "hot spots" by police and city officials, was the Shantallow Community Center, where Terry McDevitt was the senior presiding officer, or head electoral official, in 2003. McDevitt

recalled that as the Land Rovers started to pull away from the center, the vehicles were caught in a hail of stones and gasoline bombs. “All you heard was the noise of the rocks bouncing off of the Land Rovers,” said McDevitt, whose vehicle briefly caught fire before one of the officers was able to extinguish it after they had driven a short distance away from the center. With only one route leading in and out of each polling place, the police were unable to disguise their arrival or alter their escape route.

A few months before the 2004 elections, Ricky Russell, a 24-year veteran of the police service, was appointed police chief in Derry. After that year’s election violence, he knew that something had to be done. And although his role as commander gave him final responsibility to determine the police role at polling places, he recognized that fixing the problem required a joint effort by a broad spectrum of electoral officials, political party representatives and community activists. After much wrangling, this diverse group agreed that the police should be removed and the elections overseen by community members and political-party representatives.

This case sheds light on how, in a highly divided society with a history of electoral violence, factions with competing interests were able to develop and successfully implement a plan to eliminate violence at polling places. In devising a security plan unique to the nationalist community, decision makers relied heavily on local input to dissect the problem and identify the solution.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2004, voters in Derry were tired and frustrated with the continued disturbances and let it be known to their political-party representatives and electoral officials. Patricia Murphy, the head of elections in the city for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland—the British government’s elections-administration

arm—recalled that the 2004 elections were the most violent in recent memory. On election night, rioters threw roughly 50 gasoline bombs and 20 containers of paint. A bystander at one of the polling stations was injured by a gasoline bomb, and an electoral officer was sprayed with glass when a brick was hurled through a window at a polling place. With another vote scheduled for May 2005, appeals for a solution gained urgency.

Since the early 1990s, community activists like O’Doherty and Charlie O’Donnell, who was principal of Derry’s Holy Child Primary School at the time—another of the hot-spot polling places—had called on the electoral office and the police to take steps to mitigate the potential for violence. “I kept pleading with the people in the elections office and the PSNI: ‘Let us take care of the ballot boxes,’” recalled O’Donnell.

Indeed, nationalist communities had already assumed a role in trying to curb unrest on Election Day. O’Donnell and O’Doherty, both of whom lived near the Holy Child Primary School, mobilized groups of concerned neighbors to help monitor crowd activity. Mothers, teachers and members of the clergy joined the two men as they patrolled in front of the polling place and tried to discourage violent behavior. O’Doherty often searched the neighborhood for weapons and remembered discovering 30 gasoline bombs stored behind a wall near the school. Community activists made similar efforts at the other hot-spot polling places.

When violence continued, community activists tried new tactics. O’Donnell said that at one election in the late 1990s he helped create a corridor 300 yards wide around the school so that rocks and other objects thrown by protestors could not reach the police Land Rovers. But people formed a human chain at the end of the street where the corridor ended and attempted to block the vehicles. Anger caused by one of the Land Rovers pushing up

against a protestor led to a barrage of paint containers being thrown at the vehicles.

Years earlier, O'Doherty had succeeded in getting the police to agree to let the community handle security for soccer games at a stadium in a nationalist neighborhood. By O'Doherty's account, that endeavor proved successful. Other strategies were used in attempts to reduce election disturbances, including stationing respected figures—often former IRA officials—in the crowds to wave off troublemakers.

With the country set to mark the six-year anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the British government was eager to show that Derry was emerging from its violent past. Electoral officials felt added pressure because of the severity of the unrest in 2004 and the resulting media coverage. "After the 2004 elections, we were trying to come up with a plan," recalled Murphy. "We had to get all the stakeholders on board."

Major political parties also had compelling reasons to work toward a solution. At the time, Sinn Fein, the former political wing of the IRA, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the police service and strongly opposed police involvement in electoral matters. But the violence deterred people from voting and thus threatened to cut into Sinn Fein's vote totals. Moreover, in accordance with the 1998 agreement in which the party renounced violence, officials were keen to disassociate themselves from such acts. "It was in our interest that the electoral system would proceed as normal," said Gerry O'Heara, the former head of the IRA's youth wing and a former mayor of Derry.

Until 2002, the Social Democratic and Labor Party, the second-largest nationalist party after Sinn Fein, had vehemently opposed the removal of the police on the grounds that the police presence helped reduce the extent of impersonation fraud perpetrated by Sinn Fein. But in 2002, when the electoral office required all voters to produce photographic identification

at polling places, the number of fraud complaints declined sharply, and the party backed away from calls to keep the police at the polling places.

After the 2004 election violence, Russell, Derry's new police commander, knew he had to confront the problem. Previous police chiefs had balked at the community leaders' suggestions that the police were the issue and should be removed from the polling places. Although the police were responsible for the safety of the electoral staff and voters, Russell recognized early on that the law did not require a police presence. "When we did our police debrief after the 2004 elections, I thought it was time we do something different," Russell said. "I was prepared to step out and do something to eradicate the violence."

Although community representatives, electoral officials, political parties and police all recognized the need to break the cycle of violence, finding a solution posed a stern challenge. Any decision required consensus, as each had a unique role to play on Election Day.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

One major element of the effort was already in line: The diverse constituencies recognized that they confronted an intertwined problem. Murphy, of the Electoral Office, needed police cooperation in order to ensure the safety of her staff and the integrity of the ballot boxes. Murphy also needed the political parties and community activists to assist the Electoral Office in maintaining order on Election Day. Members of both groups patrolled streets, acting as a deterrent to unrest.

The police, who had the bottom-line responsibility to ensure the safety of voters and to enforce the law, had to work closely with the Electoral Office on a number of matters, including making sure enough ballot boxes were at polling places to avoid delays that might create crowds and raise the risk of disturbances.

The police needed political parties and community activists to help maintain calm outside the polling places. O'Doherty, for instance, would spend the day rounding up hidden stockpiles of gasoline and asking mothers to keep their children indoors after nightfall.

The political parties and community activists also shared a common goal: to make the voting process as simple and straightforward as possible. Both opposed suggestions to move some polling places to less-populated areas—the parties because they worried about hurting their vote totals and the activists because they wanted to maximize overall voter participation.

With these shared concerns as the basis for their collective involvement, the groups got together to hammer out a solution.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In the autumn of 2004, Derry's City Council, comprising unionist, nationalist and republican members, gathered to discuss Election Day violence. The Social Democratic and Labor Party was a nationalist party while Sinn Fein, the larger of the two, was republican. While both nationalists and republicans advocated merging Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland, republicans were considered the more strident of the two. Murphy attended the meeting, along with her boss Dennis Stanley, the chief electoral officer, who was in charge of elections administration in all of Northern Ireland. Community activists, political players and some members of the clergy were also on hand, but no police were there. Because Sinn Fein refused to recognize the legitimacy of the police, the two sides never appeared together in public.

Stanley outlined a plan to relocate five of the six hot-spot polling places and asked the nationalist and republican parties to suggest alternative venues. "We were looking to find new places that would not attract the rioters," Stanley explained. The idea received a cool

reception. A Sinn Fein representative, Barney O'Hagan, said he offered a counterproposal: "What I proposed on behalf of the party was that we could identify prominent community leaders ... that could escort the ballot boxes out of the polling stations, and there wouldn't be any need for a police presence." Stanley rejected O'Hagan's proposal and told the council that he would move ahead with his plan to relocate the polling places.

Weeks later, O'Hagan and a delegation of Sinn Fein members traveled to the Electoral Office's headquarters in Belfast, where they met with Stanley and reiterated their proposal. Community leaders would help keep troublemakers away and would escort the ballot boxes to a secure holding facility, or they would meet the police escort in an area where trouble was unlikely. Early the next day, after voting had been completed, the boxes would be transported to a centralized counting center.

But Stanley remained firm in his plan to relocate the polling places, and he recalled his opposition to O'Hagan's proposal: "Sinn Fein were saying that they would police the election, and that was totally unacceptable in any democracy." Among his concerns was the opportunity for ballot tampering.

"It was a very frustrating meeting because there was no compromise or give or exploration of the proposal at all by Dennis Stanley," recalled O'Hagan. "His whole argument was ... the police have a right to be there, they're legitimate. He refused to accept the idea that you could entrust nationalist communities to host an election without an armed police guard." At a second City Council meeting just six weeks or so before the 2005 election, nationalists were again frustrated when Stanley maintained his insistence that the polling places be relocated. "I was very concerned about the polling stations and the ability of people to get there and our staff to function," Stanley recalled. "You have to accept the police are there as law and order and

must be respected as such.” O’Hagan and his colleagues left the meeting upset. “I couldn’t understand why Dennis Stanley was being so obstinate and so dogmatic,” he said

After failing to win his point at the Belfast meeting, O’Hagan said, he considered other paths to success. He recognized that he might be able to sidestep Stanley if Russell could be persuaded to agree to the plan. If Russell saw the importance of removing the police, O’Hagan thought, there would be little Stanley could do. After all, Russell had the final say on the extent to which the police were involved in securing polling places and transporting the ballot boxes. If Stanley went ahead with his plan to relocate polling places, Russell could choose not to station forces at the new sites. O’Hagan said he knew from speaking with O’Donnell and O’Doherty that officers had confided in them that they did not want to be involved in elections, and that privately, senior police officials were looking for a way to bow out of their direct role at polling places.

Because he was a member of Sinn Fein, which refused, officially at least, to recognize the legitimacy of the police, O’Hagan had to approach Russell through intermediaries. He met with O’Doherty and other community leaders and asked them to take his case to Russell. His message was simple: “We were confident that we could rally the community to support the proposal and that we could actually give an assurance ... that the safety of everyone concerned would be guaranteed.”

O’Doherty talked with the heads of community groups in the neighborhoods surrounding the other hot-spot polling places, and together they approached Russell to make their argument. “I think what the community leaders conveyed to us was that there was a lot that the community could do to reduce the violence,” Russell said. As the new police commander, he favored the idea as a bold

initiative to solve a problem that had defied solution by the usual methods.

“Russell seemed very open to the idea,” recalled O’Doherty, who noted all of the community leaders were a bit surprised. “He went for it very quickly. He didn’t need an awful lot of persuasion. He was incredibly open-minded and could see things very strategically in terms of the community and not just the police.”

Following his meeting with the community heads, Russell met privately with Stanley to discuss removing the police from the polling places. He found Stanley opposed the idea on a number of grounds, but mainly his concern was that if the ballot boxes were tampered with or damaged during removal, the elections might have to be declared invalid.

Yet, a few days later, the Electoral Office announced that the polling places would remain where they were and that the police would no longer be present during the day or assist with the removal of the ballot boxes. Russell had informed Stanley that the police would excuse themselves from any direct involvement at polling places on Election Day. Stanley was put somewhat at ease by the community leaders’ assurances that they would take steps to prevent rioting. Stanley also was glad to hear that the police were willing to work with the Electoral Office to devise countermeasures to minimize the chance of disruption, including remaining a discrete distance from the polling places, ready to respond if needed.

The negotiators never discussed the idea of boosting the police presence to quell the violence. Alex Penney, the police operations and planning inspector in Derry, said that all parties recognized that any increase in the number of police officers on Election Day “may have created an even greater backlash. First, there would have been an image problem, with so many police units involved in the electoral

process. Second, people would have felt even more intimidated, and third, the police would have become an even greater target.”

Security planning

“To an extent, we all welcomed the decision to keep the polling places open and to remove the police,” said John Campbell, the senior presiding officer at St. Eithnes Primary School, another hot-spot polling location. “But in the back on your mind you were thinking, ‘Oh, what happens now?’”

In the final weeks before the election, Russell and Murphy met with Penney. At 42 years old, Penney had spent 23 years with the police, 17 of which were in Derry. The trio worked out new security arrangements.

Phones were installed in each school with a direct line to the central police station in Derry. A local courier company, using unmarked vans, would pick up the ballot boxes and transport them to a secure holding facility on the east side of the city. Van drivers would have radios to communicate with the police station. Police units would be on stand-by near each of the polling stations. A police helicopter would patrol over the polling stations and send back live video to the command center, allowing early detection of gathering crowds. The helicopter also would track the vans as they made their way to the holding center.

Murphy then met with the community leaders and members of the clergy to hear what they were planning. “I remember her asking us to use our power in the community to try and reduce the violence,” said Father Stephen McLaughlin, head of St. Mary’s church in the city. O’Doherty and O’Donnell spoke with as many community members who would listen, and encouraged them to help patrol the streets on Election Day.

Meanwhile, Sinn Fein and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labor Party drew up lists

of individuals they would call on to help keep watch on the streets outside the polling places.

Election Day

Security preparations for Election Day 2005 began at 4:00 in the morning, when the police swept all 32 polling places in Derry for weapons and bombs and established vehicle checkpoints on the roads leading to the polling places. These procedures had been routine for decades, and the early-morning start time minimized the risk of any backlash. The polling places opened at 7:00 a.m. Russell and Penney spent most of the day in the dark, wood-paneled command center at the police station in Derry. A screen on the wall beamed back live images from the helicopter. Penney periodically called each polling place and spoke with the senior presiding officer to ensure there were no disturbances. Both men were in frequent contact with Murphy, who spent much of the day driving among the polling places. Murphy stayed in close contact by mobile phone with O’Doherty and the other community heads.

Around 8:00 p.m., Russell led an intelligence briefing. No polling station had reported a disturbance. After the meeting, 45 officers from the police’s tactical unit in 10 Land Rovers took up positions about five minutes’ driving distance from each of the hot spots.

When the polls closed at 10:00 p.m., about 200 youths gathered outside Holy Child Primary School, and smaller crowds assembled at other hot spots. O’Doherty told the crowd at the Holy Child school that the police would not show up. “They didn’t believe it, and they hung about for an hour and a half, two hours,” he recalled. “But eventually it got through to them.”

One at a time, the vans traveled to each of the schools and retrieved the ballot boxes without incident. The helicopter tracked the vans to the holding center. O’Donnell, who

only a year earlier had spent the day attempting to discourage the rioting outside the Holy Child Primary School, now assisted the electoral staff in moving the ballot boxes to the courier van. “As we were carrying the ballot boxes out, somebody started to clap and then everybody was applauding,” recalled O’Donnell. “It was just an extraordinary sensation.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The community activists were afraid to be seen bargaining with the other groups on the Election Day issue, lest they lose the trust of their constituents who were already leery of the intentions of the police and electoral officials. To maintain the appearance of neutrality, the activists hid from the community the fact that they were engaged in the discussions. When in 2005 O’Hagan, of Sinn Fein, prepared a draft press release welcoming the electoral office’s decision to keep open the polling places, the community activists asked O’Hagan to remove their names from the list of supporters who were thanked. Even in 2010, few ordinary citizens were aware of the extent to which the community activists had worked with the police and electoral officials.

The political parties and community workers gave the police an unconditional guarantee that violence would not occur, and improved relations between the nationalist community and the police hinged on a successful outcome. Fulfilling the promise to prevent violence required effective community policing of polling stations. Yet, historically the parties and community workers had been limited in their capacity to effectively police the polls for two main reasons.

First, the political parties and community activists had mobilized an array of individuals to patrol the streets near the polling place and discourage violent activity. But the violence always occurred when the polls closed, and by then most of the mothers, who exercised

considerable influence with the youth in their neighborhoods, had gone home to attend to their families. This left fewer individuals on the street at a critical moment in the evening.

Second, Sinn Fein, the dominant political party since 2001, had focused more of its resources on a “get out the vote” campaign than crowd control. “It certainly wasn’t a priority of ours to ensure that there weren’t stones thrown,” said O’Hagan of elections before 2005. “Our focus was basically maximizing the Sinn Fein vote.” In order to increase its vote count, Sinn Fein had its supporters knock on doors to encourage people to vote, and a small army of drivers had been on standby to help voters get to polling places.

In 2005, with the guarantee of no violence on the table, Sinn Fein shifted its “get out the vote” staff to the streets to guard against rioting. This transfer of resources increased the number of individuals involved in policing the elections and thus countered the manpower issue.

ASSESSING RESULTS

Although he eventually abandoned his plan to move the six hot-spot polling stations in the wake of the 2004 disturbances, Stanley’s initial proposal had the unifying effect of getting all of the other groups to focus on a single aspect of the problem. During the ensuing discussions, members of the community stepped forward with proposals to ensure order on Election Day, ultimately leading to Russell’s decision to remove the police from the polling places.

All the stakeholders hailed Election Day in 2005 as a turning point. By 2010, there had not been a single incident of rioting at polling places since the removal of the police, and the same procedures for how the ballot boxes were handled remained in place, with two exceptions. First, after successive non-violent elections in 2005 and 2007, the electoral office decided the ballot boxes could proceed directly to the counting center without first diverting to a

holding center. Second, the electoral office scaled back the use of the transport company. Senior presiding officers at most of the former hot-spot polling places drove the ballot boxes in their personal vehicles to the counting centers, a marked change from previous years, when the police had to shuttle them out of the polling places. The helicopter patrol, however, remained in place.

REFLECTIONS

Aspects of the decision in Derry to rely on locally sourced solutions and manpower to reduce violence at elections—broad-based community involvement and a strategy of first identifying and then removing the target of violence—may resonate with officials in countries that attempt peaceful elections. However, extrapolation of the overall strategy beyond Derry may be limited because the success of the community-based initiative stemmed in large part from the political and ethnic unity of the nationalist communities in specific areas of the city. Activists and party representatives shared with potential rioters the view that the British were unwelcome occupiers of Northern Ireland. The dual strategies employed to police the elections—mobilizing manpower in the form of respected community figures and relying on persuasion by activists, mothers and clergy—worked because potential rioters could relate to the enforcers, and vice versa.

As head of the Derry police, Ricky Russell agreed to remove his officers from hot-spot polling places because he was confident that the idea would work in this particular situation. Had the community comprised unionists and nationalists, any strategy that relied on shared enforcement may have faced significant problems. In such a mixed community, for instance, rioters might take aim at voters, electoral staff and volunteers from both sides, as well as the police.

Russell asserted that in Derry, where the security services were often perceived as favoring one group over another, a purely “security-focused approach” would not produce measurable change. “We essentially removed the target, which was an important first step,” he said. “But far more important was recognizing the context of the elections and working with the community. It was a huge effort across the board by a huge number of individuals to a chronic problem.”

School principal Charlie O’Donnell credited the success of the effort largely to Russell’s willingness to risk his own reputation and to the organizational skills of Tony O’Doherty and other community activists. “There were lots of players,” O’Donnell recalled. “We started with a lot of local people doing local things. When spiders unite, they can tie up a tiger.”

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