

## **What This Opinion Poll Tells Us**

By David Quinn

This is the first ever opinion poll conducted in Ireland to try and discover what Irish people think about marriage and the two-parent family. There have been opinion polls about issues like divorce or gay marriage, but none to my knowledge about what people really think about marriage, about its value to society, about fatherlessness, about whether or not the State should continue to give marriage special status, etc.

The poll is mainly good news for those who support marriage although a cautionary note will be struck shortly.

The first and most important thing to be said, however, is that a roughly two-to-one majority of the public still favours marriage and the two-parent family.

Whatever question is asked, whether it be about the effects on children of fatherlessness, or whether marital and family break-down are harmful to society, the results are similar and mostly cluster around the mid-fifties percentage-wise.

Those who do not agree that fatherless matters, or that marital and family breakdown matters, etc, represent around 27 or 28pc of the population.

The two-to-one majority in favour of marriage and the two-parent family will have to be noted by the Government. Most people still believe that it is better for children if both of their parents are present and active in their lives, and most still people believe it is better if the parents are married.

What an opinion poll rarely reveals, of course, is how deep these feelings are, but this applies both to those who support the two-parent family, and to those who have a different view.

What is also not clear is what exactly the 27 or 28pc of people who don't seem to favour the two-parent family and/or marriage actually believe. Are they all subscribers to the 'family diversity' view which maintains that all family forms are more or less equal in their effects on children? It is hard to believe, for example, that 29pc of people really believe that the absence of a father from the home will have no effect on children emotionally or developmentally.

Exactly why 27 or 28pc of people appear not to believe that two parents, on average, are best for a child, will have to be explored in more detail at some point in the future.

Nonetheless, and to repeat, 54 or 55pc of people do support the two-parent family, they want the State to support the two-parent family, they believe it is better if parents are married, and 45pc still want the State to support marriage over and above other family forms, while not neglecting those other family forms. (Thirty-four per cent of people disagree with this view).

Let's bear in mind that this is not an either/or scenario. It is not a case of the State having to support marriage and nothing but marriage, or the State supporting all family forms exactly equally. The State can give some support to all families while still favouring marriage. This is currently the case.

Now for the note of caution. The fact that 34pc of people don't think the State should favour marriage is worrying. So is the fact that only slightly more than half of people think the two-parent family is better for children and best for society.

This seems to be such a commonsense proposition you might have imagined support for it would be higher. We can only speculate, but perhaps some people think if you support the two-parent family you are in some way condemning lone parent families. But this isn't an either/or situation either. It is fully possible to believe that two-parents are best for children without condemning lone parents. Regretting the phenomenon of fatherlessness is not the same thing as singling out lone parents.

What the poll shows, perhaps, is the need to find a way to support marriage without appearing to wish to marginalise other family forms. This won't be easy but marriage is too important not to support, and support strongly. At the same time, no family should be neglected or made to feel marginalised.

If this can be accomplished, then perhaps some future poll will find that a bigger majority of people support marriage and the two-parent family because they know they can do this without seeming to condemn other family forms.

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