The December CPRF was titled, “Using Polls as a Strategic Intervention in Conflict Resolution”. The speakers were Colin Irwin, Research Fellow in the Institute of Governance at Queen’s University in Belfast, and Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), at the University of Maryland.

Colin Irwin has done extensive polls in Northern Ireland in the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement and later in implementation phases. He has also done polls in the Balkans, the Middle East, Alaska, and Greenland, as well as other places.

Polls provide a way to involve civil society, politicians, as well as extremist parties; they “give people a seat at the negotiating table” by making their opinions known. Having politicians help frame the questions gives the polling results greater legitimacy and makes them harder to dismiss.

Polls are a vehicle for including the perspectives and ideas of the smaller parties that are not often covered in the press. Polls also can highlight that the perspectives of radical, polarized parties or groups are indeed marginal and not widely shared by the population.

Colin believes it is good to include groups like Hamas and the IRA in polls and to have their opinions included in the polling questions, as it reaffirms their marginality in some of their stances. If the public is not included in the peace process it is likely to fail.

He uses several different scales for polling purposes: a qualitative scale from 1-5 that ranks answers from “essential” to “unacceptable” that allows for nuanced answers, and also asks people to rank order different things on a 1-8 ranking scale. He publishes everything in order to hold negotiators accountable and to push the process forward. This is public diplomacy.

Steven Kull spoke of the importance of polling in giving the public a greater voice, identifying the consensus positions between Democrats and Republicans in the US, and looking in other places for common ground. If you get leaders involved in framing/phrasing the questions they cannot then find excuses for the findings quite as easily (can’t blame the results on the phrasing of the questions).

When people see where the public is in terms of opinions/attitudes, it starts discussions and this gives legitimacy to decisions. The majority view has international legitimacy, is seen as the democratic way of decision-making.

The US Congress is polarized. People in the US tend to be in the middle and try not to identify with either the “right” or the “left”, seeking to be “both”. They seek integrative solutions. People assume that governments reflect attitudes of their populations, but the majority of Americans support the Kyoto protocols even when they hear the cost; the majority of the US who is polled favor joining ICC, paying UN dues, and an even hand in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These have not been the US government's positions. The US public is more apt to find common ground than US leaders; leaders tend to be more crystallized in their views. Groups differentiate between themselves and compete against others for what they define as limited resources. They suppress their multiple identities in favor of one narrow identity. But polling can show the commonalities among people.