



European Union?

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The relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) and its predecessors has been complex. The UK made three applications to join the European Economic Community (EEC): in 1961, 1967, and (successfully) in 1973. In a referendum in 1975, 67% of UK voters were in favour of continuing membership of the EEC. Move forward to another referendum 41 years later, and a narrow majority (51.9%) across the UK voted to leave the EU. The ensuing Brexit negotiations have been difficult and confusing.

For Northern Ireland, in particular, the relationship with the EU has been complicated by issues such as the border and national identity. In the 1975 referendum, support for EEC membership amongst voters in Northern Ireland (52%) was much lower than in the UK as a whole (67%). Conversely, in the 2016 referendum, a majority in Northern Ireland (55.8%) voted to remain in the EU, with nationalist areas voting strongly to remain. Findings from public attitudes surveys in 1993, 2002 and 2016 provide an interesting reflection of this complicated relationship. Not least, they indicate that the public often have low levels of interest and knowledge of the EU, its policies and institutions (O'Connor and McGowan, 2003).

Data from the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey - which ran from 1989 to 1996 - indicate strong support for the continuation of membership of the European Community (EC). Respondents in Northern Ireland were more pro-European than respondents in the British Social Attitudes Survey at that time. NISA data for 1991, 1993, 1994 and 1995 show that four in ten respondents thought that the UK's relationship with the EC should be closer. In their analysis of 1993 NISA data, Smith and Corrigan (1995) found that respondents identifying with unionist parties were less supportive of unity within the EC than those identifying with other parties, especially the SDLP (for whom European integration potentially provided a resolution to the Northern Ireland conflict). In addition, younger respondents were more supportive of European integration.

By 2002, attitudes were still generally positive, and respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey strongly supported remaining within the EU (*see Figure 1*). Only 6% felt that the UK should leave, although this was much higher amongst DUP supporters (28%). Conversely, 8% of NILT respondents thought that the UK should work towards a single EU government. Of note, however, is that one in five respondents in 2002 did not know how to answer this question, including 26% of Sinn Féin supporters.

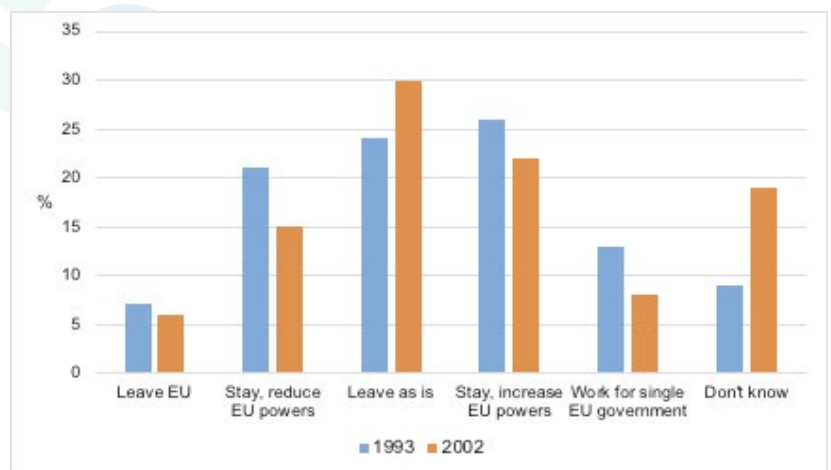


Figure 1: Attitudes to UK's long-term policy

Also in that year, just under one half (46%) of NILT respondents thought that EU membership was a 'good thing', and a similar proportion (48%) considered that Northern Ireland has benefitted from the EU. These same questions were asked across all European countries. NILT respondents were more favourable towards the EU than across the United Kingdom as a whole, but less favourable than in the Republic of Ireland.

Identity

There is no evidence that a European identity really developed in Northern Ireland. For example, in 2002, only 31% of NILT respondents said that they always or sometimes thought of themselves as 'European', and this was highest amongst younger respondents, those with no religion, and those with highest educational qualifications. Reflecting the patterns found in earlier surveys, there were marked differences according to political party affiliation, with 58% of those supporting the Alliance Party identifying always/sometimes as European, compared with 37% of SDLP supporters and 14% of DUP supporters.

The Border

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK which shares a land border with another EU member state. However, the Common Travel Area and the ending of border security checks meant that people in Northern Ireland have been accustomed to crossing the border with ease. Thus, much of Brexit negotiations towards the end of 2017 has focused on that border. One in four NILT respondents in 2016 indicated that they cross the border at least once a month, although a similar proportion do so very rarely. Those who cross the border regularly were more likely to be concerned that crossing the border will be more difficult after Brexit (Gormley-Heenan et al., 2017).

The Future

The results of the 2016 NILT survey (which was run after the Brexit referendum) identified apprehension among many respondents about how Northern Ireland will fare outside the EU: 53% felt that Northern Ireland will probably or definitely be worse off, and 48% felt that they personally would be worse off. Those who had voted for Brexit had a more optimistic view about the future of Northern Ireland, and of their own situation.

The implications of Brexit for the devolved regions of the UK has attracted much attention, with governments in Scotland and Wales producing lists of concerns. There has been more limited governmental input from the Northern Ireland government due to the different positions of the two main parties on Brexit and exacerbated by the collapse of the political institutions. The House of Lords EU Committee has referred to the implications of Brexit on the devolved settlements as one of the most complex and politically contentious elements of the Brexit debate (House of Lords, 2016). Specific concerns with regard to Northern Ireland relate to the movement of people and goods across the border, the fear that some of the key arrangements in the peace process implementation would be compromised, and the economic impact of changes to EU structural Funds and the EU Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Given the uncertainty about the future, public attitude surveys will provide an important barometer of opinion and behaviour as the UK exits the European Union.

References:

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Notes:

This ARK Feature is part of ARK's Marking Anniversaries series, which reflects on important historical events, and explores how attitudes and perceptions in Northern Ireland have changed over time. In particular, 2018 marks 20 years since the first Northern Ireland Life and Times survey was run. For more information, see www.ark.ac.uk/ma2018.

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