



Waking up in a different country: Brexit and Northern Ireland

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On 23 June 2016, a referendum was held on Brexit – the exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU). A narrow majority across the UK (51.9%) voted to leave, and the withdrawal process began when Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon was triggered on 29 March 2017. However, the results of the referendum have been contentious, especially given that majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain within the EU (62.0% and 55.8% respectively). Northern Ireland is especially affected by Brexit, given that it is the only part of the UK that has a land border with another EU member state (Republic of Ireland). Nevertheless, Northern Ireland had the lowest voter turnout across the UK (62.7%).

This Research Update explores public attitudes to Brexit based on data from the 2016 **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey**. That survey ran from September to December, when the results of the referendum were still being digested. During this period, the media emphasis was placed on the public's appetite for 'changing its mind' should they be asked the referendum question again. Partly this was a consequence of the surprising result, as most commentators and polling companies had expected a Leave victory. Our survey results consider this 'Bregret' effect, as well as the links between Brexit, identity, expectations, and the constitutional question.

Voting

Voting patterns among NILT respondents generally reflected the referendum outcome. Three in ten respondents said that they did not vote; five per cent did

not want to say how they voted, or could not remember. Of those that stated how they voted, 64 per cent voted to remain. This is higher than the referendum result (56%), but may be due to 'shy Brexiteers' who wanted to hide that they voted to leave (Garry, 2016).

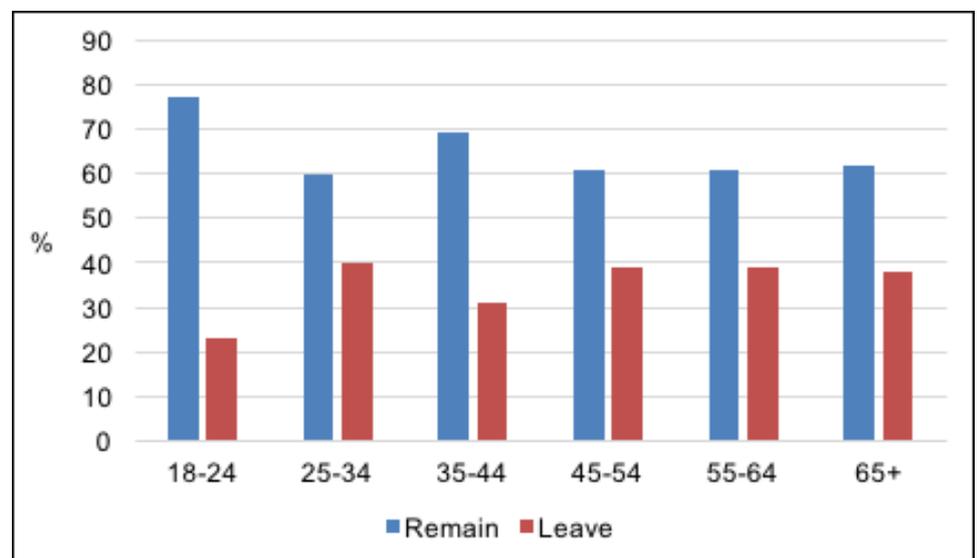
A key tension after the referendum related to voters' age, with older people being perceived to be pro-Brexit and younger people being pro-EU. Given that voting takes place anonymously, the only way to test this is with survey data. The NILT results confirm this perception to some degree: Figure 1 shows that those aged 18-24 were most likely to vote to remain (77%). However, the voting behaviour of those aged 25-34 was similar to that of respondents age 45 years or over. This differs from the pattern in the UK where there was a steady upward gradient in the leave vote according to age – from 25 per

cent in the youngest age group (18-25) to 66 per cent (65 or over) (Clarke et al., 2017: 155).

The Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study (Garry, 2016) was held just before and immediately after the referendum, and found a strong link between how people voted and the ethno-national divide in Northern Ireland. Table 2 shows that this pattern was also strongly evident in NILT data. The majority of Catholic respondents (88%) and those with no religion (66%) voted to remain in the EU. Among Protestants, however, attitudes were more divided, with 57 per cent saying that they voted to leave, and 43 per cent voting to remain.

Perhaps as one might expect, a split along nationalist/unionist lines was also visible. Unionists (63%) and those with a British identity (61%) voted to leave, whilst

Figure 1: Referendum vote and age



nationalists (92%) and those with an Irish identity (90%) voted overwhelmingly to remain. Nine out of ten respondents stating affiliation to Sinn Féin, SDLP and Alliance voted to remain, whilst three quarters of DUP supporters voted to leave. UUP voters were split, with 53 per cent voting to leave, and 47 per cent voting to remain.

As well as being asked about how they voted on 23 June, respondents were asked how they would vote if the EU referendum was held again on the following day. Fifteen per cent said that they would not vote, and a further nine per cent did not want to say, or did not know. Focusing solely on those who said 'leave' or 'remain', support for leave was 31 per cent – slightly lower than the figure relating to the referendum. Perhaps this change of heart reflected the mixed messages after the referendum about the

Table 1: Referendum vote and identity

	% voted to leave	% voted to remain
Protestant	57	43
No religion	34	66
Catholic	12	88
Unionist	63	37
Neither	29	71
Nationalist	8	92
British	61	39
Northern Irish	32	68
Irish	10	90
DUP	74	26
UUP	53	47
Alliance	11	89
Sinn Féin	9	91
SDLP	9	91

Table 2: Bregret

	% (June referendum)	
	I voted to leave	I voted to remain
I would vote to leave	93	1
I would vote to remain	7	99

cost of leaving the EU and that savings (£350 million per week) were unlikely to be redirected into the NHS.

When we consider these two questions together there is a strong sense of consistency. Nearly all respondents who voted in the referendum to remain in the EU would continue to vote that way. Table 2 suggests that some degree of 'Bregret' is visible, in that 7 per cent of those who voted in June to leave would now vote to remain. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of a major change of heart on either side. This is interesting when considered alongside expectations about the Brexit effect on Northern Ireland.

Expectations of Brexit

NILT respondents had negative feelings about how Northern Ireland will fare outside the EU. Around one half of respondents (53%) felt that Northern Ireland will probably or definitely be worse off, whilst three in ten (28%) felt that Northern Ireland will definitely or probably be better off. It is notable that 19 per cent of respondents were uncertain about the future. These attitudes were closely related to how respondents voted in the referendum. Most of those who voted to leave were optimistic that Northern Ireland would be better off (78%), whilst those who voted to remain

felt that Northern Ireland would be worse off (82%). Nevertheless, 13 per cent of those who voted for Brexit have a negative view of the future for Northern Ireland outside the EU.

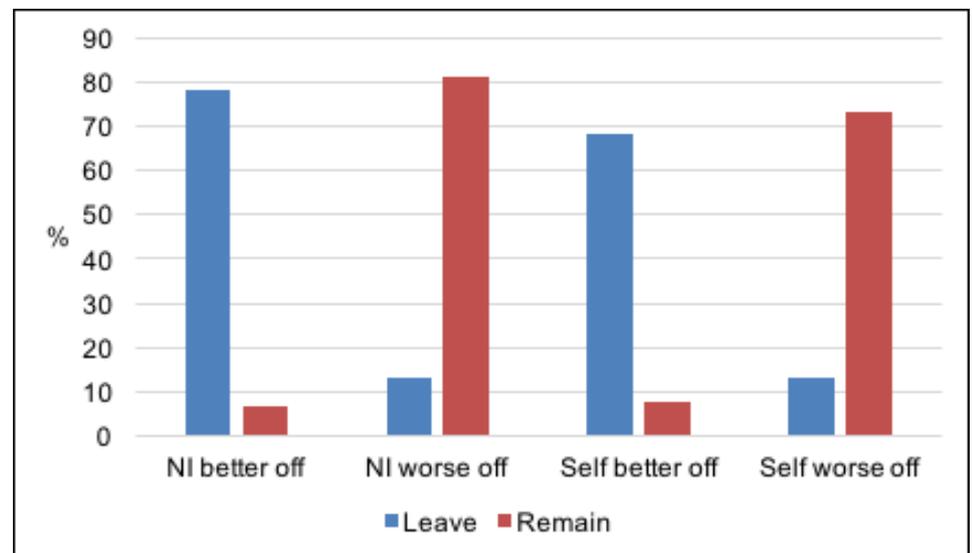
When asked about their own situation, just under half of respondents (48%) thought that they would be worse off under Brexit, and 25 per cent thought that they would be better off. At the same time, a sizeable minority (26%) were unsure of their personal situation outside the EU: As before, the correlation with voting behaviour was evident (see Figure 2).

Border

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK which shares a land border with another EU member state. At present, one in four NILT respondents (26%) cross the border with the Republic of Ireland at least once a month. A similar proportion cross it less than once a year or never (24%). Changes to the border will impact collectively on everyone in Northern Ireland, and will be a personal concern for the majority of NILT respondents. Whether that becomes a 'hard border' or a 'seamless and frictionless border' forms part of the negotiations between the UK and the EU over the next two years.

Table 3 shows a clear association between frequency of crossing the border, and

Figure 2: Perceptions of future after Brexit



how respondents voted. The majority of those who crossed the border at least once a month (80%) voted to remain, compared with 48 per cent of those who crossed the border least frequently.

Opinion was split about potential impact of Brexit on the border. Three in ten (31%) felt that Brexit means that they may have problems crossing the border in years to come, but 57 per cent thought there would be no or little effect. Again, there was a link with how people voted in the referendum: 41% of those who voted to remain thought that there would be problems, whilst only 16% of those who voted to leave thought this (Table 4). However, the surprising figure is that 51 per cent of those voted remain did not think crossing the border would be a problem after Brexit. One may speculate here - because the evidence is paradoxical - that respondents feel reasonably confident that the Common Travel Area arrangement will be maintained.

There was also a relationship between how frequently respondents cross the border, and how much of the problem they feel crossing the border will be after Brexit. More than four in ten of those those who cross the border at least once a month (43%) felt that there will be a problem. On the other hand, only 19 per cent of those who cross the border infrequently felt that there would be a problem in the future, and one third of these respondents did not know how to answer the question.

United Ireland

Brexit has encouraged political debate about its implications for the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Membership of the EU and commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights were part of the Peace Process and written into the 1998 Agreement. The Agreement confirmed that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK would remain unless and until a majority of the population wanted otherwise. This constitutional consent principle was complemented by a commitment that both unionists and nationalists consented a shared idea of the *context* of politics, if not the *ends* of politics.

Table 3: Voting behaviour, by frequency of crossing the border

	%		
	At least once a month	At least once a year, but less than once a month	Less frequently or never
I voted to leave	20	39	52
I voted to remain	80	61	48

Table 4: Perceived problems crossing the border after Brexit, by vote

	%		
	I voted to leave	I voted to remain	All*
Yes (probably/definitely)	16	41	31
No (probably/definitely)	75	51	57
Don't know	9	8	13*

* Includes respondents who didn't vote, won't say, or can't remember

Table 5: Long term future for Northern Ireland, by vote

	%		
	I voted to leave	I voted to remain	All
Remain part of the United Kingdom, with direct rule	21	9	12
Remain part of the United Kingdom, with devolved government	62	56	54
Reunify with the rest of Ireland?	8	24	19
Independent state	3	6	5
Other answer (WRITE IN)	1	<1	1
Don't know	6	6	10

For example, the right to hold British and Irish citizenship through the Agreement in the context of EU membership helped to defuse the border question. It was famously said by Lord (Peter) Mandelson that the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement were 'the only game in town'. The result of the EU referendum has not shaken the Agreement's foundations, but it has raised the other side of consent – that Northern Ireland post-Brexit will be a different Northern Ireland from the one agreed in 1998. This has raised the possibility of a border poll on the reunification of Ireland.

On Northern Ireland's long-term constitutional future, around one in five NILT respondents (19%) said that they think that Northern Ireland should reunify with the rest of Ireland (see Table 5). However, this proportion was much higher among respondents who voted to remain (24%) than it was among those who voted to leave (8%). Looking at this another way, 85% of those who would favour reunification with the rest of Ireland voted to remain in the EU.

However, one half of respondents (51%) felt that the UK leaving the European

Union has made no difference to the likelihood of a united Ireland. In particular, those who voted to leave were more likely to think this (65%) than those who voted to remain (46%). For a small minority of respondents (16%), leaving the EU has made them feel more favourable to a United Ireland, and this is more true of those who voted to remain (25%) than those who voted to leave (2%). For most respondents (69%), regardless of how they voted, Brexit has made little or no difference to their constitutional preference.

Conclusion

The EU Referendum in June 2016 marked the start of a long period of uncertainty as the UK government negotiates the

terms of Brexit. This is particularly strongly felt in Northern Ireland which voted to remain within the EU. However, the NILT results indicate a predictable division of opinion, reflecting traditional positions in Northern Ireland. The question of identity has come into sharp focus again. Applications for Irish passports from within the UK have risen considerably since the referendum result – and unpredictably perhaps, many of these applications from within Northern Ireland have been made by Protestants. There is much variation in respondents' expectations of how Northern Ireland, and themselves personally, will fare after Brexit. The border question has now been reintroduced into political discourse in a way that it has not been for some time.

References

Clarke, Harold, Goodwin, Matthew and Whiteley, Paul (2017) *Brexit: Why Britain voted to leave the European Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Garry, John (2016) *The EU referendum Vote in Northern Ireland: Implications for our understanding of citizens' political views and behaviour*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series

Key points

- Three in ten respondents did not vote in the Referendum. Of those that declared how they voted, 64% voted to remain.
- Three quarters of 18-24 year olds voted to remain. Those aged 25-34 were least likely to vote to remain (60%).
- The largest support to remain were among Catholics (88%), Nationalists (92%), Irish (90%), and Sinn Féin or SDLP supporters (91%).
- Some Regret was evident: 7% of those who voted for Brexit would change their mind if the referendum were held again.
- 53% felt that Northern Ireland will be worse off after Brexit, and 48% felt that they would personally be worse off. Those who voted to remain in the EU were more pessimistic.
- 31% feel that Brexit will mean problems crossing the border, and this was higher among those who voted to remain in the EU (41%).
- 26% say that Brexit has made a united Ireland more likely, although half of respondents think it has made no difference.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. *Perceptive Insight* carried out the interviews for the 2016 survey. 1,208 adults took part.

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