

# **UACES 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference**

**Leeds, 2-4 September 2013**

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## **Flags, Money and Democracy: How far has EU Factor brought citizens in**

### **Northern Ireland closer to the Union?**

Lee McGowan

#### *Abstract*

It is now over forty years since Northern Ireland (as part of the United Kingdom) acceded to the then European Economic Community (EEC) in January 1973. In the interim much has changed with the adoption of new European treaties and the introduction of devolution - in the form of political governance within both political unions. Public attitudes towards the EU for one have also undergone major change over the intervening period. The once 'permissive consensus' on European integration has given way to growing euroscepticism across Europe and also in the UK. As the UK moves towards a second referendum on EU membership this paper revisits the theme of public attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland. It finds that Northern Ireland opinion has changed too but in contrast to the wider UK picture has become more supportive over time and is now one of the least eurosceptic regions within the UK. The transformation in attitudes is surprising given the scant attention the EU receives in the press and from government. Recognising this information vacuum and seeking to explain attitudes in NI, this paper argues that what is labelled here as the EU factor has enabled is the public to recognise the benefits arising from EU membership. In doing so it presents the EU as a more proactive force than is so often assumed.

*Draft Paper presented at 43<sup>rd</sup> annual UACES conference, Leeds, 2-4 September 2013.*

*I am 'honoured to be a supporter of the (James Wharton's EU referendum) bill. It is 38 years since we have had a referendum on the UK's relationship with Europe and it is now time to give people their say' (Nigel Dodds, DUP deputy leader, Belfast Telegraph, 9. July 2013).*

The issue of European Union (EU) membership has emerged as a key theme for many of the political elite in Northern Ireland as elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK). Dodds' call carries validity as it is now some forty years (Phinnemore et al, 2012), since the territory of Northern Ireland (NI) acceded to the European Economic Community (EEC)

as part of the United Kingdom in January 1973 and only once over this timeframe have the public had the opportunity to express their views through a referendum in 1975. Calling for a referendum may be popular and much has certainly changed since in the economic and political spheres within the borders of both the UK (post devolution in the late 1990s) and the EU (through subsequent treaty changes). Questions need to be asked about the readiness and current knowledge of both the politicians and the wider public to engage with the referendum question and to weigh up the implications of a ‘stay in’ or ‘get-out’ vote. This paper explores attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland. It builds on earlier studies to show how opinion in this region has become more positive over time (in contrast to developments in the UK as a whole), before introducing a new means to consider why and how public attitudes have changed which are presented here as growing recognition of the benefits arising from EU membership. The paper also lays the basis for a much needed new survey to update information on how attitudes have changed over the last decade and to test the explanatory variable that is the EU factor.

## **SETTING THE CONTEXT**

From a UK perspective much has now been written on the country’s relationship with the EU from both a government and political party perspective over the last four decades). Although there is an emerging body of academic work on the political relationships between regional assemblies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and their engagement with the EU arena, there has been very little research done on public opinion and attitudes towards the EU in NI (McGowan and O’Connor, 2004; Clements, 2010). Public opinion matters more now than ever in the UK context following the passing of the European Union Act in 2011 (which allows a UK referendum on future

treaty changes) and prior to a referendum on EU membership itself. At the outset this paper recognises how the much documented ‘permissive consensus’ that had existed between the national governments and their publics in favour of the EU integration process is being replaced by a new and growing ‘dissensus’ across the EU.

Of course, circumstances and degrees vary from member state to member state basis and this paper focuses on just one region, Northern Ireland of one of the largest and most eurosceptic member states, namely the UK. For the average UK citizen connections to the EU are limited. The repeated failure of successive UK governments to explain the rationale behind European integration became ever more problematic as the EU developed further. One consequence of this information deficit has been the rise of a growing eurosceptic discourse in UK politics and particularly over the last decade and this translated into augmenting demands from the public (67 per cent versus 26 per cent against) for a referendum on membership.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there has been a swing in favour of leaving the EU in the UK since 2007. The outcome of any in/out referendum is hard to call. Peter Kellner (2013) argued that current figures for the UK suggested a narrow victory for those wanting to leave the EU and this view was further supported by a survey for Sky News in June 2013. The latter showed a thin majority (51 versus 49 per cent) in favour of leaving, but the reality is that the margin of error here makes it too close to call.<sup>2</sup>

Northern Irish politics has not remained immune from a eurosceptic discourse and Dodds’ call resonates among most other main political parties (DUP, Sinn Fein, UUP and the newly arrived force of UKIP in this region) with only the more minor forces of the SDLP and the Alliance Party being supporters of the European integration

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<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI European Union poll from October 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *The actual question read* ‘Do you think that the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union?’. See [news.sky.com/story/1099378/eu-immigration-tops-list-of-uk-concerns](http://news.sky.com/story/1099378/eu-immigration-tops-list-of-uk-concerns) (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013).

process.<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland represents the smallest region of the UK with a population of 1.77 million (1.5 per cent of the UK population). Nevertheless, it makes for a fascinating case study as it is in the unique position of being part of the United Kingdom, which is consistently one of the more europhobe EU countries on many measures, while sharing a land border with another EU member state in the form of the Republic of Ireland that is consistently one of the most europhile of the EU countries.

One of the central questions underpinning this research paper is the degree to which Northern Ireland, as a constituent part of the UK, exhibits similar trends to the British average or whether opinion diverges or coalesces with opinion in Scotland and Wales. The paper recognises the importance of comparison but it has not been designed as a comparative paper as it is not comparing like for like. Each region has its own specific reference points in terms of both culture and politics and recent historical developments. That said, comparisons are made. There are five conditions which help inform public attitudes to the EU and these apply to both national and subnational entities. These are:

- A willingness of political parties to engage with the EU
- A media that engages with EU events and policies in an objective manner
- A political executive that discusses the EU dimension and expresses and interest in informing the public about the EU
- An active pro-European lobby
- And arguably a visible EU ‘mission’

Whereas the first four conditions are present in Scotland and Wales, they are largely absent in both the Northern Ireland and the UK contexts. From the public’s perception the three MEPs representing the NI constituency almost seem to disappear after one

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed four of the DUP MPs voted for an amendment to the Queen’s speech in May 2013 regretting the specific omission of a referendum in the text

election contest and do not reappear until the next contest All three current MEPs are not only eurosceptics but have a very low media profile. Debates about EU affairs among MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly have been rare and tended to be set at a fairly basic level. Secondly, the three regional newspapers (*Belfast Telegraph*, *The Irish News* and *The Newsletter*) may carry stories about the economy and agriculture that have an EU dimension but very rarely do they cover the shape, purpose and functions of EU governance.<sup>4</sup> The paucity of coverage and the disinterest in the EU arena UK wide was recently acknowledged by one leading British reporter (Charter 2013, 17-20).<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, the executive and the present form of consociational government still struggle to identify its European priorities and how to manage them (see, for example, limited progress on subsidiarity developments in NI). The EU also needs a purpose.<sup>6</sup> Given this context it might be expected that attitudes towards the EU among the public in NI would reflect the higher degrees of interest and euroscepticism that now prevail within the UK. However, work from earlier data sets on public opinion in NI on the EU (McGowan and O' Connor, 2004; Clements, 2010) reveal that attitudes in NI are more positive than those for the UK and especially among the younger age cohorts, among those with higher educational qualifications and among the nationalist community. In seeking to explain this divergence, and to avoid recapping familiar material, this paper pursues a new approach and identifies a series of strategies that have enabled the reality of the EU arena to connect with the public.

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<sup>4</sup> Local journalists are often ready to admit that they do not write about EU stories because often they feel ill-equipped to tackle these issues, but primarily because their readers are not interested in EU stories.

<sup>5</sup> David Charter became the Times Brussels correspondent in 2006 'knowing precious little about the EU really worked....it was a topic hardly mentioned at school..., rarely, if ever, did an MEP appear on *QuestionTime* or the *Today* programme (Charter, 4-5).

<sup>6</sup> Leo Tindemans argued that with peace secured in Western Europe the European idea had long its sense of adventure. See 'Report by Mr Leo Tindemans, Prime Minister of Belgium, to the European Council', pt. I.A.

*Hypothesis: In seeking to explain higher levels of satisfaction (in contrast to the UK average) among the public towards the EU in Northern Ireland where the EU is at best a peripheral issue, this paper argues that the more positive views in NI find partial explanation in people directly recognising the benefits of EU integration on the ground. In short, it aims to identify an EU factor.*

The paper charts the transformation of public opinion in NI towards the EU and identifies the EU factor as a core variable. The paper is divided into four sections. The first of these identifies and elaborates on three strategies ('German', 'Roman' and 'Greek') that arguably foster engagement between the public and the EU. It is followed by discussion of attitudes towards the EU across the UK before turning to look specifically at the situation in NI. The penultimate section addresses the impact of the three strategies in opinion in NI before turning to identifying a research agenda for future work in this area.

## **IDENTIFYING THE EU FACTOR: THREE STRATEGIES**

The EU has become a daily aspect of modern governance for all its member states. As such the public should be informed about the EU's activities, aspirations and its leading personalities. Greater public awareness should also provide support and legitimacy for the EU itself. However, for many media outlets and politicians the EU seems too 'difficult' a subject to explain sufficiently and there is a 'prevailing tendency' among 'Dutch parliamentarians to see the European Union as an occupying power which strengthened my conviction that in any account of European politics, the battle for the public should be placed centre-stage' (van Middelaar, 2013, xv). The public's voice has

now become an essential ingredient in future alterations to the EU treaty base but is support forthcoming?

Making the connection between the EU and the citizen has to be understood as a highly problematic exercise. States do have an automatic advantage as they can deploy a number of strategies to make links with their citizens and these can be flag-waving events, annual state occasions, national sporting successes, military parades, free education and well functioning health systems and politicians can talk of our people and our own decisions. In contrast, and with the EU not constituting a state its possibilities to connect with its citizens may initially appear problematic but such it is time to re-evaluate any such view. In the mid 1970s. Van Middelaar presents three possibilities from the past (van Middelaar, 223-4) that he labels the 'German', 'Roman' and 'Greek' strategies. The first of these three strategies focused on cultural and historical identity (e.g. language, customs, flags, anthems and monuments to heroes). The 'Roman' strategy was very much centred on the conferral of rights that citizens enjoyed as well as a range of material benefits from aqueducts to public baths as well as security. Finally, the 'Greek' strategy was built upon the role of the public as both spectator and participant in decision making processes, democratic sovereignty and the periodic appraisal by the population of representatives. Trying to apply these strategies to the EU construct raises issues about how impact is measured and about whether people know where actual benefits stem from (member state, EU level and/or, a third state).

Public support for political institutions and political systems have generally been divided into two distinctive types, and classified as either affective or utilitarian in nature. The former is very much more concerned with emotional attachment in accordance with the 'German' strategy (the adoption and use of the EU flag in 1986), and based on non-material beliefs whereas the latter and where most attention has

focused, is much more influenced by individual perceptions of losses and gains. Recent studies on the EU (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Gabel 1998) have developed and refined David Easton's original theoretical arguments of a utilitarian cost-benefit approach that has been dominated by economic and rational cost-benefit analyses. Basically this presupposes that those who benefit materially from EU membership tend to be supportive of the integration process. This fits the 'Roman' strategy but is it true?

It has already been recognised that the European integration process has produced both winners and losers. Several authors including Gabel, (Gabel, 1998) discovered a higher income often signalled pro-EU feelings whereas negative emotions were primarily the preserve of those who felt threatened by change and closer links to this new supranational system. In short, the existing world of the nation state seems to embody a high degree of historical certainty whereas the EU presents not only a challenge but provokes uncertainty. In general, however, Eurobarometer surveys have repeatedly shown that professionals and students are often the more disposed groups towards the EU than their peers with more limited formal education and those working in manual jobs. Among these latter two groups there is a greater tendency for feelings of at best luke-warm and at worst outright hostility toward the EU. Into the 'connected' category we can also add in very general terms groups such as business people (benefit from economies of scale from the single market), farmers (monies from CAP) and border residents. Seeking to explain the variations in attitudes towards the EU across the member states goes beyond the scope of this paper and attention focuses on Northern Ireland after setting the overall EU context.

## **SETTING THE SCENE: PUBLIC ATTITUDES IN THE UK TOWARDS THE EU**

Over the last decade since the publication of its White Paper on Governance (2001) the Commission has increasingly placed emphasis on the need to engage with civil society and to explain why the EU factor and the and benefits it brings to the public. Although the Commission is now making much more of positive policy developments (see, for example DG Competition's website and decisions such as roaming charges in 2007 or airline liberalisation), there are real questions about how far this information is being picked up by the wider public. Public attitudes are crucial to the process of European integration. The Commission's Eurobarometer surveys have been testing and measuring public opinion at least twice yearly on a broad range of salient EU institutional and policy issues amongst the EU states since 1973.<sup>7</sup> These reports undoubtedly provide a very rich source of information and enable researchers to monitor the public's views on a range of issues as well as charting opinion across member states and over time, but they were also an innovative creation by the Commission for itself to monitor and to seek to respond to public concerns.

Support for the process of EU integration across most member states beginning to decline after its zenith (71%) at the end of 1991 riding on the optimism of the single market programme and the collapse of the Communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. Thereafter, however, identification of the EU as a good thing declined and hovered around the 50 per cent mark (EU average) for most of the later 1990s, before dropping to 48 per cent in 2002 (EB58) and by 2012 (EB78) had further declined to 33 per cent. When exploring the situation in Northern Ireland researchers need to

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<sup>7</sup> The Eurobarometer surveys are based on samples of 1,000 approximately in each of the member states. Although extremely welcome these reports have focused on the member states with only the occasional incursion into the issue of public opinion in the regions. The small size of the Northern Ireland element (some 300) precludes meaningful analysis and led the authors to conduct a much wider survey that interviewed some 1800 people in the autumn of 2002 to investigate specifically knowledge and attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland. These, in turn, can be compared and contrasted where appropriately against the indicators for the UK as a whole.

consider comparative data on the UK as a whole and Ireland. Evidence from Ireland uncovered more supportive responses on the question of membership as a good thing (74 per cent - EB58, 2002) while at the other end of the spectrum public opinion in the UK remained at best lukewarm at 31 per cent (EB58, 2002). Indeed, survey findings on the UK have consistently revealed comparatively higher degrees of scepticism towards the EU. In 2002, for example, only 30 per cent (EB58, 2002) - the lowest figure among the EU15 - believed that the country benefited from EU membership.<sup>8</sup>

By 2012 (EB78) perceptions, as figure 2 illustrates, towards the EU in the UK had cooled further and only 17 per cent held positive views towards the EU in contrast to 36 per cent in Ireland and 33 per cent for the EU27 as a whole. By this stage Eurobarometer had moved away from posing the longstanding general question on membership being a good thing towards more specific questions on the benefits and achievements of EU membership (in line with the 'Roman' strategy).<sup>9</sup> Other questions were changing and Eurobarometer came to focus more on asking about trust in the EU and European institutions and contrasted responses with questions about trust in the national systems of government. Trust in the EU had been declining after 2000. EB78 revealed that trust in the EU institutions among the UK was at all time low at 20 per cent (an EU average of 33 per cent) and recorded the lowest figures across the EU for the European Parliament (24 per cent) and the Council (20 per cent) and the second lowest figure of 24 per cent for the Commission (with Spain at 23 per cent). In contrast and

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<sup>8</sup> By comparison the same question elicited the following responses in other states: Belgium (58 per cent), France (48 per cent), Ireland (85 per cent), Italy (50 per cent), Netherlands (61 per cent), Portugal (68 per cent), Finland (88 per cent) and Luxembourg (68 per cent).

<sup>9</sup> I terms of achievements EB78 posed a number of specific questions on border controls, improved consumer rights for air passengers, roaming charges, medical assistance, working and living in other member states and the right to study in Europe, Interestingly, responses to such achievements showed a decline from the previous survey (EB77). Border controls seen as an achievement by 32 per cent; improved consumer rights by 20 per cent; medical assistance by 14 per cent and studying in another member state by 8 per cent. The one area that showed an improved result was recorded on reduced roaming charges 25 per cent.

somewhat bizarrely, trust in the United Nations has been growing and stood at 44 per cent.

Yet, are such attitudes informed by a definite knowledge of the EU or are they the product of prejudice and even mis-or disinformation? Evidence indicates that a degree of knowledge exists though the level differs quite markedly from member state to member state. Certainly, most of the EU institutions are clearly recognisable to many and both the European Parliament and the European Commission score well above the 90 per cent mark, but there is a substantial difference between simple recognition and an awareness of an institution's powers.

*Figure 1: Contrasting Images of the European Union among the Public<sup>10</sup>*

Territory	European Union average	Ireland	United Kingdom
Very positive image	3	6	1%
Fairly positive image	27	30	16%
Neutral image	39	47	33%
Fairly negative image	22	14	29%
Very negative image	7	4	19%

Source: *Europabarometer Annex 78*, 2012, p.145.

Surveys on the British public's knowledge of EU affairs point to an information deficit. Flash Eurobarometer (2011) found that only 18% of respondents felt sufficiently informed about the EU (with some 2% claiming they knew a great deal) whereas a much larger percentage (some 82%) stated that they knew little (68%) or

<sup>10</sup> The questions (for EB78) read 'In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?'

nothing (14%) about the EU. 36% of UK respondents do consider themselves well informed about European matters. Moreover, over half of all respondents (60%) were either not interested (38%) or quite uninterested (22%) in receiving more information on the EU.<sup>11</sup> Do responses in Northern Ireland mirror or diverge from the UK average?

It was generally assumed that the public and governments of three non-English regions comprising the United Kingdom were almost automatically more open to engagement with the European Union than England. Efforts to explain why this was possibly the case in Scotland and Wales have led to some commentators seeing the EU issue as clear distinction from the English discourse which was reflected among the ranks of an increasing eurosceptical Conservative Party and a very hostile UKIP. Both forces polled badly in both Scotland and Wales where the nationalist parties (*Plaid Cymru* and the SNP) are supportive of EU integration. Others have cited these regions' peripheral geographical location, historical and cultural clashes with England and receipt of funding packages from the EU (estimated some €2 billion for 2014-20). Recent surveys on public opinion strongly suggest that this general assumption be revisited.

Evidence from Scotland indicated that this region looks more favourably on the EU than their English counterparts. In a survey covering the period 1999-2005 (Scottish Executive, 2007) the number of respondents who favoured staying in the EU had remained fairly constant over this time period. In 2005 some 53 per cent

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<sup>11</sup> Other key facts can be established on this issue. Men are more inclined than women (45% against 28%) to claim they feel informed, There may be less to say on different age groups, but there is a clear causal relationship between those who have gone to university and/or work in the professions (48%) and opposed to those with minimal, few or no qualifications (32%). Some 49 per cent (EB78) claimed that they never discussed European politics with family or friends and only 11 per cent did. Corresponding figures for Ireland were 42 per cent and 14 per cent respectively. Caution is required for when questioned about discussing local issues with family friends some 37 per cent in the UK said they never did this (and 26 per cent in Ireland).

supported EU membership (although some 36.3 per cent favoured reducing the EU's powers). However, this survey revealed a higher number people wanting to leave the EU (14.4 per cent in 2005 as opposed to 9.6 per cent in 1999). A more recent series of poll findings by Ipsos-MORI from 2013 reinforce both trends and found that 53 per cent of the respondents wanted the UK to remain in the EU, but also registered that the number of those opposed to membership now stood at 36%.<sup>12</sup>

This divergence between views in Scotland and England, however, has not been replicated in the Welsh case. Attitudes in Wales towards the EU have changed over time as this region has become gradually more eurosceptic. In February 2013 a BBC poll showed a narrow majority (49%) in favour of the UK being outside the EU with some 45 per cent expressing the preference to stay in the EU.<sup>13</sup> Another survey from July 2013 revealed a sharper distinction between those wanting the UK to remain within the EU (20 per cent) and those that preferred to leave (37 per cent) but also recorded a sizable number who claimed they would not vote (21 per cent) and another 14 per cent who did not know how they would cast their vote.<sup>14</sup> All regions in Wales favoured the withdrawal option though support was strongest in the south by a 43 to 23 per cent margin. Again some familiar indicators emerged where younger respondents and those more those with more formal educational qualifications and in ABC social classes were less likely to welcome the UK's exit. Any idea that the UK's regions are all drawn towards a positive disposition towards the EU is incorrect. The issue for this paper is where opinion in Northern Ireland lies.

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<sup>12</sup> [Scotland and the EU – the polling evidence](http://newsnetscotland.com/index.php/scottish-opinion/6761-scotland-and-the-eu-the-polling-evidence) <http://newsnetscotland.com/index.php/scottish-opinion/6761-scotland-and-the-eu-the-polling-evidence>

<sup>13</sup> The poll was conducted for the BBC by IBM. 1,000 adults were interviewed in February 2013 – see [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-21606095](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-21606095)

<sup>14</sup> Western Mail, and conducted by Beaufort Research interviewed 1,015 people for its Omnibus Survey – a representative sample of the Welsh adult population. Most of the fieldwork for the survey was undertaken between June 14 and June 25, with a small number of interviews conducted later.

## **ENGAGING CITIZENS WITH THE EU PUZZLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND?**

There are two main ways to analyse and assess how citizens' attitudes and engagement with the EU alter or remain constant over time and they take the form of looking at direct participation in terms of voting and secondly, in responses to public attitude surveys. Although both are explored here, the latter has posed some difficulties in terms of the availability of data and reinforces the need for a new survey especially prior to a referendum. Information on the UK as a whole is readily available through established data collections such as the biannual Eurobarometer surveys, its Flash surveys, the British Household Panel Study and the European Election Studies from 2004. In contrast, there are considerably fewer resources with specific reference to the NI case study. Indeed, Northern Ireland can often be overlooked as the British Social Surveys tend to focus on attitudes towards the EU in England, Scotland and Wales or sample sizes are too small. What materials on attitudes to the EU in NI exist such as the 1993 survey (Smith and Corrigan, 1995) and a 2002 survey (McGowan and O'Connor, 2004) may seem dated but both, when used on conjunction with more recent work in a number of Flash Eurobarometers and reports from DG Communication, positively allow us to identify changes over time.<sup>15</sup>

To test just how far attitudes have changed this paper begins with up till now has been the only UK referendum on the issue of EEC membership in June 1975.<sup>16</sup> The issue of membership had arisen as part of the February 1974 general election campaign and Labour had pledged both to renegotiate the terms of UK membership and then consult the people.<sup>17</sup> An analysis of the results not only provides clear demarcations

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<sup>15</sup> DG for Communication, Perceptions of the European Parliament in the UK, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Government pamphlet on the issue see <http://www.harvard-digital.co.uk/euro/pamphlet.htm>

<sup>17</sup> The question put to the electorate on June 5, 1975 read, 'Parliament has decided to consult the electorate on the question

between voters in GB and NI on the issue of membership, but identified (see figure 2) NI as the least interested and most eurosceptic part of the UK. In marked contrast to the national turnout of 64.5%, turnout in NI was at 47.4% the lowest in the UK (Butler and Kitzinger, 1976: 266).<sup>18</sup> While nationally 67.2% of those who voted opted to back the UK’s membership of the EEC, the corresponding figure for Northern Ireland was 52.1% (259,251 votes in favour of membership against 237,911 votes). The only two parts of the UK that recorded a weaker yes vote were the Shetlands (43.7%) and the Western Isles (29.5%) and both with much smaller populations).<sup>19</sup>

*Figure 2: 1975 Referendum on EEC Membership in the UK*

UK	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	N.IRELAND
<b>YES - 67.2</b>	YES – 68.7%	YES – 58.4%	YES – 64.8%	<b>YES – 52.1%</b>
<b>NO – 32.8</b>	NO - 31.3%	NO - 41.6%	NO - 35.2%	<b>NO – 47.9%</b>

The outcome of this referendum provided a fairly accurate reflection of popular attitudes towards the EEC at the time and these less than receptive views on the EEC were displayed again in the Eurobarometer report from late 1975. Once again, responses illustrated that views were clearly behind GB on many of the key indicators. For example, 33% in NI (58% in GB) regarded EEC membership as a good thing. 18% of respondents in NI were opposed to membership in contrast to 13% across GB.<sup>20</sup>

Seeking to explain the lower turnout and more critical views on EU integration has led some commentators to put forward a variety of explanations from elector fatigue

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whether the UK should remain in the European Economic Community. Do you want the UK to remain in the EEC?

<sup>18</sup> 17,378,581 people voted to remain in the EEC and 8,470,073 voted against.

<sup>19</sup> All English counties recorded higher yes votes than in NI with most English councils approving the referendum with figures of 60%+ and stronger returns of close to 75% in counties such as Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, East and West Sussex, Kent, North Yorkshire and Surrey,

<sup>20</sup> *Eurobarometer 4: Consumer Attitudes in Europe, October-November, 1975.*

(given that the 1975 referendum marked the 7<sup>th</sup> election in two years), cultural and geographical detachment from both Great Britain and the continent, but lower levels of acceptance and engagement reflected the composition of the NI electorate and the aspirations and fears of its two main political communities in Northern Ireland. Broadly speaking an attachment to GB and the need to preserve British culture (within the Protestant community) perceived 'ever closer union' with Europe as a challenge to their own cultural identity and a dilution of their very 'Britishness'. In short, the more British some felt, then the less Europhile the voter. This fear of foreign influences predisposed people to a particular evaluation of European integration (De Master and Le Roy, 2000). In contrast those of the nationalist community perceived European integration as a positive as means of enhancing their Irishness in an European arena and diminishing British affiliations.

The elections to the European Parliament provide another possible means to measure voters' engagement and attitudes to the process. One of the greatest paradoxes of the EU's development (and arguably in relation to the debates on legitimacy and democratic accountability) has been the growing empowerment of the EP through the treaties. However, simultaneously public engagement and support for the EP as measured through the EP election turnouts EU wide has declined sharply (see figure 2) from 62% in 1979 to 43% by 2009. Historically, elections to the EP in the UK have been much lower key affairs than general election campaigns and have never even reached the 40% threshold. Interestingly, when these figures are broken down by region it becomes evident that the Northern Irish experience once again does not match GB experience. EP elections have resonated more with the electorate in NI than the rest of the UK. In each of the seven EP elections held, Northern Ireland has been treated as one constituency (using PR's single transferable vote system) that returns three MEPs and

turnout has always exceeded the UK average – and until 2009 – quite substantially by a margin of 13-33%. It is difficult to read too much into these figures as outcome of EP elections settled into a ‘steady pattern of predicatibility’ (Hainsworth and McCann, 2010; 303) and as the only-province-wide poll and is regarded as a test of Northern Ireland’s constitutional position’ (Peter Robinson, Newsletter, 29 May 2009). Politics was changing slowly and the 2009 elections registered the first occasion when the margin between NI and UK turnouts narrowed to within 10% of UK average. Can we identify ‘increasing apathy’ (Hainsworth and McCann, 311) towards European elections in NI?

*Figure 3: Turnout Figures at EP Elections, 1979-present*

<b>Year of Election</b>	<b>EU wide</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>NI</b>
<b>1979</b>	<b>61.99%</b>	<b>32.35%</b>	<b>56.92%</b>
<b>1984</b>	<b>58.98%</b>	<b>32.57%</b>	<b>65.4%</b>
<b>1989</b>	<b>58.41%</b>	<b>36.37%</b>	<b>48.81%</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>56.67%</b>	<b>36.43%</b>	<b>49%</b>
<b>1999</b>	<b>49.51%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>57.04%</b>
<b>2004</b>	<b>45.57%</b>	<b>38.52%</b>	<b>51.2%</b>
<b>2009</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>34.7%</b>	<b>42.8%</b>

Source for EU and UK wide figures see [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-\(1979-2009\).html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-(1979-2009).html) (accessed 29 May 2013)

## **EXPLORING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

In one of the first and largest surveys on public opinion in NI towards the EU from 2002 McGowan and O’Connor (2004) were able to identify a number of pertinent issues about

the public's engagement with the supranational level.<sup>21</sup> This raised a number of familiar aspects that impact on positive attitudes to the EU such as higher educational attainment, working in professions as well as looking at the position of the two main communities towards the EU (and incorporating issues such as gender, class and age). It also brought home the paucity of information that existed on the EU from the germinal public's point of view. Only four in ten claimed to have read anything about the EU in the year prior to the survey. This arguably explained the low degree of knowledge held by the public about the EU. Indeed, some 50 per cent of interviewees claimed they knew little or nothing about the EU and 45 per cent expressed little interest in this level of governance, though interestingly the EU was associated in peoples' minds as a grant awarding body. Leaving aside the issue of knowledge the survey demonstrated how public opinion towards the EU in NI had gradually become much more positive since 1975. The upswing had first been illustrated by Smith and Corrigan (1995) in research from the early 1990s.<sup>22</sup>

By 2002 46 per cent considered Northern Ireland's EU participation as 'a good thing' and only four per cent registered its participation as 'a bad thing'. Attitudes on this question were considerably higher than corresponding figures for the UK (32 per cent) and indeed, many other EU member states (Sweden, Austria and Finland) although noticeably much lower than the figures for the Republic of Ireland's (74 per cent). This same pattern was reflected when the interviewees were asked benefits from membership. 48 per cent thought that NI had benefited from membership whereas comparative figures for the UK and the Republic of Ireland were 35 per cent and 85 per cent respectively. Another key finding from this survey centred on the attitudes of the two major

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<sup>21</sup> The Europe module of the 2002 Life and Times Survey was made possible from an award from the ESRC. 1,800 people were interviewed in the autumn of 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Two studies, namely the 1991 *British Social Attitudes* survey and the 1993 *Northern Ireland Social Attitudes* survey provide illustrate broad similarities in trends in attitudes to the EU in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

communities towards the EU. Although reservations were still in evidence by those within the Protestant community they were less resonant and 64 per cent (see figure 4) were generally supportive (i.e. leaving the EU as it is; increasing the powers of the EU and working towards a single European government). True the percentage of DUP voters (see figure 5) wanting to leave the EU had more than doubled between 1993 and 2002 to 28 per cent but 61 per cent were broadly supportive. The two Catholic/nationalist parties (including Sinn Fein) showed a stronger support for NI's role in the EU than their unionist peers. Northern Ireland public opinion had been transformed.

*Figure 4*  
*Opinions on UK policy towards the EU by Unionist, Nationalist or Neither identification 2002*  
%

Identification	Leave EU	Reduce Powers	Leave as is	Increase powers	Work for single EU government
Unionist	15	21	34	24	6
Nationalist	2	14	38	32	13
Neither	4	18	39	25	12
Total	8	18	37	27	10

Crucially, attitudes to actual EU membership showed a marked difference from the position in the 1970s. By 2002 only 8 per cent of the respondents in NI sought the UK's withdrawal from the EU while 10 per cent were supportive of a single EU government. More importantly only 18 per cent wanted to reduce the EU's power while another 27 per cent wanted to increase it.

*Figure 5: Opinions on UK policy towards the EU by party identification 2002*  
*(1993 in brackets)*  
%

Party	Leave EU	Reduce Powers	Leave as is	Increase Powers	Work for single EU government
UUP	8 (9)	24 (31)	38 (25)	26 (23)	4 (5)

SDLP	2 (2)	12 (11)	39 (35)	35 (35)	12 (27)
DUP	28 (13)	11 (25)	31 (29)	19 (17)	11 (9)
Alliance	3 (1)	11 (25)	37 (16)	36 (45)	14 (27)
Sinn Fein	5 (-)	23 (5)	27 (26)	31 (24)	14 (31)
PUP	8	25	25	25	17
Women's Coalition	--	20	24	28	28
None	6	20	41	28	28
Total	8 (7)	18 (21)	36 (24)	27 (26)	11 (13)

Source for 1993: Smith and Corrigan (1995) 'Relations with Europe' pp: 84-105 in Breen, R., P. Devine and G. Robinson (eds) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Appletree Press.

These more positive attitudes towards the EU in NI held throughout the 2000s and were reinforced in later (albeit shorter) surveys (involving fewer participants). The 2008 Household Survey, for example, established that NI citizens were more supportive than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales with 45 per cent identifying EU membership as a good thing (some 40 per cent in Scotland and Wales and 33 per cent in England.<sup>23</sup> The transformation of attitudes towards the EU in NI was illustrated by Clements (2010) when he provided separate averages for the four decades after the referendum (1975-9; 36.3%; 1980-89; 40.2%; 1990-99; 60.4% and 2000-2006 54.4%).

Levels of trust (Flash Eurobarometer (FL356)<sup>24</sup> from autumn 2012 finds all regions of the UK having poorer views on trust. 72 of the 1270 regions polled more than 50 per cent claimed that they did not trust the EU and in seven states there is no region where a majority of respondents claimed they did. However, NI remains the region with the highest level of trust albeit that 31% claim to trust. NI one of 10 UK

<sup>23</sup> British Household Panel Survey 2007

<sup>24</sup> This survey was most concerned with viewing peoples' views on the state of the economy, their own economic situation and quality of life – identifying issues as crime and unemployment as key concerns..

regions polled for Eurobarometer. Finding change is one thing, but identifying why change has occurred is quite another! Is there an EU factor?

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE: AWARENESS OF THE EU FACTOR**

Research findings to date on public opinion in NI towards the EU have identified a clear change in perceptions over time. This region of the UK has moved from one of the least enthusiastic to arguably the least eurosceptic, but how do we explain this change and why have the NI figures not replicated the overall UK pattern, especially when the Northern Irish political scene remains very much set in parochial mode and has shown little interest in EU affairs? This disinterest has been reflected within the media and the current power sharing government –who together have done very little to counter the information gap. Seeking to account for the change finds partial explanation with the public’s growing visibility of the EU on the ground but a growing recognition of the benefits for NI arising from membership (see figure 6). To address this EU factor this paper now deploys van Middelaar’s three strategies (flags, benefits and democracy) to explain the transformation in attitudes in NI case study.

### *The ‘German’ strategy - flags*

The first strategy centred on building identity through culture, common histories and language. At the outset this might seem somewhat problematic and especially on the language front. The aborted Constitution for Europe (2003) might be cited as a further reality check because such formal attempts within the EU at constructing and solidifying European identity through the adoption of symbols of statehood (Part IV, Art. iv) including an anthem, a flag, its own motto, a day of celebration (Europe day – 9<sup>th</sup> May),

proved too controversial and were deliberately omitted from the Treaty of Lisbon. However, the EU flag and the euro have become symbols that provide the EU with a recognition factor. Both have strong resonance in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in a region with something of a flag fetish the EU flag does not hold any sectarian connotations and can be found on many buildings (but not bonfires!). Given the geography and border with the Irish Republic (and clear marker from other UK areas) many people in NI are very familiar with the euro and use it on a regular basis.

The recent turbulations within the eurozone is expected to have impacted views negatively on the introduction of the UK into Northern Ireland. Prior to the current economic crisis commencing in 2008, however, the public in NI had been more disposed to the euro than the UK average. Findings from 2002 revealed that although half of all respondents supported the continued use of sterling, some 37 per cent expressed their preference for the introduction of the euro and a further 13 per cent expressed the use of both currencies. Interestingly the majority of nationalists (60 per cent) supported the introduction of the euro while a majority of unionists (69 per cent) strongly favoured the maintenance of sterling as the exclusive currency. The euro has real potential as a connector and was designed as one benefit for EU consumers.

#### *The 'Roman' strategy - monies*

One of the strongest ways of theoretically linking the public with supranational politics is through recognition of direct benefits accruing from the latter. In advancing the 'Roman' strategy this paper can identify an EU interest in the development of Northern Ireland, or more accurately an interest in seeking to help end the conflict. This interest has largely taken the form of monies and financial aid through existing both EU policies and policy programmes that were specifically designed for this region. Three are

identified here. Firstly, in the NI context EU interest translated into agreement (post the first ceasefire in 1994) on a series of four direct financial aid package programmes (PEACE) running from 1995 to 2020).<sup>25</sup> The PEACE programme was designed to foster and build better community relations and represents a sophisticated and sustained example of a 'peace-building from below'. Over this period the Commission provided some €This EU role should not be underplayed and very much sees the EU in the guise of a 'peace-maker' and as such overturns Tindeman's earlier assumption that this specific role had passed.

Secondly, the EU's role as benefactor was present in other areas of EU policy. The opportunities and restrictions created by the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy, as two prime examples, certainly found resonance with the farming and fishing communities. Other EU funded infrastructure projects such as URBAN and INTERREG and the Single Market project raised general awareness of the EU and arguably over time contributed to more positive attitudes being expressed towards the EU. The extent of EU financing was often directly visible to the public as the aid was acknowledged on roadside hoardings and on plaques of completed infrastructure projects.

The third example of the special attention that has been awarded to Northern Ireland is to be found with the creation of the Northern Ireland Task Force (NITF) in 2007. The NITF was a Commission initiative and was spearheaded by its president, Jose Manuel Barroso. It was established with the executive in Stormont and sought to examine how NI could benefit more from existing EU policies and how this region could participate more actively in EU discussions and policy development.<sup>26</sup> There is no

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<sup>25</sup> The programmes are Peace I (1995-1999), Peace II (2000-2006), Peace III (2007-13) and Peace IV (2014-20).

<sup>26</sup> . The NITF is composed of representatives of European Commission Directorates General (DGs) that have a role in fostering socio-economic development (Agriculture, Education and Culture, Enterprise,

parallel body for either Scotland or Wales. All three arguably raise the EU recognition factor and hence translate into higher support.

*Figure 6: Public perceptions of the EU in NI: Evidence of the ‘German’, ‘Roman’ and ‘Greek’ Strategies*

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>EU FACTOR - GERMAN</b>	<b>EU FACTOR - GREEK</b>	<b>EU FACTOR - ROMAN</b>
1973		Accession to EEC	
1975		Referendum on EEC	
1979		First EP elections	
1984		Second EP elections	
1986	EU Flag		
1988	EU Passport (UK)		
1989		Third EP elections	OBJECTIVE STATUS 1
1994		Fourth EP elections	
			PEACE I
1998		Good Friday Agreement	
1999		Fifth EP elections	
2000			PEACE II
2004		Sixth EP elections	
2005	Aborted Constitution for Europe		
2007			PEACE III Barosso Task Force
2009		Seventh EP elections	
2014			PEACE IV

*The ‘Greek’ strategy – democracy*

The third and final strategy also concerns tangible benefits but these are centred on the empowerment of the individual and his/her ability to participate as both spectator and an active player in shaping the EU. Earlier opinion polls (e.g. 2002 poll on NI) have illustrated how far removed citizens often feel from decision making and real doubts

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Environment, Research and Development, Transport, Energy, Regional Policy, Secretariat General and Information Society) and is managed on a day-to-day basis by the DG for Regional Policy. The European Investment Bank also participates in meetings of the Task Force.

about their ability to influence EU institutions. However, at the same time there has been a growing recognition of the EU factor through awareness of the European Parliament elections which provide a regular and direct opportunity to become actively involved in EU affairs. A 2012 report from the European Commission's DG Communication on *Perceptions of the European Parliament in the UK* revealed that although knowledge about the EP's activities in the UK fell slightly below the EU average (26 per cent as opposed to 27 per cent), there had been a noticeable increase in the number people in the UK feeling well informed about EP activities (up from 28 per cent in November 2010 to 39 per cent in November 2011).

A regional breakdown of the UK figures revealed that NI respondents felt less well informed (22 per cent) and not well informed (75 per cent – 72 for the UK as a whole) and reinforces the message made at the start of this paper about dissemination of EU affairs. However, overall NI polled some of the better responses (than UK average) on awareness of key EP facts.<sup>27</sup> For example, 39 per cent in NI were aware that MEPs sat on the basis of their political affinities and not by nationality (35 per cent for the UK); 57 per cent of respondents in NI (and highest awareness in the UK) were aware that MEPs were directly elected (50 per cent for the UK) and 42 per cent (in NI and 36 per cent in the UK) wanted to see the EU play a more active role than it currently does. How do we explain these differences? This strategy is one that requires substantial fieldwork to develop and complete!

## **CONCLUSIONS: ROAD AHEAD AND A NEW SURVEY**

Ahead of an imminent referendum on EU membership this paper set out to examine attitudes towards the EU among the public in NI. This has been a rather neglected

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<sup>27</sup> This report was compiled from a series of Eurobarometer reports from 2007-11.

area and the paper aimed to address the information gap but also to explore how far attitudes in this region converged or diverged with other parts of the UK, but also recognised the difficulties. The issue itself has received scant attention from politicians, aroused little interest from the local media and proved problematic for the executive in terms of its effort to devise a meaningful EU engagement strategy. This paper shows how Northern Ireland public opinion is the least eurosceptical part of the UK and somewhat paradoxically in a region where the political elites are arguably the most eurosceptic or least interested in the EU. Explaining why the public is more disposed towards the EU than the political establishment made for an intriguing research topic. This initial theme setting paper set out to examine public opinion but also to explore how aware the public are of an EU factor and one that is recognised as beneficial. It is this EU factor seems to have translated into higher support for the EU in NI as compared to the UK average. To provide clear evidence the next stage of this research is to conduct a new survey on attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland. This new survey will follow the pattern of a previous 2002 survey to enable comparison and changes in attitudes over time but will also introduce a number of new questions that relate directly to the 'German', 'Roman' and 'Greek' strategies:

*Sample questions:*

Is membership of the EU a good thing or a bad thing?

Has Northern Ireland benefitted from EU membership?

Can you identify the benefits!

Do you recognize the EU flag?

Do you have views on the EU passport?

Has the EU been important to the NI peace process?

How important are the European Parliament elections for you?

Are you intending to vote in 2014?

Did you vote in the last EP elections?

Have you met any of your MEPs?

What do MEPs do?

Have you heard about the Committee of the Regions?

What is the Northern Ireland Task Force

In a future referendum on EU membership – how will you vote?

Do you feel European?

Do you think you can influence ‘Brussels’?

Attitudes towards the euro

At the time of writing the devolved and shared form of government in Northern Ireland is facing real strains and tensions. Recognition of the EU arena and Northern Ireland’s placed within it – may be the only real way of reconciling community frictions for this region’s future!

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