Uncovering the Underlying Causes of the Brexit Referendum Result in Northern Ireland: Members of Legislative Assembly Perspectives

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to examine the determinants of the outcome of the Brexit referendum in Northern Ireland, by administering a closed-ended questionnaire to the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), who serve as representatives of the entire population of Northern Ireland. The findings were consistent with the outcome of the actual 2016 Brexit referendum, which resulted in a vote to remain part of the EU, albeit with a higher percentage point of 66.7%. The primary factors driving the 33.3% votes' decision to exit the EU, as articulated in the survey however, were identified as the cost of EU membership (41.6%), the growth of nationalism sentiment (33.4%), and the perceived superiority of EU laws (25%) respectively, whereas the respondents' stance was not significantly influenced by the freedom of movement factor.

Keywords: Brexit; EU Membership; MLA perspective; Northern Ireland; Referendum Outcome.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The divorce of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) block, known as Brexit, has spilled much ink about the future of the EU and that of the UK. The latter is mainly due to the disproportionate results of the 23 June Referendum among the kingdoms of the UK. While the overall majority in the UK has decided to give up their membership in the union, with a slim majority of 51.9% leave votes against 48.1% remain votes, the results were different in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, 62% of the votes were in favour of remaining part of the block verses only 38% of votes to leave it. In a similar fashion, 55.8% of the votes in Northern Ireland supported preserving their membership in the EU against 44.2% of the votes for breaking their ties with the EU (Electoral Commission, 2022).Hence, Northern Ireland and Scotland, as part of the UK, are to depart from the EU though they are at odds over the decision.

The leave result of the Referendum was not expected and it did take everyone by surprise, including most online pollsters such asYouGov, Bookmakers, SurveyMonkey among others.The discrepancy between polls and the final outcome, however, was due to the high turnout of voters who do not usually vote in general elections,the death of Jo Cox; the British Labour party Member of Parliament, in a heinous act to advance white supremacism just days before the Referendum took place, and the low turnout of young voters that the remain campaigndepended on heavily (YouGov, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Saiidi, 2016;).The question to be asked at this stage is why the Referendum wascalled in the first place.In fact,David Camron pledged to hold a referendum on Europe if his party won an absolute majority on the 2015 general elections, which he did. He campaigned to remain part of the block but he lost the bid this time and eventually he stepped down as Prime Minister and Theresa May succeeded him as the second female to hold office in the history of Britain (France 24, 2019).

The present work will try to explore the reasons behind Northern Ireland's majority vote to remain part of the EU and the factors that energized the minority of the voters' decision to exit the block. A divorce scenario the Northern Ireland constituents did not want to take place in the first place. The latter will be achieved via gauging the opinion of the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) representatives through the means of answering a questionnaire administered by the researchers. Nonetheless, the debate that surrounded campaigning for Leave or stay referendum will be brought to the fore to examine the pretexts used to motivate the leave side. Then the political distribution in Northern Ireland will be dived into. Followed by zeroing in on the referendum results in Northern Ireland and finally analyzing the questionnaire and sharing the results.

1. The Debate Surrounding Brexit Referendum

The official Campaign for the 23 June 2016 Referendum had started ten weeks before D-Day,
with David Camron, PM and leader of the Conservative party, the very person who called the referendum leading the campaign to remain part of the EU. Other active politicians such as; George Osborne, the chancellor of the Ex-Chequer from 2010 to 2016 and a member of the conservative party;GeremyCorbon, leader of the labour party from 2015 to 2016 ; Gordon Brown, former UK Prime Minister and leader of the labour party from 2007 to 2010, sided with the PM. On the other side of the campaign, Boris Johnson, Mayor of London from 2008 to 2016, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (2016 - 2018), and Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party from 2019 to 2022, led the leave campaign. Nigel Farage, Leader of the UK Independence Party from 2006 to 2009 and 2010 to 2016, the party with the one mission, which is withdrawal from the EU, and Leader of the Brexit Party from 2019 to 2021, the party with a stance to terminating the Kingdom's political ties with the EU. Michael Gove, a Conservative Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath since 2005. He had occupied several cabinet positions under three successive PMs. During the years before the referendum through to D-Day, hewas appointed the Secretary of State for Education from May 2010 until July 2014. The Government Chief Whip and Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury(July 2014 - May 2015), Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice from May 2015 until 14 July 2016. Lain Duncan Smith, former leader of the Conservative party (2001-2003) and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the period 2010 to 2016, are also politicians with a Brexit stance (All Ministers …).

According to Moore and Ramsay (2017), the Brexit Campaign was seen as "divisive, antagonistic and hyper-partisan…" by the campaigners and several Media outlets alike (168). According to the same source, the main arguments are, in order of importance; economy, immigration, sovereignty, Dishonesty, and Fear of the establishment respectively (35, 63, 115, 127, 139, 149). Marshal and Drieschova (2018), seem to share the same opinion about the Economy in terms of the cost of EU membership and immigration at the level of the number of immigrants and the fear of a further enlargement of the European Union, whichcould include Turkey. Dustman et al (2017) and Yann et al. (2017) mentioned the raise of nationalism and the decreasing trust in parliamentary institutions, be it national or European and they associated it to the raise of unemployment. The following is a brief account of the areas said to have played a key role in shaping UK voters' decision to favour the divorce from the EU. The questionnaire designed to investigate the stance of the MLAs regarding Brexit will delve into the very same areas mentioned above at a later stage in the present work.

1.1. Free Movement and Brexit

The free movement of persons, goods, capitals and services are at the heart of the fabric
ofthe EU institutions. Any EU state national is automatically a citizen of the European Union. Hence, when lawfully in one of EU countries they are not to be treated differently from citizens of that country in terms of access to employment, working conditions, taxation, housing, education and healthcare among others.The latter did not cause any problem until the 2004 biggest EU enlargement everwas witnessed. Eight former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe, mainly with poor economies, along with Malta and Cyprus had joined the supranational state. The UK did not impose a transitional period, for up to seven year had they decided to do so, before the newly accessed countries fully enjoy the benefits the package of free movement the EU membership offers, including accessing their job market. The easy access to the UK's job market triggered a chain of economic migrants from the newly accessed countries. Substantial numbers of EU immigrants from the 2004 enlargement flooded the UK. In eight months only, the number of EU immigrants in the UK matched the number of the EU immigrants in the UK before the 2004 enlargement. Though the government admitted underestimating the effect of the unconditional access to the UK's job market, curbing their numbers was not possibleas the chain of immigration from within the EU is legal and unstoppable (Vargas-Silva, 2014). According to Balch and Balabanova (2017), the issue of the uncontrolled EU immigration to the UK played a crucial role in shaping voters' decision to favour departing from the supranational state. Menz (2018) holds a similar stance as far as Brexit vote results are concerned.

1.2.Brexit and the Cost of EU Membership

The contributions EU states make towards the budget of the European Union is highly linked to the size of each country's economy. As of 2020, while the UK was still liable for the cost of EU membership, it was the third largest contributor towards the EU budget, with a staggering €17 billion preceded by Germany and France the largest and the second largest contributors at €28 billion and €23.7 Billion respectively during the same period(Duncan 2020). The budget of EU however is spent on administration -running the EU on each country-, preservation and management of natural resources, cohesion for growth and employment - helping poorer countries of Europe, competitiveness for growth and employment - economic growth grants to small businesses, science and research-, along with the international aid activities outside the EU.

The leave campaign leader, Boris Johnson claimed that the EU membership costs the UK £350 million a week. The latter is clearly a misuse of official statistics, as it does not account for the rebate, which is the money the UK gets back from the EU. The aids poorer areas in the UK receive known as public sector receipts are not included either. In 2019, for instance,the net contribution of the UK to the EU budget was £9.4 billion and it received back £4.5 billion back on rebate plus £4.9 billion on public sector receipts. The money the UK gets back on rebate and on public sector receipts matches the EU membership cost to the UK. In other words, what the UK pays towards its EU membership almost equals what it receives back on rebate and services. The latter does not account for any economic benefits the UK gains from being part of a supranational market (Duncan 2021).

1.3. The Sovereignty of the UK's Institutions

In the absence of a codified constitution in the UK, the idea of parliamentary sovereignty or supremacy is brought into play. According to Albert Venn Decey:

(a)Parliament is the supreme law- making body and may enact laws on any subject matter.
(b) No Parliament may be bound by a predecessor or bind a successor.
(c)No person or body – including a court of law – may question the validity of Parliament's enactments. (Barnet, 2013, 113-14)

Back in 1973 when the UK joined the European Communities (The European Economic Community, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Community for Atomic Energy (EURATOM)), which evolved to become the EU we know today.The European Communities had their own constitutional structure as spelled in the treaties. The supremacy of EU laws over any member state's law is clearly emphasized by the European Court of Justice. Hence, all member states have to comply with EU laws with immediate application. Accommodating the EU laws within the UK's domestic laws is part and parcel of their membership to the European Union. While the latter seems to jeopardize the legal role of the UK's parliament, in fact, joining the EU was voluntary and surrendering their sovereign power to EU institutions is binding under European communities Act 1972 (Barnet, 2013, 129-30).

The concerns of Britons about the sovereignty of their parliament is valid and the only way out to gain back their parliament legal authority is ending their EU membership. As of 31 January 2020, the UK officially ceased to be a member state of the European Union and the UK's parliament gained back its legal power. The leave campaigners, especially Nigel Farage stressed giving up the authority of the UK's parliament to EU bureaucrats and claimed that leaving the EU is the equivalent of having their independence. In Farage'sterms, The UK has claimed the sovereignty of its institutions back the day it broke up from the supranational state.

1.4.The Raise of Nationalism

Nationalism could be understood, in plain English, as the priority and superiority of the interests and values of a particular group or nation to those of others. Therefore, the discourse on nationalism in the UK is more complicated due to the multi-faceted nature of the kingdom. Britishness is the façade of the whole nation, but the other side of the coin includes Scottish, welsh, Northern Ireland and English nationalism. Hence, the devolved governments in the UK embodied mainly in the Scottish parliament, welsh parliament and the Northern Irish Assembly are yet separate factions of nationalism at a regional level (Black &Borras, 2021).

The discrepancy of the overall results of Brexit Referendum and the results at regional level are seen as some kind of raise of nationalism. According to Michael Kenny (2020), Brexit supporters are more likely to identify themselves as English, based on the results of the polls that preceded the plebiscite. Besides, Scotland and Northern Ireland people, who are a minority compared to their counterparts in the multi-national state, England, remain steadfast in their opposition to Brexit. The latter was apparent in the dispute of the devolved governments over the returned powers from Brussels in areas of devolved competencies. Kenny also suggests that in the long run, the conflict of interests at a regional level and the centralization of decision making in Westminster may affect the unity of the UK, as no nation could be forced to remain part of the Union against its will(25,26).

The raise of political parties such us UKIP, with the sole objective of detaching the ties of the UK from the EU is yet another sign of adapting a nationalistic approach in the conservative politics in an attempt to absorb the four million nationalist voters of UKIP. In that regard, the referendum was called in 2016, but it was won by a slim margin by the faction of the English nationalist. Black and Borras (2021), attributes the results to the scaremongering campaign of the remainers, rather than highlighting the benefits enjoyed from the EU partnership. Yet again, the result of Northern Ireland people decision to remain part of the EU in the 2016 Referendum illustrates the difference in interests at a regional level, Northern Ireland, and at the a larger scale, the UK, which in turn feeds off Nationalism regionally.

2.Political Parties Distribution in Northern Ireland

The political parties in Northern Ireland are split into three main categories, the Unionist

parties, Namely Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and other smaller parties such as the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). Broadly speaking these partiessupport the continued existence of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom. The Nationalist parties, respectively Sinn Féin and the SDLP, however, favour a united Ireland (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as one nation). The last category is the Cross-community parties, which are, Alliance Party, the Green Party and People Before Profit (PBP), as middle ground parties filling the void the Unionist and Nationalist parties' completely different objectives created, giving sufficient space for cooperation between communities. These parties favour a powe-rsharing government in Northern Ireland.

The following is a brief description of the orientation of the above-mentioned parties:(a). Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), a center-right party that is socially conservative and pro-British. It is the largest party in Northern Ireland and has traditionally been the dominant party in unionism. (b)Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), a center-right party that is pro-British and favors the continued existence of the United Kingdom. (c). Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), a left wing working class party, opposed to sectarianism and seeks to build a society that is inclusive and fair to all its citizens.(d). Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), a unionist party that advocates for the mainstream of Northern Ireland's membership on the United Kingdom, but opposes the Good Friday Agreement and any form of power-sharing with Irish Nationalists, and it supports a tougher stance on law and order issues. (e). Sinn Féin, a left-wing Irish nationalist party that advocates for a united Ireland. It is the second largest party in Northern Ireland and has traditionally been the dominant party in nationalism. (f).Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), a center-left party that is nationalist but also advocates for social justice. (g). Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, a centrist party that promotes cross-community cooperation and favors a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland).

3. Brexit Referendum Detailed Results in Northern Ireland

The majority of Northern Ireland people voted to remain part of the EU. With 55.8% or 440,707 of the cast votes. The Leave voters, however, reached 44.8% or 349,442 accepted cast votes. The Turnout was 62.8%. Out of the eighteen parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland, seven constituencies voted leave, namely Belfast East, East Antrim, Lagan Valley, North Antrim, South Antrim, Strangford and Upper Bann. While the mean of turnout in the leave constituencies is 64.8%, the average of leave votes is 54.31%. While North Antrim is on the top of the list of the leave votes with 62.2% percentage points, South Antrim is on the bottom of the very list with only 50.6% leave votes.

On the other side of the spectrum, however, 11 constituentcies voted remain namely (Belfast North, Belfast South, Belfast West, East Londonderry, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Foyle, Mid Ulster, Newry and Armagh, North Down, South Down, and West Tyrone). The mean of turnout of eligible votes equaled 61,4% in the pro remain constituencies. The cast vote fluctuated between 78.3%, remain votes in Foyle and 50.4% remain votes in Belfast North.

Northern Ireland's clear vote to remain part of the European Union was overridden by the overall UK decision to leave. Unsurprisingly, being part of a union with limited devolved powers does not allow much of room for manoeuvres. In other words, negotiations with Westminster around devolved powers is the utmost that can be done at the actual state. However, setting the UK ties loose might open new perspectives of either independence or union with other parties, the republic of Ireland in particular (EU Referendum Results).

II Methods

A combination of methodsis deemed necessary to answer the questions the present paper is trying to investigate. The qualitative method helped illustrate the debate surrounding the referendum and the way the events unfolded along with the quantitative method which is of fundamental importance to inspect the facts and interpret the statistics of the referendum results. Most importantly to gauge the opinion of the representatives of the Northern Ireland citizens via the channel of the questionnaire arranged by the researchers to this end. The research is exploratory in nature and relies on a primary data collection using a questionnaire with closed-

ended questions administered to a carefully selected population,the MLA's. Ninety (90) Members of Legislative Assembly represent the Northern Irelandpopulace at large. They are distributed over 18 constituencies (Five members from each constituency). The very MLA's are affiliated to one of the nine political parties that do exist in Northern Ireland. The respondents that answered the questionnaire, however, are the present work's sample. Our sample reflects the opinion of 13.33% of the whole population. A Google form questionnaire was electronically sent to the Professional Email addresses of all of the 90 MLAsrepeatedly, three times, with an interval of 7 days between each attempt to make sure a maximum of answers is harvested. The operation extended on the period from 6 June 2020 until 27 June 2020. The questionnaire consists of four main sections respectively (Personal Information, about Brexit, Post Brexit UK union, and EU integrity after Brexit).

III Results and Discussion

Out of the questions our respondents answered in the personal information section, was the inquiry about their political affiliation. The biggest contributors, with 41% of the respondents, were affiliated to the Alliance party. Followed by 25% of the respondents were Democratic Unionist party affiliates and 16.7% Social Democratic and Labour party affiliates. The respondents of Sinn Fein and the DemocraticUnionist Party participation matched in term of percentage points and it was 8.3% out of the participants that answered the questionnaire. Some political parties respondents did not reply to the questionnaire and the latter is due to the way their professional emails are managed. They have a filtering layer that suggests leaving contact details including the address and a phone number and suggesting that they will get back to respondents in their geographical constituencies only. Figure 1 below, illustrates the percentages of participation and spells out the names of the political parties with no participation in the present investigation.
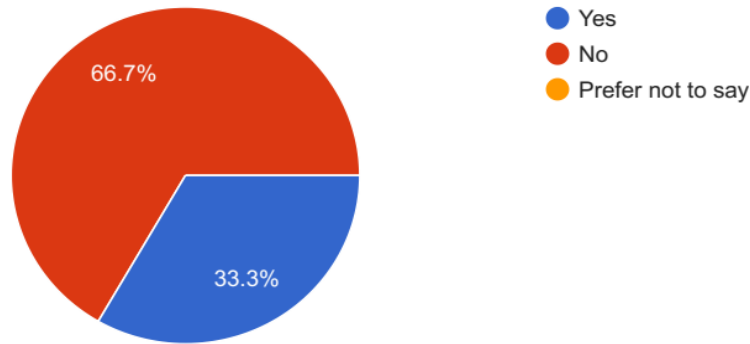
Figure (1): Political affiliation of the respondents. What is your political affiliation?
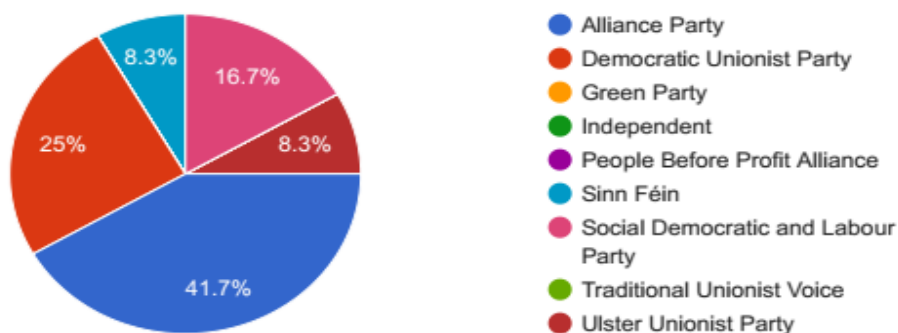
Source: Survey Questions investigating Post Brexit UK Integrity: Northern Ireland (2020).

One key question our respondents answered to help us understand the stance of our participants vis- a- vis Brexit was Do you consider yourself a Brexiter? 66.7% of the respondents affirmed that they wanted to remain part of the UK. Whereas 33.3% of the respondents affirmed that they supported the opinion of departing from the union. It was emphasized in the questionnaire that the MLA's should share the opinion that reflects that of the majority of their constituents. It is interesting to find out that the results shared in the questionnaire led to the same result of the actual referendum, which is remaining part of the block, with some percentage points of difference, 55.8% voted for remaining part of the block in the official referendum against 66.7% in the present questionnaire. Though the overall result is the same, the difference in percentage points could be due to the low participation in answering the questionnaire and the absence of the opinion of some political parties.

Figure (2): Do you consider yourself a Brexiter

Source: Survey Questions investigating Post Brexit UK Integrity: Northern Ireland (2020).

Digging deeper into the reasons behind the stance of the respondents, the most brought to the fore reasons to depart from the EU in the political debate and on media were investigated. The first statement was: The rise of nationalism and populist parties influenced the result of the 23 June 2016 Brexit referendum. While 33.3 % of the respondents agreed with the statement and 16.7% strongly agreed, hence, 50% of the respondents believe that nationalism is a great influencer to the result. Only 16.7.% of the respondents disagreed and equal percentage share strongly disagreed with the statement to be left with 16.7% neutral respondents. The outcome does seem to be decisive somehow, the raise of nationalism is one of the factors that influenced the referendum outcome and at the same time, it is a key contributor to persuade the respondents to decide to remain part of the EU and not the other way around. In accordance with the overall result of the present investigation, the raise of nationalism did put the respondent off voting for departing from the supranational state.

Figure(3): The rise of Nationalist and populist parties influenced the results of 23 June 2016 Brexit Referendum.
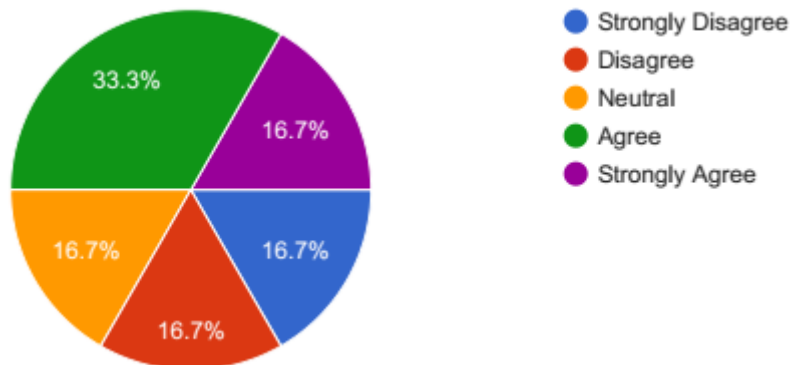
Source: Survey Questions investigating Post Brexit UK Integrity: Northern Ireland (2020).

Scrutinizing the free movement of people as a factor that lead to the decision, reflected in the present investigation, to remain part of the block, however, yielded a 50% of the respondents agree that the free movement of people, in other words the uncontrolled immigration from the EU led to the decision they made. Moreover, 25% of the respondents strongly agreed on the fact they hold their stance because of the free movement in people. Not to forget that the remaining 25% of the respondents which chose to be neutral. Reading the graph while considering the overall result of the present questionnaire and that of the results of the actual referendum alike, it is understood that the free movement is not a strong enough cause considered for departing from the block.
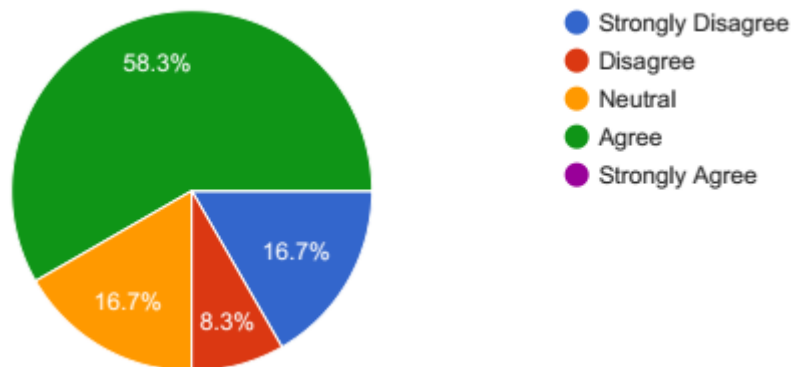
Figure (4): You hold your stance on Brexit because of the free movement of people.
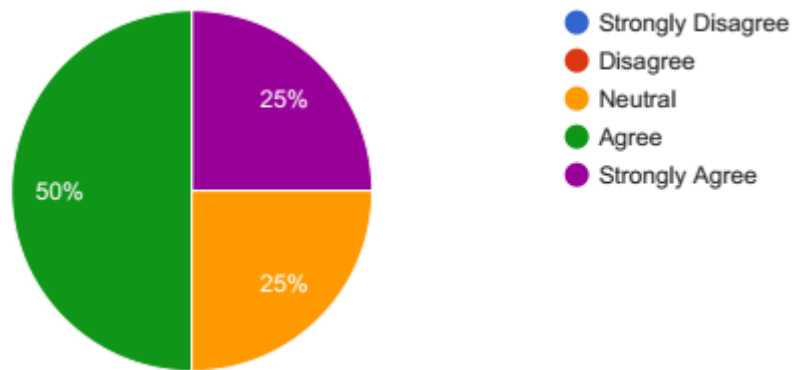
Source: Survey Questions investigating Post Brexit UK Integrity: Northern Ireland (2020).

Whether the sovereignty of UK institutions was behind the stance of our respondents on Brexit was investigated asking aboutthe supremacy of EU laws over the majority of UK domestic laws. 58.3% of the respondents agreed that they hold their stance on Brexit because EU laws jeopardize local laws. 16.7% of the respondents were neutral and 16.7% of the respondents strongly disagree in addition to another 8.3% of the respondents who disagree. Putting the results in perspective, it is evident that the sovereignty of EU laws, with 25% of the respondents, is the second factor for deciding to depart from the supranational state after the raise of nationalism. Both factors seem to be related somehow though.

Figure (5): You hold your stance on Brexit because of the supremacy of EU laws over the majority of UK domestic laws.
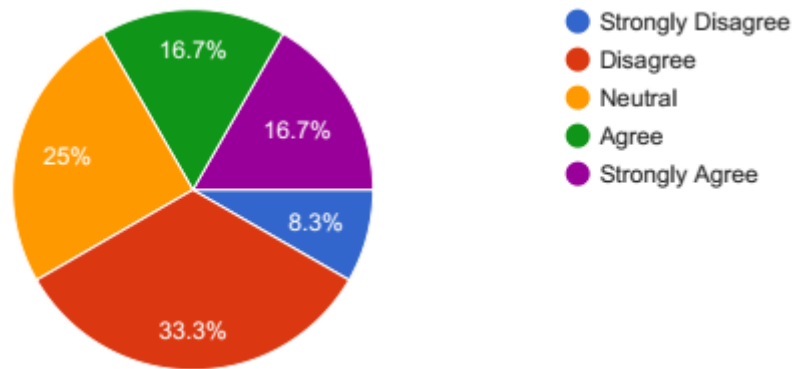

Source: Survey Questions investigating Post Brexit UK Integrity: Northern Ireland (2020).

The last question our respondents were asked was whether they hold their stance on Brexit because of the cost of EU membership. 25% of the respondents are neutral. 16.7% of the participants agreed and a similar percentage of respondents strongly agreed. In the other side of the equation, 33.3% of the respondents disagreed and 8.3% strongly disagreed. Considering the overall results of the questionnaire, it is evident that the cost of EU membership is the greatest concern of the respondents out of all the listed causes in the present work. In order of influence of decision making, The cost of EU membership comes first, followed by the raise of nationalism and the third most problematic issue is the sovereignty of EU laws over the majority of UK laws.
The uncontrolled Immigration from the EU, however, did not cause a problem at all from the point of view of the respondents.

Figure (6): You hold your stance on Brexit because of the cost of EU membership

Source: Survey Questions investigating Post Brexit UK Integrity: Northern Ireland(2020).

In an attempt to analyse the stance of the Members of the Legislative Assembly on the four most talked about areasin the debate surrounding the campaigns of the 2016 Brexit Referendum,a questionnaire was designed to this end. These areas werethe cost of EU membership, the supremacy of EU laws over local laws, the free movement of people, and the rise of nationalism. Examining the results of the very questionnaire in light of the overall majority of the respondents, 66.7%,did not consider themselves Brexiters. In other words, the opinion of the constituents they represent is to remain part of the block. These results are in line with the results of the actual referendum where 55.8% of the voters opted for preserving their ties with the European Union. Based on the stance of the respondents, the disagree and strongly disagree icons determine the reasons for deciding to depart from the block, however, strongly agree and agree and even neutral determine the reasons they wanted to remain part of the EU. Based on the scale used, we can deduce that the cost of EU membership is the reason number one for leaving the union, with 41.6% of the respondents share this opinion. The rise of nationalism comes second with 33.4% of the respondents classifying it as one of the underlying causes for being a Brexiter. The supremacy of the EU laws comes last with only 25% of the respondents being Brexiters. It is worth mentioning here that the supremacy of EU laws is another facet of nationalism.

IV Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate the factors that influenced the outcome of the Brexit referendum in Northern Ireland by gathering the perspectives of the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). The results of the study were consistent with the outcome of the actual 2016 referendum, which resulted in a vote to leave the EU with 55.8% wanting to remain and 44.2% wanting to leave. In our research, the percentage of people wanting to leave the EU was even higher with 66.7%. The latter could possibly be due to the low participation in the survey and the absence of the opinion of certain political parties. The primary drivers of this decision were identified as the cost of EU membership (41.6%), the rise of nationalist sentiment (33.4%), and the perceived superiority of EU laws (25%). While the rise of nationalism and the precedence of EU laws seem to be two sides of the same coin, the uncontrolled free movement of people factor did not play a significant role in shaping the opinion of the MLA's who participated in the investigation.

These findings provide valuable insights into the decision-making process of voters in Northern Ireland and contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that shaped the outcome of the Brexit referendum in the region. It is important to note that even though Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, the overall UK decision to leave was carried out as of the 31 January 2020 and the region benefitted from a special protocol "The NI protocol" that there would be no hard boarded between NI and the Republic of Ireland among others.

This research further confirms the complexity of the decision-making process and the multiple factors that have contributed to the Brexit outcome in Northern Ireland.Further researches could be conducted to assess the impact of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement, on Northern Ireland economy, Political stability, and its relationship with the UK and the EU.

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