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Sea of Opinions: Elite Cueing, Deep-Rooted Beliefs and Differentiated Integration in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This research investigated the role of elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs as causal drivers of public opinion on differentiated integration (DI) in Northern Ireland (NI). As a result of Brexit NI was forced to de-integrate from the European Union (EU). However, as a result of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), they had to maintain connections with the EU through policies, so as to maintain peace post the conflict that occurred. Brexit raised serious issues within NI, especially in relation to the border on the island of Ireland. Due to this, policies in relation to DI have become more salient to those living in NI. Previous studies on the topic of DI have analysed public opinion on DI but have not attempted to analyse what drives it. This study aims to begin to fill that research gap through analysing how public opinion is shaped by these factors on tangible DI policies such as the Irish Sea border (ISB) and VAT and regulatory checks. Furthermore, this research aims to unpack the complex causal mechanisms that exist within the concepts of elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs. Interviews were conducted with members of the public in order to unpack these mechanisms and understand them better as drivers. Results show that mechanisms such as identity, community, collective memories and historical context interplay to engrain deep-rooted beliefs therefore, making them influential drivers of public opinion on these topics.

Keywords: Differentiated integration, elite-cueing, deep-rooted beliefs, public opinion, Northern Ireland, Europe

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List of Abbreviations

DI	Differentiated Integration
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EU	European Union
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
ISB	Irish Sea Border
MS	Member states
NI	Northern Ireland
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SF	Sinn Féin

1. Introduction

On June 23, 2016, Britain voted to leave the European Union (52% leave, 48% remain). The referendum was highly controversial, stemming from growing Euroscepticism within the UK Conservative Party, which threatened to split the party into factions (Dorey, 2021; Glenny, 2013). Prime Minister David Cameron had sworn to resign if the Leave vote won, confident in the Remain campaign. He was subsequently replaced by Theresa May, tasked with securing an optimal exit deal with the EU. This divisive campaign led to two snap elections in 2017 and 2019 and resulted in the UK leaving the EU on January 31, 2020, without a deal. Throughout this process, a recurring question posed by Brussels officials and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) government was how Northern Ireland (NI) would be handled (BBC News, 2016a; BBC News, 2016b). Questions included how to avoid a hard border on the island and maintain an open border while leaving the single market. This led to broader questions on EU integration, such as managing varying levels of integration among its MS.

The aftermath of Brexit has placed NI within the broader debate on Differentiated Integration (DI) (European Parliament, 2017). NI remains connected to the EU, and its citizens with Irish passports enjoy EU benefits. Many NI citizens without ideological ties to the ROI have applied for passports, as allowed under the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), for ease of travel (Colfer & Diamond, 2022). Strong trade relationships remain between NI and the EU. Brussels has made clear that if Ireland reunifies, NI will be re-included in the EU (Leahy, 2017). Brexit has created a complex situation for NI citizens, prompting them to consider this potential future and issues like the border. The border issue became a dominant feature of Brexit deal conversations. Customs controls between Britain and NI had to be reintroduced, required by the EU to ensure unity on the island of Ireland as per the GFA (Baccini, 2024).

In the broader DI debate, literature on public opinion has grown. Scholars analyse public comprehension of DI as a concept and understanding of its resulting policies (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2019; Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). For NI, these policies include access to goods, regulatory checks, VAT, and the Irish Sea Border (ISB). Research is developing to assess what drives public opinion on DI (Moland, 2023; Telle et al., 2022). Scholars investigate the factors people consider when forming opinions, their interrelations, and the role of elites as causal

mechanisms driving public opinion (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). They also examine how deep-rooted beliefs influence opinions. NI's unique ideological divides (Catholics vs. Protestants, Unionists vs. Nationalists) and the role of elites make it a compelling case to study these factors. The recency of Brexit and the complex issues it has raised, such as the ISB, add to the interest. NI provides a unique case for analysing how these factors play out.

This intricate situation has led NI citizens to think deeply about their potential future and the multifaceted issues surrounding Brexit. The unique deep-rooted ideological divides in NI (Catholics vs. Protestants, Unionists vs. Nationalists) alongside the role elites play in the region's society provides a highly interesting case to study these factors. The recency of Brexit and the complex issues it has driven up, such as the ISB, make NI an extremely intriguing case for analysing how these factors play out in an incredibly unique way. The evolving research and public opinion on DI will continue to shape the future of NI and its relationship with both the UK and the EU.

I will begin by examining the existing literature on DI and public opinion. Then, I will unpack the concepts of elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs and the causal mechanisms within these concepts. The methodology will explain how interviews were used to measure public opinion. In the analysis I will examine these results and how they align with the research question. Finally, I will discuss the results and limitations of this study before concluding and providing future recommendations.

1.2 Research Problem

Understanding public opinion is crucial for analysing DI in NI. This goes beyond DI, touching on a larger debate about the fundamental drivers of public opinion. Recent differentiation in NI since Brexit has made it a prime location for research on DI. Existing literature has focused on public opinion towards the EU in NI (Clements, 2010) and how Brexit affected NI's role in Europe and the EU (O'Brennan, 2023). NI's unique position, sharing a border with one of the most pro-EU countries in Europe and having had a positive stance on the EU until Brexit (Jarrett, 2020), combined with its complex historical context of colonialism and rebellion, makes it ideal for analysing deep-rooted beliefs.

Literature on DI has investigated certain causal drivers of public opinion across Europe, such as the levels of DI in a country and citizens' experiences with opt-outs from EU policies

(Winzen & Schimmelfennig, 2023), and preferences for “multi-speed” Europe versus “opt-out Europe” (De Blok & De Vries, 2022). Multi-speed Europe refers to a process in which member states (MS) integrates at different levels and speeds, such as some European MS not being a part of the Schengen Zone. On the other hand, opt-outs are legal provisions that allow a member state to not engage with a specific EU policy such as Denmark opting out of the Eurozone. However, there is a specific gap in examining public opinion towards DI in NI, particularly the drivers of this opinion. While studies have explored various drivers of public opinion on DI in Europe, the focus on elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs in NI remains underexplored.

Focusing on these two drivers—elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs— is particularly important as they represent influences on public opinion that are significant, yet often entangled. These drivers are challenging to disentangle due to their intertwined nature, but doing so is crucial. Understanding these specific drivers can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms of public opinion formation in NI and contribute to broader debates on the causal mechanisms driving public opinion dynamics.

Therefore, the goals of this research are twofold: firstly, to assess the drivers of public opinion on DI in NI; and secondly, to contribute to the literature on how elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs drive public opinion on complex policies like DI. This research aims to answer the following question:

To what extent do elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs drive public opinion on differentiated integration in Northern Ireland?

1.3 Academic Relevance

The academic relevance of this research question relies on the unexplored territory of factors such as elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs in driving public opinion on DI (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). Previously, in exploring this area there has been a focus on the level at which a country’s integration is differentiated and how that experience for citizens can drive public opinion on the topic of DI itself. Researchers have examined how different speeds or levels of DI drive the opinions of the public on the topic and how DI itself can manifest into different forms such as opt-outs, or multi-speed. Recent developments in the literature have examined the effects of DI on efficiency and legitimacy in the EU in order to examine, amongst other questions, how citizens

from different member and non-MS evaluate different types of DI (Schimmelfennig et al., 2022). It was found that whilst excluding states with capacity deficits can increase efficiency, it may lower legitimacy. However, including those states in order to increase legitimacy will negatively affect efficiency. Further literature on the topic has examined public opinion on DI as it relates to nationalism and national autonomy; however, again the gap in relation to elite cueing is mentioned again (Moland, 2023). To quote Schimmelfennig et al., (2022) when discussing the research gaps that persist in the topic of DI, "...we know less about its institutional and public opinion effects."

1.4 Societal Relevance

This research problem has a societal relevance. As the opinion of citizens towards the EU has become more salient with regards to policy-making at the EU-level (Scholz, 2021), it becomes more important to gauge the opinions of the citizens on integral aspects of the EU, such as DI. Understanding how specific factors, such as political leadership, media influence, and social identity, drive citizens to form opinions on EU policy is extremely beneficial for EU officials, as it can inform more effective and targeted policy-making decisions that better address the concerns and preferences of the public. This is because of the growing value that is being placed on the role of citizens in policy at EU-level (De Luca, 2023). Furthermore, recognising the drivers behind public opinion on DI in a specific region can help to shape relations between the EU and NI in the future.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Differentiated Integration

DI refers to the process by which MS of the EU participate in common policies and levels of integration at different levels or speeds. Not all MS are ready or prepared to integrate at the same level or time. DI allows for variations in participation, accommodating diverse political, economic, and social contexts within the EU. The concept of DI was introduced in the mid-1990s as a subject of study within European studies. Schimmelfennig (2019) defines European integration as differentiated if "EU rules and policies are not legally valid in all member states – or not exclusively valid in member states." However, there has been difficulty in agreeing on a common definition of DI (Leruth et al., 2019). The idea of a 'multi-speed' Europe, where MS integrate at

different speeds, was first conceptualised in 1975 by Leo Tindemans, the Prime Minister of Belgium at the time. The Single European Act mentioned derogations, allowing MS to deviate from obligations, which reflects early attempts at differentiation.

Leruth et al., (2019) note the reasons for the emergence of DI as a study in the mid-1990s. Examples include exceptions given to the UK and Denmark in the Maastricht Treaty and the enhanced cooperation in the Treaty of Amsterdam, which constitutionalized mechanisms of differentiation. These measures allow for more flexibility and variability in integration. Public opinion towards integration shifted post-Maastricht Treaty from a “permissive consensus” to a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). As Europe has expanded, there has been growing variation in policies adopted by MS, with increasing “opt-outs, exemptions and exclusions” from various EU policies (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). Initially, theories of integration proposed uniform integration of MS into the EU. However, further research established varying categories of integration, leading to the development of DI (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2019).

2.2 Public Opinion and Differentiated Integration

Understanding what influences the public is crucial for ensuring their support for governmental decisions (Bullock, 2011; Odugbemi, 2008; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020). Post-functionalist scholars argue that public opinion should be included in conversations about European integration as part of the “politicisation process,” making European issues salient in national politics (Di Mauro & Memoli, 2021).

Eurobarometer polls have examined public opinions on DI policies since 2009. Schimmelfennig & Winzen (2023) argue that DI is a fundamental aspect of the EU, making it important to gauge public opinion. Public opinion has been mobilised at the EU decision-making level through direct involvement or electoral considerations (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). Ignoring public sentiment risks harming negotiations on opt-outs, exemptions, and exclusions, potentially leading to fragmentation (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). Further study on potential drivers of DI can advance existing literature on the topic.

Limited research exists on what drives support for DI. De Blok & De Vries (2022) analyse public opinion regarding opt-outs and a multi-speed Europe. Their findings suggest that public opinion towards DI is highly reliant on citizens’ ideological preferences. Left-right ideology

heavily influences preferences regarding DI methods. Leuffen et al., (2020) note that general support for DI is linked to liberal tendencies. Right-leaning citizens with negative opinions of the EU are less supportive of a multi-speed Europe than left-leaning citizens critical of the EU. Right-wing citizens with positive EU opinions consider opt-outs a credible option. Variations in opinion on DI are greater among right-wing Eurosceptics.

Schimmelfennig et al., (2022) found that ordinary people use ideological criteria linked to EU support when forming opinions about DI. Citizens measure their beliefs based on their existing EU support. Leuffen et al., (2020) identify ideological dispositions as an important factor. Those favouring the EU support a multi-speed form of DI to avoid gridlock, while those less in favour prioritise national sovereignty and support an opt-out system.

These findings suggest that DI means different things to different people and might deepen existing divisions. Political leanings and EU opinions are key factors, but other drivers of public opinion on DI remain unclear. Regional context also influences opinions on DI. Eastern MS, for example, opted out of redistributing asylum seekers and received “flexible solidarity” from the EU (Micinski, 2024). This opt-out likely stemmed from ideological reasons identified by De Blok and De Vries (2022) regarding DI forms supported by citizens. Public opinion on DI varies country-to-country, as seen in Eastern vs. Southern Europe. National identity plays an important role in DI support (Moland, 2023). Perceived threats to national identity lead to less support for DI (Leuffen et al., 2020). Both country of residence and personal EU support impact opinions on DI (Schimmelfennig et al., 2022; Moland, 2023).

Further research is needed on factors leading to the formation of these opinions. Framing DI as negatively impacting national sovereignty reduces public support (Moland, 2023). Elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs are potential driving factors of DI requiring more research (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023). Clear and understandable communication is essential for understanding public opinion on DI (Leuffen et al., 2020). The current methods of analysis lack the ability to engage extensively on the topic, making it difficult to understand public feelings about aspects of DI. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving public opinion on DI is essential.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Elite Cueing

When engaging in politics and forming opinions, it is unrealistic to expect the average citizen to be well-informed on all policies. Therefore, citizens will rely on experts in these fields as a resource-saving device when forming their opinions (Downs, 1957; Gilens & Murakawa, 2002; Jones & Brewer, 2020; Popkin, 1991). This is called elite-cueing. There is an incentive for citizens to form opinions as it saves time and the people they turn to are knowledgeable in their respective fields. Informational shortcuts such as elite cueing however, do not ensure that the public will be well-informed on the reasoning for their opinion (Bullock, 2011; Gilens & Murakawa, 2002). On top of this, Gilens and Murakawa (2002) find the motivations behind citizens decision-making are multi-fold. They don't tend to seek the most factually-based decision, but instead, tend to engage with ideologies that already support their preferences (König, 2022).

3.1.1 Complexity

Scholars find that when citizens engage with complex areas of policy, such as socio-economics, they are more likely to look to elites for guidance (Carmines & Stimson, 1980 in Gilens & Murakawa, 2022). This complexity creates a dependency on experts, allowing elites to shape public opinion by emphasising certain aspects of the issue (García-Sánchez et al., 2022). When issues are complex, elite cueing becomes a crucial mechanism for opinion formation. For example, in NI, citizens rely on political leaders and media figures to interpret socio-economic policies as the subject matter is technical and beyond most citizens' direct experience (Carmines & Stimson, 1980 in Gilens & Murakawa, 2022; García-Sánchez et al., 2022; O'Callaghan, 2018). This mechanism shows that as the complexity of an issue increases, so does the public's reliance on elite cueing, underscoring the significant role elites play in opinion formation. However, when issues are more personal, and therefore less complex to citizens, they tend to rely on their own experiences and beliefs when forming their opinions (Boswell, 2021).

3.1.2 Salience

Public opinion is influenced by the salience of issues (Ray 2003 in Steenbergen et al., 2007) . Low-salience issues, like some aspects of DI, see greater reliance on elite cues because the public is less

engaged (Gilens & Murakawa, 2002). When an issue's salience rises, such as during significant events like EU enlargement, public opinion becomes more bottom-up. This means that political parties will tailor their policies for civilians, reflecting increased engagement (Economides et al., 2023; Telle et al., 2022). This dynamic shows that elite cueing's effectiveness is conditional on issue salience, with low-salience issues more heavily shaped by how elites manage to frame them. Telle et al., (2022) further found that DI remains an issue of low salience for citizens. This indicates that European citizens are likely to seek out the opinions of elites when forming preferences related to DI. One would therefore expect citizens to seek out elites, unless the topic was one of high salience for them (Moniz & Wlezien, 2020). This dynamic indicates that elite cueing's effectiveness is contingent on the perceived importance of the issue, with low-salience issues being more susceptible to elite influence.

3.1.3 Politicians

Elite persuasion theory posits that citizens use heuristics from politicians to process political information (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023). In NI, where political identities are deeply entrenched, elite cueing is expected to be effective (O'Callaghan, 2018). Politicians' rhetoric has always been a vital political tool and was seen as an important means of engaging in political issues throughout the NI conflict and in recent years (Colbourne, 2023). Citizens often align their opinions with heuristics and rhetoric from preferred leaders, despite low levels of trust in politicians (Breen, 2023). Framing political issues through ideology is a tool possibly used in NI in order to influence public opinion (Edwards et al., 2011). However, this relationship is complex; while political elites can shape opinions, the effectiveness depends on the public's identification with the party's ideology (Connolly, 1990; O'Callaghan, 2018). Thus, elite cueing in NI operates within a framework of political identity and trust, highlighting the nuanced interaction between these factors.

3.1.4 Trust

Trust is crucial for elite cueing. In NI, political instability post-Brexit has led to low trust in government (Burke, 2017; Devine, 2024; NISRA, 2017; ONS, 2024). Low levels of trust in political institutions significantly reduce the public's willingness to follow elite cues (KCL, 2023). This then shifts the reliance to community and social circles (Devine, 2024; Kertzer, 2017). However, a strong attachment to political identities prevails. This suggests that even in a low-trust

environment, clear ideological distinctions presented by elites, could guide public opinion (Collins et al., 2021; van Elsas & Fiselier, 2023)

3.1.5 Media

Media framing theory argues that how issues are presented by the media affects public perception (de Vreese, 2005; Miu, 2022). In NI, the media has historically played a significant role in documenting conflict, fostering a level of trust that enhances its framing power (Gilens & Murakawa, 2002; Miu, 2022). This trust contrasts with the distrust in political elites, allowing media frames to more effectively influence public opinion. Certain media outlets, such as BBC, are considered unbiased (Barnier & Morrow, 2014). Thus, one may expect the media in NI is an important tool for shaping public views. However, it is important to note that these media outlets are influenced by community affiliations, political pressures, and the complexity of the conflict (Cosstick, 2018; Rodríguez-Davis, 2023). Therefore their ability to shape public views in NI may be limited by existing political and social divisions (Barnier & Morrow, 2014).

Through an in depth-analysis of the causal mechanisms of elite cueing and how they manifest in NI and based on the existing literature the first hypothesis can be formed:

H1: Members of the public in Northern Ireland turn to elites when seeking information on policies related to DI and are therefore influenced through the causal mechanisms of elite cueing.

3.2 Deep-Rooted Beliefs

Understanding citizens' preferences involves examining deep-rooted beliefs such identity, community, collective memory and history. Early scholars like Feldman (1988) further highlight the significant role deep-rooted beliefs play in decision-making. Feldman's work, though specific to American society, is transferable to Europe through examining the link between deep-rooted beliefs and public opinion. Hooghes & Marks (2005) examined how deep-rooted political beliefs influence European citizens' public opinion. Brandt & Slegers (2021) further argued that beliefs are simply interconnected networks of connected attitudes and identities that intertwine to inform political opinions. One can then argue that evaluations of political topics are deeply intertwined with one's individual beliefs (Perez Santangelo & Solovey, 2023). NI's conflict was rooted in religion, identity, and political ideologies resulting in the creation of deep-rooted beliefs. Post-

GFA, NI still faces issues typical of post-conflict societies, with ongoing separation between communities (World101, 2023). Attempts at reintegration have progressed, but conflation between religious, political, and national identities persists highlighting the powerful role deep-rooted beliefs play in NI to this day (Muldoon et al., 2006).

3.2.1 Community

Theories of social influence and opinion formation highlight the role of community in shaping beliefs. Individuals tend to rely on their social groups to inform their decision-making, especially in politically charged environments (Cabrera et al., 2021; Moussaïd et al., 2013). Goeke-Morey et al., (2015) note that strong community ties mean that social groups heavily influence individual opinions in NI. These communities share a historical and cultural context that continually reinforces deep-rooted beliefs (McManus & Hayward, 2021). For example, community gatherings and local events provide platforms for discussing and solidifying collective memories and shared identities (Goeke-Morey et al., 2015). This communal reinforcement ensures individual opinions align with the broader community's beliefs, making them resistant to change. The influence of community is a significant factor in developing deep-rooted beliefs as these social structures provide a stable foundation for maintaining views over time. Strong in-group identities, limited cross-community interaction, and the continued influence of community leaders and paramilitary groups contribute to the persistence of deep-rooted beliefs in NI.

3.2.2 Identity

Identity theory posits that an individual's self-concept is largely derived from their group affiliations, such as religion, ethnicity, and political orientation (McLeod, 2023; Ohlagaray, 2020). In NI, these affiliations are deeply intertwined, influencing various aspects of life and opinion formation. Being part of a Protestant or Catholic community often implies a set of political beliefs aligned with Unionist or Nationalist identities (Allen, 2024). This interconnection means that opinions on political issues are deeply rooted in identity, making them resistant to change (Kunze, 2015). The conflict and subsequent peace process in NI have further solidified these identities, with political opinions often reflecting historical loyalties and grievances. White (2014) notes that beliefs that are based in identity identity-based beliefs are transmitted across generations, reinforcing deep-rooted political and social divides. This intergenerational transmission underscores the resilience of these beliefs as they are deeply embedded in the social and cultural

fabric of NI. Through this, as people in the community grow up and begin to develop their opinions they are constantly being influenced by identity.

3.2.3 Collective Memory

Collective memory theory suggests that societal memories of historical events significantly shape current opinions and beliefs. In NI, the collective memory of the Troubles and the conflict's legacy continues to influence political opinions. Traditions, commemorations, and historical narratives play a crucial role in maintaining these memories (Boschi et al., 2020). Annual marches and celebrations, for instance, serve as reminders of past events, reinforcing collective memories. These memories create a strong foundation for deep-rooted beliefs, as they are tied to significant historical experiences. The emotional and historical weight of these memories, due to the conflict that occurred, makes them powerful tools for shaping current political opinions (Lambert et al., 2009). Thus, collective memory in NI contributes to the persistence of narratives that influence how new information is perceived and integrated into existing belief systems. Deep-rooted beliefs are strongly held and difficult to change in the same way that collective memories from times of conflict are. These memories serve as a lens through which current political issues are viewed, often reinforcing established viewpoints.

3.2.4 Historical Context

The political landscape of NI is heavily influenced by its historical context, marked by deep divisions between Catholics and Protestants, and Unionists and Nationalists (Carroll, 2023; Nagle, 2022). These historical divisions have created lasting political and social divides, shaping current political dynamics. Support for extreme parties like Sinn Féin (SF) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) often reflects these historical loyalties. Tilley & Evans (2010) identify how the close familial and historical ties made to extreme political parties mean that young people have already formed an attachment to the party by the time they reach voting age. This historical continuity makes political beliefs deeply rooted and resistant to change. For instance, the prolonged violence and political turmoil in NI have left a lasting impact on the collective memory and identity of its people, further entrenching their political beliefs (Psaltis et al., 2017). The complex interplay of history, identity, and community in NI means that understanding current political opinions requires a nuanced appreciation of these deep-rooted historical influences. Thus, the historical context is

crucial in explaining the persistence and nature of political beliefs in NI, highlighting the enduring impact of past events on present-day political attitudes.

Through identifying the manner in which deep-rooted beliefs manifests itself in NI and analysing the current literature on the topic, the second hypothesis can be formed:

H2: Members of the public in Northern Ireland rely on their pre-existing deep-rooted beliefs that are shaped by causal mechanisms, when developing opinions on DI

4. Methodology

4.1 Justification

Interviews were selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of citizens on DI policies. Unlike surveys, which collect quantifiable and generalisable data but often miss the depth of individual experiences, interviews allow for detailed exploration of complex topics.

Previous studies (Heermann & Leuffen, 2023; Stahl, 2021; Winzen & Schimmelfennig, 2023) have predominantly used surveys, leaving a gap for research that captures the nuanced opinions of the public. Interviews facilitate a deeper understanding by allowing participants to elaborate on their thoughts, thus enabling the researcher to probe further into their responses. Similarly, the interviews ensured that participants were given an open space in which to communicate how and what they believe (Knott et al., 2022). Additionally, the aim of this research was to allow for a thorough understanding of how certain complex factors interplay to influence public opinion, which is best suited to qualitative interviews due to its complex and explanatory nature (Babbie, 2015). This method is therefore particularly useful for unpacking complex factors that influence public opinion, which surveys may not adequately capture. Therefore, engaging in a qualitative approach through semi-structured in-depth interviews was the optimal research process (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2022). Interviews provide a platform for participants to communicate openly, allowing the researcher to explore the interplay of various factors driving public opinion. This method is optimal for understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of public sentiment on DI, as it enables comprehensive discussions that are not restricted by the structured format of surveys (Cresswell & Creswell, 2022).

As most of the previous research analysis has been carried out through survey methods, a gap existed with regard to understanding public opinion on a deeper level. On top of that, face-to-face interaction with the participants meant that the researcher could extract more information from the participants and allowed for more precise and all-encompassing questioning (Indeed Editorial, n.d.).

4.2 Research Design

Ten interviews were conducted for this study. Through questioning citizens of NI as to their opinions related to current DI policies, alongside elements that may influence these opinions, the aim was to discover how, or if, certain factors (elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs) drive their opinions on DI. In order to ensure an open dialogue and to allow for all possible factors to be covered, including those that may be unknown to the researcher, a semi-structured style was chosen. The interview was however guided by topics and questions (Table 1) that were created by the researcher based on key theories. This allowed the researcher to operationalise the key concepts determined by the theories that were analysed (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2022).

As the concepts and theories that are used in this research are quite complex and are out of the reach of the average citizen, questions had to be structured carefully in order to establish the role of the independent variables on the dependent variable. To begin, participants were first asked about their awareness of the links of certain parties to the topics at hand. As DI is a concept that the average citizen may not be aware of, specific policies of DI were chosen to act as representation for the concept itself. These policies were the Irish Sea border (ISB) and the introduction of new regulatory checks and VAT. The ISB policy was chosen as its day-to-day impact on citizens makes it a tangible policy. Similarly it was the alternative to the controversial hard border making it salient to the public. Finally, its connection to the hard border means it touches on the concepts of identity and community. The changes in VAT and regulatory checks was chosen as it demonstrates the practical application of DI principles in customs, and regulatory alignment, which could make the abstract concept more tangible for participants. The questions were then linked to the theories of elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs in order to unpack and untangle the two concepts.

Ensuring that the causal mechanisms could be unpacked beyond simply identifying variables was integral to the research question. Therefore, it was important to craft questions that could explore the manner in which these mechanisms interact in order to drive public opinion. For

example, it was not only important to identify whether or not citizens were aware of the opinions of elites on the policies. It was equally important to examine how their identity, community and collective memory informed their opinion. Through examining how these variables (elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs) interact, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the causal mechanisms at work.

Participants in this study were identified using purposive sampling. This involves intentionally selecting participants based on demographics such as age, level of understanding of the topic and area in which they live in order to ensure a wide range of participants (Table 2). Characteristics such as age, gender, political affiliation, and level of political engagement and interest were considered to capture a broad range of perspectives. Interviewees were found through the researcher contacting people from NI and asking to be put in touch with members of the public from the varied backgrounds. The researcher aimed to engage in maximum variation by sampling participants that have a variety of characteristics of interest to the researcher. This allows researchers to maximise the diversity of information relevant to the RQ. However, issues arose with finding Unionists willing to engage with the study. While the participants will remain anonymous, the relevant demographic and contextual information of the interviewees will be provided in Table 2 to aid in interpreting the findings.

Table 1: Operationalisation of Concepts

Variable	Indicators
Public Opinion on DI	How often do you find yourself discussing or thinking about NI's role in the EU, especially in terms of economic and political issues?
Public Opinion on DI	From your perspective, what are the most pressing issues facing NI today regarding its relationship with the EU?
Elite Cueing (Independent Variable)	To what extent are you aware of the positions of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) on the border in the Irish Sea? - Has this influenced your perspective on this issue? - Having discussed the DUP's stance on the border, how does Sinn Fein's position compare? - How does it compare in terms of priorities and proposed solutions?
Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variable)	How do these stances on the Irish Sea border influence your personal or community life? - Would you consider this to be an issue of importance to you? - If not, why not? - When new policies are introduced regarding the Irish Sea border, what factors do you consider when forming your opinion about them?
Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variable)	What were your initial thoughts on the Brexit vote and its implications for Northern Ireland? - Can you describe another time when a political decision about the EU made a noticeable impact on your community or daily life?
Elite Cueing (Independent Variable)	Could you explain how familiar you are with the DUP's policies on the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the UK, as well as between NI and the EU? - Are they any key elements to these policies - How does the stance of Sinn Fein on the movement of goods between NI and the UK compare to that of the DUP's? Between NI and the EU?
Elite Cueing and Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variables)	What are your thoughts on the trade relationships NI engages in? - Which do you believe is more beneficial to NI? - How do you believe it impacts NI?
Elite Cueing and Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variables)	Reflecting on your experiences, how do you think Northern Ireland's economic ties with the EU have benefited or disadvantaged the region? - When new policies are introduced regarding the Irish Sea border, what factors do you consider when forming your opinion about them?
Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variable)	How do you weigh the importance of maintaining a relationship with the EU against the implications of an open sea border?
Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variable)	How do discussions about the EU and Northern Ireland's status within it usually go in your family or friend circle? Are there common points of agreement or disagreement?
Elite Cueing (Independent Variable)	How reliable do you find the information on the Irish Sea border and related trade issues as presented by the media, the DUP, and Sinn Fein? - Can you share examples that might have shaped your opinion?
Elite Cueing and Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variables)	From which sources do you primarily gather information about the Irish Sea border and trade movements? - What leads you to choose these sources? - What makes them trustworthy to you?
Elite Cueing (Independent Variable)	In your opinion, is NI handling the Irish Sea border issue effectively? - What changes, if any, would you suggest?
Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variable)	What about in relation to the removal of formalities, checks and controls on the movement of goods between NI and the UK, NI and the EU? - In relation to the access of goods in NI do you think they could change anything? /What are the main advantages and disadvantages
Elite Cueing and Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variables)	Is there any aspect of Northern Ireland's political or economic engagement with the EU that you feel needs more attention or understanding? - Have recent political changes concerning Northern Ireland and the EU altered your perspective on what's best for Northern Ireland? Can you elaborate?
Elite Cueing and Deep-Rooted Beliefs (Independent Variables)	Do you have any final thoughts or concerns about the future of Northern Ireland in relation to the EU that you haven't already mentioned?

Note: Created by author

Table 2: Interviewees

Participant	Gender	Age	Religion	Political Party	Location
1	Female	Over 55	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border
2	Female	Over 55	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border
3	Female	18-25	Protestant	Alliance	Not on Border
4	Female	25-34	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border
5	Male	18-25	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border
6	Male	Over 55	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border
7	Male	25-34	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Not on Border
8	Female	18-25	Protestant	Alliance/SDLP	Not on Border
9	Male	25-34	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border
10	Male	25-34	Catholic	Sinn Fein	Border

Note: Created by author. In light of the degree to which border crossings between NI and ROI occur, the location has been marked as “Border” or “Not on Border” to identity where participants live.

4.3 Data Analysis

The interviews are semi-structured and in-depth, tailored towards members of the public. Not all of the participants come from the same level of education, same level of political engagement or the same cultural backgrounds. Due to this, variability can occur in the responses of interviewees and in the structure of the interviews themselves (Patton, 2015). This is how interviews with members of the public differ comparatively to those that occur with experts in the area. It is therefore important to have a strict method of coding to be able to identify the recurring themes throughout the interview that relate to the theories in question.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a deductive coding process on Atlas.ti. This program was further used in order to organise and manage the codes. The codes were directly derived from the theories that were discussed in the theoretical framework. The coding scheme was created through the conversion of theoretical factors into codes. For example, the key elements from the mechanisms were made into codes and then organised under the overarching theories (Appendix A).

There are certain factors that must be at play in order for one to identify whether or not a theory can be applied to the topic in question. For example, one can identify if elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs are driving opinion based on factors that were discussed in the theoretical framework. Those factors were used to code in order to thoroughly assess the degree to which both

theories applied. This structured approach ensured that the coding process was systematic and aligned with the theoretical framework.

4.4 Validity

To ensure validity, triangulation was employed by comparing interview data with existing literature and theories. In order to ensure higher internal validity the researcher engaged in a pilot interview with detailed feedback from the participant. Engaging in a pilot interview can ensure the interviewer is more comfortable but can also allow for questions to be edited and adapted before the process begins.

4.5 Reliability

Reliability can be a problem in this method of qualitative research due to the nature of interviews. In order to alleviate this issue, the researcher developed a list of themes and topics to use for each interview. Similarly, it is important to use a strict method of deductive coding. Unfortunately, this cannot ensure that the interview is wholly reliable but it can help. A pilot interview was conducted to refine the procedures and questions, enhancing reliability. This interview provided detailed feedback which was used to make necessary adjustments before the main interviews commenced.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

All participants were given consent forms, which they signed, and their anonymity was guaranteed (Babbie, 2015). Furthermore, participants were made aware that the interviews were being recorded and transcribed. Participants who were more apprehensive about the prospect of an interview engaged in a brief conversation with the interviewer in which they could express their worries. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring that participants were fully aware of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time.

4.7 Reflexivity

As a researcher, it is important to recognise the importance of reflexivity in the process of conducting a study (Brown, 2023; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). I am aware that my background as someone from the ROI, from a pro-Irish reunification family, could impact the research I am conducting. In order to mitigate this, I ensured that I had predetermined themes to discuss that were in no way leading towards a certain ideology (Brown, 2023). Furthermore, I engaged with

peers, who do not share the same potential biases, throughout the process. Engaging in these conversations with my peers allowed me to take a step back and challenge certain viewpoints I had and ensure they would not affect the research. By acknowledging this potential bias, I hope to enhance the trustworthiness of this research. It is difficult to ensure total objectivity in qualitative research. However, being open about the reflexive practices undertaken can aid in providing a clearer understanding of the research process undertaken in this study.

5 Analysis

5.1 Elite Cueing

5.1.1 Complexity

To examine the role of complexity in the responses of participants it was important to code for instances where participants seemed confused in relation to the policy. Similarly, it was relevant to code when participants were explicit in mentioning that they were unaware of, or uninformed on a particular topic in a manner which indicated it caused confusion for them.

It was evident that members of the public found both policies to be complex, participant 10 said; *“I really don't understand these trade agreements. You probably need a degree in this kind of thing.”* Similarly, participant 3 stated that they weren't sure *“what would be affected”* by a change in policies on VAT and regulatory checks. However, policies in relation to the ISB were considered less complex by most of the participants as they understood it. Participant 6 said; *“I think the border in the sea was the best out of a bad option.”* Contrastingly, the policies related to VAT and regulatory checks were regarded as being more complex by the participants with participant 1 saying; *“Yeah, I I don't know. Umm. I'm not really sure how to answer that to be honest with you...on a daily basis, most of that doesn't effect most people, unless it's your workplace.”* Participants were able to engage more clearly and passionately with conversations on the topic of the ISB, participant 5 said; *“So it had to go somewhere and there was no chance of it going on this island. Not only for peace, but also I mean the border goes through people's farms.”* As opposed to their inability to engage with conversations on policies in relation to VAT and regulatory checks.

5.1.2 Saliience

In coding for saliience it was integral to note the times in which the participants identified that a policy had little to no effect on their day-to-day life and therefore they never thought to seek out information on the topic. It was then equally as important to code for instances where participants felt a policy would affect their day-to-day life. It was also pertinent to code the moments in which participants expressed more passion and knowledge when discussing a policy as this indicates that the policy is salient to the individual.

With regards to both policies on DI, it was clear that the issue of the border was more salient than any problems that would arise regarding VAT and regulatory checks. However, it was less to do with the ISB but to do with its alternative. The participants were highly concerned with the idea of having a border on the island of Ireland, likely due to the number of participants with Nationalist beliefs. Participant 7 stated; *“A border in Ireland? Yes, that would be a massive issue.”* Therefore, the issue of the ISB became more salient but only due to what would have happened if there had to be a border on the island of Ireland, participant 5 stated; *“The only other alternative to the Irish Sea border is physical infrastructure and checks on this island. It's not happening. That can't happen...for me it's just a common sense approach.”* It seemed that once they were assured that the border would not be a land border, its saliience for most of the participants became low. Participant 7 said; *Yeah, like the implications of the sea border are again as I, as I said, like just a complete irrelevance.*

5.1.3 Trust

It was equally important to assess the level of trust that participants felt towards elites. Therefore, ensuring that mentions of distrust or inferences to untrustworthy characteristics, such as bias or motive, were coded for. Similarly, explicit mentions of lack of trust in elites were also coded for.

We know that the level of trust held by people in NI towards elites is relatively low (ONS, 2024), so it is unsurprising that this sentiment was reflected by the participants, with participant 3 saying; *“How I can how can they be trusted to kind of make you know more important decisions I suppose if they can't even kind of get along long enough to kind of just like talk it out?”* There was a general feeling from the participants that the motives of political elites were not aligned with what would be best for the NI, participant 9 stated: *“Sometimes it's hard to kind of decipher between peoples intention and strategy and their underlying agenda in politics in Northern Ireland.”* Contrastingly, there was an element of trust that one of the participants felt towards the

media. Participant 8 compared the trust they felt for the media versus politicians; *“I kind of get the impression that, like obviously they're trying to convince you to vote for them. But I just think, yeah, I'd kind of go to the media more so because they're not interested in that. They're just reporting on what's actually been happening.”* Participant 10 felt that they could differentiate between biased and unbiased media and therefore felt they could trust the media they engaged with to inform their opinions to get a *“well-rounded view on things.”* However, overall this sentiment did not seem to be reflected by other participants.

5.1.4 Politicians

When coding for influence of politicians it was vital to first code for the general mentions of politicians by the participants before assessing whether or not politicians were discussed in a positive or negative manner. It was then necessary to identify how participants spoke of politicians when discussing the perceived intentions and motivations of politicians. Identifying their perception of politicians and motivations behind their influence was important for this.

One might have assumed that participants that shared extreme ideologies with political parties such as the DUP and SF would be cued by them due to the ideological ties. However, this was not the case. Those with more moderate opinions, like participant 3, did not find their opinions on policies such as the ISB and VAT to be cued by politicians because, *“I kind of feel especially with like Northern Ireland like history. The politicians are kind of useless, so like, well, from what I see.”* In fact, other participants were similarly generally unaware of the stance of politicians on these topics, participant 4 said; *“I'm not really aware of it at the moment I haven't really kept up to date.”* Similarly, those with more extreme ideologies had similar things to say regarding the influence of politicians on their opinions, participant 6 stated; *“I don't have much time for politicians in general, no matter where they're from.”* Specifically in regards to the ISB the participants generally felt that the ISB policy was framed by those who disagreed with it, as an ideological affront rather than a decision made out of practicality, participant 9 stated; *“They kind of make noise on certain policies and they try to, like, offer good reasons for why they believe in such policies. But at the end of the day, you can just see that it's always to further the Unionist agenda.”* Therefore, they felt that both sides made the policy one of an ideological issue, with some reflecting that this is a recurring problem, such as participant 9; *“Anything they do or say is always trying to better further the underlying agenda of either unionism or republicanism.”* Due

to this participants felt that there was a general bias being displayed by politicians. It was this bias and ideological framing that led participants to express that they began to totally ignore the opinions of politicians on the issue. Participant 2 said; *“I think I'm that pissed off at politics and the green and the orange...you tend to just not really listen.”* With relation to VAT and regulatory checks participants were generally very unaware of the stance of politicians on these topics, indicating a low level of cueing on both policies but for contrasting reasons.

5.1.5 Media

When coding for media as a causal mechanism, firstly mentions of the media were coded for. It was then specified whether or not this was in a positive or negative manner. Then it was important to identify if there were patterns in the negative and positive ways in which the media was discussed.

What became clear was that the opinion on the media varied throughout the participants. Those who identified with the more extreme political parties felt a level of distrust towards the media due to perceived biases they felt the media had towards their ideology; *“I think there is a media... at the minute the status quo is that the north is in the UK, I feel, there's a media bias towards that current stance and that current position.”* The historical context of the foundation of these newspapers and their relationship with certain communities means that it is not as simple as picking up a newspaper and knowing that this information is unbiased and comes without underlying reasons. Participant 7 engages with media that matches their ideology, stating that an *“unconscious bias”* still exists within media. However, they only identify the bias in the media that is contrary to their beliefs. This reinforces the idea that people will seek out media that confirms their existing ideology however, it does not suggest that people actively seek out the media as the same participant still spoke quite negatively about the media in general saying *“I don't believe anything that comes from the media.”* There are participants, such as participant 10, who go out of their way to engage with the media from all perspectives in order to gain a *“well-rounded view on things.”* However, for the majority of participants, it is simply used as a way in which to confirm their ideology and they tend to strictly engage with sources they see as ideologically similar.

5.1.6 Businessmen

What may come as a surprise is the role of businessmen in the development of public opinion on these issues. For some participants they played a more significant role in driving their opinion than that of the media or members of the political elite. This speaks to a significant pattern which has emerged throughout the interviews which is the importance that all participants placed on the element of community. In that, the role of local businesses and the livelihood and the effects these policies would have on people were a considerable factor which lead to participants being influenced by those in business. Specifically participants 2 and 5 noted the importance they placed on the opinions of those in business when making their opinions on Brexit and the policies that followed. Participant 2 stated that they “*would have been*” influenced by those in business with participant 5 stating; “*Those local businesses, small businesses, medium like enterprises are so important. They're vital for our local economy.*” Although this sentiment was not shared by all participants it’s interesting to see how it acted as somewhat of a driver for some of them.

5.1.7 Conclusion

However, in order to properly understand these mechanisms one must be able to analyse how they interact, further unpack how they relate to each other and examine how these interactions result in the public making justifications for their opinions.

Firstly, many of these causal mechanisms have direct relations to each other. For example, issue salience and issue complexity are deeply intertwined and linked to each other. One therefore must be able to understand why and how their relationship leads to certain opinion formation in this context. One expects that if an issue is of low salience but high complexity then members of the public will turn to elites for cueing. However, this is not the case regarding the ISB as this was not technically an issue of low salience. Although most of the participants displayed low levels of interest in the ISB as a concept they found the issue of a land border, the ISB’s alternative, to be an issue of high salience. This meant that most of the participants had already developed an opinion on the ISB. What was surprising was what participants turned in order to develop their opinions on topics of low salience but high complexity. This was represented by the policy changes in relation to VAT and regulatory checks. On this topic, the participants indicated there was low-salience due to the lack of impact they felt these issues had on their day-to-day life. In this case, participants turned to those they felt would be directly affected by these policy changes or those with lived experiences of them such as participant 2. Participants then tended to turn to

businessmen in order to inform their opinion on these policies. They felt that those in business would face the direct impact of these policy changes and therefore were the best to inform their opinions,

What is similarly interesting to unpack is the reasoning behind participants not taking cues from politicians on these policies, like one may expect. The participants generally recognised that the politicians they supported represented their ideology. However, they don't always trust their motives. Participant 9 indicated that they would vote for these politicians in elections as they know their ideology and identity will be protected; *"But at the end of the day, I'm always glad to go with Sinn Fein in the North because they're the only ones who would actually, you know, protect my identity."* Some participants, such as participant 1, also recognised that this was also done to prevent the other side from winning seats; *"I get the impression that the people who vote for them, it's...if I don't vote for the DUP, who will I let in?"* Ideological alignment with politicians exists but, outside of election times, participants indicated that they were more influenced by their inability to trust the motives of their politicians.

Therefore, there is limited evidence to support H1. One may expect the causal mechanisms to allow for more elite cueing from politicians on DI policies due to the ideological ties that exist in NI. Instead, there is evidence of cueing to some extent from those in business. The other mechanisms however, follow the pattern that would be expected as the policies that are of low salience and high complexity (VAT and regulatory checks) do result in cueing from those in business and the policy of high saliency and low complexity (ISB) leads to participants relying on pre-existing beliefs.

5.2 Deep Rooted Beliefs

5.2.1 Identity

Coding for identity was an integral part of the process of understanding deep-rooted beliefs, as it is linked to the deep-rooted beliefs of people in NI. Therefore, it was important to understand that people from the region present their identity through language, ideology and religious beliefs. Assigning codes when these mechanisms were mentioned and then analysing the context in which they were used was crucial to fully understand how identity manifests itself.

What continued to become clear throughout the process of interviews was the important role identity was playing in the decision-making process for most of the individuals. Even the word *"identity"* was employed frequently by many of them throughout the interviews. Something as

small as the language used by participants was important, as those from Unionist backgrounds refer to NI as “*Northern Ireland.*” Whereas, those who identify as Nationalists will call it “*the North*” or “*the North of Ireland*” indicating that they perceive the island to be one and do not recognise the division or the border, like participant 6; “*I would never recognise the border.*” This then links to the issue of the ISB as if the participant does not recognise the land border, they are more likely to be driven towards supporting its alternative; the ISB. Similarly, it was important to identify how their ideology aligns with their identity. Identity for people in NI is so interwoven with all aspects of their life that it has a strong influence on how one’s ideological opinions are developed. For example, participant 9 makes opinions in the area of policy based on who will protect their “*identity.*” Participant 9 and participant 5 further display the elements of this complex concept of identity and religious beliefs by referring to themselves as “*Catholic.*” This, for many people in NI, has nothing to do with religion and everything to do with the moniker. Evidenced by participant 3 when using the term “*Protestant*” to refer to themselves. It is therefore clear how these elements of language, ideology and religion all interlink to create this feeling of identity for people in NI. One can see how language is used to express the ideology held by participants. Therefore language, ideology and religion should not be seen as separate entities but as a stream of combining factors.

5.2.2 Community

In order to be able to analyse deep-rooted beliefs fully one must be able to analyse the role of community in their development. Therefore, it is important to code for the elements that make up the concept of community. This includes references to family, friends and the locality of the participant. This specifically allows one to analyse whether this has influence over how participants come to their opinions on policies.

Most participants identified some form of influence with regards to community. Some participants stated that they felt their beliefs were influenced by friends, like participant 10; “*My understanding of the northern conflict was through the lived experiences of family, friends or my parents or other people in like my like wider circle, I suppose.*” Similarly, participants found they would seek out information from these friends or from family members when forming opinions on policies, like participant 4, who stated that friends have “*in the past influenced my decision, influenced my opinion and stuff.*” This element of community influence links to the development

of opinions on policies regarding VAT and regulatory checks as participants indicated that in that regard they would turn to those around them and small businesses in their area to develop opinions on these policies, like participant 5; *“But at the same time, those local business, small business medium like enterprises are so important. They're vital for our local economy.”* For the participants that live near the border, the location of their locality played an integral role in how their opinions are formed. This is especially relevant in relation to the policy on the ISB as many of them named this as the reason why the ISB is the only viable option. Participant 10 said; *“So as someone from a border community who has family either side of said border...I'm always going to be, I'm always going to prioritise seamless travel.”* It is clear that this issue is especially salient to those whose community and residence would have been impacted by the implementation of a hard border. This is demonstrated again by participant 10 who went on to say; *“But I think that in that kind of anxiety of whether it be a hard border on the island and will that affect my community.”* and was supported by participant 9 who said; *“People who are kind of so far removed from both the sea and the border that they just kind of spot out what their parties tell them to... People, I think who live near the the hard border have more definitely have more informed views.”* One can therefore see how the elements of family, friends and locality come together to create a sense of community that guides most of the participants' decision-making on these specific policies of DI.

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5.2.3 Collective Memory and Historical Context

In order to understand the root of beliefs in NI, and what drives them today, one must understand the role of collective memory and historical context. Coding for this is then integral to being able to thoroughly understand deep-rooted beliefs. It is therefore important to code for references to the past in the interviews. It is similarly important to code for references to memories that were shared with participants that have informed their current beliefs.

For many of the participants, the historical context of the border as an issue is what drives their opinion. Some participants displayed how this historical context had entrenched their beliefs, such as participant 5; *“People for years lived under a militarised regime, they were occupied. It then changed where they didn't have that military infrastructure on their border ruining their daily lives, ruining their business, ruining their days.”* On top of this, the collective memory of violence and soldiers present at the border was at the forefront of the minds of these participants. Therefore the possibility of a hard border again triggered strong reactions in people, such as participant 2;

“I'm old enough to remember the custom checks and you know and and there was a big industry on the border where customs clearance...and you just... you don't wanna go back to that.”

However, this was not just a trigger for those who lived through the conflict but also for those who didn't, as participant 7 spoke about how they were influenced by the stories they were told by those who had experienced the border checks and who had lived through the hard border. This can therefore explain why some participants were in support of the ISB. These participants were driven by the stories about life with a hard border on the island. This then becomes especially salient for those who grew up in communities on the border as there was a stronger collective memory to be shared. Those who grew up in non-border communities still demonstrated a strong opinion on the border. These participants were driven by the deeply entrenched anti-border opinions they have developed due to the historical context that a border on the island of Ireland brings. It becomes incredibly clear that the history and memories are deeply embedded in the public consciousness in NI and served as a reference point for evaluating this potential policy.

5.2.4 Conclusion

In order to fully unpack deep-rooted beliefs one must be able to analyse the manner in which the mechanisms within deep-rooted beliefs act independently but also, how they interconnect and operate with each other.

Firstly, identity does not simply operate alone and separate from community. Participants connected to their identity when making decisions on policies tended to be similarly informed by their community, like participant 10; *“So as someone from a border community who has family either side of said border. So I think that I'm always going to be, I'm always going to prioritise seamless travel within... either side of the border over any kind of regulatory alignment with Britain.”* One can argue that community can inform and enshrine the mechanisms that make up identity, as in language, ideology and religion. Participants from extremist communities tended to express this in their language but also in their comments on identity, such as participant 5 who demonstrated this when talking about their feelings of identity post-Brexit; *“We have rights as Irish people.”* Those with strong senses of identity are likely to come from communities where this is the norm, such as participant 10 who expressed the influence of their nationalist community on their beliefs; *“Just cause of where I'm from and family background...I've always been someone who has supported reunification.”* Therefore, identity is not something that is easy for people to

escape from and its existence in the community ensures that it becomes deep-rooted within the individuals of the community. Even subconsciously, it may inform people more than they realise. Therefore, participants are not only being influenced by their community when they are forming an opinion on a policy such as the ISB, they are also being influenced by the mechanisms of identity that their community is fostering.

Furthermore, one must understand the ways in which historical context and collective memory can strengthen identity. The historical context of conflict gives people reason to value their identity more. Participants from Nationalist communities reflected on how the historical persecution of those from Nationalist and Catholic backgrounds in NI gives them a reason to feel more strongly about their identity and to further make decisions that will protect their identity. This can give understanding as to why participants with this belief would then support the sea border over a border on the island, which they felt encroaches on their identity as an Irish person. Collective memory and its relationship with identity further supports this. Nationalists who experienced the hard border share the collective memory of the effect it had on their identity and this is something they share now. Thus, this memory of how they were impacted by the border at one point would lead to support for the ISB. However, the historical context, collective memory and its relationship with identity can provide little explanation for policies on VAT and regulatory checks as those policies are not seen by participants to be related to their identity.

For those participants who live near the border the relationship between collective memory and community is one they are deeply impacted by. Their location as a community with regard to the border is particularly pertinent to the policy of the ISB as is the collective memory of those who live there. Participants noted that they took into consideration those in their community who campaigned against Brexit due to the fear of a hard border. These protests were cross-community, meaning they were composed of both Nationalists and Unionists. This demonstrates how strongly against a hard border those in these communities are. Therefore, participants were strongly impacted by the combination of both collective memory and community with relation to the ISB policy. Collective memory and community are deeply inter-connected especially in the context of NI, so it should not be surprising that this was a driving force behind the opinions of participants. Similarly, some participants, like participant 2, had memories of the issues that arose with VAT and regulatory checks whilst a hard border was in place and how that impacted communities with

business on both sides of the border. This led to them fearing similar issues would arise with NI out of the EU.

Therefore, H2 can be confirmed. In the context of NI it is incredibly difficult to unpack all of these mechanisms from each other as they tend to act as a stream of factors that interact and combine and impact each other. The complex history of NI has created a region in which deep-rooted beliefs, whether consciously or unconsciously, drive most people's decision-making on policies. In the case of DI, participants can directly relate the policies they were asked about to the issues that have arisen in their country in the past. This means that when making decisions on how they view these policies, the deep-rooted beliefs of participants will drive their opinions. However, one cannot say for sure that the same mechanisms would apply if there had been extreme Unionist participants.

6. Discussion

In this section I will attempt to answer the research question: *To what extent do elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs drive public opinion on differentiated integration in Northern Ireland?*

I will do this through firstly analysing my findings. I will then reflect on the findings, methodology and theories and discuss the limitations that existed within this study.

A notable finding in relation to the research question is as follows. The extent to which a factor can drive public opinion depends on the DI policy that participants are asked about. When participants feel that policies have the potential to impede upon their identity, ideology or community, they are more likely to be influenced by deep-rooted beliefs. Due to the deep-seated community ties that exist in NI, a feature that is common to countries post-conflict, participants are more sensitive to things that could pose a threat to their identity (Lambert et al., 2009). Participants held positive opinions on the ISB policy, as the alternative policy of a hard border posed a threat to the identity of the participants who see themselves as Irish. Contrastingly, these same participants were likely to be cued by those in business on policies regarding VAT and regulatory checks. This is due to the fact that these policies did not pose any perceived threat to their identity or their community.

Moreover, when attempting to explain what leads citizens to be influenced by elites, the theory of elite-cueing suggests that ideology is a causal factor. The theory suggests that when

participants have strong ideological opinions they tend to turn to elites as elites match their ideology. However, the findings of this study indicate that this is not the case. Rather, ideology is a causal mechanism of identity and therefore is a causal mechanism of deep-rooted beliefs. Therefore, it is not a feature that contributes to participants being influenced by politicians. Participants who mentioned their ideology noticeably linked it to their identity. This indicates that participants that have strong ideological opinions form these opinions despite the ideologies of politicians and not because of them. Therefore, the theory of elite-cueing fails to account for the extreme cases, such as NI, in which the causal mechanisms can change, therefore impacting how it operates when driving public opinion.

Similarly, is the extent to which the theory of elite cueing does not account for trust as a causal mechanism. The mechanism of trust is important to account for because low levels of trust in political elites prevented participants from turning to political elites for cues. This again points to elite cueing as a theory that can best explain standard cases but in unique cases, such as NI, it does not adapt as well to the shifts in mechanisms. Findings revealed that the causal mechanisms at play within both elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs have a large impact on the extent to which they will drive public opinion on DI. Firstly, one would expect participants to be driven by elites on policies such as VAT and regulatory checks due to their low salience and high complexity (Gilens & Murakawa, 2022). However, the mechanism of trust is incredibly important. Due to the low levels of trust most participants felt towards politicians, they were unlikely to take their cues. Rather, on issues that they found to be highly complex and low in salience, they would turn to family members or people in business that they felt would be directly impacted. Therefore, participants are driven to a greater extent by trust than they are by ideology in regards to elites.

What stands out in these findings is the fact that deep-rooted beliefs act as a thread guiding the opinions of most participants on the DI policies. Even participants that displayed more neutral viewpoints mentioned identity and ideology. This indicates that deep-rooted beliefs act as a driver of opinion for those who don't engage with the identity politics of NI. Deep-rooted beliefs for these participants were also connected to the community. On top of this, these participants were similarly influenced by the collective memory of conflict. This led to them being influenced by the memory of the conflict that arose around a hard border when developing their support for the ISB. These findings indicate that deep-rooted beliefs do not just act as a driver for those from

extremist political backgrounds and communities but also, those who grow up without the presence of this in their lives.

Ultimately, the findings of this study have laid groundwork for future in-depth analyses of public opinion on DI. It is clear that deep-rooted beliefs are a driving force for participants' decision-making. The way in which mechanisms within deep-rooted beliefs interact and behave deeply entrenches them in people. Participants are more likely to be impacted by these causal mechanisms than by the mechanisms of elite cueing. This is contrary to what one would initially expect in NI, due to the power of politicians. However, this study has explained and unpacked why things would play out differently in a region like NI. The complex history in the region has created a case that deviates from expectation, especially in regards to decision-making on complex policies. When formulating their opinion, the participants focused on identity, community and the shared memories and histories of those around them. They were less impacted by those who would be perceived to be more knowledgeable on the topic, such as elites. This study provides a very interesting lens at which to look at identity in a case where it manifests very differently than it does in most, if not all, other European countries. Furthermore, it sheds light on the lack of understanding that most citizens have in relation to the EU and the relationship their own country has with the body.

Of course, this research faced limitations in the methodology and interview aspect which will now be outlined. The research method chosen was indeed the most optimal to use in order to unpack complex concepts and gain an in-depth understanding of members of the public's opinions. The methodological approach to this thesis was appropriate for the question. However, due to the strong emphasis on community and the conversational nature of people from NI, there is a possibility that in-person interviews could have allowed for the participants to feel more open and comfortable. Furthermore, the complex role identity plays in the region means that someone from the ROI is not the most optimal person to carry out the interviews. There is an element to discourse on these topics that would lead someone from NI to be more held back in conversation and to an extent be less likely to be completely open in conversation. Participants may be more likely to hold back from comments about the ROI. They also may be conscious of appearing extremist as people from ROI may be judgemental as the shared historical experience is not in place. On top of this, being from ROI makes it difficult to find people from Unionist backgrounds who are willing to participate in interviews. Even someone from a nationalist background from NI would have a

chance engaging participants from Unionist backgrounds as they possess the shared NI identity. Ensuring that the interviewer was also from NI could allow for more candid and in-depth conversation.

7. Conclusion

To what extent do factors such as elite cueing and deep-rooted beliefs drive public opinion on DI in NI? In this study, I analysed the causal mechanisms at play and the extent to which this drives how the public form their opinion on policies related to DI. Overall, I found deep-rooted beliefs play a more significant role as drivers of public opinion for the participants. While certain elite cues, from those in business or the media, may influence some of the participants, the impact of deep-rooted beliefs appears to be far more enduring. Mechanisms such as identity, community and collective memory combined in a way that held high levels of influence over participants when making decisions on policies. On top of this, policies, such as the ISB, are salient to people because of their deep-rooted beliefs and therefore beliefs acted as a driving factor for participants.

This study has further contributed to the literature on DI and public opinion, by filling the existing gap on causal drivers of public opinion on DI. Schimmelfennig & Winzen (2023), identified that factors such as elite-cueing and deep-rooted beliefs are unexplored territories in this field of study. Therefore, this study will hopefully aid in establishing a foundation from which to build on. Similarly, the methodology of interviews chosen differs from similar studies that use survey methods and thus allows for a more in-depth unpacking of the factors. Based on the findings of this study, future literature on the topic could benefit from certain recommendations. Firstly, I would propose that the interviews be conducted by someone from the region in order to mitigate the historical connections that people from NI have with people from ROI, potentially leading to engagement from the extreme Unionist community. Secondly, this study has shown the importance of identity as a mechanism of deep-rooted beliefs. Future studies could further analyse the extent to which specific aspects of identity can differentially impact public opinion on DI. Finally, this study demonstrated that participants of all ages were similarly impacted by deep-rooted beliefs. Future studies on the topic could further examine how mechanisms such as collective memory and historical context can still impact those who did not live through conflict.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Code Tree

Elite Cueing	Deep-Rooted Beliefs
Media Influence	Identity (use of language, mention of ideology, mention of religious belief)
Mention of Politicians (negative and positive)	Community (reference to family, friends, locality)
Mention of businessmen	Historical context (mention of the past)
Salience of issue	Collective Memory
Complexity of issue	