



# EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign

*Early reflections from leading UK academics*

**Edited by:**  
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<http://www.psa.ac.uk/psa-communities/specialist-groups/media-and-politics>

For an electronic version with hyperlinked references please go to:

<http://www.referendumanalysis.eu>

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June 2016

ISBN 978-1-910042-08-3 (eBook - PDF)

ISBN 978-1-910042-09-0 [Print / softcover]

Design & Layout: Luke Hastings

BIC Classification: GTC/JFD/KNT/JPHF/JPL/JPVK/JPVL

Published by

The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community

Bournemouth University

Poole, England

BH12 5BB

Printed in Great Britain by:

Dorset Digital Print Ltd, 16 Glenmore Business Park,

Blackhill Road Holton Heath, Poole

# Acknowledgements

Having published a similar report within ten days of the 2015 UK General Election, we embarked upon this project with the experience of what it takes to write, edit and publish 70+ articles in a short space of time. This time, we also gave ourselves a longer run-up, meaning that on the whole, it was a far less stressful experience than 2015. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of work has gone in to this project and we are immensely grateful to a number of people who have helped make it possible.

We were very fortunate to work with an outstanding Research Assistant in Luke Hastings, who has excelled in every task we have given and worked with infectious enthusiasm throughout. We couldn't have made this publication without him.

We have also had the privilege of working with Emma Bambury-Whitton at Bournemouth University, who has been invaluable in helping us with the Westminster launch event.

We are thankful for the financial support of a number of organisations: the Political Studies Association; the Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community (Bournemouth University); the Centre for Politics and Media Research (Bournemouth University); The Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (Loughborough University); and the Bournemouth University Undergraduate Research Assistant Programme.

Finally, the ambition of this project rested on the speed of the publication post-Referendum. For this we were reliant on our contributors delivering on time. We would like to thank all of the contributors for their excellent work, timely delivery and enthusiasm for the project.

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# Introduction: the Brexit campaign



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Harold Wilson once opined that ‘a week is a long time in politics’. This much overused phrase is apt for describing the events that have followed in the wake of the momentous Referendum vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Wilson was the Prime Minister who originally introduced plebiscitary decision-making to Britain in an attempt to bring unity to his fractious government. The contentious issue was, then as now, UK relations with its continental partners. Despite the electorate voting decisively to stay in the then European Economic Community in 1975 the question over British membership was not resolved. The closeness of the 2016 result and its implications will ensure the issue continues to dominate debate for the foreseeable future.

British exit from the European Union, so-called ‘Brexit’, will have profound consequences. The Referendum delivered a 52% to 48% victory to the Leave campaign but this result masks serious division within the UK. Scotland voted 62% to Remain and there are now plans to hold another referendum on independence to protect the country’s EU membership. Although its constitutional status within the UK is less in doubt there are also implications for Northern Ireland, where 56% backed Remain, given it shares a border with the European Union. In contrast, England and Wales both supported Leave by a slightly larger margin than the UK as a whole. But even here the campaign has been blamed for stoking resentments and, in the tragic case of the late MP Jo Cox, violence of the most heinous kind. There is also major uncertainty about the state of the British economy and the degree to which it can cope with the potential consequences of Brexit, whenever the latter process formally begins.

Aside from the economic situation Britain also faces political uncertainty following the resignation of David Cameron and the failure of Boris Johnson, his nemesis, to succeed him as Prime Minister. This after a highly unusual campaign in which both of these Conservatives, effectively the respective leaders of the rival Remain and Leave camps, only declared how they would vote in the Referendum months before the country had to decide. Although more united before the vote, the opposition Labour Party has since been plunged into turmoil by an attempt to overthrow Jeremy Corbyn.

Despite the consistently close polls, the verdict delivered on 23rd June still came as a shock to many experts. Three weeks before this historic vote former Education minister and Leave campaigner Michael Gove argued ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’. But now, more than ever, expert and public alike need to try and make sense of what has happened and could now unfold.

This report is a modest attempt to pursue this goal. The aim of this publication is to capture immediate thoughts, reflections and early research insights of leading scholars in media and politics in the UK; and in this way contribute to public understanding

of the 2016 EU Referendum whilst it is still fresh in the memory and help shape the path ahead. Here, we are particularly interested in what ways different forms of media, journalism and political communication contributed to people’s engagement with the democratic process during the Referendum – and crucially the relationship between media, citizens, and politicians.

There are eight sections to the report. The opening Context section lays the foundations of the historical debate over UK-European relations including more recent controversies surrounding immigration and sovereignty, often played out through the news media.

The Politics section focuses on the contemporary debate and begins to unpack some of the key political themes of the Referendum campaign such as the rhetoric of excess, the role of facts, falsehoods and political infighting. Whilst the Referendum was in many ways an exercise in democracy as people power, serious questions are raised by contributors about how democratic the campaign actually was given the campaign strategies of the respective Leave and Remain sides.

These campaign themes reverberate throughout this report and are given detailed attention in the Campaign and Political Communication and Social Media sections. Here, we can also consider this Referendum campaign in the context of ongoing debates around contemporary campaigning through billboards, social media, popular culture and televised debates.

In this fiercely contested and divisive campaign, what role did the news media play? In the News and Journalism sections, we offer empirical, theoretical and at times, polemical perspectives on this question. Whilst press coverage might have been quite predictable, a number of authors question the more problematic notion of broadcast impartiality and its role in presenting the issues to the public. A public, it should be noted, that professed widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of information they received during the campaign.

The fallout from Brexit has been truly tumultuous for both the main UK political parties and their leadership. In the penultimate section we therefore turn attention to the Parties and evaluate the significance of the campaign for the major UK wide contenders for power.

The final section focusses on Voters, including identity, emotion, Britishness, young people, gender and social class. This sheer diversity of perspectives tells us that there is no single explanation for why UK voters chose to vote leave on 23rd June 2016.

Published within ten days of the Referendum, these contributions are short and accessible. Authors provide authoritative analysis of the campaign, including research findings or new theoretical insights; to bring readers original ways of understanding the Referendum. Contributions also bring a rich range of disciplinary influences, from political science to cultural studies, journalism studies to psychology. We hope this makes for a vibrant, informative and engaging read.

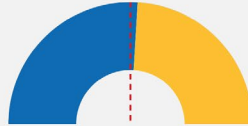


# Results

[Share](#)

## UK votes to LEAVE the EU

Leave  
**51.9%**  
17,410,742 VOTES




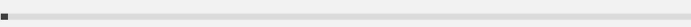
Remain  
**48.1%**  
16,141,241 VOTES

0 results left to declare

**LEAVE** UK votes to **LEAVE** the EU

Electorate 46,501,241

Turnout  72.2%

Rejected ballots  26,033

**How results are calculated**

## Nation results

### England

Leave **53.4%**  
15,188,406 VOTES

Remain **46.6%**  
13,266,996 VOTES

Counting complete

Turnout: 73.0%

### Northern Ireland

Leave **44.2%**  
349,442 VOTES

Remain **55.8%**  
440,707 VOTES

Counting complete

Turnout: 62.7%

### Scotland

Leave **38.0%**  
1,018,322 VOTES

Remain **62.0%**  
1,661,191 VOTES

Counting complete

Turnout: 67.2%

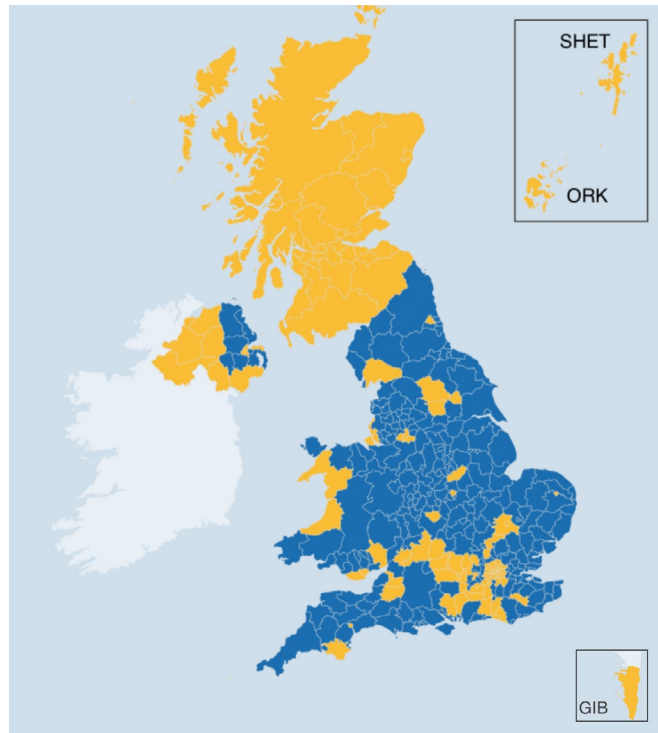
### Wales

Leave **52.5%**  
854,572 VOTES

Remain **47.5%**  
772,347 VOTES

Counting complete

Turnout: 71.7%



Graphics from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results)



1

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Context

# EEC/EU campaigning in long-term perspective

Despite some similarities, the Referendum campaigns of 1975 and 2016 were as different as proverbial chalk and cheese. The differences shed a penetrating light on how the UK political communication process has evolved over the last four decades - not much of it for the better!

But first, the similarities. Turnout was high on both occasions – 65% in 1975, even though a vote to stay in the EEC was a foregone conclusion throughout. Both major parties were divided on the issues, especially Labour in 1975; hence the formation of cross-party umbrella organisations to do battle with each other. In advance of the campaign proper, the terms of Britain's membership were successfully re-negotiated with the EEC by the Labour government, enabling it to support the pro-European position. Much of the argument turned on economic prospects (but somewhat more disaggregated than in 2016, looking more specifically at implications for jobs, prices, balance of trade, agriculture, etc.) and restoration of the country's democratic sovereignty.

What were the main differences between the 1975 and 2016 campaigns?

Whereas in 1975 face-to-face confrontations were in short supply (just a few in the last campaign week), in 2016 there were debates galore all over the television schedules, often organised around pointedly challenging questions from members of studio audiences. This reflected the less respectful and more populist tenor of 2016's opinion climate as well as broadcasters' recognition of the popular appeal and civic value of leader debates in the 2010 and 2015 General Election campaigns.

But what about the leading actors and their modes of discourse? The differences on these crucial matters were stark.

For one thing, there was a huge difference in the perceived integrity of the principal spokespersons in the two campaigns. There could be no reason to doubt that in 1975 Roy Jenkins, Ted Heath, Shirley Williams, Tony Benn, Michael Foot, Peter Shore and Enoch Powell genuinely believed in the cases they were making. Fast forward to 2016, when after a record peppered with policy flip-flops, David Cameron had become something of a damaged rhetorical good; doubts hovered over Boris Johnson's real reasons to enthuse over Brexit; rivals continually accused each other of deliberately misleading the public, corroding people's trust, and down-right lying; and the public voice could be characterised as 'They try to pull wool over our eyes', 'All we hear is propaganda', and 'They only say what they think we want to hear'.

There was also a huge difference in how the European Community/Union was represented in the two campaigns. In 1975 the broadcasters pulled out all the cognitive stops in order to inform viewer/voters about the EEC, its institutions and their powers. Just two examples of many such efforts: ITN presented a series of 18 short films, totaling 72 minutes of viewing time, in which different features of Common Market

workings were explained. World in Action went on a 'Voyage of Discovery' throughout Europe (3,000 miles in all) 'In Search of the Common Market'. The same cognitive commitment shaped British broadcasters' approach to coverage of the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. Out of 26 editors and reporters I interviewed at that time, 23 said they regarded it as their responsibility to give voters essential background information about the European Community. In fact, such items appeared regularly in BBC1's nine o'clock news and in the Today programme. But in 2016 no such effort was mounted. Voters were therefore being asked to decide whether to stay in or leave an institution about which they could know very little. It was as if the public service troika had lost one of its three wheels, running on entertainment and information but not on education!

A media-system difference in the two periods will have been a source of another referendum coverage difference. Whereas the 1975 coverage was spread across campaign political broadcasts (four for each side), some half-hour morning press conferences, items in the news bulletins, and commentary, analysis and discussion in the four main weekly current affairs programmes, in 2016 the balance had shifted, television news having become a prime target of the campaigners (preferably to top the running orders) and a prime source of voter awareness. This meant that protagonists' claims were filtered far more predominantly and strictly in 2016 than in 1975 by conventional news values – especially those of conflict, drama, concreteness and personalisation.

This is related to a more fundamental – and more fundamentally worrying – political communication system difference between the two periods. In 2016, politicians on both sides of the fence closely followed the rules of a quite firmly entrenched game. To play it well, this would require a pre-designated core theme, which could be unfolded in successive attention-grabbing variants, be encapsulated in short sound-bites (an unknown term in 1975), be closely coordinated from on high, and be voiced by spokespersons trained to stay on message. There is a sharp contrast between the Leave campaign's proclaimed faith in the British people's potential to achieve all sorts of greatness and its operative assumption that most people can take in only one or two simple, repeated ideas. More troubling, however, is how the broadcasters tethered their coverage to the campaigners' ploys. Of course, they reported each side's challenges of their opponents' claims, and in interviews and debate moderation, vigorously pursued the inadequacies of those claims. But bound so tightly to them, they never moved the argument on. And so they utterly failed to prepare the electorate in advance for the momentous depth and breadth of uncertain change, which only after the Leave fact are they depicting now!



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# From Super-Market to Orwellian Super-State: the origins and growth of newspaper scepticism



## Prof Dominic Wring

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The influence of print media has been a theme of the debate post-Brexit. Explaining 'How Vote Leave won the EU Referendum', Sebastian Payne of *The Financial Times* attributed some responsibility for the outcome to the avowedly partisan press coverage: 'The role of the media in this campaign must also be taken into account. For almost a quarter of a century, Fleet Street has been fomenting Eurosceptic sentiment. The media operation from Stronger In was unable to compete with the populist message orchestrated by tabloid newspapers such as *The Sun*'.

Among those most keen to leave the EU were *Sun*, *Mail* and *Express* readers. These groups are even more Eurosceptic in outlook than three demographics<sup>1</sup> - the over sixties, less formally educated, and those belonging to social classes C2DE - whose support for Brexit has been highlighted as a key reason behind the Leave victory. There is, however, some considerable overlap between all the aforementioned categories of voter. This interplay of different demographic factors helps explain why readers of the *Mirror*, the only pro-EU popular newspaper, also appear to have supported Leave, albeit by a closer margin. However more analysis is clearly needed to account for the dramatic Referendum result.

In suggesting press reporting may have had some bearing on the Referendum outcome, Payne also acknowledged newspaper opposition to European integration is a longstanding phenomenon. Initially when (Western) European integration was first discussed it was the left leaning *Herald* (which later became *The Sun*) that raised doubts about the potential impact on its core working-class readership. Among the right-wing press the *Express* voiced opposition to proposed British membership of the EEC in the 1960s before later abandoning this stance prior to the Referendum the following decade. Announcing a resounding June 1975 pro-EEC vote that all major national newspapers had supported, the title's front-page 'SUPER-MARKET' headline said it all.

Although there were periodic criticisms of the EEC over budgetary and other matters, the debate over UK membership was not as intense as it would later become. Eurosceptic journalists associated with a largely minority cause included right-winger George Gale and the Communist *Morning Star*. This changed following the passing of the Single European Act in the 1980s. Paradoxically, given its significance as a defining moment, the legislation did not attract the level of press scrutiny that subsequent moves towards greater European integration would.

Three weeks before Margaret Thatcher's 1990 downfall, partly over Europe, *The Sun* had brought the issue to the fore by proclaiming 'Up Yours Delors!'. This memorable denunciation of the Commission President ensured both he and his integrationist agenda became decidedly more newsworthy. The subsequent hiatus caused by Britain's September 1992 exit from the ERM (for which David Cameron, then an aide to the Chancellor, had a ringside seat) only intensified debate

with *The Sun* proclaiming 'The European dream is in tatters'. The best-selling daily paper denounced what it saw as the Maastricht Treaty's plan for a 'United States of Europe...run from Brussels' deciding policies on tax, immigration and the economy with recourse to a Central Bank. Among the popular press, the *Mirror* found itself isolated in arguing for 'ever closer unity in (a) Europe' that had acted as a force for stability in the post-war era.

After Thatcher's more emollient successor John Major had forced the passage of Maastricht through a fractious parliament, newspapers became a key forum for raising criticisms of European integration. The then Brussels based *Telegraph* correspondent Boris Johnson was one of those journalists who became most associated with propagating what the Commission denounced as baseless 'Euro-myths' designed to undermine its credibility. Nonetheless many tendentious stories about 'Euro-crats' seeking to standardise condom sizes or ban bananas that were too bendy stoked ridicule of 'interference from Brussels'. Following the Commission's controversial 1996 ban on exports of British beef, the debate became increasingly rancorous. *The Sun* once again provided some of the most polemical copy: 'We want to see free trade between friendly nations, a genuine Common Market, not an Orwellian superstate...'. Predictably it was the *Mirror* who came to the defence: 'Britain needs EU... If we ever cut ourselves loose from our partners across the Channel, we would become an isolated irrelevant island'.

In 1997 *The Times* helped to try and ensure, as it put it, 'Europe is the one big issue' in that year's election. The same editorial asked readers to vote for candidates 'who will make the Commons more sceptical' rather than a party. Intriguingly this even meant endorsement of Jeremy Corbyn, a critic of the EU, despite his acknowledged 'support for Irish Republicanism'. A year after Labour's subsequent victory Murdoch's other daily, *The Sun*, labelled Tony Blair the 'Most Dangerous Man in Britain' and warned him not to commit the UK to joining the Euro. Although this never happened, the pace of European integration led to other intensive debates. Having been originally elected Conservative leader on a Eurosceptic platform, David Cameron found himself increasingly drawn into an issue that continued to bedevil his party in government and that would ultimately destroy his premiership. During the 2015 election Cameron had been warned of the consequences of holding a referendum by the pro-EU, Labour supporting *Mirror*. At the time the Prime Minister could not have imagined that the same newspaper would be his only popular daily press ally in what would become the last fateful and defining campaign of his career.

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1. I am grateful to Will Jennings for alerting me to this information.



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Turtles photos -  
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# UP YOURS DELORS



**At midday tomorrow  
Sun readers are urged  
to tell the French fool  
where to stuff his ECU**



**THE Sun today calls on its patriotic family of readers to tell the feisty French to FROG OFF!**

They **INSULT** us, **BURN** our lambs, **FLOOD** our country with dodgy food and **PLOT** to abolish the dear old pound.

Now it's your turn to kick **THEM** in the Gauls.

We want you to tell Froggie Common Market chief Jacques Delors exactly

By **NICK PARKER, PETE WALSH and LIZ DUXBURY**  
(Sun Diplomatic Staff)

what you think of him and his countrymen.

At the stroke of noon tomorrow, we invite all true blue Brits to face France and yell "Up Yours, Delors."

The ear-bashing from our millions of readers will wake the EC President up to the fact that he will **NEVER** run our country.

His bid to replace the £ with the faceless ECU is the last straw: after centuries of

Froggy Brit-baiting. They: **BURNED** alive British lambs earlier this year because they couldn't match our quality;

**JEERED** Mrs Thatcher when she visited Paris to boost celebrations for the bi-centenary of the French Revolution last year;

**FOUL**

**BANNED** British beef after falsely claiming it had mad cow disease;

**BLEATED** when we found their foul soft cheese was riddled with listeria bugs;

**GAVE IN** to the Nazis during the Second World War when we stood firm;

**TRIED** to conquer Europe until we put down Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815.

Remember, folks, it won't be long before the garlic-breathed bastards will be here in droves once the Channel Tunnel is open.

So grab your megaphones, turn south and let 'em hear the British lion **ROAR**. And the best of British to you all!

Where to bowl at the Gauls - Pages 2 and 3

# Understanding the role of the mass media in the EU Referendum



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On June 23rd Britain voted to leave the European Union triggering what the *Guardian's* assistant editor Michael White described as the 'greatest political crisis' since the Second World War. At the time of writing most economists are predicting a severe downturn that could be worse than that which followed the Great Financial Crisis of 2008. What role did the media play in influencing public opinion and how significant was it to the final result? In this article I want to argue that it is important to distinguish between the short term role of the media in the campaign and the long term cumulative influence of the media. Ultimately the impact of the media in the referendum is a product of the interaction of these two effects.

## The Campaign

The mass media played two key roles during the campaign. First, it was the site where representatives of the two sides attempted to win the battle for public opinion. Leave campaigners employed a classic KISS (Keep it simple stupid) strategy. They concentrated on a simple message - 'Take Back Control' which was repeated at every opportunity. The message was effective because it was both easily understood by different social groups and open to multiple interpretations. As the PR specialist Greg Delaney noted 'it resonated across the extraordinary Leave patchwork of parliamentary fundamentalists, elderly nostalgics and quasi racists as well as large sections of the discontented working poor. In a world where very few people other than the very rich feel they have much control over their lives, it promised an alternative future.' The Leave campaign also invested heavily in targeted messages delivered via social media. Mirroring the successful social media strategy employed by the Conservatives in the 2015 General Election, the Leave campaign designed a variety of messages delivered to specific audiences. In contrast the Remain campaign lacked a clear, simple narrative on the benefits of EU membership that could resonate at both a rational and emotional level with different audiences. A key reason for this was that Labour and the Conservatives were running largely parallel campaigns with conflicting messages on key issues such as immigration and the economic consequences of Brexit. This inability to coordinate core messages also prevented advertising agencies from producing an effective campaign. Despite the official cross-party 'Stronger In' team hiring top agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi and WPP, infighting prevented the most hard hitting messages being deployed.

Second, the media played an agenda setting role during the campaign by focusing on particular politicians and issues. As research from Loughborough University in this edited collection shows, the news media largely reported the campaign as a 'Tory story' and there was more coverage of Leave arguments.

## The longer term impact of media narratives

Although most commentary tends to focus on the

impact of the campaign the more powerful effects of the media are actually via long term processes of political socialisation, where voters are exposed to messages many times. Here it is important to consider how both the EU and the key issues linked to evaluations of the EU - particularly immigration - have been reported over many years.

Research on how the EU has been reported in the press has been unequivocal. Outside the *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Mirror* press reporting has been relentlessly hostile to the EU. From meddling 'pointy head Eurocrats' squandering our membership fees to the European project the press has employed a shifting selection of negative themes. However, research shows that broadcast media has failed to offer a counterpoint. Broadcast reporting has tended to be dominated by summits, disputes between the EU and UK or domestic political conflict. This has meant that when the EU is reported it tends to be framed as being in a conflictual rather than collaborative relationship with the UK. Furthermore, since most broadcast reporting is dominated by the main two parties - and Eurosceptic Tories have been more vocal than Europhile Labour MPs - audiences have been more exposed to arguments against the EU than those in favour.

Immigration reporting particularly in the tabloid press has tended to be extremely negative, with a steady stream of stories about immigrants 'sponging' off the welfare state, 'bleeding' the NHS dry and being involved in criminality. These negative themes can become linked to other issues in the minds of the public. In my own research on public reactions to the 2008 Financial Crisis, many respondents thought the public deficit had been created by immigration. One told me "Don't let them in because, I've nothing against them or anything like that but they're just taking all the money. They're taking all the money and they're bleeding it dry." In this way immigration can act as a lightning rod catching discontent on a range of issues and then transferring these to perceptions of issues that are linked like the EU.

Therefore in understanding how the media influenced the referendum result it is important to recognise that before the campaign even began the large parts of the public had been primed by the media to be Eurosceptic. During the campaign the Leave campaign was able to build on this through appeals that highlighted long-established themes around sovereignty and immigration. In contrast the Remain campaign was unable to build a positive case for Europe partly because those narratives had not been comprehensively established in the past by media and politicians. Therefore, even if Remain had consistently put forward arguments about the social and cultural and benefits of EU membership they would have not resonated effectively because they lacked social currency. In this way the media played a powerful long and short term role in influencing the result of the referendum.

# Brexit: the destruction of a collective good

On the 10 May 1967 the House of Commons voted by 487 to 26 in support of a second British application for EEC membership. It was one of the largest majorities the House had ever seen. 10 years after the Treaty of Rome, the British political class had collectively swung behind membership as the solution to post-imperial decline. Many were reluctant converts; the Labour cabinet was divided. Voting for membership included Tony Benn and Enoch Powell, who went on to lead the No campaign in the 1975 referendum. In 1967 the arguments in support of membership proved overwhelming. Labour's Foreign Secretary, George Brown, spoke of 'the reconciliation of deeply felt antagonisms'. He pointed to the decline of Commonwealth trade, alongside the new economic opportunities in Europe. Alternatives to full membership were dismissed, 'we would be passengers on the train; but the driving would be done by someone else.' On sovereignty the then Chancellor, James Callaghan, bluntly pointed out that 'to a very large extent nations are not free at the moment to take their own decisions'. In short, British power in the world depended on British power in Europe. Significantly, the US had been a long time supporters of British membership.

Party political divisions notwithstanding, Britain finally entered the Community in 1973 on the back of a governing consensus. A nexus of Europeanised political interests had been constituted that included party political leaders, Whitehall, financial and corporate capital and the majority of the press. The 67% who voted in favour of membership in the 1975 referendum overwhelmingly endorsed the British establishment position. Moreover what was notable was the consistency of the Yes vote. From urban to rural, North to South majorities in the 60s and 70s were common across England and Wales. While Scotland and Northern Ireland were outliers, they still recorded majorities for the Yes side. In some shape or form, the 1975 referendum reflected the will of the people who concluded that their collective interests aligned with what the British political establishment was telling them. They were not wrong and the experience of membership has reinforced their validity.

Many predicted that the British economy would struggle to compete in a Common Market. In fact, the economy quickly benefited from membership, and has seen higher GDP per capita growth than Germany, France or Italy since. The warnings that the City would lose out by the UK not being in the Eurozone proved erroneous, as London established itself as the global hub of Euro trading and the financial gateway to the EU. On security, the enlargement of the EU to the former communist countries has renewed its post-war purpose of bringing peace to the continent. Consequently hard working and educated young people entered the UK, providing a significant economic boost. Support

for enlargement has been a central plank of British government European policy. Moreover the UK has managed its role in the EU without sacrificing its relationship with the wider world and found the EU remarkably accommodating to British exceptionalism, facilitating a range of opt outs. Visions of a European superstate have proved consistently wide of the mark, as the EU's supranational institutions, the Commission and the Parliament, accept agendas set down by the member-states. Intergovernmentalism rules as much now as it ever did.

This all points to a UK augmented in power and prosperity by its membership of the EU. But none of this matters anymore. The idea of membership as a collective good for the British people, established in the 60s and 70s, has been erased by Brexit. It is not just that the referendum reflected divisions within UK society, but the Europe was used to reinforce and essentialise those divisions and to create new ones. It was a populist instrument with a populist outcome, which also has its antecedents in the 1970s. In the wake of the loss of the 1970 election, the Labour left saw Europe as a useful populist motif around which to mobilise the British working class against the British establishment. Similarly, the crisis of Thatcherism at the end of the 1980s saw a populist Euroscepticism rise from its ashes to destroy the Major government and give the right a new article of faith. The more disillusioned people became with mainstream politics, the more populist Euroscepticism embedded itself in the political culture. Farage and the tabloid press led the way, and with the referendum a post-rational politics of indignant, self-righteous moralism went viral.

Brexiters may talk about taking back control for the British people, of making Britain great again but they have embedded a form of politics that is anathema to constructing a national political community. We no longer have the politics to establish what a British collective good is; the EU today, Scotland and the welfare state tomorrow. Brexit is achieving precisely what the Eurosceptics have accused the EU of doing, bringing about the end of the United Kingdom.



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# How the Brexit outcome has changed our understanding of referendums



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In a referendum campaign, typically the impetus is with the status quo. Unless the situation surrounding the issue is highly negative then on the balance of probabilities voters will stick with what they are familiar with rather than what they are unsure of. This finding has been consistent for referendums across advanced democracies. For those referendum campaigns arguing for change, their imperative was not just to convince voters that the status quo is a bad thing but *additionally* that the alternative they propose is better.

What makes the Brexit referendum outcome fascinating is that voters had such a negative position toward the status quo of EU membership that they rejected it *without* a singular or clear alternative being presented to them. This leads us to two immediate conclusions; firstly, that opposition to the existing UK political system and EU membership ran deep; and secondly, that the Brexit side did not expect to win as they did not draft up detailed plans for a post-Brexit Britain. The second conclusion can be contrasted to the plans of the SNP for what a post-independence Scotland would look like. Their proposal 'Scotland's Future' was critiqued in great detail by the media, pro-Union politicians and independent experts. This had the result that nuanced policy arguments such as a currency union and the future of North Sea Oil becoming key issues of debate that swayed many voters to stick with the UK. The fact that this did not happen is representative of the first conclusion, the depth of negative sentiment toward the existing political order in Westminster and Brussels.

*The table opposite* lists out the four main Leave campaign groups next to the main alternative proposals they put forward for EU membership. As can be seen there was wide variance between the proposals. All advocated for some form of associated membership of the EU based on other examples – Norway, Switzerland, Albania etc – with a specific focus on a trade agreement and access to the Single Market. In essence this argument was somewhat superfluous. The campaign boiled down not an alternative to UK membership of the EU, but more to what specific EU policies would be removed from a new UK-EU relationship. With public understanding of the EU at the lowest in the EU, the electorate were more focused on immigration, the UK financial contribution to the EU budget, and the democratic deficit in EU governance. As for alternatives the focus was on a 'globalized' UK that went 'out into the world' to trade with fast growing states beyond the sclerotic Eurozone. This reveals a significant gap in the alternative proposals of the Brexit campaigners. They focused on articulating the specific EU policies they opposed and made arguments for greater focus on non-EU trade, but omitted an analysis

of what would happen in the middle, namely what form would the new UK-EU relationship take.

All of these 'movements' were lead by a mixture of MPs, MEPs, political activists, and civil society members. This proved to be both a strength, and a weakness for the Leave campaign - a strength in that it gave them a wide base of support across social, party, and geographic cleavages; but a weakness in that it made formulating an alternative plan to replace the UK-EU membership impossible to agree on. Leave campaigners were clear on what they disliked about the EU, were in unison about future participation in the Single Market as part of a wider global trade strategy for the economy, but were negligent in articulating how this goal would be achieved. It would appear that their trenchant criticism of the EU, left them bereft of any practical consideration of how European integration worked in reality, and thus how they could secure the immediate future of a post-Brexit UK.



**Table 1**

| <b>Group</b>                                                                                                        | <b>EU membership alternative</b>       | <b>EU Policies opposed</b>                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Leave.eu<br><a href="http://www.leave.eu/">http://www.leave.eu/</a>                                                 | EFTA – particular focus on Switzerland | Payments to EU budget;<br>Freedom of movement;<br>Democratic Deficit; |
| Vote Leave<br><a href="http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/">http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/</a>               | European Free Trade Zone               | Payments to EU budget;<br>Freedom of movement;<br>Democratic Deficit; |
| Grassroots Out (Go!)<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/GrassrootsOut">https://www.facebook.com/GrassrootsOut</a> | European Free Trade Zone               | Payments to EU budget;<br>Freedom of movement;<br>Democratic Deficit; |
| Better Off Out<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/betteroffout/">https://www.facebook.com/betteroffout/</a>       | European Free Trade Zone               | Payments to EU budget;<br>Freedom of movement;<br>Democratic Deficit; |

# The referendum and Britain's broken immigration politics



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The decision in 2004 by Tony Blair's New Labour government to allow unfettered access to the UK for citizens of the 8 central and east European EU newcomers has had monumentally important implications. Most other member states imposed transitional restrictions of up to 7 years. If Britain had done so too then it's probably safe to say that the scale of movement to Britain would have been tiny in comparison with actual numbers and Britain would still be in the EU.

If about one thing, the 2016 referendum was about immigration, but British immigration politics are broken. While strained at times, it once was that a two party Con-Lab consensus established in the 1960s removed the issue from wider public debate. This consensus has long since been stretched way beyond breaking point fuelled not least by the steep growth in migration from other EU members after 2004.

Propping up this political consensus were powerful pro-labour migration voices. The well-organised beneficiaries of increased immigration such as business interests were not shy to express their view that a liberal approach to labour migration was a good thing. EU free movement sustained a flexible, liberalised UK labour market. These pro-migration voices might have been influential but there was growing public opposition to increased immigration. While voices from the business community will be to the fore arguing for the centrality of the EU single market to any future vision of Brexit, such views run counter to a more hostile public mood revealed by the referendum campaign and vote.

While once not seen as a topic for polite discussion, immigration has become a near obsessive focus for public debate. A famous 2005 general election Conservative campaign poster made what was seen at the time as the contentious contention that: 'it's not racist to impose limits on immigration'. The biter was bitten as public scepticism about immigration was mainlined into British politics via UKIP with hugely important effects on both Conservative and, even more importantly, Labour support. Once derided by Cameron as cranks, fruitcakes and closet racists, UKIP capitalised on opposition to 'uncontrolled immigration'.

Brexit is a powerfully negative verdict on David Cameron government's immigration policy. While some may see Cameron's January 2013 speech at the London offices of Bloomberg calling for a referendum as a defining moment, perhaps more damaging was his decision 3 years earlier to 'cap' net in the tens – rather than hundreds - of thousands. At no point in the subsequent 6 years did the government get anywhere near this target. Four weeks before the referendum vote, the Office for National Statistics presented a gift to the Leave campaign when announcing that 630,000 people moved to the UK in 2015 of which 270,000 came

from other EU member states. Net migration in 2015 was 333,000.

Cameron's government had specified a target that it couldn't attain, not least because of EU free movement. Worse still, every 6 months when the immigration statistics were published the public was reminded of this failure. Ex-Cameron advisor Steve Hilton said in the run-up the referendum vote that Cameron was told that the target was unattainable while Britain was in the EU. For Leave, it was the gift that kept on giving. Cameron's once vaunted re-negotiation of February 2016 with its limits on access to welfare benefits for EU migrants was an utter campaign irrelevance.

The future of Britain outside the EU will necessarily be defined by attempts to fix these broken immigration politics. Yet, the Brexiters themselves are riven by a basic divide between liberal and nationalist strands with very different world views shaping their outlooks on immigration.

Liberal Brexit centres on a continued commitment in some as yet unspecified form to free movement of goods, services, capital and, dare to say it, people. On June 27<sup>th</sup>, Boris Johnson articulated his cake approach to public policy – pro having it and pro eating it – when he articulated an open and engaged vision of Britain's future relations with the EU centred on single market access but unencumbered by EU laws and with an Australian-style points system for new immigrants. A vision swiftly dismissed as a pipedream by EU diplomats.

Free movement of people is anathema to Brexit's nationalist wing with Nigel Farage as its champion. For nationalists, 'uncontrolled immigration' must be halted. In March 2015, Farage suggested that he'd prefer to see net migration of around 30,000 people a year.

Immigration is a major faultline dividing liberal and nationalist versions of Brexit. The tortuous negotiations of the route to exit will be about details. Liberal Brexiters favour the economic benefits of European integration without the burden of EU laws. Maintaining a commitment to free movement is likely to enrage the nationalist wing of the Brexit campaign keen to show any backsliding as a further sell out by the political elite.

Raising expectations about immigration control and then carrying on regardless with free movement could not only fail to repair the broken politics of immigration but further widen the gap between the people and their political leaders.

# The great miscalculation: David Cameron's renegotiation and the EU Referendum campaign

It was supposed to be the springboard for a smooth and successful referendum campaign. In reality, David Cameron's EU renegotiation was a great miscalculation that helped pave the way for voters to reject EU membership. Most significantly, the much-anticipated deal failed to sway members of his own Cabinet, while also highlighting the EU's inflexibility on the free movement of people principle. Rather than create the momentum for a comfortable victory, the renegotiation storyline petered out as the official pro-EU campaign got stuck repeating messages about economic doom after Brexit.

There was a strategic calculation behind using the referendum announcement to pursue a new deal – to great fanfare – with other EU leaders. In 1975, Harold Wilson won the referendum on remaining in the European Economic Community (EEC) on the back of a successful, if largely cosmetic, renegotiation. Prior to what the then Labour government called "Britain's New Deal in Europe" opinion polls indicated there was in fact a majority to leave the EEC. The winning message in 1975 emphasized the advantages Wilson had succeeded in obtaining.

The other auspicious feature of a renegotiation this time round is that polls showed a clear preference among voters to stay in a reformed EU. All Cameron seemingly had to do was talk tough with EU leaders and come out with a piece of paper to wave to a thankful electorate. However, neither the reality nor the symbolism of the Prime Minister's eventual deal did him any favours.

What came out of the February European Council where EU leaders debated UK demands was a set of conclusions running to 36 pages. Buried amongst its dense legalese was a commitment to protect countries not using the Euro from contributing to Eurozone bailouts and a reference stating that the UK was not legally bound by the "ever closer union principle". The Leave camp swatted these changes aside as simply not binding until there was actual treaty change.

Once campaigning began in earnest, the EU debate bifurcated between the government's dogged economic argument about the risk of Brexit and the anti-EU camp's relentless politicization of immigration. This left no place for a discussion of the legal niceties of the conclusions from the February summit. When the renegotiation did feature, albeit peripherally, it was damaging on both a symbolic and a practical level.

The nitty-gritty of the in-work benefits arrangement (a phasing in of tax credits over four years for new EU migrants) was hardly something that could mobilize the masses. The Prime Minister gamely translated this into the slogan "no more.. something for nothing". But this showed a fundamental misreading of the public mood. For it is the number of new migrants not their access to

benefits that exercised anti-EU voters.

Hence the renegotiation played into the Leave camp's hand by confirming the weakness of the government's position over immigration within the EU. Indeed, Iain Duncan Smith made hay out of this after his resignation by portraying negotiations with the EU as being under the tutelage of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. His comments yielded the inevitable newspaper caricature of Merkel as Cameron's puppetmaster in *The Sun*.

The problem here for the Remain camp went beyond the awkward symbolism of being bossed around by Germany. Coming back from Brussels with very little to show on the hyper-sensitive immigration issue underlined the EU's commitment to a single market that includes labour mobility. In response to voters' fears that, pro-EU figures such as Yvette Cooper and Theresa May announced in the last days of campaigning that there could be new discussions on migrant quotas after a vote to remain. The Scottish National Party steadfastly refused to join this particular debate as it specifically sought to stay aloof from the Cameron deal. In this was the renegotiation also failed to unite cross-party support amongst the Remain camp.

Ultimately, Cameron blundered by promising so much and delivering little when it came to the UK's position within the EU. The February agreement codified the UK's special status as never before, which from an EU perspective was quite an achievement. But it came at the cost of self-marginalization in Brussels and did nothing to appease EU antipathy amongst UK voters. Such a precedent augurs badly for the negotiations on the UK formally withdrawing from the EU.



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Politics

# Rhetoric of excess

Arguments were centre-stage for the entire Referendum campaign. Its rhetorical purpose could not have been clearer: to supply good reasons for voting either to leave the EU or to remain. With a simple choice made by a single constituency, party loyalty or local concerns were not overt factors. The Leave campaign was tasked with promoting grounds to transform the status quo; the Remain camp had to supply sufficient doubt against such a change. Nor were their arguments especially new: they had been rehearsed for years and were largely familiar to the public.

Yet for all its simplicity of purpose, the Referendum's rhetoric was divisive and, on occasion, rather uncivil. The length of the campaign meant the same arguments were repeated ad nauseam and efforts to censure each other's fallacies, exaggerations, inaccuracies, unfair advantages, or personal attacks inevitably came to the fore. Personalities and deeply held feelings would be as important (if not more so) than rational arguments as either side fought to ridicule the other's claims and ensure their own advantage. Ultimately, argumentative appeals were directed not at forging common understanding or reconciliation but at forcing a decision on an issue of enduring ambivalence. In such circumstances, the contest often came down to either side amplifying the intolerable excesses of the other's arguments.

The challenge for the Leave campaign was to promote a substantial alteration in the UK's economic and political status without conceding the possibility of instability or disadvantage in international standing. Exit from the EU, it argued, would permit Britons enhanced autonomy over policy, freedom from arbitrary political interference, and greater control of economic resources. The difficulty in this argument lay in its speculative nature: much depended on the outcome of future trade negotiations whose success could not be guaranteed. Nor could Leave decide which model of non-EU existence it would prefer (Norwegian, Icelandic or Swiss models?). In the end, the strength of Leave's argument lay in the purported self-evidence of its premise -- that the EU restricted the UK's capacity to succeed on its own. The apparent excesses of the EU were therefore stressed. Membership reduced national sovereignty, imposed disproportionate legal controls, was run by unelected bureaucrats, and disregarded national borders to permit vast numbers of immigrants to enter Britain to take jobs and enjoy welfare benefits.

This demonisation of the EU lent itself to a negative pathos, often in conspiratorial arguments that captured some supporters but alienated others. The different personalities associated with the campaign each had their own take on this appeal to emotions. Michael Gove employed the analogy of a kidnapping, where the innocent UK was held hostage in the back of a car. Boris Johnson used the well-worn trope of Nazism to describe the

geopolitical ambitions of the EU. Nigel Farage, on the other hand, offered the more vulgar gesture in alluding to the prospect of sexually predatory migrants. One way or another the EU was rhetorically associated with a dangerous excess; departure was thereby presented as the restoration of a mythic integrity (captured by the UKIP slogan: 'We want our country back').

Remain, on the other hand, was burdened with defending a status quo to which few felt enormous attachment. Its arguments concerned primarily the economic utility of continued membership: the benefits of the single market; the rights, freedoms and international status that ensued; and the distinctive 'opt outs' that assured British independence. For Remain, EU membership enhanced (not diminished) sovereignty and supported (not restricted) autonomy; any disadvantages were mere inconveniences. Its case lacked the excitement of challenging the prevailing order and offered no ambitious vision of further improvements to the EU. Much of the Remain position relied on dull 'factual' evidence of expert opinion: from the Treasury, the Bank of England, economists, business leaders, as well as US President Obama. The argument (denounced as 'project fear') rested on an appeal to cautious, sensible pragmatism and the public's aversion to risk.

The greatest risk, argued Remain, came from Leave's reckless excess in opposing so-called 'ruling elites', distorting truths, and mobilising unpleasant sentiments against immigrants. Leave proponents, it claimed, were prepared to lie about how much was contributed to the EU, how ordinary people would benefit from leaving it, and how the UK could recover from the shocking effects of withdrawal on jobs and house prices. For Remain, departure would provoke a veritable economic Apocalypse. Moreover, Leave's advocates were less than sincere in their ambitions for the UK given, for instance, Farage's 'dog whistle' appeals to prejudice or Johnson's political ambitions. For Remain, Leave's arguments were risky delusions promoted by untrustworthy characters.

The rhetoric of the referendum was rarely inventive or inspirational. There were strong arguments on either side but often the debate felt exaggerated and shrill. Focused on the excesses of others, neither side won the argument decisively.



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# Myth versus fact: are we living in a post-factual democracy?



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Referenda function as legitimate instruments of democracy if (1) voters are informed about the issues at stake in their vote, (2) they vote on the basis of these issues once informed and, finally, (3) they turn out to vote in sufficient numbers. With over 72% turnout in the EU referendum, we might conclude that the last of these criteria was met. However, we still need to reflect on whether the first two criteria were met for one of the near constant cries as Referendum day neared was that the scare-mongering must cease, voters need facts as each side was accused of misusing statistics. In addition, two further points are also worth bearing in mind with respect to these criteria. First, past research on referenda voting has demonstrated that when voters are faced with uncertainty they tend to opt for the status quo. Second, a number of EU referenda held over the past 10 years in other member states have been used to punish current governments rather than to express preferences about the process of European integration (Hobolt & Brouard, 2010).

The campaign was not devoid of data and evidence regarding the impact of continued membership or an exit on the economy, immigration, services such as the NHS and the balance of EU vs. national powers. But data and evidence are different from factual claims. There were many types of claims made by the Leave and Remain camps during the campaign. First, there were arguments that reflected fundamental values and revealed differences in visions for the UK. These were about regaining sovereignty or maintaining a shared destiny and security within Europe. A second type of claim rested on dystopian visions of remaining (unbridled immigration for the Leave side) or leaving (economic devastation by the Remain side). These visions of the future are based on modelling and assumptions about future trends – media reporting on these predictions was sometimes lacking in that the assumptions were not detailed, the source of the prediction not identified or the claims dismissed as too complex rather than an attempt made to explain to voters. The assumptions and sources can give important clues as to the slant or possible bias in the figures. The media tended to treat these claims as equally credible regardless of how questionable assumptions or consensus predictions about the impact on the economy by the IFS and economists. However, there is a third, and potentially more malicious, if misused, category of claims. These are factual claims about current conditions.

In this latter category, one of the most well recognised ‘facts’ in the campaign was that the UK sends £350 million to the EU each week. In a reply to MP Norman Lamb’s query about the figure, the UK Statistics Authority indicated that the use of the £350 million figure along with the suggestion this money could be spent elsewhere was ‘potentially misleading’. There were a number of websites providing fact checking of claims made by each

side. Fullfact.org published lengthy explanations on the UK’s EU membership fee and immigration. Even though still a net contributor, FullFact shows the true cost of membership after rebates and EU contributions to the UK and explains that the costs and benefits of membership should be distinguished from the membership fee. Andrew Dilnot, the UK’s Statistics Authority, was so concerned about the misuse of this figure that he issued an additional statement on 27 May writing that the continued use of the figure is “misleading and undermines trust in official statistics.”

Why would voters opt to ignore these corrections to misleading information? Psychologically, there are many heuristics or biases that lead to selective engagement with information and outright resistance of facts that may run counter to one’s beliefs. The ‘motivated reasoning’ paradigm and a confirmation bias suggests that citizens will tend to resist information that is inconsistent with prior beliefs and values and seek out information that confirms them (Kunda, 1990). Therefore, we might assume that those who were supporters of the Leave campaign and who wished to redirect funds from EU membership to social services in the UK avoided processing the corrections to the misleading figure. Indeed, resisting fact checked claims may have happened across a range of issues where statements were found to be misleading such as on the impact of immigration. In a survey conducted by ICM Unlimited, we asked 449 respondents in an online panel whether they had heard the claim “The UK contributes £350 million a week to the EU” and over 75% reported that they had heard the claim many times. Of those who had heard the claim, half had heard or read materials to suggest the claim was false. However, despite hearing that the claim was false there was resistance to processing the claim as factually incorrect. Amongst Leave supporters who had heard the claim was false almost 50% rated the claim as strongly or mostly believable. On the other hand, amongst Remain supporters only 11% rated the claim as strongly or mostly believable. Given biases in the processing of information in any referendum situation it may be difficult to sway voters with facts. Clearly, it seems, voters were not motivated by accuracy – and perhaps they were not encouraged to be so by a media that treated all claims as equivalent.

# Destroying and building democracy, a German view

In Germany, referenda are anti-constitutional and for a reason: they were the Nazi's favourite means of breaking international treaties and preparing war. Among the more known referenda were the ones on the annexation of Austria and Germany's exit of the League of Nations, both sanctioned with more than 90% of the eligible voters. Based on the experience of the Third Reich, Germany's federal constitution has a number of safeguards to avoid exactly the situation that has arisen in Great Britain after the referendum: a major crisis of democracy and the country's parliamentary institutions.

Not only do referenda not exist but any change to the constitution (as an exit from the EU would demand) requires a two third majority of both parliamentary chambers, the Federal Assembly and the Federal Council. Members to the Federal Assembly are elected through a mixed system of proportional voting (one cross for the party) and 'list voting' where voters choose their candidates from a list. Voters can therefore split their votes, for instance in order to favour a local MP who they think is doing well even if s/he is not member of their preferred political party. Parliamentary representation requires that a party receives at least 5% of votes in the proportional voting. Add this to a much stricter party discipline in parliament (if not declared an open vote, MPs risk losing their seat if they vote against their party's line), and a far-reaching devolution of legislative, taxation and political powers to the federal states, counties and municipal council to diversify channels of democratic participation and to counter-act tendencies of centralized alienation. This makes a long list of safeguards to avoid political disasters such as the Brexit referendum where a meek 37.4% of eligible voters have decided on a matter of epic and international dimensions.

Ostensibly, British parties have no proper institutional way of responding to this vote and are on the verge of exploding instead of channelling the vote's result into a reasoned parliamentary debate. The most vocal leader of the Leave campaign, Nigel Farage, is not even a MP himself and his party is represented with only one seat in Parliament. The dynamics of Brexit are mostly extra-parliamentary. Every ingredient of the disaster of Weimar's dismissal are united at this very moment.

And yet, many, even Remainers, celebrate the Referendum as a strong show of democracy. Clearly, many British citizens have expressed their strong feelings of anger and frustration with Westminster more than the EU (given the level of ignorance about the implications of Brexit), and many may have secretly hoped that their vote would have exactly the destructive effect it had. Rather than calling it a democratic vote, hence, one should call it a luddite vote. The intent was to break the machine and to claim people power. It might well be that Leave voters had no clue what they wanted control over but they were certainly sure that they wanted

neither the EU nor Westminster to have it. The argument that sovereignty in Britain lies in Parliament since it forced out the King in 1688 will only reinforce those feelings of bitterness and the wish to destroy the system. The cry is for popular, not parliamentary sovereignty. Trying to make up now for democratic safeguards that have never existed with this terribly ill-conceived Referendum, will, in the current situation, alienate the Leave electorate even more and fuel their propensity for further (auto) destructive voting.

Very few politicians currently debate the leave vote on these terms and think about how it might be possible to de-locate Parliamentary decision-making from London to loci of decision-making which are closer to the people who reject Westminster democracy. With the notable exception of the Greens who tabled again proposals for proportional voting, there is absolutely no debate about forms of federalism and about the question how local councils and counties could be made more responsive and participatory. Yet, even if proportional voting will allow a better reflection of voters' preferences and therefore counter-act feelings 'that my vote doesn't count', it is not sufficient.

The biggest constitutional work that is awaiting Great Britain in the wake of this referendum is to think about the form of the Union and how to get political decision-making close to the local and county level in order to better respond to the diversity and concrete needs of the British population in a globalised world. This not only means strengthening local and regional institutions but also making sure that there is much more equitable regional distribution of the country's wealth.

This includes developing further devolution to downsize political decision-making on the one hand, and integrating the existing European citizen rights (like the right to participate in local elections) to open up British politics, on the other. It means as well as to think creatively and collectively about representation beyond the tyranny of a minority. The British could certainly copy something from Germany's present political system (or other federal states like Switzerland).

But, sure enough, the tide of xenophobia and nationalistic hubris that was unleashed with the Referendum campaign will prevent any such learning from European neighbours, and that's where the real misery of this referendum lies. In the end, Brexit is a nationalist vote and that is a vote for narrow-minded closure.



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# Remembrance of referendums past: Scotland in the campaign



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The place of Scotland in the narrative of this election was assured as soon as the results became apparent, and the UK-wide vote to leave cast into stark contrast a Scottish vote of 62% in favour of Remain. With memories of the referendum for Scottish independence from two years earlier still fresh in the mind, early analyses raised the alienation of the Scottish electorate – even more than the Remain-supporting voters of London and Northern Ireland – and the implications this may have for the survival of the United Kingdom. Placing for now aside the now-likely second independence referendum, I want to explore the considerable influence the Scottish factor had over the campaign itself.

The political ramifications of what academics routinely refer to as the “personalisation of politics” were rarely more apparent than in this election. Prime Minister David Cameron presumed to speak for Remain, and his most prominent opponent in Leave was former-Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson. This was to the disadvantage of the UK Labour Party, and Jeremy Corbyn’s visibility was undermined by this “blue-on-blue” tussle with its ramifications for the Prime Ministership. Where Scotland figured in the personalisation of the campaign was in the appearance first of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, and then to a lesser extent of Scottish Conservative Leader Ruth Davidson. Sturgeon was invited to participate in one of the televised debates along with Leave star Boris Johnson, having already become a high-profile personality in UK politics (Higgins and McKay, 2015), bearing a political mantra of an independent Scotland within Europe (Smith, 2016).

However, a chief point of attack on Sturgeon related to the frame of “Project Fear” that had been mobilised against her and her party during the previous Scottish referendum. This expression had been internalised in that campaign within the unionist Better Together campaign to refer to negative communication tactics, on the basis that those in government or supporting the constitutional status quo are able to generate uncertainty around the implications of change. This was leapt upon by opponents including Sturgeon as a damning and cynical admission. However, this negatively charged phrase was revitalised at the UK level and used to dismiss the warnings of Remain. This was at its most explicit in Boris Johnson’s debate clash with Sturgeon. Using the technique of epitrope to cite Sturgeon’s prior description of the Better Together campaign as “miserable, negative and fear-based - and fear-based campaigning of this kind starts to insult people’s intelligence” (quoted in Phipps, 2016), Johnson sets Sturgeon as previously opposed and now engaged in a politics of malign negativity. While just one example, this formed part of a more broadly expressed set of concerns about the aggressiveness of the debate. Reflecting

on the death of Labour MP Jo Cox, London Mayor Sadiq Khan characterised the referendum campaign as a “climate of hatred, of poison, of negativity, of cynicism” (Mason, 2016). While undoubtedly sincere and warranted by the tragic circumstances, this also drew upon longer-term narratives around the retreat of civility in public discourse (see Higgins and Smith, forthcoming).

Ironically, the debate in Scotland was comparatively mild-mannered and courteous: even described as “tepid” by BBC political commentator Brian Taylor. In large part, this was because of well-founded assumptions that EU membership was comparatively popular in Scotland, translating to support across the majority of politicians. This left a lack of dominant personalities around which to animate any clashes. Leader of the Scotland Leave campaign was former Labour MP Tom Harris, with support from sole Scottish UKIP MEP David Coburn. Significantly, all of the major political figures in Scotland – from party leaders including Sturgeon and Davidson to grandees Gordon Brown, Alex Salmond and Alistair Darling – were united behind the Remain side.

It remains to be seen whether this campaign signals the shift from what Mouffe (2005) describes as an “agonistic” clash of ideas to an “antagonistic” trade of insult and spite. It may be that the bipolar character of a referendum, with a comparative loosening of the constraints of party discipline, encourages a more rancorous mode of engagement; and the Scottish example properly was cited as evidence of an on-going pattern of deterioration. However, more likely, the Scottish experience of the two campaigns suggests that the tone is as much determined by assessments of public opinion and appetite for rancour, as well as such factors as the status and performative style of the political personas involved.





European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, left, greets Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon upon her arrival at his office at EU headquarters in Brussels, Wednesday, June 29, 2016. Sturgeon is in Brussels to meet with EU officials. Scottish voters overwhelmingly chose to remain in the European Union but were drowned out by English voters. Sturgeon has indicated there may be a new referendum on Scottish independence. (AP Photo/Geert Vanden Wijngaert)

# Public personalities in the EU debate: elites vs the majority and Bullingdon resurgent



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While the corporate media's reporting of the Referendum campaigns tended towards relaying the proclamations of key figures within the political/corporate establishment, some of their coverage also sought out public opinion on the UK's EU membership. *The Guardian's* John Harris, through his travels across the UK, uncovered an electorate that articulated exasperation at traditional political institutions and expressed a sense of abandonment by the political class. For many, the Referendum presented an opportunity to strike back against an elite with whom they had grown increasingly estranged. In the discourse of the Referendum, the complexities were largely stripped away in favour of simplistic messages that reached the electorate on an affective level. Benefits of European unity and fear of the potentially dire consequences of leaving the EU were pitched against notions of sovereignty and patriotism that veiled a strain of xenophobia to emerge more fully after the result was declared.

When public sentiment is provoked in such a manner, yet tied to abstract concepts, it provides the type of environment in which the interventions of entertainment celebrities might prove effective for mobilising the majority. For the Remain Campaign JK Rowling, Jude Law, and Benedict Cumberbatch, among others, argued the benefits of staying within the EU. As it is impossible to determine the in/effectiveness of their individual contributions, we are left to speculate on whether the privileged, largely London-based celebrities had become too closely aligned with the Westminster elite in the minds of the electorate, of whom many faced the thin end of the wedge in austerity Britain. Read in this way, the dichotomy between 'ordinary' and 'elite' might be a determining factor in our understanding of the role played by public personalities in the EU debate.

These types of emotionally charged campaigns also present fertile ground for radical populists and political opportunists who rank among professional politicians. The more successful figures, such as Nigel Farage, have crafted public personas that position them as outsiders to elite political institutions. They have used this with great effect to align themselves with the disenfranchised masses, in spite of the economic and class interests their persona might have masked.

Such efforts can also be seen with key protagonists in the Conservative Party. The more prominent spokespeople in the party, such as David Cameron and Boris Johnson, have worked throughout their careers to fashion public personas more appealing to the majority of voters, and they drew on these in the Referendum campaign in order to sway the electorate. Cameron, lead proponent of the Remain Campaign, has sought over time to manufacture a political brand that unites the antithetical concepts of 'compassionate' and 'conservatism', but fell back on the authority of his prime ministerial position to support his case. Within the Leave Campaign,

Johnson utilised his persona as the bumbling buffoon which has routinely proven lucrative in capturing public affection. A clash of personalities ensued between the two, and much could be gained through considering the Referendum campaigns in terms of the various aspects of their constructed public personas and other components of their personal biographies.

Throughout their careers, both sought to underplay the unique privileges afforded to them as Old Etonian, Oxford-graduate millionaires. This includes distancing themselves from their former membership of the Bullingdon Club; a highly exclusive, all-male, dining society for a clique of privileged Oxford students. With a reputation for raucous, destructive behaviour, members were said to vandalise the local restaurants in which they dined, while in pursuit of their self-indulgent aims, and pay restaurant owners on-the-spot, in cash, for the damage. The Referendum pitched two ex-Bullers against each other. Where Cameron sought to retain his grip on power, Johnson aimed to pursue prime-ministerial ambitions.

Nick Cohen's profile of Johnson for *The Spectator* presents him as a chameleon-like political opportunist who changes his stance in pursuit of self-interest. Taking this at face value, Johnson's position in the Leave Campaign and subsequent post-Referendum back-peddling on key Brexit policies, combined with a lack of coherent exit strategy, becomes clearer. Policy analysts may ponder the political and economic strategy of figures such as Johnson, and question what will actually be different after the UK's exit – aside from the probable withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights, for which Theresa May is likely already salivating. However, reading the campaign in terms of some of the personalities involved suggests an old-fashioned fight for individual political power. It may not be entirely inaccurate to view the Referendum campaign being part-fuelled by a raucous scrap between two ex-Bullers in pursuit of their own self-interest which, rather than being limited to undermining the prosperity of an Oxford restaurant, might cripple the economy of an entire continent, and leave the majority to foot the bill.

# Healthier ever after? The NHS as a campaign issue

My long-time collaborator and friend, Martin McKee, saw it before I did.

“I’m getting a few people together on the health aspects of the EU referendum debate”, he explained, back in January (“A few people” for Martin tends to mean, say, members of the House of Lords, or the Royal College of Physicians, or in the World Health Organisation). “We could do with a lawyer who understands the EU and health – would you join us?”

And so my involvement in the EU referendum debates began. A small contribution, in the grand scheme of things. I spent an entire weekend reading, re-reading and decoding the negotiating texts of the The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. I nervously prepared to speak on Radio 4, appear in a panel for Sheffield Law School, address a group of interested people at CoVi with Craig Bennett of Friends of the Earth and Lord Andrew Lansley, the former Health Secretary. I learned more about how social media works from Mike Galsworthy of ScientistsForEU. I reluctantly deleted a post on Facebook, because someone in another law school dubbed the post as ‘smug’ for its claim of expertise.

My daughter searched the internet for a quotation from the late MP Jo Cox, and painstakingly wrote it on our front window, as a small act of solidarity.

And, even by 22 June, there was still a part of me that simply could not believe that the NHS could be such a central part of the EU referendum debate.

Because the way health systems are organised and financed is not an EU competence. Because EU migration isn’t the main migration issue when it comes to health. Because governments have a great deal of discretion on how they implement EU law involving health (even public health). Because EU governments have negotiated health system opt outs from TTIP.

But these were all nuances that became lost in the way the discussions unfolded.

When you’ve spent your entire career, as I have, learning about and teaching EU law, and trying, in any small way possible, to use that knowledge to pursue socially progressive agendas, it does feel odd to be arguing for the EU. After all, as I have often observed to my students, the EU may be understood as a “nasty capitalist organisation”. Trade deals (like the TTIP) can have similar unpleasant – and sometimes devastating – effects on those without power.

But the UK referendum on EU membership forced us all into a yes/no debate. There’s no room for the conditional in such a choice. So, at least to begin with, I found myself explaining the potential of the EU for change for the better, with illustrations of those things that the EU has done (for women, for workers, for impoverished regions, for the environment, to constrain the global tobacco industry, and so on) as evidence of the promise of more.

But as time went on, I found myself spending a great deal of time simply correcting gross factual inaccuracies as they emerged and trying to use legal arguments to stop misleading uses of the NHS logo. I

had not appreciated the ways in which the media, in an age of ‘instant news’, simply reproduce each other’s stories, without checking their veracity. Parts of the media from which I expect more disappointed me hugely. I will never buy the Guardian again (though they did publish a later letter).

And it wasn’t enough.

For me, as perhaps for others in universities, the ways in which “experts” were depicted by the media as untrustworthy became impossible to ignore. Scientists, economists, academics were all branded as equivalent to power-driven politicians. As my former colleague Rebecca Sanders observed, it is hugely insulting to assert that the general public are not interested in the views of experts, or too stupid to understand those views.

One thing the EU referendum has taught me is that the claim of authority that comes from the kind of knowledge built on deep reflection and learning, valued within the academy, is much more fragile than I hoped.

But equally, I was reminded, over and over, of the generosity of the academic communities to which I am privileged to belong. In Twitter conversations, emails, Facebook, videos, infographics, and in face-to-face encounters – people were giving up their time and energy to inform and assist. Some were ‘big names’ – known to me only through reading their published work. We were all still doing our ‘day jobs’ – teaching students, marking their work, writing papers, going to meetings. But no one was ‘too busy’ or ‘too important’ to opt out. And in all of this, the disciplinary distinctions that sometimes beset universities were irrelevant. This was the academy at its best.

I can’t name everyone here. I lost count of the times Steve Peers, Paul James Cardwell and Jo Shaw helped me out. I couldn’t have got on top of The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership without Gabriel Siles-Brügge.

Simon Hix (by Twitter) and Lisa McKenzie (by email) reminded me that, while overall immigration is a net benefit to the economy and creates jobs, we mustn’t ignore its geographical dimensions. The localized effects of migration are an important part of the lived experiences of many in the UK today. Rather than demonising immigrants, we need redistributive policies that bring more local services – including health services – to those parts of the UK directly affected. Now the UK has to renegotiate its agreements with the EU and the rest of the world. The details of these agreements will affect the NHS, public health, education, and social welfare both indirectly through their effects on the economy, and in some cases directly. Where global (or European) trade is underpinned by law that supports the interests of capital, there’s a job to be done to secure a better deal for those who need it most. Law professors have a small part to play.

I shall be carrying on, until we are all ‘healthier ever after’.



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# Wales, immigration, news media and Brexit



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Despite Wales benefiting significantly from EU funding, on June 23<sup>rd</sup> voters in Wales voted to leave the EU. Beyond Gwynedd, Ceredigion, The Vale of Glamorgan, Cardiff and Monmouthshire, Leave gained 52.5% of the overall share of the vote. The economic arguments to leave were unconvincing at best, with most credible, expert analyses arguing that Remain had a better, more evidence-based and well-founded case.

And yet, in Wales, as in many areas across the UK that have gained most advantage from EU investment, votes were cast that seemed diametrically opposed to their social interests.

In the immediate aftermath of the result, the atmosphere in Cardiff, where 60% voted to remain, and where I live and work, felt to be one of genuine shock and anxiety. Passionate and vocal political conversations seeking to make sense of and assess the potential fallout of the result were encountered in everyday contexts – the pre-school nursery, the trendy hairdressers, the bank foyer, the supermarket checkout. Having participated in the democratic process, people all seemed to want to talk about their feelings of shock and struggle to interpret fellow voters' behaviour. They also wanted to talk about the influence of immigration as an issue and about their feelings of shame surrounding Wales' apparent endorsement of UKIP's message on this issue.

UKIP's highly inflammatory 'Breaking Point' poster, for which Nigel Farage refused to apologise, was emblazoned on a fleet of vans in the final days of the Leave campaign. Picturing a queue of Syrian refugees at the Slovenian border, it symbolically condensed the complex conflation of refugee and other migration issues for which media scholars have long criticised immigration coverage. This was neatly wrapped in a securitising discourse and linked firmly with EU power: 'we must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders' the poster claimed, 'The EU has failed us all'. The poster was widely condemned as 'disgusting' and likened to a Nazi propaganda technique by many mainstream public figures. It was emblematic of an atmosphere engendered by the UKIP-led Leave campaign's approach, thought to give license to xenophobic violence – an argument expressed eloquently by many commentators, including Brendan Cox, the husband of MP Jo Cox, who tragically was murdered, allegedly by a fascist Britain First supporter, during the campaign itself.

Across the national press, the 'Breaking point' controversy was highlighted as a key moment in the campaign. Of 56 national press articles reporting criticism of the poster as xenophobic between 16<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> June (identified through a simple Nexis database keyword search), most focused on its uncouth pandering to the worst of public instincts, yet nonetheless noted the likely resonance of its message with some voters. Few sought to reflect

upon how such resonance may have been aided or encouraged by the seemingly inexorable rightward shift of mainstream public discourse on immigration over at least two decades, and how that may have prepared the ground for the campaign.

It was not just a xenophobic campaign, arguably, but the cumulative force of an aggressive anti-immigration sentiment, long legitimated by the political mainstream and reproduced in the news media that won it for Leave. This long-standing 'cultural work' provided the immediate conditions of plausibility to scapegoat immigration for society's ills. Key claims of UKIP's populist discourse are to represent an 'anti-establishment' position, to stand up against 'our' lack of freedom and to take back control of the nation. Yet, more than 'regulation', 'red tape' and other generalising euphemisms, immigration as a familiar national object of hostility served as the most tangible symbol of what could be 'changed' if only 'we' had more power.

Why did Wales vote against its own interests? The answer is evidently not simply to be found in the mediated construction of antipathy towards immigration. We might point out that years of political failure to represent ordinary peoples' interests adequately, the erosion and hollowing-out of publicly owned resources that allow everyone at least a small, tangible stake in a society that feels like it cares about their existence, combined with nearly 20 years of a dominant public discourse advocating a 'tougher' approach to immigration seem plausible explanations. All Leave had to do was press the buttons.

One reason people vote for change is that they are fearful of what the future holds. Another reason is hope for a better one. One question for the news media is whether it might have a role in addressing the 'deficit of hope' that arguably facilitated the Leave campaign's xenophobic message. Can assertive and positive arguments for the things people should have a right to hope for be more newsworthy? There would of course be disagreements about those hopes, but with reports of increasingly confident xenophobic violence now populating headlines, it is surely worth renewed reflection.

# The referendum campaign and the public's constitutional understanding

The decision to leave the EU is constitutionally momentous. The legal issues it raises have been analysed by, among others, [Mark Elliott](#), [Alan Renwick](#), [Stephen Tierney](#), and [Steve Peers](#). This contribution does not wish to replicate them. Instead it discusses where the referendum campaign itself leaves the public's understanding of the constitution.

Referendums should have an educational function. Their suitability for resolving knotty questions rests not on the bare fact that the public decides, but that it is an informed public. Rather than rising to the occasion, the referendum descended into a series of questionable assertions that saw its closing stages punctuated by pleas [for the facts](#). Despite organisations such as [Full Fact](#) and initiatives like [UK in a Changing Europe](#), half-truths and untruths abounded. Among the most notorious were Vote Leave's incorrect claims that Turkey was poised to join the EU and persistent disagreement between both sides about their economic forecasts. This failure in political communication was not confined to the specific issues concerning the relationship between the UK and the EU; it overflowed into the wider constitutional sphere.

Particular problems arose from Vote Leave's constitutional vision. In line with mainstream thinking, this had Parliamentary sovereignty at its core, but its interpretation was one-dimensional. It failed to appreciate the wider constitutional framework within which Parliament operates and gave the public an oversimplified view of the constitution. Its misunderstandings could have serious knock-on effects.

During the campaign, the Queen's stance on Brexit was apparently twice leaked to *The Sun*. The legitimacy of a hereditary monarch with various formal roles, including ultimate responsibility for appointing the Prime Minister, hinges upon their public neutrality. These incidents, presumably intended to boost Vote Leave's patriotic message by drawing on the Queen's royal capital, undermined this premise. The irony – to protect one core constitutional principle, the leaker tarnished another – implied that the constitution is only about Parliamentary sovereignty, not about other matters, even those as obvious as the Queen's neutrality. Similarly, the focus on 'restoring' an idyllic British Parliament meant, at least in England, that little attention was paid to the equally obvious devolution issues. It was not made sufficiently clear that Brexit could jeopardize the Union.

Rhetoric was deployed about ['unelected EU judges'](#) overriding Parliament's will. This misrepresented the situation which will prevail until Brexit concludes. In domestic law, EU law is only effective, and only takes primacy over UK legislation, because of the terms Parliament wrote into the European Communities Act 1972. It is not because of EU judges. Indeed, there are good [legal reasons](#) to

suspect that, if Parliament expressly instructed UK judges to ignore applicable EU law, or if EU law conflicted with a fundamental constitutional principle, it would not be enforced in domestic law. It is inaccurate to perceive EU law as an unstoppable invader; even in the [rare](#) situation where the UK government did not vote in favour of EU legislation, Parliament had chosen to accept it.

Relegating Parliamentary sovereignty's value to a matter of all-or-nothing patriotism disguises facts like this showing that it encapsulates a representative political process capable of nuanced thought on difficult issues. It is valuable because it can weave competing ideas, arguments, and principles into its decision-making process. Depicting it as a blunt object oversimplifies the complexity of constitutional politics and encourages shallow thinking about fundamental issues within our system of government.

Attacking 'unelected' judges also neglects the value of an independent and expert judiciary. It ignores that British judges are, happily, unelected: this helps them remain independent and uphold the rule of law. The double standard – unelected judges are fine for us but not for them – is troubling. It corrodes respect for the rule of law. This attitude to the EU judiciary may legitimise British unwillingness to comply with other international legal obligations and normalise claims that judicial decisions are illegitimate if one disagrees with them.

Why does this matter? Apart from the general importance of encouraging constitutional literacy, the result precedes further constitutional events and reforms. The Prime Minister has announced his intention to resign. There may be calls for a snap election when his successor is named. A second Scottish Independence referendum seems likely, and the situation in Northern Ireland is unclear. Proposals to replace the Human Rights Act 1998 with a 'British Bill of Rights', and perhaps to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights itself, loom. Understanding these issues requires an awareness of constitutional principles outside of Parliamentary sovereignty: when and how can Parliament be dissolved? What are the powers of the Scottish Parliament? What about the Good Friday Agreement? How should we protect human rights? It is to be hoped that these crucial matters are debated within an atmosphere more appreciative of our intricate constitutional tapestry than was the EU referendum.



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# The EU referendum and the Country of Origin principle (COO)



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The debate about the EU referendum has been polarised, the Remain camp stressing the risks of Brexit, the Leave camp arguing that the UK would be better off if it reasserted its sovereignty, took control of its borders and stemmed immigration. Each side has been accusing the other of scaremongering, of exaggerating the financial threats associated with a UK departure or the threat of immigration, of EU's further widening or its development to a super-state. This debate has been unhelpful to voters, as it has failed to explain the nature of the EU as a supranational organisation, its workings and the benefits of being a member. Media policy has hardly featured as a campaign issue. This piece attempts to retrospectively fill this vacuum and to expose some of the fallacies of the case for Brexit – which unhelpfully also underlay the Remain Camp's soft Euroscepticism – by taking a bird's eye view of one specific aspect of EU's audiovisual policy: the country of origin principle (COO).

## **The COO and national sovereignty**

The COO is the cornerstone of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) (former Television without Frontiers Directive), the most important regulatory instrument for the audiovisual sector in Europe, adopted in 1989 as a single market initiative to establish a legal framework for the cross-border transmission of TV programmes. In simple terms the meaning of the COO is that Member States are obliged to ensure the unhindered reception of audiovisual media services, i.e. TV broadcasts and on demand services, lawfully transmitted in their state of origin. They only have a limited possibility to restrict such foreign services when they manifestly, seriously and gravely breach provisions concerning the protection of minors or public order. The COO is a specific manifestation of the very mechanisms that allow persons, goods and services to move freely across the EU. It undeniably encroaches upon the power of the Member to shape their broadcasting orders at will. Some have even exaggeratedly stated that it signifies the end of the broadcasting sovereignty of the Member States. However, one needs to pause and ask: what is the real meaning of this sovereignty in an interconnected world where countries have limited possibilities to contain satellite transmission to their territories and are forever caught in the internet's global web?

## **Why does the UK support the COO?**

Both the Leave and Remain camps were united in their single-minded insistence on the UK's national sovereignty, the former seeing departure as a way to strengthen it, the latter wishing to further it by staying in and working with the EU. If sovereignty is at the core of what makes or breaks the UK's EU membership, one might have expected a principle such as the COO to be anathema for the UK government. A principle that weakens

national sovereignty would surely be something to fight against, to dilute, to eradicate. Yet, the exact opposite is the case. The UK has been one of the most vocal proponents of the COO. A quick look at the official UK [response](#) to a recent consultation on the AVMSD is telling. The UK government fiercely defended the COO from Member States such as France that wished to transfer the power to regulate broadcasts from the country of transmission to the country of reception, thus allowing Member States to impose their own standards on incoming programmes. The UK's [argument](#) was that the COO is a 'fundamental and critical precondition for the generation of a Digital Single Market in content', that it makes broadcasts subject only to 'the regulatory standards of whichever country the service is based, as opposed to requiring a channel to adhere to 27 slightly different regulatory standards in each country in which it is received', that it 'lowers trade barriers by facilitating operation for industry and reducing costs'. In particular, as a result of this principle, 'the broadcasting market has seen an increase in the number of channels from 47 in 1989 to over 11,000 today, an increase for VoD [video on demand] revenue from 61 million Euros in 2007 to 616 million Euros 2011 (up 45.7%)'.

A sense of bewilderment is inevitable at this point. Is it really the UK government that extolled the benefits of the digital single market for its economy? The same government that gave in to a populist, high-risk referendum deal, whose destabilising consequences will reverberate for a long time to come? If the COO has been so undeniably beneficial, and if similar mechanisms govern what was the referendum's bone of contention, the free movement of persons, then perhaps it would have been worth revisiting the contribution all the allegedly hand to mouth living, benefit seeking migrants make to the UK economy. It would have also been worth bearing in mind that the UK has been able to meaningfully influence EU decision-making, as it has done by successfully arguing in favour of the retention of the COO principle for the future, an argument that it could only make by being a member, not an outsider.

# Calming the storm: fighting falsehoods, fig leaves and fairy tales

Will the EU referendum be remembered as a golden moment in British democratic history? Was it really an example of how to 'do' democracy in the Twenty-First Century? Or was it an example of fairy tales and falsehoods that tended to create more heat than light and a dysfunctional system that was unable to enforce truthfulness?

In its report published at the end of May 2016, the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee complained that 'The public debate is being poorly served by inconsistent, unqualified and, in some cases, misleading claims and counter-claims.' It added, 'Members of both the 'Leave' and 'Remain' camps are making such claims.' But the standard of public debate did not improve, and the former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, felt forced to state publicly that he was 'angry about the way the British people are being misled'. Such claims resonate with a public letter signed by over 250 leading academics that suggested that the level of misinformation in the Referendum campaign was so great that the democratic legitimacy of the final vote might be questioned.

Now that the Referendum has happened and the storm has somewhat abated the question that demands urgent attention is how any future referendum might be conducted on the basis of a more rigorous – dare we suggest even fact-based – public discussion?

If the problem that the EU referendum exposed was the inability of the British political system to enforce even the most basic requirements in relation to publicly-funded information campaigns, there are at least four reforms that could be considered to prevent such situations arising in future. The first is a legal response in the form of new legislation that would state that, just as some lying in election campaigns is against the law, so too should lying in referendum campaigns be against the law. Campaigners who violate such provisions could then be subject to criminal sanctions. The risk is that this may create significant unintended consequences in the form of far-reaching concerns about freedom of speech and the transfer of powers from elected politicians to unelected judges.

Tighter press regulation would be a second option. The Independent Press Standards Organisation, has upheld at least four complaints relating to inaccuracy that related to the Referendum. But its rulings typically take two or three months and there is a case for insisting that not only are rulings delivered more quickly but, where those complaints are upheld, retractions or corrections should have a prominence commensurate to that of the original article.

If statutory measures are deemed too draconian and press regulation too harsh then the official campaign organisations could be obliged to recognize their *civic responsibilities*, in the sense of promoting engaged and informed citizenship, in return for their *civic rights*, that come in the form of public funds, free mailings, broadcasts, etc. The mechanism in this case might be an enforceable code of conduct, which the Treasury Committee's report (at paragraph 235)

seemed to favour. Once again, the devil would be in the detail: who or what would be the arbiter of when the facts strayed from tenuous but legitimate into the terrain of deceit and political lying? Would they be able to act quickly enough to work effectively? How would penalties be decided and enforced?

A final option would be to alter the statutory role of the Electoral Commission to include a duty to enhance public understanding of the issues at stake in the referendum. The extensive materials the New Zealand Electoral Commission produced for that country's 2011 Referendum on the voting system, for example, included detailed explanations of each option, statements of the criteria against which the options might be evaluated, and analyses of how the options perform against these criteria. In what was (it should be acknowledged) a much less intense or politicised campaign than the current one, journalists frequently relied heavily on the Commission's guide as a basis for their reporting.

There is also a rather awkward question concerning the meaning and delivery of public service broadcasting in the UK, notably in relation to the BBC. If major broadcasters have a public service obligation, if they are maintaining high quality 'fact-checkers' and 'myth busters', then why are they required to maintain a degree of impartiality and balance between both sides of the debate when the expert analysis, on certain specifics, overwhelmingly favours one side of the argument over the other? Impartiality in this context risks simply facilitating the promotion of falsehoods, fig leaves, fantasy and fairy tales as fact.

The twist, sting or barb in the tale is, however, that institutional change is unlikely to prevent future storms without a complementary shift in the cultural foundations of British politics. This is a critical point that the EU Referendum brutally exposed. The operating culture of British politics appears increasingly infused with a form of attack politics in which negative campaigning, personal slurs and populist declarations are dominant. The paradox is that this form of politics risks achieving little more than fuelling anti-political sentiment and the emergence of ever-greater numbers of 'disaffected democrats'. In this context, there is a danger that any policing of the standards of claim and counter-claim in future referendums could simply be used to fuel a populist fire: that injunctions against certain claims could be turned around and presented as further evidence of the perfidy of 'the establishment'. Fighting falsehoods therefore requires fundamental change in how we think about and structure our democracy. That is a challenge that we should all seek to address once the referendum is over. Failure to do so may do more than render future referendums unhealthy. If the degree of mendacity witnessed in this campaign were to become commonplace in our electoral politics as well, one of the crucial foundations of our democratic system would be badly damaged.



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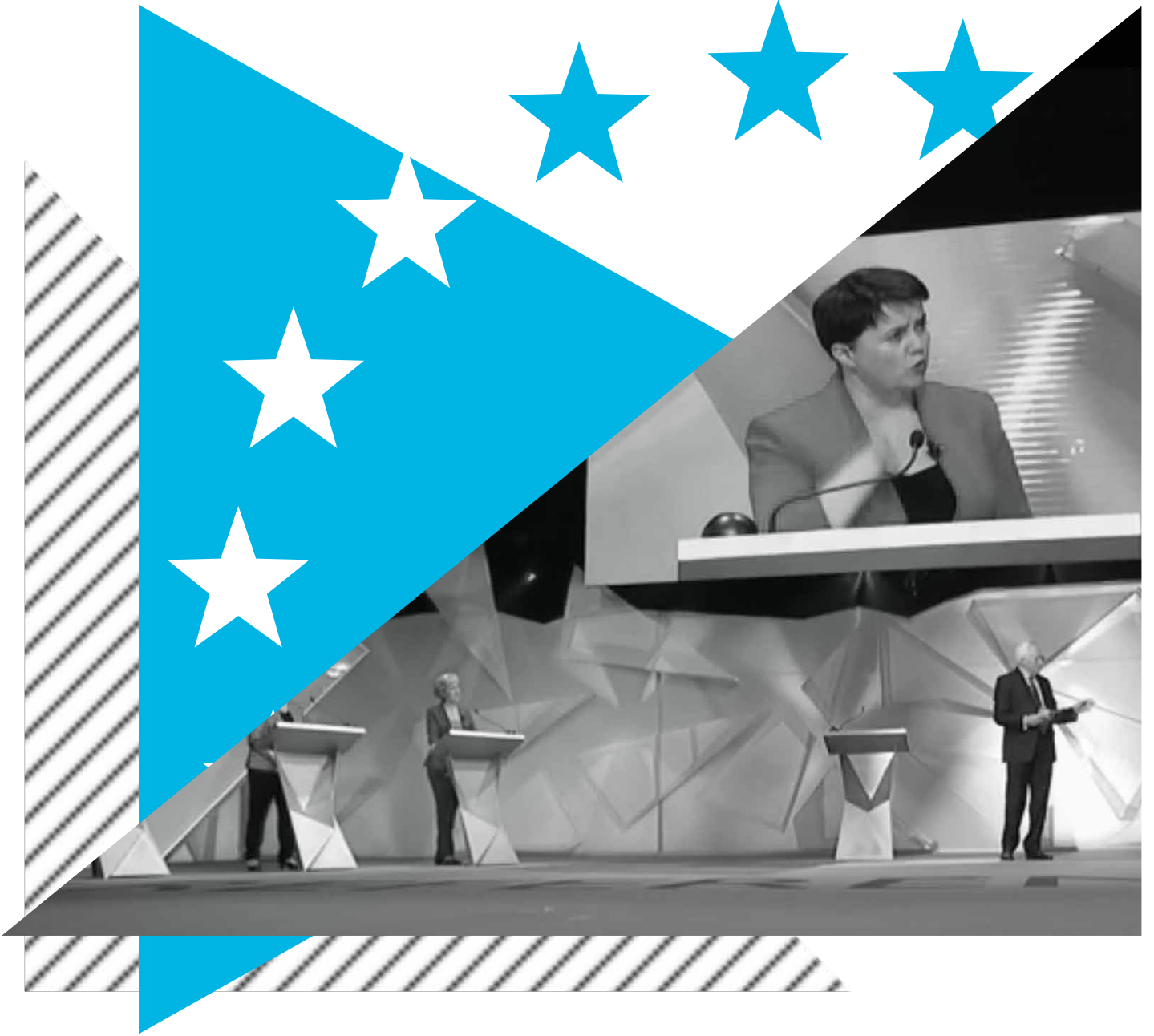
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News



# The press and the Referendum campaign

Our initial findings from research of press coverage in the first three months of the referendum campaign shows that the majority was heavily skewed in favour of Brexit. Here we provide some further detail on those findings together with some preliminary thoughts on their wider significance.

## Key findings about the coverage

Our research is based on a study undertaken with communications research consultancy [PRIME Research](#) into press coverage of the referendum campaign. The findings presented here come from analysis of two sample days per week (Tuesday & Saturday) of press coverage in the London Editions of 9 National newspapers during the first three months of the referendum campaign, from David Cameron's post-summit Cabinet meeting on February 20 to 31st May. A full report for the whole period up to referendum day will be published in September.

Of the 1558 articles focused on the referendum (an average of 52 per day studied across the 9 newspapers), 41% were in favour of leaving, with only 27% in favour of staying in the EU. (23% were categorised as 'mixed or undecided' and 9% as adopting no position.)

Of the total number of spokespeople quoted in the articles, 35% were UK politicians, of whom 70% were Conservatives and just 13% Labour, with UKIP spokespeople quoted in 8% of articles.

*The Daily Express* had the highest share of pro-leave articles (75% of all its articles about the referendum, compared to only 5% of pro-remain ones) followed by *The Daily Mail* (61% vs. 14%). A majority of the articles published in *The Sun*, *The Daily Star* and *The Telegraph* were also pro-leave, while the newspapers with the highest share of pro-remain articles were, in order, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror*, and *the FT*. *The Times*' coverage was relatively evenly balanced between positions, with a slight preponderance of pro-leave articles. All newspapers, whatever their main position, included some articles from the other point of view, but the proportion was smallest in *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror*. In terms of issues, the economy featured most heavily in *the FT* and *The Times*, with migration, sovereignty and security jointly taking on a dominant position in the largely pro-leave coverage of the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Star* and *the Daily Mail*.

## A campaign that operated at two levels

We have still to analyse the tone of the coverage in detail but believe this may have been a factor in the campaign as the two sides increasingly operated in very different registers. The Remain camp's focuses on economic risks and expert endorsement of these, appears to have compounded the sense that they represented an elite. It contrasted with the more

emotive pull of the Leave campaign's approach, their hostility to experts and elites, and their very effective slogan of retaking control of the country, which neatly brought together concerns about sovereignty and migration. In that sense the Leave campaign's messages offered a better balance of hope as well as fear and worked better in the popular press (In arguments about the post-referendum future only 12% were coded as positive for Remain compared to 40% positive for Leave).

## Press coverage resonated beyond its readers

The rise of online news and the continuing decline of newspaper circulation has not ended the relevance of the press to political debate. Recent [Reuters Institute research](#) shows that two thirds of people use BBC TV news each week compared to 14% who read the Sun in print and 17% who use the Mail online. But as John Gapper [wrote recently in the FT](#), Fleet Street may be "smaller, weaker and less profitable than before, but it still bites".

The long recognised agenda setting role of the press for the broadcast media, may have been particularly important in this campaign. All broadcasters are bound by a requirement to offer due impartiality. Given the way the referendum debate cut across traditional party lines, broadcasters may have relied more than usual on the press in deciding how best to balance their campaign coverage.

As Dominic Wring and colleagues found, the influence of pro Brexit coverage increased once circulation is taken into account since [over 80% of consumers who buy a daily newspaper read a title favouring British withdrawal from the EU](#).

Age mattered too in terms of readership and voting behaviour. Press readership skews heavily to the older age groups; recent [research on UK news consumption](#) suggests that while 29.3% of 15-24s are print newspaper readers, this compares to 67.9% of over-65s. [The BBC reported](#) a survey by Lord Ashcroft of over 12,000 voters after they had cast their ballot suggesting that older voters were more likely to have voted Leave and in addition that turnout among older people also appears to have been higher than average.

In conclusion, based on our initial findings of the first three months of press coverage, the majority of the press was heavily skewed in favour of Brexit. It also seems possible that this may have had some influence on the wider media coverage. However, understanding whether and how that might have impacted on the result is beyond the scope of this research.



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# The narrow agenda: how the news media covered the Referendum



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The Referendum was always going to pose significant challenges for those covering the campaign. When the battle lines became clearer, it was obvious that news organisations could not resort to established practices derived from their reporting of electoral contests. With the Party so divided, the “Tory press” had to decide which Conservatives they preferred. Broadcasters had to assess whether inclusion of participants beyond the governing party risked introducing new imbalances in their coverage given the other significant parties wholly or mainly endorsed staying in the EU.

The Centre for Research in Communication and Culture audited national news coverage of the Referendum between 6 May and 22 June. We analysed the main weekday bulletins on BBC1, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News, as well as a representative sample of pages from the print editions of all ten UK national daily newspapers. Our purpose was to measure three balances: the extent to which coverage favoured one or other position (‘directional’), the amount of coverage given to the respective campaigns (‘stopwatch’), and the range of issues covered (‘issue’).

## Directional balance

One measure for discerning press alignment involved subtracting the volume of items that advanced the IN position from the total that supported OUT. This enabled us to position different newspapers on an ‘opinion continuum’. To varying degrees, five newspapers favoured IN and five OUT. Overall there was a greater volume (60 to 40%) of articles supporting OUT over IN. When these figures are weighted by sales, this advantage is far larger (80% versus 20% in favour of OUT).

Pro-IN and Pro-OUT newspapers gave more prominence and quotation space to IN and OUT campaigners respectively. In TV terms none of these clear directional tendencies were evident. Analysis of 482 TV news items found a small surplus of 28 IN orientated items over OUT items. There was also much greater parity in the broadcasters’ presentation and quotation of competing viewpoints.

## Stopwatch balance

Table 1 compares the amount of times parties, corporate and civil society representatives were featured in news coverage. The results show the dominance of Conservative sources, particularly in the pro-OUT newspapers. Business sources were most prominent in Pro-IN newspapers. TV news gave far greater prominence to reporting and quoting the views of citizens. Where there was marked consistency was in the marginalisation of other parties. Labour’s presence was boosted by increased prominence during the last two weeks of the campaign. UKIP (mainly its

leader) sustained some media presence but the other parties were side-lined. The era of multi-party politics witnessed by us in last year’s General Election found scant expression in coverage of this campaign.

Reporting was highly ‘presidential’. The top five most frequently reported participants were David Cameron (8.9% of all appearances), Boris Johnson (6.7%), George Osborne (4.0%), Nigel Farage (3.2%) and Michael Gove (2.8%). Cumulatively these individuals accounted for more than one in four of all media appearances.

## Issue balance

Table 2 compares which issues gained the most coverage in the press and TV news.

There was remarkable consistency in issue coverage across the media (i.e. TV, and pro-IN and OUT newspapers), with three issues dominating media debate: the economy, immigration, and the conduct of the campaign itself. Figure 2 shows the relative prominence of the ‘Economy’ and ‘Immigration’.

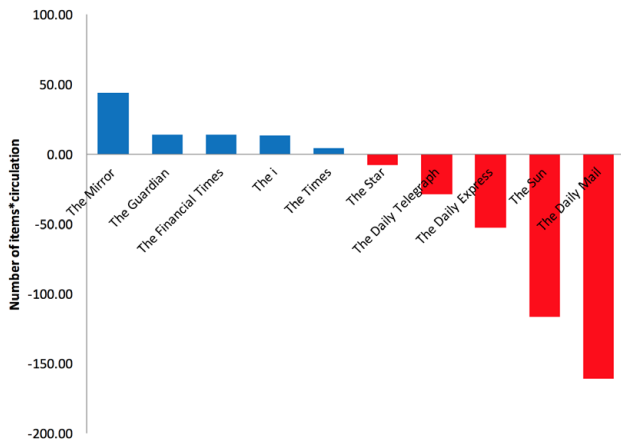
Initially the economy received considerably more attention than immigration, potentially to the benefit of the IN campaign. Later there was, however, a significant shift with immigration overtaking economic issues and this may have given the OUT campaign valuable momentum. Subsequently, while the economy regained pole position, there was closer proximity between the two main substantive issues in the closing stages of the campaign than at the start.

The marginalisation of many other major issues including the environment, taxation, employment, agricultural policy and social welfare was striking. Devolution attracted less than 1% of news coverage. Given their clear Remain majorities and the future implications for both Scotland and Northern Ireland this is a remarkable absence.

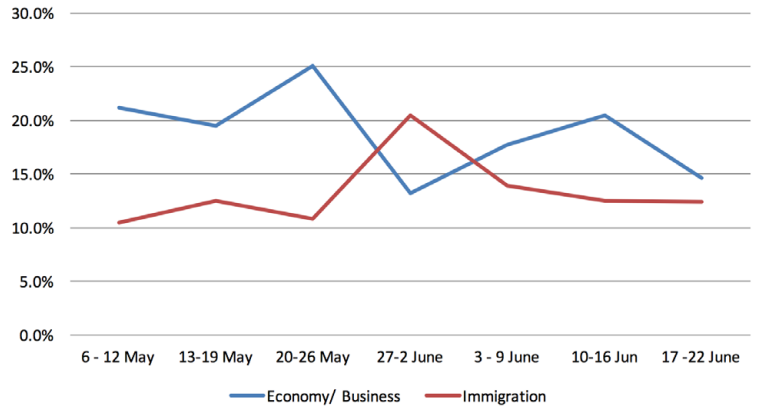
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*The authors would like to thank Jon Crannage, Charlotte Hester, Simon Huxtable, Sarah Lewis, Nadilla Mohamed-Jamil, Amanda Overend, David Smith, Lukas Stepanek, Ian Taylor, Dane Vincent and Judy Wing for their invaluable assistance.*

**Figure 1: Volume of IN to OUT items weighted by circulation**



**Figure 2: prominence of 'Economy' and 'Immigration' news by sample week**



**Table 1. Comparison of the frequency of appearance by sources**

|                                   | IN papers | OUT papers | TV    |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Conservative (IN and OUT)         | 35.7%     | 50.3%      | 29.3% |
| Labour (mainly IN)                | 11.9%     | 10.0%      | 10.0% |
| UKIP (OUT)                        | 3.7%      | 4.5%       | 4.2%  |
| SNP (IN)                          | 1.0%      | .7%        | .7%   |
| Lib Dems (IN)                     | 1.1%      | .2%        | .7%   |
| Other party (incl Green, IN)      | 0.7%      | 0.5%       | 0.5%  |
| Celebrities/ media                | 2.9%      | 2.6%       | 4.6%  |
| Experts                           | 4.9%      | 3.5%       | 4.7%  |
| Business                          | 8.2%      | 3.6%       | 4.1%  |
| Trade union                       | .9%       | .5%        | .5%   |
| Citizens                          | 5.8%      | 4.5%       | 26.0% |
| Other ref. pressure group         | 9.0%      | 6.2%       | 3.5%  |
| Government <u>depts</u> /agencies | 4.9%      | 5.3%       | 2.7%  |
| Other UK                          | 3.3%      | 3.0%       | 0.9%  |
| EU organisations                  | 2.2%      | 1.6%       | .7%   |
| Other non-UK                      | 3.9%      | 2.9%       | 6.9%  |

**Table 2: Most prominent issues**

|                              | All Media % | IN papers % | OUT papers % | TV news % |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|
| Referendum conduct           | 30.9        | 33.5        | 29.6         | 28.9      |
| Economy/business             | 18.9        | 18.9        | 18.9         | 18.8      |
| Immigration                  | 13.2        | 9.9         | 14.8         | 15.6      |
| Public opinion and citizens  | 8.0         | 8.8         | 5.0          | 11.3      |
| Constitutional/legal         | 6.1         | 5.8         | 6.7          | 5.5       |
| Employment                   | 3.6         | 3.9         | 3.4          | 3.4       |
| Defence/military/security    | 3.4         | 2.9         | 4.4          | 2.7       |
| Standards/ corruption        | 2.4         | 2.1         | 4.2          | .3        |
| Health & health services     | 2.3         | 2.7         | 2.2          | 1.7       |
| EU operations and activities | 1.7         | 1.4         | 1.6          | 2.4       |
| Housing                      | 0.9         | .7          | 1.1          | .8        |
| Crime/ law and order         | 0.9         | 1.1         | 1.2          | 0.0       |
| Social security              | 0.8         | .6          | 1.2          | .7        |
| Devolution in UK             | 0.8         | .8          | .3           | 1.5       |
| Other foreign policy         | 0.7         | .8          | .7           | .5        |
| Taxation                     | 0.6         | .6          | .7           | .5        |
| Public services              | 0.6         | .1          | 1.0          | .6        |
| Agriculture                  | 0.6         | .6          | .3           | .9        |
| Environment                  | 0.5         | .7          | .6           | 0.0       |
| Education                    | 0.5         | .4          | .7           | .2        |
| All other issues             | 2.7         | 3.5         | 1.5          | 3.4       |

# Newspapers' editorial opinions during the referendum campaign



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Without solving the million-dollar question (or should that be £350 million?) about media effects, it is unwise to claim that newspapers' editorial positions influenced the referendum. However, my analysis of all editorials in the fortnight preceding the vote reminds us that newspapers should be scrutinised as independent political actors. Representing a newspaper's collective opinion, newspapers intervened in the debate through declarations of editorial positions with the strategic aim of influencing politicians, campaigners and readers. Whilst we already know that news coverage was skewed towards Brexit, what editorial positions were taken, how strongly were these injected into the debate, and how were positions constructed?

Deep divisions within political parties, public opinion, and Britain's complex relationship with the EU were always going to make it difficult to predict which side newspapers would support. Including their Sunday counterparts, and the surprise positions of *The Times* and the *Mail on Sunday*, 6 newspapers supported Remain (*Mirror*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Financial Times*) and 5 backed Leave (*Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*). The sibling disagreement between the daily and Sunday editions of the traditionally Conservative supporting *Times* and *Mail* titles adds to evidence that editorial opinions are determined by a far more complex set of influences than loyalties to proprietors or parties.

Although all papers declared a position, not all chose to promote their agenda to the same extent. Measuring the salience of opinion between 10-23 June, Diagram 1 shows that on average Leave newspapers published editorials on more days (9.4) than Remain papers (7.6). *The Sun* and *Mail* voiced their opinion every day and the *Telegraph* and *Express* were not far behind. *The Guardian* was most vocal on the Remain side, but the other Remain papers made for much quieter company.

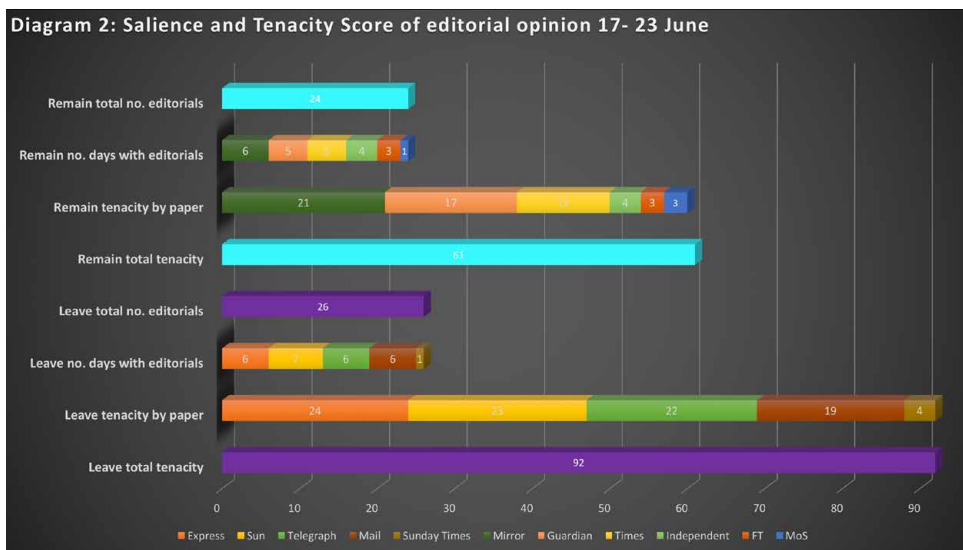
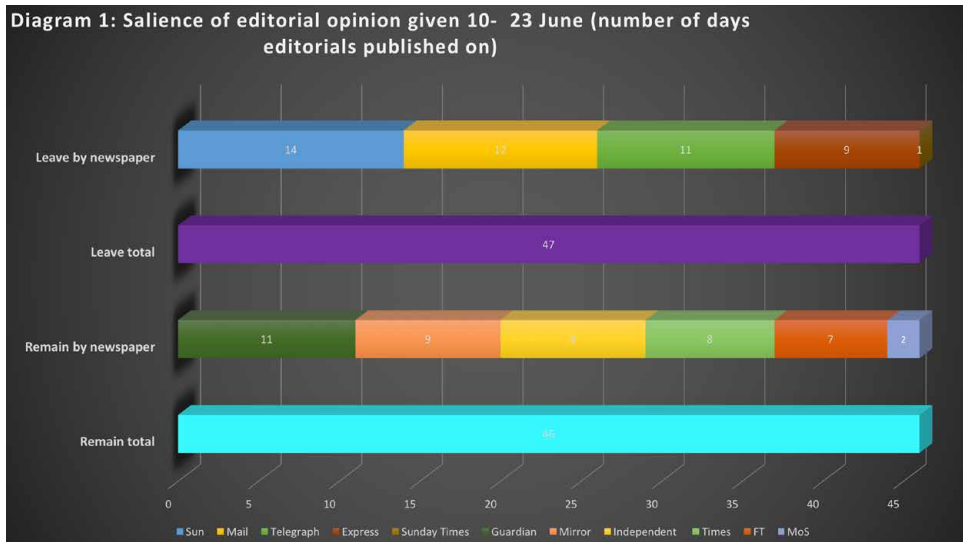
Perhaps more revealingly, combining a range of factors in addition to basic salience to provide a score for the tenacity of each newspaper's editorial position illustrates that those supporting Leave had by far the loudest voice during the last week of the campaign. Even without considering that the combined readership of the pro-Leave papers outweighs that of pro-membership titles, it is clear that Leave newspapers dedicated more resources to promoting their view (Tenacity score 92). The *Express* created a campaign logo from their English Knight masthead to announce the paper's crusade to 'get us out of the EU' on two front pages and used this in a free poster claiming "We demand our country back". *The Daily Mail* and *Sun* frequently published more than one Leave editorial on the same day and gave their opinion the highest possible prominence by featuring it on the front page at least twice. They were joined by the *Telegraph* and *Express* in using their front pages to plead with readers to vote Leave on polling day. Such vigorous

campaigning was not matched by the Remain papers, which were 30% less tenacious and varied in their campaigning efforts (Tenacity score 61). Only the *Mirror* came anywhere near a Tenacity score (21) to rival the highest of the Leave papers (24). The front page was used sparingly by 3 out of 5 (*Mirror*, *Times*, *Guardian*) to declare and/or promote their position. Most disappointingly, whilst the Leave papers pulled out all the stops on polling day, only the *Mirror* clearly called for a vote to Remain. *The Independent* chose simply to urge readers to 'get out and vote', the *Guardian* said nothing, and the *Times* seemed to get cold feet, using one of its three editorials to point to multiple ways it thought the EU should reform.

Newspapers' constructions of the issue were characterised by three themes. First, the majority of editorials on both sides focussed on criticising and denouncing each campaign, ironically perpetuating the very lack of 'facts' that they criticised. Second, a narrative of 'us vs them' was a strong feature of this criticism, with both sides (although Leave more so) emphasising the gap between politicians/elites/experts and the electorate. Although details of who constituted 'us' and 'them' varied according to predictable Labour/Conservative affiliations, papers were united in their anti-establishment view which arguably played into the Leave campaign's hands (see Diagram 3).

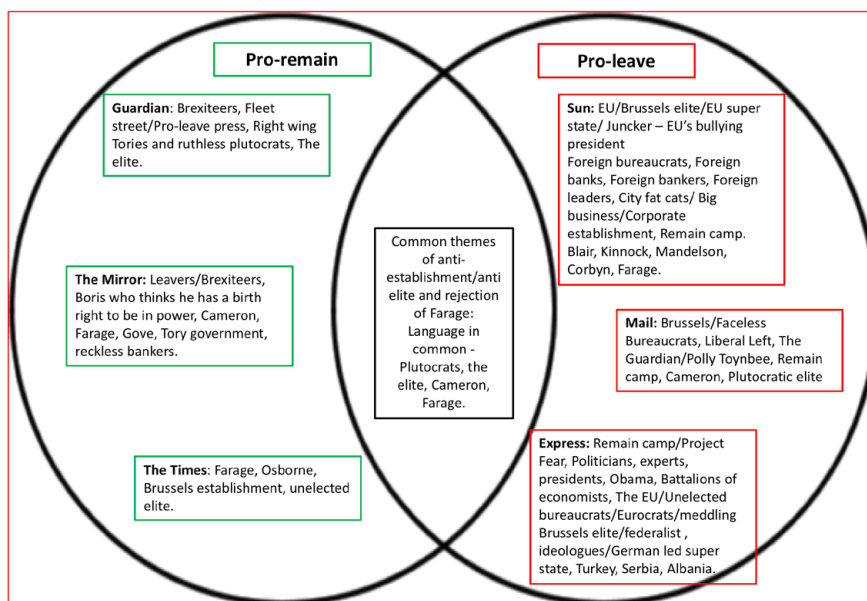
Third, Leave newspapers employed compelling narratives and metaphors, combining language more familiar to descriptions of war with nationalistic concerns about sovereignty and immigration: "This is truly a Battle for Britain" (*Express*, 19/6); the *Daily Mail* claimed to explode and demolish the four main Remain lies (23/6); "Today you can make history – by winning Britain's independence from the crushing might of the Brussels machine. We urge you to vote Leave ... and make today our Independence Day" (*Sun*, 23/6).

Overall, in keeping with their reputation, the anti EU newspapers shouted loudest, with the strongest conviction, and with a message that we can assume voters found more compelling. Why does this matter now that we have voted to Leave the EU? Because, whilst we no longer have seat at the table, we are still next door neighbours, which makes the job of scrutinising the EU more important than it was before.



The Tenacity Score is aggregate of the daily scores for each newspaper. The Tenacity score was calculated for each day of a newspaper's coverage as follows: 1 point per editorial article, 3 points for editorial comments featured on the front page, 3 points when the entire space for editorial comment was dedicated to the referendum, 1 extra point for editorial positions promoted with banners or logos on the front page. Maximum Tenacity score per day = 9.

**Diagram 3: Constructions of 'them'**



# Brexit ‘mansplained’: news coverage of the EU Referendum campaign



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Media coverage of British politics is stubbornly male-dominated at the best of times and EU referendum news would be no different. Eventually, Labour’s Harriet Harman made an intervention into the debate criticising the lack of visible women in the campaign. As it turned out, Harman’s intervention had some impact on the strategies employed by both sides, as women campaigners were subsequently deployed to take part in prominent televised debates; however this seemed to have very little impact on the subsequent news coverage. Analysis by Loughborough University’s Centre for Research in Communication and Culture showed that between 6<sup>th</sup> May and 22<sup>nd</sup> June, women accounted for just 25.3% of all individual sources included in television coverage and just 15.4% in the press. This demonstrates the extent to which the debate was dominated by men (Figure 1).

When we examine the roles that women actually take up in the coverage it is clear that women are less likely to be portrayed as exhibiting any form of expertise and much more likely to be included as ordinary citizens. On television women accounted for 16.5% of all politicians featured in the coverage, 25.5% of experts and 19.6% of business spokespersons whilst 48.1% of citizens were female. The press featured even fewer women, just 14.9% of politicians, 15.6% of experts and 10.3% of business voices. Even ordinary women were underrepresented in the press, accounting for just 39.1% of citizens (Table 1).

Despite the marginal status women occupied in the news coverage, when women were actually quoted in the press and on television their average quotation time or length were comparable with those of men. On television the average quote from a woman was 29 seconds long, compared to 28 seconds for men. Similarly, women were given 31 words on average compared to 33 words for men (Table 2). This means that when women actually appear they are granted a voice on similar terms to men, meaning that the main problem women had with regards to the coverage was gaining access to the media in the first place.

The thirty most visible campaigners included nine women in total, with Priti Patel the most prominent woman in 9<sup>th</sup> place (making 65 appearances). Furthermore, women account for only 10% of the total number of appearances in the top 30. It is also noteworthy that Patel and London Mayor Sadiq Kahn were the only BAME campaigners to feature in the top 30 demonstrating that this most important of political discussions, one in which the spectre of immigrants was routinely called upon to emphasise the benefits of withdrawing from the EU, was troublingly presided over by not just men, but primarily by white men.

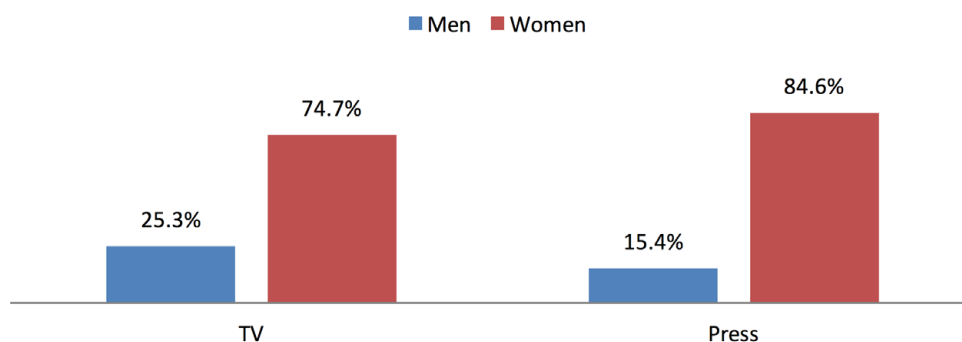
Since the news coverage was dominated by

just two policy areas - the economy and immigration - the prominence of white men in the debate was rendered still more problematic. The Leave campaign and their supporters in the press pushed immigration as the dominant reason for leaving the EU, increasingly framing the issue in intemperate and inflammatory language. That such rhetoric appeared so frequently in the everyday utterances of privileged white male campaigners like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson is deeply problematic, serving to normalise and legitimate openly xenophobic and occasionally racist sentiments which could have real and lasting consequences, reinforcing troubling ideas about who is and who is not welcome to a diverse audience of voters.

Given that immigration was one of the key issues, it is surprising that Home Secretary Theresa May was so marginal to the campaign (she made just 29 appearances in seven weeks of coverage). Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan was also conspicuous by her absence. Both women seem to have emerged as potential contenders for the Conservative leadership, perhaps suggesting that strategic motivations explain their lack of presence in the campaign. Even Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon failed to make much impact in the media debate, especially given that she had linked the outcome of the EU referendum to a potential future Scottish Independence referendum, something which is only now receiving the attention it deserves.

Many have criticised the tone, content and quality of the EU referendum campaign and its media coverage throughout this campaign. Both press and broadcasters should also be questioned for the narrow range of voices, issues and opinions that were given prominence in this most crucial political debate.

**Figure 1: Proportional presence of women and men (6 May - 22 June)**



**Table 1: Gender distribution by professional/ personal category**

|             | TV    |      | Press |      |
|-------------|-------|------|-------|------|
|             | Women | Men  | Women | Men  |
|             | %     | %    | %     | %    |
| Politicians | 16.5  | 83.5 | 14.9  | 85.1 |
| Experts     | 25.5  | 74.5 | 15.6  | 84.4 |
| Business    | 19.6  | 80.4 | 10.3  | 89.7 |
| Citizen     | 48.1  | 51.9 | 39.1  | 60.9 |

**Table 2: Average quotation time for Women and Men in coverage**

|       | TV         | Press    |
|-------|------------|----------|
| Women | 29 seconds | 31 words |
| Men   | 28 seconds | 33 words |

# Scrutinising statistical claims and constructing balance: Television news coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum



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During the 2016 EU Referendum campaign many people will have been confronted by a blizzard of facts and figures about the consequences of voting one way or another. So how well did UK television news interpret the statistical claims conveyed by both sides?

Cardiff University carried out a content analysis of evening television news bulletins over the ten week campaign. We examined bulletins on Channel 5 at 5pm, Channel 4 at 7pm and at 10pm on BBC, ITV and Sky News in order to assess not just the balance of issues, parties and personalities given airtime, but *how* broadcasters routinely scrutinised the claims made by the Leave and Remain campaigns.

Overall, we found roughly half of the 571 items examined related to the *process* of the Referendum, notably about campaign walkabouts or the strategies of competing sides, as well as public opinion towards the EU and the way people would vote. There was also a focus on Conservative party infighting and speculation about the likely successor to David Cameron.

The economy was the major issue reported over the campaign, representing over a fifth of coverage, which included stories about economic forecasts and trade agreements. Immigration made up just over one in ten items, although this issue sometimes overlapped with stories about public services, housing and security.

Of the on-screen sources we examined, Boris Johnson made up 8.7% share of appearances – the most prominent figure for the Leave campaign – while 4.4% featured Nigel Farage. On the remain side, the PM and Chancellor were the most visible on television news (accounting for 7.2% and 4.1% respectively), with Jeremy Corbyn's share of appearances – 2.4% - well behind Conservative sources.

But beyond the issues, personalities and party-politics involved in the Referendum coverage, it was perhaps the lack of scrutiny by non-partisan sources that was most conspicuous by their absence. If we exclude the 12% of sources that did not express a favourable or unfavourable opinion towards EU membership, Tables 1 and 2 show the overwhelming voices heard on television news were by Leave or Remain campaigners. More independent actors – from think tanks, say, or academics – made up a tiny share of sources used to inform coverage.

Since over 4 in ten items featured a statistical claim about the EU, the burden of independent scrutiny was thus left to journalists. But how did they communicate the competing facts and figures of the campaigns? About a quarter of news items involving statistics were either challenged or contextualised by journalists, such as questioning the claim made by Leave that the UK paid £350m per week to Brussels or explaining that much of this money was

reinvested in the UK. Put another way, 3 in 4 items involving statistical claims were *not* subject to either further analysis or additional context.

In effect, this meant much of the coverage about the EU Referendum was left to campaign groups to argue with each other about the relative merits of leaving or remaining. Indeed, we found almost a third of news items involving statistics were tit-for-tat exchanges between rival camps, where journalists did not intervene one way or the other about the veracity or credibility of competing claims. Without a great deal of prior knowledge, it would be very difficult for audiences to make sense of these claims and counter-claims, regardless of their veracity.

Why does all this matter? Although broadcasters have to abide by 'due impartiality' guidelines, this does not necessarily mean they have to be balanced when reporting facts and figures. The editorial goals of accuracy and objectivity involve challenging or questioning claims about being in or out of the EU. Our analysis of Referendum coverage suggests that, while broadcasters may have been even-handed in terms of giving both sides equal time, they could have more independently scrutinised, challenged or contextualised many of the facts and figures that were used repeatedly by both sides.

Despite the ten-week campaign, just days before Referendum day one representative survey found less than a third - 31% - felt well or very well informed about their EU vote. The tit-for-tat exchanges between rival camps and the trading of statistical claims would probably not have helped many viewers make better sense of the issues confronting them. There may have been exaggerated claims from both sides of the debate, but it was also the case that some of the statistics presented were more credible than others. In this campaign, however, there was a sense that broadcasters were afraid to make such a judgement. Objectivity, in this sense, was trumped by impartiality. More regularly drawing on independent analysis may have enhanced people's understanding of the issues before they had cast their vote.

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*The research was carried out by Natasha Egan-Sjodin.*



Table 1: On screen sources used to support leave campaign

|                                           | %          |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>LEAVE campaign</b>                     | 80.2       |
| Economist                                 | 0.6        |
| Journalist/Media                          | 0.2        |
| Business                                  | 2.8        |
| Academic                                  | 0.6        |
| Foreign Leader or diplomat or institution | 0.6        |
| Celebrity                                 | 0.9        |
| Security Services                         | 0.4        |
| Public                                    | 13.6       |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>100</b> |

Table 2: On screen sources used to support remain campaign

|                                           | %          |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>REMAIN campaign</b>                    | 63.7       |
| Economist                                 | 1.2        |
| Journalist/Media                          | 0.2        |
| Business                                  | 3.6        |
| Academic                                  | 1.0        |
| Financial institution                     | 4.7        |
| Foreign Leader or diplomat or institution | 7.9        |
| Celebrity                                 | 1.6        |
| Security Services                         | 1.4        |
| Public                                    | 12.6       |
| Religious Leader                          | 0.4        |
| Trade Union                               | 1.4        |
| NHS                                       | 0.4        |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>100</b> |

# Regulated equivocation: the referendum on radio



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Under normal circumstances, one of the great virtues of broadcasting in the United Kingdom is the way in which it is closely regulated. This has been true of both the public and private sectors since their inception. In the case of the BBC, upon incorporation in 1927 under the first of a long series of Royal Charters, it was to be a public service - one which would rarely depart from a core principle of impartiality.

The arrival of a licensed commercial radio sector in 1973 meant an expanded regulatory body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), assumed the power to ensure that commercial radio should also be impartial over matters of politics and other public controversy. Relaxation of the regulation of private-sector radio with the passing of subsequent legislation and the replacement of the IBA with firstly the Radio Authority and then in 2003 Ofcom, did bring about successive changes over rules on ownership and the general nature of programming, but here, too, the core principle of impartiality still lies at the heart of commercial radio.

As is the case with television broadcasting in the UK, regulation over impartiality at least means that radio is free from the kind of crass partisanship we have witnessed over Europe in the press. While some newspaper titles owned by Rupert Murdoch and other press owners lost little time in promoting the case for Brexit, continuing a long tradition of printing mainly negative and even ridiculously exaggerated or even fabricated stories about the European Union, Sky was also bound by the regulation in force to be impartial, despite the influence of Mr Murdoch over the conduct of most of its business. Conversely, any streamed services which might be described as television or radio but which are not broadcast are, of course, exempt from content regulation, but compared to mainstream broadcasting services their audiences tend to be relatively small.

What this close regulation of broadcasting meant for radio's coverage of the referendum is clear. Impartiality meant the various arguments of both the Remain and Leave camps were widely treated equivocally, irrespective of their own merit. Shortly before the referendum campaign began in earnest, Ofcom published an advisory statement, clarifying how the standing provisions of its Broadcasting Code should be interpreted by licensees in the context of the referendum. The BBC's Editorial Guidelines were also clarified for the benefit of its own producers, reports and presenters. There can have been few experienced contributors to UK broadcasting who did not already realise that the referendum was to be one of those subjects over which the utmost professionalism - namely impartiality - was to be required, but both the BBC and Ofcom intended there to be little room for doubt.

We sampled a number of radio broadcasts of different kinds, with the intention of presenting our findings at a forthcoming conference and providing some empirical and qualitative evidence for a forthcoming book. There was no intention, and neither were

resources available, to analyse every broadcast on every regulated radio station in the UK, in order to establish to what extent the rules were adhered to or broken. By monitoring a range of news bulletins, discussion programmes and magazine programmes, we were nonetheless able to identify general trends and form some conclusions about the nature of the referendum coverage on radio and its possible effects.

There were some exceptions to what we found generally to be strict adherence to the impartiality requirement. In the commercial sector, some presenters announced their own voting intention - for example Julia Hartley-Brewer, who began an interview on Talk Radio with UKIP leader Nigel Farage by noting their common cause in supporting Brexit, but adding that she would nonetheless be asking him some tough questions. Generally, though, on both the BBC and commercial radio, every point made by or for the Remain campaign was countered by a 'balancing' point - often of almost exactly the same duration - in either the same bulletin or one shortly afterwards for the Brexiters, as is stipulated by the impartiality regulation.

Unfortunately for the Remain campaign, this balancing act meant however many economic experts, world leaders, business people or celebrities they produced to support their case, the manufactured 'balancing' riposte tended to consist of one of the Brexit supporters dismissing that case, usually without any further substantiation. Some presenters, notably on Radio 4's *Today* and *PM* programmes did occasionally attempt to challenge unfounded or misleading assertions, but there was little attempt to evaluate the claims of either side or to point out that Remain had the support of the vast majority of economic experts. Often the BBC referred listeners to a 'fact checking' service online, but its findings were rarely broadcast.

We believe this regulated equivocation may well have encouraged the undecided in believing that the decision facing them was a simple choice between binary opposites of little real consequence for the UK, when in fact the period immediately after the vote supported many of the economic claims of Remain. This equivocation reminded us of that adopted in the early 2000s, when the public debate over the safety of the MMR vaccination was also treated as a simple 'take it or leave it' choice by many broadcasters, only for the widely disputed claims by one individual that MMR was unsafe to be subsequently disproven by a large body medical evidence. We hope the decision taken over Brexit does not subsequently prove to be as potentially disastrous.

# Referendum night goings on

The live drama of election night results' programmes constitutes a moment of ritual affirmation, reminding people that even the most contested political conflicts are bounded; that the allocation of power has been settled without bloodshed; that everyday life will go on the day after and the cycle of plebiscitary choice will come round again before too long. Like switching off the Christmas lights, these are ceremonies of closure, signalling that the moment of democratic choice is now over and the return to mundane governance can commence.

The referendum result's programme on BBC1 tore up that script. Far from being an exercise in soothing reassurance, this was a precarious fair-ground ride. Far from being an exercise in closure, it seemed more like the announcement of a closing down sale. Such moments of existential instability present a challenge to broadcasters who are, as Roger Silverstone reminded us, key framers of everyday normality.

What can be gained from pursuing a forensic study of media spectacles of this kind? From the narrow perspective of political science, results' coverage would seem to be a peripheral detail, explaining little or nothing about why voters chose to vote one way or the other or how political campaign strategies succeeded or failed. Beyond such instrumentalist accounts, there is rather more going on in the political sphere than the dynamics of competition. Politics is inherently dramatic and illuminating political analysis seeks to understand the dramatic structures that underlie the distribution of power. In Victor Turner's terms, drama occurs when there is an interruption in the rhythm of mundane experience; a 'time out of time' in which relationships between scene, script and potential action seem somehow open-ended. Political drama entails indeterminacy and the ways in which people choose to respond to it. Where there is no disagreement there is no politics. Where there is certainty about what will happen next there is no drama. Few moments in politics capture the intrinsic uncertainty of politics more vividly than election night. It is here that rhetorical certitude is forced to encounter historical unpredictability. The drama of democracy resides in moments when people endeavour, however crudely, to shape the scene in which they are social actors.

Election results' coverage provides a rare moment of liveness in a political world that is largely dominated by memories, hearsay, narratives and visions. Most of the time political discourse is buried in reflections and aspirations. Even the live coverage of parliamentary proceedings is overshadowed by an architectural edifice designed to invoke the authority of the past. Election night programmes are live performances, reminding viewers that there is no script, only extemporality.

The unfolding drama of the Referendum result on the night of 23/4 June, 2016 will be recorded by historians as a pivotal moment in

the decline of the United Kingdom. The results' programme began, as most of these events do, with guest politicians offering self-serving speculations and strange, animated maps of the UK flashing in anticipation. These were moments of prelapsarian innocence in which liberal expectations of business as usual still prevailed.

The first crack in the appearance of normality occurred just after midnight when the result from the Newcastle area came in, defying the psephologists' predictions and signalling a ripple of dramatic uncertainty. As the hours passed it became clear that the vote was likely to be very close. At just after 4am Nigel Farage, having earlier appeared to concede defeat, made a victory speech, asserting that 'we fought against the merchant bankers' and that the anticipated vote to leave was a victory for 'decent people'. At 4.16 Chuka Umunna was the first person to use the word 'seismic', a metaphor that then ran wild, with no fewer than seven different speakers using it eleven times to describe the emerging reality. At 4.38 the BBC forecast a leave result. At 4.52 a tearful Keith Vaz appeared via video link, speaking of the result as a 'crushing, crushing decision'. A tweet from Paddy Ashdown declares 'God help this country'. By 5am the mood in the studio was funereal.

As dawn broke the programme began to move from shocked acknowledgement to stuttering explanation. At this point a new metaphor emerged: voters had decided to give the establishment 'a kicking'. This phrase was used five times, evoking images of voters as a gang of street thugs putting their boots into anyone who looked like they had passed their A-levels.

My plan in the coming weeks is to:

- note every single metaphor used in the course of the results' programme.
- explore the meanings and genealogies of these metaphors.
- devise an affective 'heat map' of the programme's content with a view to seeing how the referendum played out as feeling.

It will be a modest contribution to a much larger analysis of what preceded and followed the referendum result. But sometimes it is in the liveness of the moment that meanings can best be grasped.



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# The view from across the pond: Brexit on American media



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When the majority of Britons voted to leave the European Union on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, American media immediately took notice. TV networks, national newspapers, and their web portals quickly filled with live reports and commentary as the EU referendum results started to trickle in and a political and economic crisis began to unfold in Britain. In contrast with British media coverage, which was split between pro-leave and pro-remain outlets, U.S. media appeared to offer a unanimously negative interpretation of the results. This scramble to cover “Brexit” in the aftermath of the referendum stood in stark contrast with the approach that American news media had taken to this issue up to polling day. In the months leading to the vote, U.S.-based specialist publications such as the Wall Street Journal offered [some dire predictions](#). Yet, Britain’s EU referendum gained little traction in the top American media outlets that traditionally influence the broader national news agenda, including the New York Times and the Washington Post.

The EU referendum was clearly of strategic importance to the U.S. government and president Obama made his preference for the UK to remain in the EU clear when he argued that [“The UK is at its best when it’s helping to lead a strong European Union”](#) during a trip to London in April 2016. Yet, it was particularly challenging for American media to report on this issue as it involved communicating a complex and technical foreign affairs topic to an audience that realistically had little knowledge of the EU and whose interest in international politics is generally low. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that “Brexit” also competed for attention with the bombastic 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, which focused primarily on domestic issues. Looking at [Google Trends](#) data, which [measure the popularity](#) of a given topic on Google, it is clear that American users began to show some interest in the UK EU referendum only in the very final days before the vote. Although in part this may reflect the lack of news coverage about “Brexit,” it more broadly provides an indication that this issue lacked salience for the American public, which did not appear interested in finding out more about it.

Under these circumstances, American media were pressed to find ways to frame the referendum that would increase its relevance for American audiences. One potential angle would have been to draw a parallel between some of the anti-globalization and anti-immigration sentiments that animated the referendum campaign in the UK and similar positions that underpinned the campaign of 2016 Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump. In fact, [Trump himself](#) pointed out these commonalities during a strategically timed trip to Scotland on the day that followed Britain’s EU referendum. Yet, although some U.S. news outlets highlighted this angle in their commentary on the results, coverage that preceded the UK vote did not connect these

two issues.

Instead, American media focused on an issue that has little to do with U.S. politics in their scant coverage of the EU referendum in the weeks prior to the vote. That is, the possibility that the UK itself may disintegrate following a vote for “Brexit.” Both the [Washington Post](#) and the [New York Times](#) framed some of their most prominent pieces on the EU referendum by tying this event to the possibility of follow-up referenda on Scottish independence and Irish unification in case that English people voted to withdraw from the EU, but voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland did not.

Surprising as it may seem, the decision to frame the EU referendum in this way suggests that applying a domestic lens – in this case the effects of Britain’s exit from the EU on the U.S. economy or a parallel with the 2016 presidential election campaign – may not necessarily be the preferred option for American media to report on complex international news. Instead, in order to augment the salience of a foreign event for domestic audiences, it can be useful to link these issues to somewhat similar events that were mediated previously and can now be used as a template to explain new ones ([Kitzinger, 2000](#)), such as in this case the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. In the wake of the EU referendum result, the predictions that some U.S. media made about a deep constitutional crisis for the UK seem prescient. “Brexit” is now firmly on the agenda of American news outlets. Yet, finding templates to complement the coverage and make sense of the events that lie ahead in this process could be challenging considering that the UK and the EU are about to venture into uncharted and to a certain extent unpredictable territory.

# A victory of the nation state: the EU Referendum in the Southern European press

The EU Referendum was consistently constructed as the biggest democratic decision of our lifetimes in British political and media discourses. Whilst this once-in-a-lifetime decision undoubtedly constituted a pivotal moment in British history – clearly confirmed by the political and economic crisis that has followed – the Referendum was also a critical moment for the European Union as a whole. The UK's decision to leave would mean the departure of the second economy of the EU, the third largest state in terms of population, and a key player in European and global politics. A vote to leave would have seismic consequences over the European project and its current configuration, as well as for individual member states. Consistent with the importance of the event, newspapers in the continent intensely covered the Referendum. In this piece, I summarise the issues driving the coverage in French, Italian, and Spanish newspapers.

I looked at the 266 stories containing the term 'Brexit' in newspapers of record available through Nexis (*Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *El Mundo*, and *El País*) during the week before the Referendum. Coverage was eminently led by campaign events, focussing on the different arguments put forward by the Leave and the Remain sides. Key events, such as the nautical battle in the Thames, Farage's 'Breaking Point' poster, the murder of Jo Cox, and the BBC's 'Great Debate' got covered across the three countries. Coverage focussed on the evolution of pre-electoral polls too, underlining how close the race was between both sides of the campaign. Special attention was paid to rank and file citizens, particularly through voxpops, both to better understand the reasons motivating citizens to vote for one of the options, but also as a means to describe the main cleavages dividing the British public around this issue. *Il Corriere*, for example, compared how the privileged parents of public school students would vote with parents taking their children to a state school in a deprived area. *El País*, in turn, used a train ride between Aberdeen and Penzance to capture the critical issues for citizens throughout the country. *Le Figaro* opted for a dissection of the electorate in Peterborough and Aberystwyth, epitomising the Brexit and Remain camps, respectively.

A significant number of stories (17%) discussed the potential consequences of a Brexit vote. A handful of stories discussed how the process of Brexit would be handled should Britons vote to leave the EU. The implications Brexit would have for travelling to and from the UK, including mentions to roaming charges, were discussed in a limited number of stories focussed. Most stories about the potential consequences of Brexit focussed on the economic consequences, and were always framed through a national

lens. In a textbook case of news domestication, newspapers in all three countries warned about the effects Brexit could have over their main industries, over their GDP, and over French, Italian, and Spanish citizens living in the UK. Coverage also devoted attention to the economic impact Brexit could have upon the British economy, as well as upon British citizens living in other EU countries (above all in Spain). The pre-eminence of the nation state in the coverage of the Referendum was furthered in the stories warning of a possible contagion effect onto Denmark, the Netherlands, or France. This was particularly the case in France, where Euroscepticism is reaching unprecedented levels, and support for extreme right politician Marine Le Pen is growing.

Scholars have debated the emergence and the nature of a European public sphere for more than twenty years. Amongst other definitions, the European public sphere has been defined as the simultaneous discussion of the same topics in the national media of different European countries within a similar frame of reference. The EU Referendum constituted a unique opportunity for European media to transcend the limitations of national boundaries and highlight the monumental blow Brexit would have upon the European project. By constructing Brexit as eminently a British issue, and by focussing on its potential impact upon individual member states, coverage contributed to reinforce the remoteness of the EU, whilst signalling the vitality of the nation state.



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Journalism

# How our mainstream media failed democracy

Three days after the Referendum, I spoke to a Labour MP who represents a Northern constituency with one of the lowest proportions of immigrants in the country. A majority of her constituents had voted to leave the EU.

Why? Mainly, she said, because they were convinced that waves of immigrants would soon overwhelm their local communities, take their jobs, and undermine their way of life. They were particularly concerned about Turkey's imminent arrival in the EU.

If there is one normative principle that is taught in virtually every journalism and media course throughout the western world, it is this: that a free, well-functioning, pluralistic media system is essential for an informed democracy. Without it, citizens will be ignorant and ill-informed, and democracy will suffer.

A referendum is ostensibly the purest form of democratic inquisition: a single issue, uncomplicated by tactical considerations or concerns about individual candidates, a decision that can be based purely on weighing up the facts and arguments to answer a single question. So our media have an uncomplicated but profoundly important role of conveying information and analysis to assist the decision-making process.

In 2016 our mainstream media failed spectacularly. Led, inevitably, by the viscerally anti-EU *Mail*, *Sun*, *Express* and *Telegraph* papers, most of our national press indulged in little more than a catalogue of distortions, half-truths and outright lies: a ferocious propaganda campaign in which facts and sober analysis were sacrificed to the ideologically driven objectives of editors and their proprietors.

Having charted some of the worst excesses of those four publications, journalist blogger Liz Gerard wrote of the scaremongering about immigration: "Turks, Romanians, Iraqis, Syrians, Afghans, Albanians: millions of them apparently want to abandon their homelands and settle in the English countryside - and only leaving the EU will stop them. No claim was too preposterous, no figure too huge to print." Gerard compiled a montage of front page headlines whose constant reiteration of words such as "migrants", "borders" "EU" systematically ramped up the xenophobic message.

Perhaps the most egregious example was the *Daily Mail* headline of 16 June (inevitably followed up by the *Sun*), claiming that a lorry load of migrants had arrived from Europe. Despite video footage which clearly demonstrated they were refugees from Iraq and Kuwait, the banner headline "We're from Europe - let us in!" was plastered across the front page. The following day's "correction" consisted of 54 words at the bottom of page 2. Hugo Dixon, founder of InFacts, has drawn attention to both the number of inaccurate stories and the chronically inadequate "corrections" relegated to inside pages.

Did this rampant Euroscepticism make a difference? Effects studies over the years have taught us that media influence on voting is empirically unknowable. Those newspapers will, however, have exerted

substantial influence on the national conversation in three ways.

First, the barrage of headlines designed to reinforce campaign slogans will have shored up Leave strategists with confidence to pursue their simple messages. An orchestrated tabloid campaign around EU pen-pushing bureaucrats, EU cost to the UK, and untrammelled EU immigration lent itself perfectly to the oft-repeated mantra of 'Take Back Control'.

Second, it is inevitable that – even with falling circulations and readership fragmentation – the constant drumbeat of headlines in newsagents, garage forecourts, on TV and radio news programmes and online, will have infiltrated the minds of some voters. Anxieties about hordes of Turkish immigrants, with no foundation in fact, were reinforced by tabloid scaremongering.

Third, and perhaps most important, is their agenda-setting role for broadcasters. Remain campaign strategists were confident that the message of economic risk would succeed – as it had in the Scottish independence referendum – but had not factored in a deeply hostile press whose slogans served as an echo chamber which broadcasters could scarcely resist.

This echo chamber was particularly evident on the BBC which – mired in negotiations about Charter review – was far more susceptible to following than leading. Early in the campaign, a classic example followed Emma Thompson's outspoken criticism of Britain as "a cake-filled, misery-laden, grey old island". The Sun had responded with a front page splash headlined "Shut Yer Cakehole", followed by quotes from Eurosceptic MPs labelling her "the worst sort of fat-cat luvvie" and an "overpaid, leftie luvvie".

On the following night's BBC Newsnight, Evan Davis interviewed Lord Mandelson and suggested that "Luvvies and New Labour" would be "a big problem for the Remain campaign over the next few months". It was an irrelevance prompted entirely by a deliberately mischievous *Sun* front page.

We need more detailed ethnographic research in newsrooms to identify the nature and scale of this agenda-setting problem, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the newspapers' overwhelming and full-blooded Euroscepticism seeped easily into broadcasting agendas.

In her post-referendum media round-up, the *Guardian's* Jane Martinson revealed that, within an hour of victory for Leave being declared, *Sun* editor Tony Gallagher told *the Guardian*: "So much for the waning power of the print media." And that is precisely our problem. A world in which social media was supposed to democratise communicative power is still dominated by the same unaccountable behemoths that have dominated Britain's political discourse for decades. A referendum that was supposed to be an exercise in informed participation has fuelled hatred and ignorance, and debased our politics. Our mainstream media failed us at a time of greatest democratic need.



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# Divided Britain? We were already divided...



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It couldn't have been a more different atmosphere. Back in the heady days of the 1975 referendum on whether to stay in the 'Common Market', every single national newspaper urged a 'yes' vote with the exception of the *Morning Star*. Rupert Murdoch, the *Mail's* Sir David English, prime minister Harold Wilson and former PM Edward Heath all scorned the arguments of left-wing proponents of a 'no' vote such as Tony Benn and urged Britain to renew its ties to the rest of Europe. The result was a 2 to 1 'yes' vote and relief for the political establishment.

Fast forward to June 24, 2016 and things are very different. The decision to leave the European Union is evidence that consensus has now officially broken down. "Today we wake to a deeply divided country", cried LibDem leader Tim Farron on the morning of the referendum result while the *Guardian* commentator Jonathan Freedland noticed that, given the hugely different poll results between the biggest metropolitan centres and the rest, 'England is exposed as a land divided'. Story after story, meme after meme, now talks of 'Divided Britain': a land marked by a collapse in trust and working-class communities at war with the political 'mainstream'.

Unlike 1975, we also have a divided press with the *Sun*, *Mail*, *Express*, *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Telegraph* on the 'leave' side with the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Times*, *Mail on Sunday* and *Mirror* all lining up behind 'remain'. True, if you weight their impact by partisanship and reach, there was an 82% circulation advantage for the 'leave' side but 'Fleet Street' (let alone individual newsrooms), as well as the country as a whole, would appear to be irredeemably divided.

This is all surface analysis. First, the press may have been divided on their specific attitude to 'Brexit' but they remain largely united on the bigger issues that surround the debate: on the need for immigration controls, austerity and deregulated markets. Endorsements for either side emanated from a heady mixture of proprietorial influence, ideological fixations and material interests – not least the views of their readers. According to YouGov, over 70% of *Sun*, *Express* and *Mail* readers supported 'Brexit' in March 2016 before their papers formally endorsed one side while 91% of *Guardian* readers and 62% of *Times* readers were 'remain' supporters before the campaign officially started. Given the fragile state of news finances, it would be a bold editor who would go against the views of their readers.

More fundamentally, Britain was divided long before the referendum campaign got going. The economic disparities behind the powerlessness that led voters to reject the status quo in such large numbers are, according to Larry Elliott writing on the morning after the vote, 'deep-seated and of long standing.' He concludes that the

UK is a 'country divided by wealth, geography and class.' The tragedy is that the bulk of media attention during the referendum totally failed to do justice to these underlying questions of inequality, alienation and frustration with 'official' politics and focused instead on painting the vote mostly in terms of a civil war inside the Conservative Party.

The whole problem is that neither a press that is largely dominated by billionaire proprietors nor broadcasters that are all too often enmeshed with the elites themselves, are able to make sense of and to articulate the divisions that exist in our society. Of course, some titles – like the *Express*, *Sun* and the *Mail* – are determined to ramp up divisions by blaming immigrants for all social problems, adding to a poisonous atmosphere generated by politicians on both sides of the campaign. By and large, however, the national media are mostly not interested in highlighting and analyzing the divisions that are truly meaningful and that would require them to acknowledge the structural inequalities that permeate the UK.

The breakdown of consensus that we are now being assaulted with in headlines and hashtags masks the existence of a more enduring consensus: the determination of Britain's elites – including those inside the media – to hold onto power and to maintain their influence. True, they may have had very different perspectives on how EU membership would assist this, but their underlying devotion to vested interests, capital flows and market fundamentalism goes beyond a tactical question of 'remain' or 'leave'. This is what was missing from the referendum campaign and what progressives from both sides will have to confront in the uncertain days and months that lie ahead.



# Deliberation, distortion and dystopia: the news media and the referendum

The EU Referendum was a classic test of the concept of media framing of deliberation. Yet, it perhaps ended up demonstrating that it is politicians and the public who set the agenda and that the news media has short-term, shallow but significant effects.

No one can say that the media has not given us enough debate or information to help voters make up their minds. Broadcasters, newspapers, social media, universities, political parties, think-tanks and corporations created vast amounts of data and debate.

The side that lost complained loudly about the news media. They accused it of bias and of failing to explain the issues and the risks clearly enough. While the wider public say they were not given the facts. Some even now wish they had voted differently. They are both mistaken.

Politicians (and to a degree the voters) get the coverage they deserve. At times it appeared that both Leave and Remain campaign teams abandoned any coherent idea of deliberative, policy-based argument in favour of exaggerated scenarios, self-serving statistics and appeals to emotions and fantasies. This is part of a longer-term trend in political communications where the strategy is to destabilise the discourse while controlling your own message based on emotional appeals to voters. The damage being done to democratic deliberation will be long lasting and will get worse after the vote as the two main parties continue to implode.

This critique is not just that of an academic or a journalist. The Commons Treasury Committee also condemned both sides for the low standard of campaigning. The Remainers wildly exaggerated the risks involved in leaving, while the Brexiteers brazenly misrepresented the cost and impact of EU membership and its relationship to other issues such as immigration.

Not surprisingly, the Prime Minister found it difficult to convince the public that the organisation that he's been slating for years is now a wonderful thing. At the same time, the various 'charismatic' Leave leaders failed to give a coherent explanation of what will happen after June 23rd if we cut off the continent. Instead they flag waved and dog whistled about foreign hordes.

So what can the journalists do to shine light into this shade? At this point we must accept the limits of media effects. Politicians as well as journalists tend to exaggerate the impact of journalism on the public. Long term it is significant but there is a range of other influences on people's thinking including non-mediated factors that swamp the power of journalists to swing votes.

When the campaign started I wrote about how the newspapers will have less influence on the final outcome than some people might think because of their diminished status. In this campaign,

however, they were more important than I expected in helping shift the frame of the debate towards issues such as immigration and generally encouraging the febrile mood of lashing out at the status quo and risk-taking.

If you wish to consider how this media campaign has gone then don't start with the journalist or politician, ask the citizen. New LSE research suggested that many only made up their minds in the last days of the campaign. So with such a close and unstable campaign the small influence of the press might be significant at the margins.

The public have plenty of sources for campaign news if they had the will, time and (sometimes) money. Overall, too many newsrooms have been distracted by the latest lines peddled by the campaigns, but there has been plenty of good political information and debate out there.

But did people bother to consume any of this? The evidence is that people were interested and sought out information. Relatively large audiences tuned into the TV set-piece programmes.

But as voter reaction after the poll suggested - including people Googling 'EU referendum' after the result - they may have ended up feeling confused because of the contradictory claims and uncertain about the purpose of the vote ("buyer's remorse"). That is the nature of this issue and the crudeness of a referendum process. It is also the reality of post-factual politics with the government and opposition parties riven ideologically and tactically. It is messy and the media coverage reflected that. It is politicians that lead debates, not the media, and on this issue and in this campaign their previous parochial failure to take responsibility for our place in Europe is coming back to haunt them.



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# UK newspapers and the EU Referendum: Brexit or Bremain?



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How far do newspapers influence public opinion on vexed political issues, such as the Europe question in Britain? This is a very difficult question to answer definitively because causation one way or the other can never be proved beyond doubt. However, what we can establish in light of the British public's decision to leave the EU is that the media – and the most widely read UK newspapers in particular – have played a vital role in structuring the parameters of the debate for many years. Senior politicians from all the main parties over the past two decades have consistently testified to having had to consider how their policies will 'play' in the opinion-forming press. They have long felt it important to rub shoulders with influential media magnates such as Rupert Murdoch in a bid to elicit his support or at least assure his acquiescence in new or controversial policy manoeuvres.

On the Europe issue the public has been fed by many quarters of the press a solid diet of anti-EU reporting, centering on an undemocratic 'Brussels' machine subverting Britain's governing institutions, British liberty and its way of life. These scare stories (akin to a twenty year-long Project Fear of the press's making) have covered the full range, from the inflammatory to the mythical and the plain wrong, as the Leveson Inquiry pointed out. The divorce between fact and reality has done nothing to lessen the appeal of EU-bashing in Britain because there has been such little pushback on these stories from a political class unwilling to put the positive case for British achievements at EU level. The British public has been given a limited knowledge of EU history, politics and policy-making from politicians, the press and through the general educational system, which has amply fed Eurosceptical narratives of Britain's past, present and future outside the EU. Britain's uneasy status as an 'outsider' within the EU makes the referendum outcome seem less of a shock when the structuring effects of Eurosceptic media coverage, combined with the abdication of political leadership on the question until it was too late, are taken into account.

Given this long tradition of EU-bashing in the UK press it was no surprise that many newspapers came out on the side of Brexit before the referendum: the tenor of reporting by the Telegraph, Mail and Sun has long been antithetical to British membership of the European project. The Express, moreover, was the first newspaper to launch a 'Get Britain Out' campaign as long ago as November 2010. What was less widely predicted was that there would be differentiation within media groups. Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* and *Sunday Times* urged Brexit, while the Times supported Remain. The Mail Group was also split, with *the Mail on Sunday* supporting Remain, in opposition to its daily stablemate.

The differences within newspaper groups are interesting for two reasons. First, they reveal

the extent to which a newspaper's editorial line is driven by commercial reality as much as its ideology on political matters. Newspapers spend a good deal of time polling their readers and clearly do not want to alienate core audiences. Second, it gives us a potential insight into the commercial calculations underpinning ownership positions. For example, Roy Greenslade's magisterial history of UK newspaper proprietorship amply demonstrates that the Sun has always been known to be Murdoch's favourite UK press outlet – his authentic voice, as it were. The strident nationalism in the Sun has been toned down for 'establishment' Times readers, where more balance has also been injected over the years by the inclusion of more Europhile voices. This façade of 'balance' in the Murdoch empire works to head off criticisms that he is one-eyed on the European issue. Yet in truth Murdoch knows that the lukewarm Europeanism on offer in even the most EU-sympathetic newspapers (Times plus Independent, Guardian and Observer) cannot outweigh the Eurosceptic commentary elsewhere across the press.

Both in terms of breadth (judged in readership numbers) and in terms of intensity, the Eurosceptic press has more or less had the playing field to itself for years. Thus, as the Conservative and Labour blood-letting begins, and analysis gets underway into what won the referendum for Brexit, the newspapers are already playing a central role. If the Brexit newspapers are deemed to have been crucial then it should not be overlooked how far their professed faith in Britain is in fact a subtle mask for commercial imperatives. 'Europe' has become one more battleground for readership numbers in a declining newspaper marketplace.

# X marks the spot but the Ys have it: Referendum coverage as a boys' own story

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman (/feminist political communication scholar) because most of my time is spent on absences, peering into the black hole of women's silencing. Any number of men, both politicians and journalists, regularly claim that this or that election will focus on the Mumsnet vote or, in the case of the EU Referendum, that women voters will determine the outcome. The implication of these pontifications is that women will somehow be addressed *as women*, as if their/our concerns, interests and ballot box behaviour are both biologically-determined and homogenous. Not only is this fatuous nonsense, but even if it was a little bit true (for example, most of the folks who campaigned against the tampon tax were probably women), political parties and the media make scant effort to find out what women, individually or severally, might actually want. The siren song of 'where are the women?' has been heard as much during this campaign as any others although the final weeks of the campaign did see an improvement in the visibility of women politicians speaking on both sides of the argument.

The consideration of women's 'specialness' was exemplified by both Remain and Leave's launch of femme-campaigns, with Remain's *Women IN* campaign launched in January via an open letter to the *Evening Standard* signed by fifty "leading businesswomen, scientists, trade union officials and health professionals." Leave's effort, *Women for Britain*, was somewhat cynically deployed on International Women's Day, fronted by UKIP's Suzanne Evans and Priti Patel for the Tories, with Patel subsequently becoming the only woman politician who enjoyed media traction in the first weeks of the campaign. Unfortunately for Patel, comparing herself and the other EU refuseniks with the Suffragettes' struggle did not sit well with Emmeline Pankhurst's great grand-daughter, Helen, who demanded an apology for the (in)appropriation. What unites both campaigns is the strange fact that their respective official launches constitute their only significant media appearance, not so much a campaign, more a PR stunt. There have been a few soundbites from their various spokespeople since their launches but they do not add up to a campaign for women's votes: on polling day, *Women for Britain's* Facebook page had a mere 1448 likes.

By May, the domination of a few male voices (Dave, Boz and Mike) and the extreme narrowness of the debate – it's all about immigration, stupid – not to mention #allmalepanels, mansplaining and the beauty contest for next Tory Leader, was revealed in a Labour report discussed by Harriet Harman, prompting her to say that women were being "frozen out of the debate" and that she would be making an official complaint to Ofcom about women's under-representation. Labour's research showed that between January and the end of May, only two out of 14 commentators on BBC TV's breakfast show were women as were 10 of the 58 politicians contributing to the *Today* programme alongside the six women out of 24 guests invited to chat on *Good Morning Britain*. This resonates exactly

with Loughborough University Centre for Research in Communication and Culture's rather excellent campaign coverage reports which persistently showed the marginalisation of women's voices throughout the campaign.

By early June, the parties and the media seemed to have taken notice of the conspicuous and voluble social media critique of the exclusionary tenor of the tory-boys-story and ITV's EU debate fielded five women and Boris. Remain had Angela Eagle (Lab), Amber Rudd (Cons) and Nicola Sturgeon (SNP) and Leave had Andrea Leadsom (Cons) and Gisela Stuart (Lab). The BBC followed suit in the last televised (The Great) debate on 21 June with the same pair of women for Leave but a different line-up for Remain (Ruth Davidson, Leader of the Scottish Conservatives and Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the TUC) bookending Sadiq Khan. The media coverage of the event, at least the stories I read, was mostly gender-neutral with none of the routine trivialisation on women's sartorial style. However, the *Mail* could not resist commenting on Davidson's passion for kick-boxing and her recent engagement to her "partner Jennifer Wilson", a level of personal detail not provided for any of the other panellists. Whilst the last week of the campaign did indeed render women more visible in terms of these set-piece debates, general coverage remained a boys' own story, with Jo Cox the most significant woman politician in the media spotlight for all the wrong reasons. We now know that xenophobia won the day and her belief that we have more in common than divides us has failed to persuade. We are the poorer for that.



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# Mind the gap: the language of prejudice and the press omissions that led a people to the precipice



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A pervasive Euroscepticism has now reached its zenith, drawing on a collective memory, borne of the moment we chose to be a good friend of post-war Europe - but not part of it. As the UK eventually joined, unable to influence the *project's* direction, we have never fully understood what the pooling of sovereignty nor belonging to the club mean. The projection of Europe in the collective memory, reinforced by seldom articulated facts (by either politicians or press) has resulted in an 'other', based less on a grasp of the reality and more a *common-sense* understanding. Neither the political class nor the mainstream press has ever confronted the cultural presuppositions of a British past never really harnessed to a European future.

Initial linguistic analysis has established a discursive construction, prevalent in the mainstream mainly right-of-centre national newspapers in the weeks running up to the referendum, claiming to "take back our country"; "regain control"; and divorce from *Ever Closer Union*, as unprecedented as the constitutional and democratic crisis in the UK it has clearly contributed to. The main conduit for the articulation of the preceding notions is **immigration**. It is argued that never before in living memory have some newspapers fed the public's hopes, fears and yes **prejudice** against Europe (and Europeans) to this extent. They have tapped into a selective collective memory, the resulting common sense presuppositions and ignorance. Some newspapers have acted irresponsibly, have damaged our democracy and played a pivotal role in creating the crisis we now face.

The evidence to support this position can be found in the high levels of argumentation, metaphors and misinformation prevalent in mainstream newspaper discourse in the weeks before the EU referendum, as much prevalent in news stories as commentaries, despite the tenuous claim they are reporting the **facts**. For example, in *The Sun's* editorial on June 20, the paper backed leaving the EU "partly because it's a bloated, undemocratic and ruinously expensive political relic." But also so MPs could "regain control over Britain's borders", so they can "get a grip on the spiralling rate of immigration putting such a strain on wages, jobs, schools and hospitals". *The Sun* then added a caveat, mitigating possible fallout, acknowledging "some on the fringes of this debate have unjustly targeted migrants." The *Daily Mail* editorial on June 20, argued: "How will he (Cameron) prevent the NHS and other services being overwhelmed if unfettered free movement continues?"

"It is argued, what is far more serious is what was not said about reclaiming the country's economy, sovereignty and control of immigration. There was plenty of unsubstantiated argumentation prevalent in the right-wing and particularly popular newspapers, regarding immigration. None of it (on initial scrutiny) addressed how, on leaving, Britain would be unlikely to actually curb it. Barely any of

the coverage spoke of how subsequent trade deals with Brussels would likely include **free movement** as a precondition. Instead the rhetoric fed the collective memory; nationalistic fervour; the understanding of the nation in relation to the 'other', Europe and through ellipsis, an ill-informed **common sense** understanding of how *we would get our country back*, was left for the reader to *fill the gaps*. Countless English working class voters, often in impoverished parts of the UK, were televised using this refrain.

Within a day of the vote, the extent to which they had been led to this conclusion by populist politicians and the press (without supporting evidence) was apparent. Brexiters were soon **backtracking**.

Tory MEP, Daniel Hannan said free movement could result in similar levels of immigration after Brexit. He added: "Frankly, if people watching think that they have voted and there is now going to be zero immigration from the EU, they are going to be disappointed." Hannan also made clear there had been no suggestions of changing the status of any EU nationals in Britain. Leading Brexiteer, Liam Fox, said: "A lot of things were said in advance of this referendum that we might want to think about again..." Boris Johnson himself said during his speech after the result that Brexit, needn't mean pulling up the drawbridge and that the victory for Farage would somehow "take the wind out of the sails" of anyone **playing politics** with immigration.

Few read the Foreign Affairs Committee **analysis** of Brexit. It will be used as benchmark, together with fact-checking websites, to establish the extent of misinformation in coverage.

It is therefore the consistent discourse of *taking back our country* and *regaining control* of immigration, that were established in the collective memory in the years prior to the campaign that facilitated the final result, which itself has led to the deepest crisis this country has faced since the Second World War.

# ‘They don’t understand us’: UK journalists’ challenges of reporting the EU

In the coming weeks and months journalists will be accused of fuelling the toxic tone of the referendum campaigns and ultimately for being at least partly responsible for the impending Brexit. However, this is too simplistic. We need to take into account the organisational structures they are embedded in, the newsroom routines and practices they have been socialised into and their personal relationship with EU officials and sources. These discursive practices (Fairclough, 2010) have a strong impact on EU reporting in UK media and can explain some of the patterns we have seen in 2016. In order to understand media representations in the final news product and their interrelation with dominant discourses in society, social practices of production need to be considered since they provide important insights into journalistic decision-making.

In my recently conducted interviews with UK journalists and EU officials several issues have been raised which impact on EU and EU referendum coverage.

Limited staffing and resources are paired with time and space constraints. Journalists pointed out the complex nature of the EU which does not lend itself to engaging reporting, particularly when there is little time for explanation. In order to keep the audience interested, they have to tell a human story, more emotional than factual, to avoid viewers switching off. They have to address their audiences’ preferences which leads to a focus on the domestic realm and topics they are most interested in, such as EU migration. Addressing audience preferences requires journalists to avoid offending their audiences by too firmly advocating a Remain or Leave vote. Media organisations are businesses which need to secure their share in the market which will always result in tensions between the commercial and public purpose of news. Also the BBC, although not directly dependent on viewer numbers, has to fulfil its duties of providing information from both sides, acutely aware of accusations of pro-EU bias.

Furthermore the relationship between EU officials and UK journalists has been mentioned as an obstacle to reporting in particular. In interviews, EU officials clearly pronounced their frustration with the UK based news organisations while the interviewed UK journalists felt similar about EU officials. EU officials were frustrated about the ‘EU-bashing’ of UK journalists and their lack of engagement with the processes while some UK journalists feel at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues from other member states.

One explanation for the strained relations has been mentioned repeatedly by UK journalists. They strongly advocate a British tradition of adversarial journalism. Although they see their role as informers they also emphasised their duty to scrutinise the EU, a duty which they feel is in conflict with a more consensual EU system. Consequently,

according to UK journalists, EU officials mistake their tradition of journalism as ‘EU bashing’ and are less likely to provide them with useful, up-to-date information.

EU officials evaluated the situation differently. They stated that they were trying to inform UK news workers by providing them with the same services as anyone else. However, they did feel that their information was regularly distorted, often deliberately so, describing UK journalism as ‘EU-bashing’. Although they emphasised journalism’s duty to scrutinize the powerful, they also stressed its responsibility to create supranational debate and bring the EU closer to citizens – a responsibility UK journalists opposed. They felt this was the EU’s own responsibility.

One example of how those differences impact collaboration between organisations and EU officials is the Financial Times. The FT is regarded by UK journalists as the EU’s ‘pet’ which has privileged access to information. Without hesitation, one EU official admitted he rather works with the FT than with some other UK news organisations, since they have established good contacts and represent the EU ‘more fairly’.

These differences in understanding the role of journalism but also understanding each other has implications for reporting the EU and reporting during the referendum campaign. It is too simplistic to blame the development on journalists alone. It needs to be understood within the context of practices of production, which in turn are not detached from the society they are embedded in. A more nuanced picture is needed in order to understand EU coverage in UK media. This brief discussion only takes into account some of the aspects which need to be considered. Increased frustration on both sides in combination with a lack of resources for journalists and market pressures requiring news organisations to address audience preferences concerning the EU, may have formed an obstacle to ‘fair’ reporting of the EU. The domestic realm has been given priority over the European realm and framing of the EU has been generally negative (e.g. Anderson & Weymouth, 1999; Hawkins, 2012). Since UK citizens have very little direct exposure to the EU, these persistent patterns have reinforced distrust and Euroscepticism over years.



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# Bending over backwards: the BBC and the Brexit campaign



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BBC journalists, under their Editorial Guidelines, have an obligation to provide balanced coverage, but what precisely does balance mean? The BBC has long accepted that when reporting climate change it does not have to seek a balance between the views of most of the world's scientists and those who deny climate change. But there was no similar judgement made during the EU referendum campaign resulting in coverage that was, unintentionally, misleading. The problem was that virtually every BBC radio and television news bulletins that I heard or watched contained a format of 'balanced' news that was stupefyingly predictable. A claim by the Remain or Leave campaign was automatically contradicted by a rebuttal from the other side. First, it made for tedious listening and viewing, second, it probably left much of the audience confused and third left them vulnerable to simplistic slogans e.g. £350 million going to the EU instead of the NHS.

Let me offer three of the worst (and hence most memorable) examples of this phoney balance. First, just one day before the vote 1,280 business leaders signed a letter to *The Times* backing UK membership of the EU. Within this very headline the BBC 'balanced' the letter with a quote from one - repeat one - entrepreneur, Sir James Dyson, saying he was in favour of Leave. Dyson's support for Leave had already been broadcast on the 11<sup>th</sup> June hence his statement on the eve of polling was hardly 'news'. Nor was there any mention, in the more extensive web report of Dyson opposing *The Times* signatories of the fact that he had moved his entire business not just out of the UK but out of the EU, to Malaysia, a background fact highly relevant to the overall story.

Similarly when on the 20<sup>th</sup> June ten noble-prize winning economists warned of the dangers to the British economy of a Brexit the BBC 'balanced' this story with a quote from one economist - Patrick Minford, as they had done two days before, with a story of the IMF issuing a similar warning, and again the previous month when an Ipsos Mori poll found that 88% of UK economists were against Brexit. As eminent as Professor Minford might be, didn't the absence of any other leading economists supporting the Leave campaign ring even the tiniest of alarm bells?

A third example of phoney balance came on the 13<sup>th</sup> June when the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown entered the debate urging Labour supporters to vote to remain. That story led the morning radio and TV bulletins but by mid-morning the BBC was leading, not on Brown's speech, but on the Leave campaign's rebuttal. This rebuttal was followed by a summary of what Brown had to say followed by clip from leading Leave campaigner Liam Fox saying why Labour supporters should reject Mr Brown's advice. There is always pressure on broadcast journalists to keep finding a new top to a running story but editorial judgement is also required and in this case it was plainly lacking. Roger Mosey, the BBC's former Editorial Director recently reported on a conversation with a senior BBC presenter who observed: "Balance has too often been

taken to mean broadcasting televised press releases ... Instead of standing back and assessing arguments, we have been broadcasting he says/she says campaign pieces, which rarely shed any light on anything."

There was also a problem with campaign visuals. Who can forget the image and slogan on the Leave campaign battle bus? A claim that even Leave campaigners have subsequently said should not be taken too literally.

Rick Bailey, the BBC's Chief Political Advisor, speaking on Radio 4's Feedback programme implicitly accepted that the £350 million claim could not be justified. But when asked how TV and Radio news audiences would know this, he referred a Radio 4 programme about statistics - More or Less - that despite its quality, gets a fraction of the audiences for BBC News. So how 'balanced' is it to allow political leaders to appear in front of their own slogans, when this involves a palpably untrue statement being shown day-in-day out? If the campaigners were only prepared to make themselves available in front of the bus then surely the correct editorial decision would have been not to broadcast the footage but instead, to summarize what the campaigners were saying that day.

The other aspect of BBC balance that gives concern has been the attempt to 'balance' so-called elite opinion with that of the 'common man or woman'. This has entailed two aspects of coverage worthy of criticism. First, there has been a tedious over-reliance on the 'vox pop' - the quick soundbite from a member of the public that gives the appearance of being representative but is probably atypical. And in the edit suite the vox pop of the man or woman denouncing all politicians as "liars" stands a far better chance of being used than more nuanced comments. This is dangerous ground. Roger Mosey refers to how these incidents then become amplified by being the focus of the BBC news reports of the programmes. He gives the example of a student who had criticised the Prime Minister as "waffling" being "elevated to the status of a national seer" and added "segments that discuss policy are ditched in favour of having as many "zingers" as possible in the News at Ten."

So what's the answer - one-sided partial coverage? No it's simpler than that. What I am suggesting is that instead of interpreting balance as meaning "he says, she says", editorial judgement would be better employed by balancing a positive Remain story, not with a rebuttal from Leave but with a positive Leave story, and vice versa. It might make for more work but it should also ensure a better informed electorate, more interesting viewing and, maybe who knows, even bigger audiences for news.

# Bums gone to Iceland: England, Brexit and Euro 2016

On the morning of the 1966 World Cup final the *Daily Mail* wrote: “If Germany beat us at Wembley this afternoon at our national sport, we can always point out to them we have recently beaten them twice at theirs.” If anyone had been in any doubt, football had become, as George Orwell wrote, war minus the shooting. Since that point the Boys from ’66 and their victory have been hardwired into English national consciousness and the England men’s football team has become a metaphor for the country - a barometer for its health.

Due to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the Euro 2016 football tournament was played during a time of heightened awareness and reference to what it meant to be English, both in the context of the UK and Europe. The narrow margin of the result did nothing much to answer the question while the ensuing political and economic chaos kickstarted a debate about the state of the nation. The coverage of the country’s men’s football team during the tournament against this domestic political backdrop can therefore give us important insights because in modern societies sport is an important part of identity formation on both individual and collective levels making it a key area for cultural negotiation.

Benedict Anderson defined a nation as an “imagined political community”. This perception of a unique national community is created through a common language, the education system and the mass media. To an extent this shared culture is predicated on a set of traditions which have come to define the nation. Sport is key among them; one that Eric Hobsbawm argues is ‘uniquely effective’ in instilling feelings of national belonging. Events like the Olympics, the World Cup and the European Football Championships provide key arena in which national identity can be articulated. So a nation’s football team, which is adorned with national symbols (be it the English Lion or the Welsh dragon) and begins each match singing the national anthem, has become a powerful symbol of the nation. As Hobsbawm argues: “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people”.

The emotive drama provided by football (indeed by all sports, but in England football dominates) means that the press doesn’t just report on England games and relay their results. Instead they play a crucial role in producing a shared set of traditions and expectations for the imagined community that is England. Never was this more clearly articulated than by the *Daily Mirror* in the run up to England’s Euro 96 semi-final against Germany. The paper declared “football war” on Germany in a front page which used pictures of then-players Stuart Pearce and Paul Gascoigne in army helmets along with the headline “ACHTUNG SURRENDER: For you Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over”. This ‘us’ and ‘them’ rhetoric infused

with military metaphors shows no sign of abating 20 years down the line. Two days before England played Russia in their opening game of Euro 2016, *The Sun* launched a “VARMARDA”, led by Jamie Vardy lookalike Lee Chapman in Admiral Nelson garb, to challenge a Russian submarine in the Straits of Dover.

If the national team is a metaphor for the nation then the manager and the players are national ambassadors. The loss to ‘little’ Iceland, the team with a ‘big’ heart has been framed by a focus on the man, or men who let the ‘great’ nation of England down. In the initial aftermath of defeat there was no analysis of the long-term structural failings that beset the national team, instead England’s ‘misfiring millionaires’ were humiliated by ‘minnows’ Iceland in a defeat branded by *The Sun* as “CODSWALLOP”. Following Roy Hodgson’s resignation, the *Daily Mirror* was moved to opine: “In keeping with recent events, an England without a functioning government, opposition, nor any future plan, no longer has a manager for its national football team either.” This provided a mirror for the post-Brexit criticisms of the politicians at the front of the papers: “YOU IDIOT, GEORGE” screamed *The Sun* at Chancellor George Osborne, while the *Daily Mirror* labelled “No-show BoJo [a] political pygmy”.

Over the last 50 years, English national identity as articulated by the football press has been built of a range of key signifiers that both draw on and feed into the wider articulation of the imagined community. These include glorious victories of the past both on and off the pitch to the bunglers now betraying the nation. It is a narrative that, like the tactics used by the team, looks increasingly tired, confused and outdated.



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# It's the 'primary definers', stupid!



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Like many a disbelieving, frustrated, angry and bereft “Remainer” (the 48%) I signed the petition. I did so *not* because I favour another Referendum (I think them a terrible, divisive, binary means of seeking and claiming democratic legitimacy). Nor did I sign because I have any hope that the current result can be overturned. Nor, I should say, do I think the result *ought* to be overturned. Such action might very well finally fracture our already weak democracy and lead to social upheaval. But sign I did. I did so because, in our unrepresentative system, it felt like an act of solidarity with other like-minded citizens and with migrant communities now living in fear and facing increasing levels of intimidation and outright racist attack. Perhaps less importantly, I signed as a means to display that I am firmly one of the 48%. In the midst of a personal ontological crisis, amidst the growing social, political and economic crisis, signing the petition became one of the means by which I could register my anger, bewilderment and utter dismay at the result.

But over the course of the last 6 days, I have been told to “accept the result”, because, after all “that’s democracy”. However, I remain frustrated by such calls to “respect our democracy”. Democracy exercised on the basis of misinformation is not democracy, it is a corruption of it. The “Brexit” campaign had the hallmarks of a mis-selling scandal, “Take Back Control” becomes the “democracy” equivalent of mis-selling PPI.

Media scholars are of course well-versed in the theories that our politics is laced with, or even structured around misinformation. That it may seem hackneyed, does not though invalidate the claim. Misinformation ensures that the political class and fourth estate effectively works to disenfranchise a mass of the population. To reduce democracy to merely placing one’s cross on a piece of paper is simplistic at best, false at worst. Democratic empowerment can only be achieved if that cross is made with a degree of knowledge to hand. However, in the case of the EU Referendum, such knowledge is significantly blurred, or even withheld from the very people “exercising their democratic right(s)”. The entire campaign(s), both Leave and Remain – but particularly the Leave campaign – seemed, not only to run on, but glory in reductive simplicities.

Post-result, when the lies on which the Leave Campaign were built came tumbling down around us, (turns out, those experts dismissed by Michael Gove may have had a point) I have also been told “Politicians lie...we all know that”. While this may be true, it is hardly a robust defence of democracy. As alarmingly, in the course of the same debate, it was explained “... we accept the premise that politicians are going to lie in order to achieve their end goal”. But we must reject that as the frame, as the starting – and end – point. We might suspect that they lie, but to *accept* it is too passive a response.

The problem with “knowing” *and* passively “*accepting*” that politicians lie is what it does to us. It

cultivates cynicism. Hearing the lies but accepting them as “the way things are” undermines our already fragile and unrepresentative system. It leaves “us” – the voters – with misinformation on which to base our decisions; and it leaves “them” – the elected – with a “mandate” to do with as they please. Its logical end-point is disenfranchisement.

But if politicians lie, how do they get away with it? To understand this, we must examine the relationship, the nexus between politics and media. Above – referring to politicians – I used the term “withheld”, but this is a problematic term. Of course we may *suspect* deliberate misinformation, deliberate malfeasance, deliberate “withholding”, but is the same true of our media, of journalists, editors and owners? Even without ethnographic or political economy research, by using a range of well-established methods, we can assess the ways in which journalism operates, its practices, its forms, and crucially, its relationships to power. Or to use Tuchman’s phrasing, to assess the extent to which news is the “ally of legitimated institutions.” From this, we can draw some conclusions.

To quote Stuart Hall et al

“In the main, journalists position themselves so that they have access to institutions which generate a useful volume of reportable activity at regular intervals.”

What emerges, we might call:

“... professional ideological rules in journalism. The important point is that these professional rules give rise to the practice of ensuring that media statements are, wherever possible, grounded in ‘objective’ and ‘authoritative’ statements from ‘accredited’ sources. This means constantly turning to accredited representatives of major social institutions ... Journalists, in attempting to fulfil ‘public interest’ aims and present authoritative accounts, purposively seek out those who already appear knowledgeable, authoritative or representative ... as such they reinforce as well as reflect power imbalances by awarding such ‘primary definers’ greater visibility and legitimacy”

Though written thirty-five years ago, the clarity and accuracy still resonates. To paraphrase (and bastardize) a well-worn truism. “It’s the ‘Primary definers’, Stupid”. The “Primary definers” *primarily define* the terms, the frames, the discourse. Who were the most high-profile primary definers of the (two) Leave campaigns? Gove, Farage, Johnson. Granted authority by way of location in, or proximity to institutions of power. Over the course of the campaign, these three primary definers gained legitimacy by their status, they were reported on as legitimate social and political actors; what *they said, mattered*, and what they said, at important points, turned out to be false.

When the (necessary) complexity of politics is reduced to slogans, and when even those slogans turn out to be false and undeliverable, calls to “accept” that politicians lie, and that “That’s democracy!” ring a little hollow.



# Brexit: inequality, the media and the democratic deficit

Brexit has come as a shock to many people – including those who voted for it. It reveals the scars, we are told, of a deeply divided nation. An election like no other. But referenda are not normal elections. As a snap choice of this or that they bring to the fore fears and anxieties while offering solutions that are never as simple as either/or. To begin to explain what has happened we need to bring context and history to bear. One thing we have known for some time is that inequality has increased. As inequality has increased so social mobility has fallen. As the poor have got poorer so they have had less and less influence over policies and politicians and feel ever more cut adrift from politics, left without the dignity of being able to influence the making of their own history.

The last decade has also been marked by public manifestations of dissent – mass demonstrations against student fees, public sector strikes and riots, the Occupy movement – protest is now more common than ever, but rarely taken notice of by those who govern. Functions of the state that once were public have been handed over to the private sector and then judged solely on economic grounds. Anti-trade union legislation has hollowed out the ability of workers to have any effective representation over falling wages and facilitated ever more insecure employment. Welfare services and public investments have been diminished while corporate prowess gains in cock-sure confidence through deregulation. Neoliberalism has built a structure of feeling that people are dispensable, that publics don't need to be listened to.

So the tag line for the Leave campaign – 'Let's Take Back Control' – speaks to a very real disaffection that this democracy doesn't work for the vast majority of its members. Crouch has famously termed our current democratic decay as a continuing process of dissolution towards 'post-democracy', a state where 'the forms of democracy remain fully in place', yet 'politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times'.

## Forgotten publics

When publics are abandoned, when their voices no longer matter and their identities are demolished through economic inequality, precarity and non-recognition, they lose faith in the political institutions that are supposed to represent them. And they see a political system that is entangled with a neoliberal practice - forms of power detached from authority and from responsibility to those left behind, particularly in periods of economic crisis.

So it is possible to see the Brexit vote as a desperate plea for change; a bid to turn politics from something that is done to us into doing something for ourselves. Is it any surprise then

that in the pursuit of reassurance and solidarity in the face of economic insecurity, that for some life takes on a sinister and resentful white nationalism – us against them – a convenient xenophobic rhetoric peddled by the three white men of Johnson, Gove and Farage all too willing to feed a tabloid frenzy. British newspapers were overwhelmingly in favour of Brexit, with the Mail, Telegraph, Express and Star accounting for four times as many readers and anti-EU stories as their pro-remain rivals.

The fact-checking pro-Remain website In Facts run by a group of editors, made complaints to IPSO against 20 pro-Brexit stories in the national press that are mostly concerned with inaccurate and distorted stories about the numbers of EU migrants coming to Britain and their impact on the UK. Only 5 of these false stories have so far been corrected but even then the corrections are never given the same prominence as the original article. The misleading headlines and sensationalist reporting are nothing new – this is a discourse that emanates from a longstanding Eurosceptic press that has campaigned against Brussels for years. And while research tells us that the media's influence resides in telling us what to think about rather than telling us what to think, we also know that most people consume news from sources that largely reinforce their views. When views go unchallenged they gain in popular credibility. This begins to explain research undertaken in 2014 by Ipsos Mori that mapped popular perceptions against reality. According to their survey the British public think that one in 5 British people are Muslim when in reality it is one in twenty and that 24% of the population are immigrants when the official figure is 13%.

If you were ever in any doubt that media reform is needed in the UK to support something approximating democracy, the reporting of the Leave campaign surely gives you your answer. When newspapers lie to bring about referendum results and the regulator is not prepared to stop them, the consequences are socially and politically catastrophic.



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## Campaign and Political Communication

# Why facts did matter in the campaign

Knowing the outcome of the referendum, it is both tempting as well as wrong to conceive of a simple narrative of why one side won and the other lost. Moreover, given the narrowness of the result with only 1 in 10 voters tilting the balance, one can easily exaggerate the influence of any particular factor.

Nonetheless, I argue that the acceptance of what I call evidential and causal claims played a crucial role in supporting or undermining dominant narratives about the EU during the campaign and may play a key role in determining what happens next as the UK appears to enter a constitutional crisis.

This may appear counter-intuitive as the Leave campaign won despite being faced with strong expert critiques of its claims about, for instance, the positive economic prospects of the UK outside the EU or Turkey joining in the EU soon. Leave drove around the country with a prominent claim on its bus that was manifestly false, whilst Michael Gove said “people had enough of experts”

Yet, all successful arguments, narratives and frames need to be rooted in facts held to be true and consistency of argument with fact is crucial to credibility of advocates. Evidential beliefs are directly accessible or observable information, such as the legal powers each EU institution has or UK government policy on Turkish accession to the EU. Causal beliefs relate to analytical judgements about past, present or future dynamics, for instance, claims that the EU-27 would be unwilling to give the UK access to the Single Market whilst opting out of freedom of movement.

The Leave campaigns central slogan of “taking back control” from a corrupt, failing, alien, oppressive and anti-democratic Brussels was successful with many audiences, because it was rooted in thousands of evidential and causal claims made over a long period of time about “Brussels”, especially in the written press. The issue here is not solely about the predominant “anti-EU bias” during the campaign itself, but the effects of negative press coverage of the EU on collective beliefs over decades. While other European countries also know Euroscepticism, Britain is unique in the nature of its media coverage of European integration.

The many hundreds of Euro-myths about unelected bureaucrats envisaged bans on loved British foodstuffs and customs, reports about Britain being isolated as other countries gang-up on it, the lack of coverage of MEPs doing their legislative job, supported an overarching narrative of the EU being all powerful, Britain being without a say and friends, and EU institutions unaccountable. Some of these claims had a grain of truth in them, but the overwhelming majority has been at best misleading and often manifestly false. Whilst television coverage has been perceived as

considerably less biased and more trusted, it was not proactive to educate citizens about the EU.

Successive governments have contributed to these beliefs by claiming any economic and political successes for themselves and blaming Brussels for uncomfortable outcomes. We know since the Leveson inquiry how successive Prime-Ministers felt severely constrained to stand-up to the power of the Eurosceptic press and their owners’ editorial agendas.

The rejection of the case made by an overwhelming majority of elite actors points partly to a source credibility issue affecting some of the leading figures, particularly Cameron, but also Corbyn. However, more importantly the Remain campaign started from a huge “deficit” in public knowledge about the nature of the EU, its powers and the UK role within it. There are natural limits to how much the Remain side could do to overcome deeply ingrained views about the EU, but there is little evidence that they tried, and some ‘in-campaigners such as Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, endorsed the “leave” critique of the EU as undemocratic and unaccountable without specifying the reasons or being clear about the remedies.

Two lessons to draw from this: First, those who are interested in the UK forging a constructive and friendly relationship with the EU, will need to invest more in educating the public about what the EU is and how it actually works and, perhaps more importantly, do not let inaccurate reporting and the press ownership creating it go without challenge. Otherwise, persuasive positive frames and narratives about the EU will struggle to resonate.

Secondly, profound questions about the linkage between democracy, political promises and knowledge arise: does it matter on what grounds votes are cast in an advisory issue referendum as compared to general elections? Does it matter if citizens vote against their best interests as a result of accepting weak, misleading or false claims? Does it matter if promises made by the Leave campaign are withdrawn just days after the vote or evaporate when faced with economic and political reality post-Brexit?

Politics will show.



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# Less a soap opera, more a fantasy drama?



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The referendum campaign was not just conveyed by our media; it was constituted by them. This was not just a matter of media logic applied to politics, but of cultural conventions forming the narrative and content of the campaign. It was an exercise in popular culture and the popular imagination, rather than in political communication and political persuasion.

The big show-downs were pure showbusiness. The BBC staged the ‘Great Debate’ in the Wembley Arena, in front of an audience of 6000, with the protagonists projected onto big screens, as if they were rock stars performing at the nearby Stadium. Channel 4’s ‘Europe: The Final Debate’ (the Final Frontier?) was promoted with the promise of contributions from June Sarpong, Nish Kumar, Rick Astley, Delia Smith, Mike Read, Theo Paphitis, among other media celebrities.

The viciousness of the exchanges in the debates and elsewhere channeled the vindictiveness of X Factor judges and Big Brother House contestants. Or aspired to the quaint farces of an Ealing Comedy as Nigel Farage and Bob Geldof bellowed at each other across the Thames.

Then there was the matter of ‘expertise’, an idea either ambiguously advocated or darkly suspect. A Remain leaflet sent days before the vote boldly quoted ‘Ian’ on the front: ‘I won’t let anybody else decide my future’. On the other side, the third of three points pronounced ‘The Weight of Evidence is Overwhelming’, and in support it read: “From Richard Branson to JK Rowling, from Stephen Hawking to Alan Sugar ... all agree that we are better off IN”.

For the Leavers, experts were – for the most part - to be derided, their expertise attributed to self-interest or some darker forces. Conspiracy theories, the stuff of so many Hollywood movies, were routinely deployed to discount unpalatable evidence. Experts were all in the pay of a Bond villain (or worse, if Michael Gove was to be believed).

While the Remainers dabbled in another Hollywood myth: the imminent apocalypse, the Leavers conjured up an idyllic island of peace, plenty and populist sovereignty. One Leave political [broadcast](#) about the NHS portrayed two scenarios: one in which an elderly patient is made to wait because of all the freeloaders from Europe were being treated ahead of her; the other where the waiting room was almost deserted, and the treatment was fast and attentive. The images and the plot were identical to a Labour election [broadcast](#) in 1992, where two young girls were being treated for the same complaint, and one went privately and the other depended on the NHS. Just as Nigel Farage’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster recycled both Nazi propaganda and Saatchi and Saatchi’s Labour’s Not Working.

All campaigns are narratives (as the creator of Harry Potter pointed out in a [blog](#) about the

Referendum; what matters is the genre of the narrative. Politics has been dismissed in the past as soap opera – a benign image of families at odds within and without (YouGov [asked people](#) how TV characters might vote: the Vicar of Dibley led the list of Remainers; Jim Royle the Leavers. This campaign itself conjured up less parochial visions. At times, it came closer to Game of Thrones.

As such, it was a very unmusical campaign. Much mockery was made of the Leave campaign’s attempt to organize a concert in support of its cause. The best they could muster, [according to the Mirror](#), was ‘three-quarters of Bucks Fizz and an Elvis impersonator’. The Scottish referendum, by contrast, was more tuneful, although the songs belonged mostly to the independence cause. For Better Together, as for the EU debate, there was no unifying national image to set to music. Maybe it’s hard to write catchy songs about the single market or the virtues of a points-based immigration system.

All of this might be seen as trivial footnotes to the campaign. It might, though, be symptomatic of a marked change in political discourse. It has become coarser, but not because ‘we’ have become coarser, but because of the way experience has replaced research as the currency of truth, because identity has become the source of value (cosmopolitanism vs community), and because political principles have been reconfigured and reconstituted as popular cultural tastes and imaginaries.

# The rhetoric of the EU Referendum campaign

The referendum campaign was a long time coming. Approximately 26 years, in fact. This is because the Conservative Party have been at loggerheads over how to manage the UK's relationship with the European Union since Margaret Thatcher was deposed. It was an important point in laying the foundations for Conservative disunity, as Europe ended up contributing towards her demise. In 1990, Geoffrey Howe resigned over how her attitude had made dealing with the EU almost impossible. His often over-quoted line symbolised that attitude: 'It is rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease only for them to find, the moment the first balls are bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game by the team captain.' Weeks later, Thatcher was gone, and the Tory Party was traumatised.

Subsequently, Thatcher's departure and the grievances over Europe undermined party unity over the course of John Major's premiership, and when they returned to opposition, it remained a constant theme. In 2001, it was there during Hague's election campaign where he argued 'talk about Europe and they call you extreme. Talk about tax and they call you greedy. Talk about crime and they call you reactionary. Talk about immigration and they call you racist; talk about your nation and they call you Little Englanders'. And in 2005, the longstanding hostility was again present, embodied by the 'are you thinking what we're thinking' posters which led the Conservatives message on anti-immigration. It took three defeats in a row before they were ready to listen to David Cameron's argument that they should talk about something the voters care about and should stop 'banging on about Europe'. With the issues unresolved, they did.

Reflecting on the rhetoric of the referendum campaign itself, the Vote Leave side emerged victorious by positioning their arguments in long-standing assumptions about how the UK was being mistreated by the EU. Immigration, loss of sovereignty, expense of membership, and a growing sense of a detached liberal intelligentsia that failed to understand the plight faced by the poorest in society or the issues of a cultural shift in the UK. Contrasting this, the Remain side sought to highlight the benefits of access to the single market, fiscal stability, the free movement of people and ideas, and also the potential risk to the economy by withdrawing from the EU. These distinct rhetorical positions can be analysed using the Aristotelean modes of persuasion which are *pathos*, *logos* and *ethos*.

Rhetorically, the Leave side used appeals to *pathos* whilst the Remain side relied more upon *logos*-driven arguments. This significant difference framed the kind of arguments both sides would use. For example, by appealing to *pathos* the Leave side were able to use fear of immigration and the potential risks of Turkey joining the European Union to instil a sense of dread of the future. Aided

by a sympathetic media, the Leave side were well positioned to mould their narrative during the debates and through sympathetic tabloids. Contrasting this, the Remain side used *logos* by highlighting the economic benefits of immigration, the unlikelihood of an immediate application from Turkey to join the EU, and that the UK gains considerable social and economic benefits from membership. So, why did the Leave side win the argument?

Put simply, the Leave side appealed successfully to the third of Aristotle's rhetorical devices, namely *ethos*. This concerns character and credibility. Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage construct a persona that seems to be likable and open, whilst constructing David Cameron and others such as John Major and Tony Blair represented a distant establishment. The premise surrounding this rhetorical strategy concerns convincing the audience (or voter) that their background and abilities reflect their own. In the case of Leave they argued that understood and sympathised with the voters and their concerns. Given the greater likelihood of the older sections of the electorate to vote, the Leave side sought to reflect the concerns of the 'baby boomer' generation. Thus, arguing that the EU is a distant force that undermines British identity and that immigration has swamped the UK with alien customs and/or ideas. Contrasting this, the Remain side sought to articulate a more positive message targeted at the potential opportunities for the 'Millennials'. However, given their hesitation to vote, this strategy proved problematic. As a consequence, the Leave side were able to appeal to *ethos* more than the Remain side and to a greater number of the electorate.

On reflection, there are a number of rhetorical strategies that had been employed by both sides which can and do explain the outcome. Remain's appeals to *logos* were designed to highlight the benefits of the status quo, whilst Leave's use of *pathos* sought to demonstrate the dangers of the EU and its ongoing threat. Ultimately, however, it was the successful appeals to *pathos*, combined with *ethos* that rhetorically swung it for Leave.



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# A (very) brief period of Habermasian bliss



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In our mediated democracy, it has become a truism to point to the demise of traditional methods of political communication. The public meetings, the speeches from the stump, even the debates about issues of the day in the pub among ‘ordinary folk’ were deemed a thing of the past.

Even when traditional methods were used – most notably, with John Major on his soap box – they were held almost exclusively for transmission through the electronic and printed media. ‘Here is our leader, meeting the people’, while a wider view would have shown a diminutive figure surrounded by the massed banks of cameras and microphones. In other words, these events were not for direct public engagement but were part of the new mediated democracy.

Once again, that mediated democracy let the people down during the EU Referendum. The newspapers, as they did in the last two elections, had a dreadful campaign, with both sides peddling lies, half-lies and doom-laden warnings of what a vote either way would do. Broadcast media were little better, their idea of balance being to let the big guns slug it out and then pointing you in the direction of a website where you could ‘reality check’ or ‘fact check’.

Indeed, voters repeatedly cried out for some ‘facts’ or at least some considered analysis of the possibilities. Of course, the ‘facts’ were disputable, but they got personality politics of the worst kind. Not a single campaigner has a kind word to say about the nature of the two campaigns, including their own.

So, the Referendum debate was characterised by the type of name-calling and wild claims that people say turns them away from politics. Paradoxically, the only major politician who didn’t make exaggerated claims for their position, Jeremy Corbyn, is now under intense pressure to resign, largely for his failure to crank up the hyperbole for Remain.

There was one glorious exception in the political public sphere. I took part in a number of public debates, as a chair and as a panel member, and all the best points came from the floor. These debates were also lively but malice-free, a refreshing change from the tactics of our political elites.

That same willingness to debate was evidenced in the shop queues, pubs and cafes I inhabited. Sitting in the sun outside a pub in the Staffordshire market town of Leek a few weeks ago, five outside tables featuring a broad selection of views, argued quietly and without rancour. I’ve never seen this before. Traditional party politics is out of bounds for public debate by the British, along with sex and religion.

There appeared to be no such inhibitions during this campaign. People asked each other for advice and actually listened to what was being said. Many minds were changed by persuasive argument.

Sadly, what we have seen since the result was

declared is more worrying. Minorities on both sides have abandoned any attempt at reconciliation. Remainers call Brexiters ‘racists’, and in return are called ‘traitors’. Racist insults and daubed walls present a disturbing picture of a totally divided nation.

This is not just a response from a small number of extremist idiots; their bile is being fed by the language of some of our supposedly educated commentators who are equally guilty. The Ant and Dec of ‘serious’ political commentary, Andrew Pierce of the *Mail* and Kevin Maguire of the *Mirror*, traded scowls and childish insults on Sky News in the aftermath of the result. ‘Loser, loser’, chanted Pierce. No wonder the public regards our political classes with scorn.

But for at least a few brief and glorious weeks, I saw evidence of a rebirth of the supposedly now totally mediated Habermasian public sphere, as the public in coffee houses and inns engaged in informed discussion about the key issue of my political lifetime. It was wonderful while it lasted.

# The toxicity of discourse: reflections on UK political culture following the EU Referendum

The EU Referendum campaign has been widely criticised as one of the most divisive, ugly and corrosive campaigns in modern British history, the (unintended) consequences of which promise to shape political culture in the UK for some time to come.

On the morning of 24 June, once victory had been achieved, Michael Gove characterised the Referendum as being about ‘one big question: should we leave the political structures of the European Union?’ His deliberately narrow formulation here presents a sterile reduction of the vote, one which denies the complex emotions, mythologies and contradictions at play during this decisive moment in political culture and history. Gove’s stripped-down ‘question’ prompted a personal reflection for me on how, in fact, the campaign had been steeped in political discourse designed to appeal to feelings of national identity and values, brimming with intangible promises of sovereignty, freedom and control. This was anything but a simple question concerning political structures.

As presented in an earlier study with Kay Richardson and John Corner (*Political Culture and Media Genre: Beyond the News*, 2012), the ‘political culture’ perspective signals a research interest that looks beyond the official political system to include ‘the wider range of orientations, norms and perceptions within which a political system is embedded’ (p4). In this research project, one of our key tasks had been to interrogate the ways in which both serious and playful media genres offer spaces where diverse actors are able to engage with ‘the political’ and to position themselves in relation to its prevailing values and character. At the time, the MPs’ expenses scandal of 2009 appeared to represent a parliamentary low-point in terms of public trust and confidence; with the cultures, ethics and practices of other institutions such as the police and national press also coming under serious scrutiny in the intervening years. But I would like to call attention to three interrelated developments which have become especially pertinent in the last few months.

**Toxicity** as the common descriptor for political discourse. There is a noticeable escalation in characterising political culture as ‘toxic’, along with ‘racist’, the ‘politics of fear’, ‘gutter politics’; and this is not just a UK trend. At different points the anger-filled rhetoric is variously instigated by political actors, by traditional media and especially right-wing tabloid newspapers, but also by citizens on social media. How do we move beyond this acknowledgement of toxicity and rhetorical violence to identify causes, triggers or patterns of use?

## Evocations of nationhood as anti-immigrant.

Nationalistic energies have been reignited through a potent rhetorical mix of nostalgia, grievances and imagined destiny. Whilst the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum may have sparked talk of self-assertion and governance, the particular character of

English nationalism during the campaign was defined more by its fear of others (immigrants) than by a distinctive national sense of self.

## Misogyny towards women in public life.

Especially for those who speak out on feminist issues, female public figures are often the targets of an online shadow discourse characterised by anonymous and recurrent threats of sexual violence, currently most conspicuously conducted on social media platforms. Female politicians did not feature prominently during the Referendum campaign with the tragic exception of Labour MP Jo Cox, killed on 16 June in what her family believes was a politically motivated attack. It transpired that Jo Cox had reported threats to the police in the months before her death.

The above points suggest a number of worrying trends that have become difficult to ignore. So how might media scholars contribute useful analysis to this state of affairs? Certainly by developing and refining tools and techniques of analysis that are able to keep pace with the rapid changes in cultural practices and media technologies where they relate to expressions of political allegiance and activity. As noted above, in rhetorically limiting the referendum result to a rejection of the political structures of the EU, Michael Gove’s statement works to deny the troubling complexities and contradictions at play, and which include the emphatically affective. The shocking ‘political cultural moment’ offers a disruptive (and hopefully constructive) space in which to question the beliefs, values and priorities reflected back to us in political and media accounts. The generational, regional, class-based divisions that have come to the fore have been bubbling away and we have not, perhaps, paid sufficient attention. It is imperative that we continue to investigate and critique the media’s role in fostering such divisions while they simultaneously disregard the cultural, structural and economic inequalities which drive them.



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*Many thanks to John Corner, Kay Richardson and Nancy Thumim for comments on an earlier draft.*

# Britishness and Brexit



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The surprise outcome of the EU referendum has exposed the extent of divisions within the UK. These differences are geographical with 62% of Scots voting in favour of Remain in contrast to 57% of the English electorate, outside London, favouring “Brexit.” Outcomes also vary by age, gender and level of education, with the paradigmatic Remain voter a young female Scottish graduate and the archetypal Brexiteer a 50 plus Englishman with less formal education and limited means. The disparity between these identities is clear. Yet more nebulous than ever is the cultural construct of “Britishness” which was mobilised in service of both the Remain and Leave campaigns.

The Leave campaign – incredibly given their overwhelmingly upper middle-class leadership caste – self-styled themselves as a “people’s revolution” poised to “take back control” from oppressive, yet distant, elites. In their eyes, cosmopolitan London is a “bubble,” entirely out of touch with the views of “ordinary” folk. Arguably they had a point, with Londoners joining Celtic outliers in Scotland and Northern Ireland in expressing their strong preference to remain a member of the EU. By contrast the majority of English and Welsh voters opted to leave. Yet a blunt caricature of the millions of in voters as being supportive of globalising elites does not fit with the populaces of Glasgow or Belfast. In reality they share the political colours of many electorates of post-industrial cities of England and Wales. Other, more regional factors must therefore be at work in these voters’ calculations.

Both campaigns hinged on a particular vision of Britishness. In one of several televised debates, David Cameron declared the choice facing UK voters was between “Great Britain and little England.” Cameron distinguished between a country that was able to look out beyond its shores against one that looks inward on itself. It is perhaps a testament to the canniness of the Leave campaign that, despite leading on an anti-immigration platform, they were able to circumnavigate accusations of parochialism. Britain outside the EU, they claimed, would be one that could trade beyond the boundaries of what they argued was the dead weight of Europe. Prominent Brexiteers even talked vaguely about the possibilities of forging stronger ties with India and China. Through mentioning these partners they invoked memories of Empire, a territory that had spanned so vast an expanse that ‘the sun never set’. In this way the Leave campaign maintained an international outlook while tacitly upholding the monocultural English ideal so central to imperial discourses.

*The Economist’s* Bagehot columnist identified an anarchic streak in the British populace despite their traditionally deferential manner. Consequently the opinions of internationally-respected expert economists and political leaders, who universally urged Britain to remain in the EU, proved

counterproductive. Indeed, they provided further targets for an opportunistic Leave campaign to argue that a vote for Remain was also a vote for David Cameron, the governing elite and the status quo. Consequently it is possible to interpret the Brexit outcome as a proxy vote reflecting the electorate’s increasing distaste for the (outgoing) Prime Minister, a politician whose standing quickly diminished after securing a majority government in the 2015 General Election.

The Conservative and Labour Party alike are now in a state of disarray while the SNP’s Nicola Sturgeon raises a number of complex constitutional questions about Scotland’s position in both the United Kingdom and the European Union. This is a situation in which notions of Britishness and, perhaps more significantly, of unity have been radically destabilised. How these notions are resolved will be a question that preoccupies elected representatives and constitutional experts in the weeks and months to follow as Britain renegotiates its place in the world.



# Neither tackling lies nor making the case: the Remain side

The Brexit result will reverberate for years. Even within the first few days of the Leave vote, UK political dynamics twisted into a set of inter-related crises, while economic impacts continue to pile up, from a falling currency to financial organisations looking to move into the eurozone.

Many came to the instant verdict that the Remain side economic case failed in the face of anti-immigration sentiment and the ‘take back control’ slogan. Yet the communication failures of the Remain side go beyond that.

The most startling demonstration of the weakness of the Remain side was their failure to convince the public that Leave’s big fat lie that the UK sends £350 million a week to Brussels was just that – false. Yet even the BBC, in its efforts at balance and impartiality, or perhaps nervousness at attacks from the Leave side, failed to correct that, rather repeating both sides claim about it.

The Remain side did attempt to set out the various economic benefits of EU membership that made it worth being a net budget contributor – at about £8.5 billion a year i.e. about £163 million a week. Yet this was done – as the whole campaign was – in such a narrow, costs and benefits for Britain way that the wider, more strategic case for the EU was essentially not made.

In addition, some of the most powerful economic statements and arguments were made before the end of May – apparently shifting the opinion polls sharply towards Remain. But the Remain campaign did not then appear to have a strategy for the final month of the campaign to build on this, instead failing to keep up the momentum of their arguments on the economy and without clear arguments on free movement and immigration.

The failure to brand the £350 million claim as a lie perhaps came in part from the lack of unity across the Remain campaign. But it also came from the fact that David Cameron could not have been worse placed to explain the strategic argument for solidarity and cooperation in the EU.

Under Cameron as Prime Minister, the UK lost substantial influence in the EU over the last six years. From the start, Cameron and his Tory team – if not, until last year, his LibDem coalition partners – wanted to limit and inhibit what the EU did. They also deliberately stood back from active participation in how to handle the various challenges and crises facing the EU – from the refugee crisis to the unemployment challenge produced by the global economic crisis and eurozone crisis combined. Even on Russia and Ukraine, Cameron took a back seat leaving Merkel to lead.

With Cameron’s ‘renegotiation’ with the EU resulting in a deal whereby the UK, alone of the 27 other member states, was no longer committed to political integration in Europe, the UK was poised to be an outer-tier, opted out member state, with less influence, less responsibilities, fewer roles.

Cameron branded this as ‘the best of both worlds’ for the UK. But a world where the UK stands by, as the EU faces some of its biggest challenges in several decades, is not a world where Remain leaders could also argue that the UK was one of the EU’s leaders, or at the forefront of tackling key common challenges.

Faced with the narrowest cost-benefit analysis of why the UK should be in the UK, Leave voters were unconvinced. Equally, both main political parties, Tory and Labour failed to make a strong case for the social, political and economic benefits of free movement in the EU. Nor were Cameron and other Remain Tories going to argue that voters’ unhappiness with the state of the NHS, housing and education was a result of their own policies and nothing to do with the EU or immigration.

Meanwhile, Labour was also in some disarray. Corbyn proved a reluctant and unconvincing communicator on the EU – setting out a few sound bites on workers’ rights, without enthusiasm. Nor did Corbyn seem any more able than Cameron to imagine a wider, strategic case for the EU, even at a time of global and regional challenges from climate change to war and conflict in the Middle East. Labour could point to Tory cuts as underpinning the challenges in education, the NHS and housing – but the absence of a clear, anti-austerity, anti-cuts policy from the Labour opposition also weakened this case.

In the weeks, months and years to come, what the Leave side branded ‘project fear’ may come to look like a considerable understatement. The strategic weaknesses of the Remain side – and not only the lies and distortions of the Leave side – contributed to the vote for Brexit. While many are already criticising Labour for not getting more of its voters to back Remain, it is the case that Labour, LibDem, Green and SNP voters all backed Remain by more than 60%. It was Tory voters who split 58% to 42% for Leave, plus almost all UKIP voters.

In the end a Conservative Prime Minister, who made the fatal choice to hold the EU referendum, utterly failed to convince his own Tory voters of the Remain case. It is ultimately Cameron’s failure and it stems not just from weak communication and weak strategy but from a lack of real commitment to the strategic case for the EU and for the UK to play a strategic role in Europe



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# Break-point for Brexit? How UKIP's image of 'hate' set race discourse reeling back decades



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There are many lines in *Policing the Crisis* – the seminal account of a flap about an invented 1970s wave of mob violence supposedly orchestrated by black youths – that might have been written as a critique of Grassroots Out's "Breaking Point" poster (or, indeed, the Brexit campaign generally). In one of numerous memorable passages, the late Stuart Hall and his co-authors decried the "incalculable harm" done by politicians', law-enforcers' and the news media's repeated claims about a racially tinged "mugging" epidemic – accusing them of "raising the wrong things into sensational focus" and "hiding and mystifying the deeper causes" of genuine, but far more nuanced, social problems. All of which brings us back to *that* poster: an image of invading "orientals," so laced with distortion, alarm and misrepresentation that it can only be viewed as a weapon of wilfully fomented moral panic.

But, aside from its manifest racism and unsettling personification of Enoch Powell's baleful 'Rivers of Blood' speech, what is the poster trying to 'say'? And why is its underlying 'message' so profoundly untruthful? In deconstructing the image – and its equally deceitful slogan – we somehow need to divorce ourselves from the acres of commentary it provoked after Nigel Farage unveiled it on his battle-bus a week before Referendum-day. So let's confine ourselves to noting the most flagrant falsehood commentators exposed: namely that, far from depicting a line of European Union economic migrants (the people to whom the principle of free movement between member states applies), let alone one entering the United Kingdom, it showed a line of non-EU refugees crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border.

For all its crucial importance in framing the Farage case, though, this removal of context was far from the poster's most invidious deception. To turn to the charge of racism (as opposed to mere xenophobia), the poster depicted a river of people snaking towards the camera – almost all of whom are youthful-looking black or Asian men. This was UKIP's crystallisation of the fabled Cameron "swarm". Its malice lay in the fact that it simultaneously suggested a threefold untruth: that the inward migration encouraged by our EU membership is a non-white phenomenon; that it principally involves young, able-bodied males who can only be coming to steal our jobs and livelihoods; and that it is a Trojan horse for importing Islamist (ergo 'Middle Eastern-looking') terrorists. Not since Saatchi and Saatchi recruited an army of young Conservatives to stage a similarly sinuous fake dole queue for its epochal 1979 'Labour isn't Working' campaign had such a deceitfully anonymised procession been constructed in the service of British political propaganda. And it was this same spirit of calculated vagueness in its othering – constructing a hazily defined, straw-man threat – that underpinned the poster's infamous call to arms. The strapline urging

us all to "take back control of our borders" paid not the scantest regard to overwhelming independent evidence that Britain's refusal to sign the Schengen Agreement already prevented the Syrian 'migrants' the photo depicted from entering the UK via other European countries.

The poster was, then, a masterclass in conflation and exploitation: it conflated the (starkly different) identities and statuses of intra-EU migrants/immigrants and inter-EU refugees/asylum-seekers, and it exploited not only these cruelly misrepresented subjects but the climate of suspicion and distrust that numerous recent studies have identified as a growing feature of advanced neoliberal societies. In so doing, it also exploited the insecurities and anxieties of those it claimed to represent: the "ordinary, decent people" of the post-industrial North-East, South-West, Wales and eastern coastal fringes now so besieged by global market forces they are primed to be on the lookout for scapegoats.

The significance of the poster, then, lies less in what its divide-and-rule tactics *actually* achieved than what they *sought* to achieve. We will never know for sure quite how influential it was – though, given the Referendum's result, the possibility that it swayed some minds is hard to discount. But in spite – or perhaps because – of the opprobrium it drew from the Twitterati and opinion leaders across the spectrum of Brexit debate, its viral spread ensured its shock value the infamy and ubiquity Grassroots Out doubtless craved. While the moral panic dissected in Hall et al's study found a different outward expression – in fears specifically about violent crime, rather than pressure on jobs, housing or public services – it arose out of a period as economically turbulent, and socially divided, as our own. To this end, it recognised that the "mugging" discourse was but one manifestation of a deeper-rooted, perceived "crisis" of cultural identity – mobilised by authoritarian conservative forces convinced that "the British way of life" was "coming apart at the seams". In short: an imagined Britain (like UKIP's) on the verge of "breaking point".



UKIP leader Nigel Farage launches a new UKIP EU referendum poster campaign in Smith Square, London. Picture by: Philip Toscano/ PA Wire/Press Association Images.

# Referendum campaign broadcasts on television: a generational clash?



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One feature of the British political and media landscapes to have remained pretty much unchanged from the time of the first UK referendum on Europe in 1975 was the system for allocations of broadcast time on television. An outright ban on paid-for political advertising in broadcast media, with its origins in the earliest structures of the public service broadcasting monopoly of the BBC, has remained with surprisingly little change to the present day. In 1975 there were still only three television channels (BBC 1, BBC2 and ITV), only the last of which carried any paid-for advertising at all, and whilst the trickle of new channels in the 1980s and 1990s via satellite and cable turned into a flood since the 2000s with digital, and now online streaming television services, the system of allocated television broadcasts has remained pretty static, and in the view of one recent review is seen as still ‘fit for purpose’ as well as being consonant with European law, premised mainly on the likely huge cost of shifting to a paid advertising approach, and the potential disadvantages that might bring to political parties. In General Elections, where they are called Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs), the focus of allocated broadcasts has changed as television coverage has shifted from only reporting results in the early 1950s to near saturation coverage today. PEBs have become both an important site of mass audience reach for party messages, but also opportunities for media agenda setting through effective and memorably composition of the handful of PEBs the parties receive such as “Kinnock the Movie” in 1987, “Jennifer’s Ear” in 1992 or the Green Party’s “Change the Tune” from last year’s General Election.

PEBs, then, occupy a role that has evolved over time within conventional electoral contexts, though this is starting to change with the increasing use of social media platforms by political parties for video content- such as dedicate YouTube channels for instance. Referendum Campaign Broadcasts (RCBs), on the other hand, do not have any of this kind of routine, and the approaches of the two official campaign groups reveal the problem of how to utilise a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century approach in a 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape.

The Stronger IN RCBs definitely took the approach of seeing them as traditional PEBs in terms of style, content and format. They produced two RCBs that were each shown twice during the campaign. Their first RCB, shown on May 24<sup>th</sup>, offered what turned out to be a rare example in the campaign of an attempt at a predominantly positive message, with a single filmed piece showing scene after scene of happy workers, families, doctors and particularly children, focusing on 14 month-old “Sam” and the opportunities for the future the EU would bring. Apart from a BBC article that described it as ‘cutesy and soft focus’ the ad didn’t dent the already predominantly negative and

attacking agenda of the campaign in any notable manner. Their second RCB also followed a very conventional PEB format- the talking head format, with a series of prominent figures from Alan Sugar to Stephen Hawking offering soundbites of why the EU was good for all sorts of reasons- again not seeming to impact on media agendas in any way.

Vote Leave went for a very different approach, offering effectively compilations of shorter video sequences clumsily run together, suggesting perhaps, much more of a focus on video sequences designed for social media platforms, where short, pithy videos in general are much more prevalent, than traditional PEBs. The BBC’s one article on Vote Leave RCBs focused on what they saw as a ‘clever’ filmed sequence, used in all five of their slots- a short split-screen film accompanied only by music, showing the difference between an old lady’s experience of the NHS inside the EU- queues, waiting, not getting treated- to Leave’s vision of outside the EU- empty waiting rooms, immediate service, and being cured. This film was regularly topped and tailed by other short segments, on Cameron’s comments on Turkey, and claims about possible new EU member states’ pressure on the NHS using maps. The only major variation to this combination was the May 31<sup>st</sup> RCB which had two ordinary “blokes in the pub” making sly digs about Turkey and MEPs wages whilst promoting the Leave campaign’s £50 million competition linked to the Euro ’16 football championship.

Neither side’s RCBs generated more than a cursory mention in other news media, and then only by the BBC, so their impact on the campaign itself is likely to have been minimal. The impact of the campaign on the future of the party allocation system, on the other hand, may be one of the unforeseen longer consequences for political campaigning in the UK.



*Vote Leave RCB*



*Stronger IN RCB*

# Interaction and ‘the floor’ in the televised debates of the EU referendum campaign



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Televised political debates have become a central focus of UK political campaigning. Here I consider the mechanics of the two main televised debates of the EU Referendum campaign by analysing particular aspects of turn-taking and floor apportionment in the ‘ITV Referendum Debate’ on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016 and the ‘BBC Great Debate’ on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2016. Both debates ran for two hours with the Leave and Remain arguments represented by two teams of three speakers responding to questions from the studio audience. Apart from the more striking features of the debates, such as the repeated mantra to ‘take back control’ by the Leave side, and the speakers’ overt self-identifications as *mother*, *grandmother*, *immigrant*, *Turk* and *lawyer*, an analysis of debate turns can illuminate how the speakers occupied the debate floor in interactional terms.

In the ITV debate there was some variability in the distribution of turns directly allocated by the moderator. As Figure 1 shows, the Leave team were allocated 83 speaking turns and the Remain team 76. Johnson was allocated the most turns overall, with Rudd second. Johnson and Rudd engaged in ‘dyadic’ or head-to-head ‘debate within a debate’ exchanges that give interactional advantages. Direct challenges and questions directed at a speaker mean that they are given more opportunities to respond and this is often sanctioned by the moderator in the interests of provoking debate. In this way, Johnson accrued turns through challenges from all the Remain speakers. However, unlike the GE2015 TV debates, these debates were a team effort, so the dominance of allocated turns by one team member automatically reduced the participation of other members of the team. In this way, Johnson’s dominance of the allocated turns was at the expense (strategically or otherwise) of the participation of Leadsom and particularly Stuart (who took the fewest turns allocated to the Leave team), and Rudd’s allocated turns were taken at the expense of Sturgeon and Eagle. However, the allocated turns only give a partial account of participation as speakers frequently interrupt each other and speak ‘illegally’, although these contested turns are less secure than those that are allocated. Figure 1 shows that the Leave team made 17 interruptions and the Remain team made 38, with Eagle making the most overall, Sturgeon and Johnson making the approximately the same amount, Rudd only five and Stuart none at all.

Of course, simply securing speaking turns is not enough to ensure a speaker’s success in creating an impression on the audience. There was very little applause in the ITV debate but 60% of it was in response to the Leave team and 40% to Remain. Johnson and Sturgeon achieved the most positive audience response, as measured in applause. Given the equal composition of the studio audience into Leave

and Remain camps, and the variability of the audience responses towards members of the same ‘team’, this might suggest that it was strategically an advantage for Johnson to take most of the Leave allocated turns and a disadvantage for Rudd to take most of those allocated to Remain (as she achieved a less positive response from the audience than Sturgeon).

However, as with all TV debates, the participants must balance a range of competing demands. Although Johnson was noticeably dominant in the ITV debate, and gained the most positive audience reaction, this dominance risked him being perceived negatively as overbearing. This was highlighted by Ruth Davidson in the ‘BBC Great Debate’ when she interrupted Johnson to say ‘This isn’t the Boris show’ to highlight Johnson’s domineering style. In fact, there was far less variability in allocated turns in this debate. As Figure 2 shows, both sides in the BBC debate were allocated the same amount of turns and all three speakers for Leave took an equal share of allocated turns, possibly a tactical move enabled by the performance of a now well-rehearsed team. For Remain, it is Davidson who stands out as the speaker who gained the most turns overall.

The audience response in terms of applause in the BBC debate was also more equally distributed between the two sides, with 51.2% for the Leave team and 48.8% for Remain. Despite Davidson’s successful accrual of speaking turns, Johnson once again gained the most positive audience response with 210 seconds of applause against Davidson’s 173 seconds.

The performance of the politicians in this ‘dispute genre’ of TV political debates concurs with previous analyses of TV debates in the [GE2015 election campaign](#). Although these strictly moderated events aim to ensure equal participation, this principle runs against an intrinsically adversarial genre that seeks to engage audiences and rewards those who both directly challenge others and who are challenged themselves.

Figure 1: ITV Debate Turns

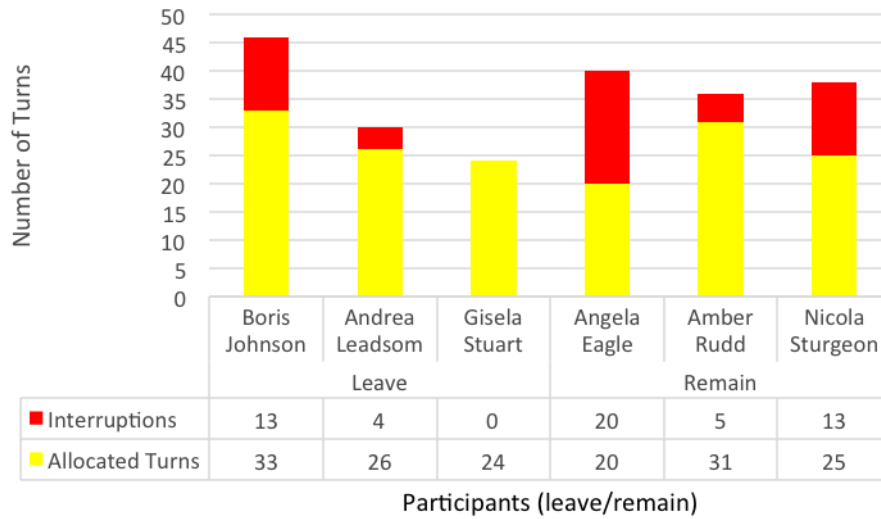
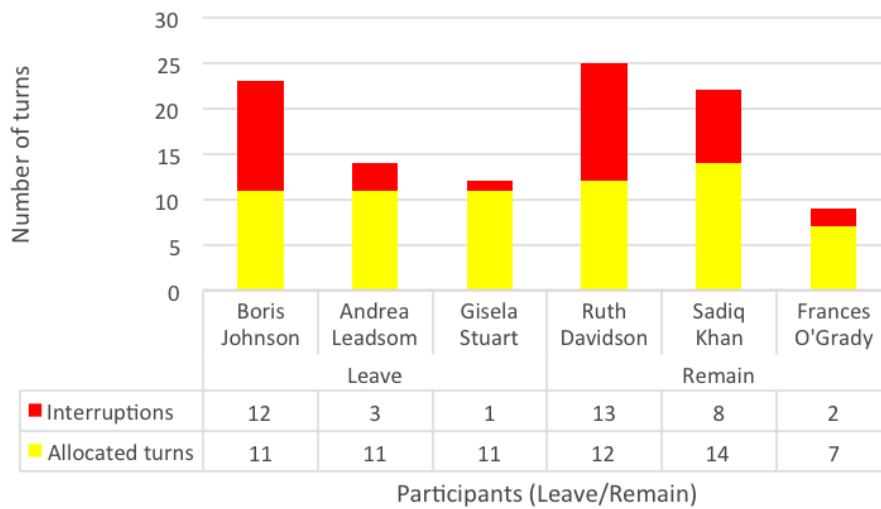


Figure 2: BBC Debate turns



# Comedy clubs offered a better quality of debate than the political stage



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On 21<sup>st</sup> June 2016, at 8pm, two performances began. Each contributed to the referendum discussion but they differed substantially in the levels of complexity that they employed. At Wembley Arena, the ‘Great Debate’ between prominent Leave and Remain campaigners was filmed before a live audience of thousands, and broadcast on BBC1. Meanwhile, Chris Coltrane’s comedy club, *Lolitics*, took place in a small room above a Camden pub; an edited podcast was released two days later, coinciding with the vote itself.

*Coltrane* offered a well-formed, incisive criticism of referendum campaigning. He noted both sides’ failure to provide reliable information, likening the voters’ experience to ‘asking two children to guess how many dinosaurs there are in the world, and then just taking the average’. Coltrane also placed key referendum issues in their wider political context. Many Remain supporters have been criticised for their readiness to attribute Leave votes to racism and xenophobia. Coltrane – in favour of Remain – did attribute much of Leave’s momentum to a ‘poisonous’ discussion on immigration. However, his argument was not simplistic but thoughtful; seeking not to abuse but to understand. Referring to a *Guardian* interview in which a member of the public dramatically overestimated the proportion of immigrants in her hometown of Leigh, Coltrane (2016) said:

“It’s easy for people to sneer at that and dismiss it as racism but we shouldn’t, because here’s what she also said: ‘I work full time, my husband works full time, I pay full rent and I can’t get anything’. And that is the thing, they’ve been *let down* – they’ve been let down by a government that hasn’t given them the basic things they need to live and they’ve been let down by a media who *should* have been holding the government to account over austerity ... but have instead very happily gone along with the anti-immigrant rhetoric ... The problems in towns like that are a direct result of Tory policy. Leigh was a mining town, right? It was not an immigrant that closed down the mines.”

The audience of the Wembley debate encountered no such trust in their intelligence, nor recognition of relevant contexts. As journalist John Rentoul *observed*, its participants ‘mainly traded soundbites.’ When the debate turned to the topic of immigration, Remain repeated the maxim that there could be ‘no silver bullets’, while Leave leant upon their platitude: ‘take back control’. Three words on either side were intended to stick in the memory: the tactic presumed that audiences would seek reductive approaches to a complicated matter. Both Gisela Stuart and Andrea Leadsom were quick to mention that they are mothers; a recurrent but meaningless statement later mocked by Ruth Davidson (‘there are actually mums and dads...on this side of the argument as well!’).

Attempts to widen the scope of debate fared badly. Remain’s Frances O’Grady endeavoured to query a significant donation to Vote Leave from a former BNP member; Leave’s Andrea Leadsom *dismissed the concern* as ‘unworthy of this debate’. O’Grady’s later reference to austerity, and particularly the legacy of ‘those greedy bankers crashing the economy’, was shut down by the moderator, David Dimbleby: ‘let’s try, within reason, to stick to the points that we’ve been asked to raise.’ As with Coltrane’s routine, O’Grady’s line of argument was ideologically driven and open to disagreement. Yet it was surely reasonable to acknowledge the resonance of her comments to the topic under discussion; unreasonable to ignore her points. Perhaps the politicians *and* journalist on that stage were too used to working in soundbites, instinctively failing to trust their audience’s desire, or capability, to navigate the complexities of the debate.

Politicians and media alike failed to prepare the population for the referendum. This is because they failed to provide good-quality information, and more fundamentally because the choices they made when it came to scripting and performing the campaign elided real discussion of the issues. The referendum highlighted the simplistic mode of address that has come to dominate political discourse, and its inadequacy. Stand-up comedy, by contrast, offers richer and more complex communication with audiences. Coltrane and his colleagues have shown that the level of debate can be raised, and the audience will cope. The political stage must improve the quality of its conversation, lest its actors fail us once again.





Comedian Eddie Izzard speaks at the University of Sussex, Brighton in a final push for the Remain Campaign in the EU Referendum. Picture by: Hannah McKay / PA Wire/Press Association Images.

# ‘Project Art’ versus ‘Project Fear’: the art establishment against Brexit



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As part of the Britain Stronger in Europe (BSiE) campaign, a group of prominent, internationally-acclaimed artists announced their support for the Remain campaign. Among them were sculptor Antony Gormley and Michael Craig-Martin. The participation of leading figures in the UK’s art world – Craig-Martin curated the 2015 Royal Academy Summer Show, for example – lent a specific weight to the campaign, but one that was radically at odds with Remain’s key narratives. Along with other artists, “limited edition” prints of Gormley and Craig-Martin’s works were even made available as merchandise at the BSiE shop.

If “Project Fear” was based largely on dire economic warnings, with celebrity capitalists and corporate announcements forming a populist plank of Remain’s strategy, then “Project Art” offered a compensatory strand of campaigning, as if someone belatedly realised “it can’t just be about the economy, stupid”. These artists’ pro-Europe statements circulated through niche sectors of the cultural industries, and their works were made available for social media circulation (Craig-Martin hosted a downloadable version of his vibrant ‘Britain in the EU’ poster on his official website).

In a piece published on the day of the Referendum, Antony Gormley argued that the “imaginative project” of European membership was a vital part of the UK’s successes. For Gormley, staying in Europe was about meeting the imaginative challenge of climate change, as well as supporting a just response to the current migration crisis. The creative imagination displaces any emphasis on neoliberal corporate-economic aims here, just as Craig-Martin’s BSiE statement reacted strongly against Remain’s emphasis on the economy:

“But the question of the UK leaving the EU is not simply about the economic implications. The EU... has guaranteed democracy, the rule of law, civil liberties, and human rights across every member state. We should remember that this represents the spread of **fundamental British values across Europe.**”

This sets out a very different narrative to that of “Project Fear”, stressing cultural and humanitarian interconnectedness between Britain and Europe, and suggesting Europe’s indebtedness to Britishness. We may not be an economic leader, after all, but our power remains one of less tangible, humanist values.

Craig-Martin’s cultural capital is not just that of a leading figure in the art establishment; his status is also significantly linked to having mentored the YBAs (Young British Artists) such as Damien Hirst, and his previous work has commemorated the National Theatre’s 50th anniversary (2013) and supported the London Paralympics (2012). Furthermore, his use of dazzling day-glo colour combinations carries a British eccentricity that is articulated with the transnational familiarity of consumer objects (iPhones, trainers, memory sticks etc). In *On Being An Artist*, Craig-Martin dismisses any nationalistic, small-minded approach

to ‘British’ art, suggesting that a “British artist is an artist who works in Britain, no matter where he or she came from. I should know [Craig-Martin was born in Dublin] ... [And] far too much attention continues to be focused on ... young [artists in the art world]. Again, I should know”. Speaking as a self-consciously Older British Artist within the BSiE campaign, Craig-Martin challenged those of his generation not to deny the benefits they had experienced (via EU membership) to their children and grand-children.

Implicitly, though, the BSiE mobilisation of art world support and its high levels of cultural capital installed a kind of popular/high-cultural binary at the heart of official manoeuvring. Economic scare-mongering predominantly targeted populist appeal – highly ineffectively as it turned out – whilst a more positive, creative and values-oriented appeal remained unhelpfully restricted to niche appeal.

Andrew Smith, writing for *The Conversation*, concluded that this group of BSiE artworks was rather lacklustre. Rather than dismissing “Project Art” as ‘bad’ work, I would argue that these prints represented an attempt, however belated and marginal, to counter and complicate Remain’s dominant semiotics. But this effort to mobilise cultural capital was part of an overly divided and divisive strategy – one that split the realms of art, imagination and human values apart from neoliberal economic concerns. Remain evidently wanted the cultural values of art and creativity arrayed behind it, but seemingly also presumed that such arguments couldn’t reach the populist vote. Art-as-merchandise was the commodified outcome; limited edition collectibles for middle-class, well-educated supporters rather than any art-oriented attempt to win over a wider public. We may, now, be muddling through as a divided nation, with each major political party itself dangerously fractured. But deep-rooted cultural divisions between art and commerce, artistic imagination and corporate number-crunching, ultimately informed the underlying practices of the Remain campaign. The UK’s Art Establishment, and figures such as Michael Craig-Martin and Antony Gormley, functioned as a badge of honour and a superficial branding choice, rather than being integrated into mainstream messages. BSiE could have been so much more artful.

# Notes for editors: what press releases tell us about Vote Leave and Britain Stronger in Europe

Campaigns have a range of communication methods. There are those with high control, such as a paid-for advertisement, and methods with less, such as reliance on supporters using social media. It is open to debate how much “control” there is over media coverage. However in the press releases/news releases issued by the two campaigns we have a clear indication of which messages were deliberately chosen, what timing was preferred and which spokespeople were viewed as credible. By looking at the language, content and frequency of the releases, we can also draw some conclusions about the nature and internal workings of the campaigns themselves.

Earlier in the campaign period, I looked at both [Britain Stronger in Europe](#) and [Vote Leave](#) to draw some preliminary conclusions. I then returned to the topic as the campaigns intensified. This article covers findings from both periods of time. [Edge Hill University](#) will be publishing more detailed material from this research.

Firstly, there can be no doubt that Vote Leave was most active in terms of press releases and media strategy. Not only was the volume greater, but there was use of both planned material (for example research into MEP expenses) and reactive or opportunistic material. Vote Leave’s “rebuttal” press release was often published ahead of the official publication of the other side’s case. Vote Leave also made good use of “piggybacking” opportunities. This consists of taking a predictable news event, such as the scheduled publication of unemployment figures or data on allocation of school places, and using this to make a point about the EU (usually linked to migration).

By contrast, Stronger In appeared to lack the ability to behave in this way. To a certain extent it was hampered by being the “establishment”. While, for example, Vote Leave made good use of the Tata Steel crisis in the days when the story led the news, it took Stronger In longer to make its points. There was a [15 June release](#) featuring [Stephen Kinnock](#), but this lacked the immediate punch of the earlier Vote Leave material.

It is a basic rule of press release writing that these should be written in a journalistic style. However Stronger In’s material occasionally gave a sense of being a news story rather than arguing a case. I am surprised for example that the [25 May release](#) on military figures supporting Remain references gains made by Leave.

While Stronger In and Vote Leave were the officially designated campaigns, much was organised by other players such as the [TUC](#) and [CBI](#). This meant that the official campaigns would choose which of these activities to highlight. Stronger In made much use of both. On these occasions Vote Leave would attempt to rebut. The campaign seemed particularly keen to rebut the CBI and used a strategy of attacking not just the content but the messenger. The theme that the CBI was “EU funded” was used

several times in an attempt to undermine. This is clearly common in some political debate, but the enthusiasm to debunk “experts” is a clear theme running through the Vote Leave communications.

There is a difference in tone between the releases from the two campaigns. Stronger In on the whole maintains a measured tone, apart from in the text of some speeches. Vote Leave is much more likely to go onto the attack. For example we are told that “people will not believe” George Osborne or that David Cameron continues to “talk down our country”.

In a General Election, we hear from the politicians seeking our vote. It is rare to hear from those running the campaigns. In this contest however, Vote Leave made considerable use of [Matthew Elliott](#) as a quoted spokesperson. Elliott of course, as the former head of the [Taxpayers’ Alliance](#), had media recognition. However, the use of a campaign official can also enable material to be published much more speedily. Locating politicians to sign off releases can cause delay and it appears that Vote Leave knew that, in political/media terms, “speed kills”. The ability to do this must stem from the culture of the campaign as well as its structure and I suspect that Stronger In officials sometimes felt constrained by their campaign structure and culture.

Finally, the themes. It is no surprise that the main theme running through the Vote Leave releases is immigration and its effects. This ranged from foreign criminals who cannot be deported to whether or not Turkey would join the EU. Vote Leave responded to worries about the lack of a plan with an announcement on 15 June of a “roadmap” to Brexit. This was somewhat overshadowed by George Osborne’s “emergency budget” announcement and subsequent reaction.

Stronger In’s themes were more diverse. A major theme was risk – risk to the economy, risk to services, risk to pensions etc. But there was also a thread of patriotism relating to Britain’s place in the world and the nation’s ability to be influential. This may seem odd from the campaign that does not advocate national independence, but planners appear to have realised that this was an issue needing to be dealt with.

Press releases cannot win or lose an election. What they can do however is increase or shape media coverage and therefore public perception. They can also ensure credibility with journalists. More interestingly for researchers, releases can give us an insight into the nature of the campaigns as they develop. And on this reading, Vote Leave simply had the better campaign.



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Parties

# The triumph and tribulations of Conservative Euroscepticism

When, after five decades of skirmishes, Conservative Eurosceptics finally secured victory it was spectacular and momentous. Defeats had hitherto been more common than successes. Conservative Eurosceptics helped to keep the UK out of the Euro (although the Maastricht rebellion failed), created the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament, and pushed David Cameron into holding an in-out referendum. But painstaking parliamentary scrutiny, multiple rebellions and extensive extra-parliamentary activity did not stop or reverse the incoming tide of European integration.

Conservative Eurosceptic opinion had coalesced around the goals of renegotiation and a referendum. But differences over the extent of renegotiation and scope and timing of a referendum blunted their influence. Soft Euroscepticism was predominant: the UK should opt-out of European Monetary Union and Schengen but remain a member of a reformed EU. Hard Eurosceptics preferring withdrawal or fundamental renegotiation appeared a small minority: few joined Better Off Out and key figures like Bill Cash and John Redwood spoke in code of a new relationship based on trade.

Cameron's unwillingness to press for the radical changes proposed by the Fresh Start Group and European Scrutiny Committee, and the debate's switch from parliamentary to public arena burst the dam. 130 Conservative MPs, some with little track record of activity never mind rebellion on the EU issue, declared for Leave. Yet, with some Eurosceptics reluctant Remainers, Cameron claimed the support of most of his party.

The Leave vote will trigger rapid, fundamental change to the Conservative Party's identity, ideology and leadership. It will not be smooth. Victory will not, for example, unite Conservative Eurosceptics. Differences over a post-Brexit relationship with the EU were not resolved before the Referendum and become more significant after it. What is an acceptable (and realistic) trade-off between single market access and the free movement of people has to be established. Brexit planning will frame the Conservative leadership contest – and there are doubts about Boris Johnson's Eurosceptic conviction and mettle. Johnson implied that a Leave vote would secure better EU membership terms and favours a (temporary?) bespoke version of the Norwegian model.

Brexit will dominate this Parliament – and Eurosceptic rebellion has not been consigned to history. Ministers and veteran Eurosceptics have concerns about the Article 50 escape route but the latter want a decisive break and will resist 'Brexit-lite'. With parliamentary sovereignty a defining issue for hard Eurosceptics and the 'take back control' message so potent in the Leave campaign, Eurosceptics will demand the enactment of commitments made by Vote Leave on disapplying the European Communities Act 1972 in specific areas (e.g. on immigration,

rights and VAT), limiting the European Court of Justice's jurisdiction and withholding payments to the EU before formal withdrawal.

When Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless defected in 2014, UKIP appeared an attractive alternative home for Conservative Eurosceptics. UKIP played a major part in bringing about and then winning the Referendum, pressuring Cameron and winning over voters the Conservatives could not reach. Factional change in their own party, tensions during the Referendum campaign and UKIP's pitch for Labour voters make Farage's party less appealing to Conservative Eurosceptics. But UKIP can stir up and take advantage of any concerns among socially conservative Eurosceptics about government wavering on Brexit.

Historically, most Conservative dissent on European integration has come from Eurosceptics. Large scale dissent from pro-European Conservative MPs is now a real possibility. When the party adopted a tougher stance on EMU under William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith, a handful of pro-European MPs defected, rebelled or worked with rival parties. The next generation of pro-Europeans took their time to take the torch and develop a new narrative, keeping their counsel and employing a discourse of EU reform not dissimilar to the leadership's soft Euroscepticism. The Referendum gave them their voice and swollen numbers; narrow defeat gives them a bigger cause. With Euroscepticism enjoying majority support outside Parliament – notably among Conservative members and voters – but not within it, will pro-European Conservatives show the same desire and determination to put principle before party as Eurosceptics did?

The EU issue wrecked the last three Conservative premierships. Cameron's policy was shaped by party management and marked by miscalculations. Lowering the salience of the issue and deferring difficult decisions allowed hard Eurosceptics to set the agenda, and building expectations about renegotiation that he would not or could not deliver (for which EU leaders share culpability) cost him his party and the Referendum. Nonetheless, an in-out referendum was the logical course of action, with the best (albeit limited) prospect of resolving the issue. The outcome means that the EU issue will frustrate and define the work of yet another Conservative Prime Minister.



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# Celebrity politicians and populist media narratives: the case of Boris Johnson



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Celebrity politics has become common-place in modern political communications. P. David Marshall has commented that politicians construct ‘public personalities,’ which have an ‘affective function’ in the organisation of issues. In turn, Liesbet van Zoonen argues that celebrity politics is founded upon a paradoxical combination of an individual’s ability to be mediated as being both ordinary and extraordinary. Thus, for van Zoonen celebrity politicians (CPs) try to strike the balance between being ‘ordinary and just like us’, while demonstrating they have extraordinary leadership abilities:

“The ultimate celebrity politician [is], then, the one who ... projects a persona that has inside experience with politics but is still an outsider; his (or, in some cases her) performance builds on a unique mixture of ordinariness and exceptionality.”

During the European Union (EU) Referendum campaign the Conservative Cabinet member, former Mayor of London and ‘Brexit’ Boris Johnson provided a problematic example of van Zoonen’s ultimate CP.

Johnson emerged within the public’s consciousness through his ‘mediated persona’ - or individual public image - to attain admiration to effect political expression. He adopted populist strategies such as appearing on satire programmes and chat shows, while making numerous, outrageous statements that have commanded media attention. Consequently, as a maverick and ‘humorous’ political figure Johnson reached the ultimate in brand recognition as he became known by his forename ‘Boris.’ Yet, while acting as a political ‘superstar,’ Johnson had serious political ambitions. His rivalry with Prime Minister David Cameron was played out in public in terms of class, entitlement, education and wit.

Thus, Johnson took a calculated risk to campaign for ‘Vote Leave’ as he perceived Cameron’s weakness concerning the EU. He fashioned his appeal to two constituencies - the general public and those Conservative Party members who are strongly Europhobic. Johnson believed that his Brexit stance would enable him to establish a post-Referendum leadership challenge. ‘Project Boris’ was launched in January amidst a media scrum that engulfed Johnson’s decision to ‘Leave.’

Throughout the campaign, Johnson maintained his maverick appeal in which he engaged (with Michael Gove, Chris Grayling and Ian Duncan Smith) in a ‘Blue-on-Blue’ descent into personal abuse against Cameron and George Osborne. Essentially, for Johnson the EU Referendum was characterised as a ‘Bullingdon’ club spat in which varying forms of ‘blue blood’ privilege became conspicuous. Moreover, taking his cue from the United States’ (US) Republican Party’s Presidential nominee Donald Trump, Johnson employed hyperbole, distortion and outright lies to sustain his public image. This occurred within his visceral attack on US President Barack Obama’s ‘Remain’ intervention

and through his comparison of the EU ‘Superstate’ with the ambitions of Nazi Germany’s Fuehrer Adolf Hitler.

In this respect, the populist media narrative in the Brexit-led newspapers reinforced the view that Johnson was standing up to the dysfunctional European elite which has undermined Britain’s economy, sovereignty and self-confidence. This led to comparisons being made between Johnson and Britain’s ultimate maverick politician - Sir Winston Churchill. In the biggest televised EU debate at Wembley Arena on 21<sup>st</sup> June, Johnson concluded that Brexit would become the United Kingdom’s (UK) ‘Independence Day.’ Along with his fellow Brexiteers, he repeated the xenophobic falsehoods that a Vote Leave outcome would Canute-like turn back the ‘waves’ of immigrants who were ready to pounce from Eastern Europe.

Johnson’s cavalier attitude to the truth received a significant hearing throughout the news and social media during the EU Referendum Campaign. Jonathan Freedland compared Johnson with Trump by declaring him to be a ‘post-truth’ politician:

“Johnson reminded us that he has more in common with Trump than just a lovingly styled, idiosyncratic head of blond hair. ... On BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, Johnson reminded listeners how slippery his grasp on the truth has long been. ... As with Trump, humour plays a crucial part. ... Too often, radio and TV interviewers want to appear in on the joke, to share in the chuckle ... but it’s clear why this matters ... (as) ... how can we have a functioning democracy when we cannot agree on the most basic facts?”

By engaging in a race to the bottom, Johnson’s unreliable political discourse (along with that of UKIP leader Nigel Farage) meant that his arguments concerning the EU debate were distorted around immigration. Therefore, Johnson’s wilful irresponsibility (with Gove, Grayling, Duncan Smith, John Mann and Frank Field) was a contributory factor to the ‘ugliness’ that surrounded the national conversation about the referendum. And as Polly Toynbee argued this corrosive intolerance provided the backdrop for the terrible actions of a disturbed mind in the unprovoked murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox on 16 June 2016.



Boris Johnson talking to voters in Selby, North Yorkshire as he tours the country on the final day of campaigning before the EU referendum. Picture by: Andrew Parsons / PA Wire/Press Association Images.

# Tuck your shirt in! It's going to be a bumpy ride: Boris Johnson's swerve to Brexit



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Back in February, Boris Johnson came out as an Outer. After months of indecision and 'a huge amount of heartache', Johnson decided to stab David Cameron in the front and align himself with the likes of Nigel Farage and George Galloway to vote 'no' to Europe. What Johnson shares with Farage and Galloway is his performative value as a celebrity politician who is 'political box office'. Elsewhere, I have applied the theme of flirtation to the practice of political communication alongside the identification with different political positions (Yates, 2015). Today, political flirtation applies equally to politicians and voters within the scene of promotional party politics. Boris Johnson's flirtation with voters on the theme of Europe provides an example of this phenomenon and his seemingly spontaneous, un-spun qualities are key to his ability to connect with the public. Combining discourses of nation and empire with that of a kind of boys-own masculinity, Johnson has repeatedly stressed the threat posed by the 'European powers' to the border shores of Britain. Like helpless infants in an Edwardian nursery, he conjures up a picture of the threat of an all-engulfing Brussels 'Nanny' who has lulled the British into some kind of passive state of acquiescence, pleading for the British to 'be brave', to wake up out of their slumber and imagine 'an independent future' (Johnson, 2016).

There were mixed reactions following Johnson's initial Brexit call to arms. Some were thrilled that the 'blonde bombshell' managed to upset the plans of Cameron. Others viewed him as opportunistic and self-serving in his last-minute swerve towards Brexit. As some pointed out, in the preceding months, Johnson had said that he was definitely not 'an outer' and that his instincts were to stay inside Europe (White, 2016).

For those of us who have followed Johnson's career over the years, it came as no surprise that he should have changed his mind (Yates, 2014). Johnson's political identity is slippery; as joker and skilled political orator he seems to enjoy cocking a snook at the establishment whilst at the same time, as a white, upper middle class, Oxbridge educated member of the Conservative Party, he also symbolises all that the establishment is held up to be. With one eye on the banking service sector and one on the electorate, he has managed the potential contradictions of his political position by adopting a persona associated with Englishness and amateurism. In this way, he harks back to an earlier era of deference whilst simultaneously appearing to refuse the patriarchal structures of authority that shaped it. With his teddy bear looks and public gaffes that make people laugh, Johnson is a seductive figure. It is as if he often appears to represent a cuddly toy with whom the electorate can play, thereby undercutting the notions of governance that his roles as former London Mayor and Member of Parliament represent.

Like his fellow Outers - Farage and Galloway

(and over the waters, Donald Trump), Johnson's apparent lack of deference to the establishment sits well with an electorate who are increasingly cynical and disenchanted with politics and the affective dimensions of his appeal should not be underestimated. It is interesting to explore the emotions that get stirred up when identifying with politicians in such contexts who may be idealised and loathed in equal measure. In an age of precarity, feelings of helplessness and anger may also give rise to an envy of politicians and the power and prestige that they seem to represent. Yet Johnson manages to ward off any potential envy of his position as a wealthy politician and journalist by representing himself as an un-impinging figure that people can enjoy.

It is arguably this very traditional *English* trait of refusing to commit and take things too seriously which taps into Johnson's populist appeal as a flirtatious, 'post-ideological' politician, who plays down traditional party loyalty and appeals across cross party lines within the South of England in particular. Despite his Thatcherite love of the free-market, Johnson has constructed a persona that fits more with that of a benign, eccentric character straight out of the comic pages of *The Dandy*. As a media professional surrounded by other media professionals, he is skilled at using contemporary methods of political communication to associate himself with a particular nostalgic fantasy of Britain as 'a truly great country' as being located within an earlier, less complicated age of nannies and flag-waving street parties. This nostalgia can be read as a defence against the losses and uncertainties of late modernity. The desire to look back, or at least to turn away from the contemporary malaise and to identify instead with the retro, personality-driven politics of Johnson, can be seen in that broader psychosocial context, alongside the more specific features of the contemporary political moment framed by fears of migration and the experience of austerity.



# ‘Conservative party future?’ Party disunity, the media and the EU Referendum

There were two clear sides of the 2016 EU Referendum: Leave versus Remain. Each campaign was constituted by activists from across the conventional political divide. However, the media largely seemed to fixate on the internal dynamics of the Conservative Party. The media framed much of the Referendum narrative around Conservative disunity, which was often portrayed as a ‘blue on blue’ civil war. At times, the extent of this coverage was such that the campaign appeared to be a largely Tory affair. For example, two days before the Referendum, the BBC television’s *Daily Politics* show gave over a prominent slot to a segment entitled ‘Conservative Party Future?’. Items like this reflected a seemingly dominant narrative of the media’s Referendum coverage.

The news media addressed a diverse mix of issues during the Referendum but at times the three main UK news broadcasting networks- BBC, ITN and Sky- appeared noticeably more preoccupied with speculating over the internal dynamics and future of the Conservative Party than they perhaps ought to have.

The nature of the news reported feeds into the wider normative question about the role media should play in election campaigns and referenda. It seems pertinent to ask whether the more speculative aspects witnessed in this kind of coverage is necessary? Rather the media should focus on providing more quality factual information and expert analysis and thereby resist the allure of sensationalised politics and speculation, because it can often be misguided and misleading.

In recent years media speculation over the likely outcome of campaigns has been driven by misleading polls. The UK’s 2015 General Election is a prime example where the news framed its discourse based on information of questionable accuracy which encouraged coverage of red herrings and distractions. With successive polls suggesting the electorate would vote for another coalition government the media narrative largely centred on what such a partnership might look like. Conversely journalists took a more superficial approach when representing and analysing party manifestos. The subsequent Tory victory highlighted just how that the media had been overly preoccupied by misleading polls that fostered misguided coverage and agendas.

In the Referendum the polls generally and incorrectly predicted a Remain victory. Therefore the media tended to focus on a narrative as to what happens to a deeply divided Conservative Party after the vote. This was informed by an assumption that there would be a continuance of the status quo that provided a misguided frame and context for the ensuing discussion. It was only when the UK voted Leave and David Cameron resigned that the media narrative shifted sharply away from Conservative disunity to focus on divisions within the electorate and regions of the UK as well as the ‘meltdown’ in

the Labour Party; and a disunited Britain.

Aside from misleading polls why were media pre-Referendum assumptions about divisions in the Conservative Party so misguided? Academics have a potentially important role in challenging and improving journalistic understandings of politics. For example, when speculating over the survival of the Conservative Party, journalists ought to consider more of the context including, in this case, a 350 year history as the oldest extant, and arguably most successful, political party in Western democracy. The Party is known for its pragmatism and ability to adapt, change and endure through wider social, political and cultural changes with historian Richard Cockett likening it to a ‘Darwinian’ organism that adapts to survive.

Over its long history, the Party’s pragmatism has tended to trump ideological divides and thereby encourage a display of party unity of the kind generally recognised to be key to electoral success.

In contrast to the Conservatives the Labour Party has been historically characterised by its ideological commitments that have rendered it less inclined to take pragmatic steps towards preserving party unity. The aftermath of the Referendum is one such example. Cameron’s resignation reinforced the appearance of a revival in Conservative Party unity.

In terms of the post-Referendum media narrative, the blue on blue civil war evaporated to be replaced by a more accurate portrayal of the divisions in Labour under Jeremy Corbyn. These fractures are driven by much wider and deeper ideological fissures than those of the Conservatives whose historic divisions over Britain’s membership of the EU has been more of a single issue. Yet comparatively little of pre-referendum media speculation and analysis focused on the future of the Labour Party. This demonstrates a need for more well-informed debate amid quality information. Speculative news discourse has played an unhelpful and misleading role in dominating wider campaign narratives. In referenda and elections, the central role of the media ought to be to facilitate the electorate’s access to quality information and analysis. A greater exchange of knowledge between media practitioners, academics and experts during campaigns might contribute to more credible coverage of politics in Britain.



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# Cameron and the Europe question: could it have ended any other way?



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When David Cameron was elected leader of the Conservatives in December 2005 many saw him as the figure that could finally move the party forward and, crucially, away from the divisions over Europe that had blighted it in opposition since 1997. Here was a modern, liberal, Conservative politician that could appeal to the electorate and return the party to government at the next election. To many of those that backed him in the leadership election, he was also no Ken Clarke style Europhile but a moderate or 'soft' Eurosceptic who believed European integration had reached its limits and that some powers should be returned to full UK control. Many thought, optimistically in hindsight, that this would be the first Conservative leader returned to No.10 not to be consumed and defeated over the question of the UK's relationship with the European Union.

We now know that this has turned out not to be the case.

David Cameron joins the previous Conservatives to make it to No 10, Margaret Thatcher and John Major, in having Europe as one of the reasons for hastening their departure from office. In the case of Cameron and the lost Remain/Leave EU Referendum, it was the defining reason. However these events beg two important questions we need to consider when evaluating Cameron and Europe: was it always going to end like this and could he have avoided a fatal confrontation with his party over this issue?

This is not the place for in-depth analysis but some initial reflections are considered. There were early signs that the European issue would pose problems for Cameron's leadership. To win the support for his leadership from influential Eurosceptic MPs Cameron had to make a number of concessions, including a commitment to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the European Peoples' Party-European Democrats' grouping in the European Parliament. He also pledged to return full control over social and employment policy to the UK government. Later he made significant promises on restricting the influence of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and agreed to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The mood music was thereby established by Eurosceptics and substantial reform of the UK-EU relationship expected. Cameron would make it happen and they would not forget.

Timing- in history, politics and stand-up comedy- is everything. For Cameron and Europe the failure to win the 2010 election outright and the subsequent need to form a coalition government dependent on the support of pro-European Liberal Democrats MPs largely stymied Tory plans for European reform. Rightly or wrongly, many Eurosceptic Conservative MPs blamed Cameron both for the failure to win in 2010 election and for being too quick to drop their reform agenda in the face of Liberal Democrat opposition. Expectations had been raised in opposition and the

reality of being in coalition left many Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, members and voters angry and disappointed. This, as much as the rise of UKIP during the coalition years, explains the source of the pressure that eventually led Cameron to make the fateful decision in January 2013 to concede the promise an in/out referendum in the event of his re-election as Prime Minister in 2015. Had Cameron won the 2010 election and implemented some of the Eurosceptic reform agenda developed in opposition, much of the pressure for such a plebiscite might have been defused.

Could David Cameron have confronted his party in opposition and resolved the European issue? Could he have resisted the pressure to commit to an in/out referendum? These questions need further consideration but the likely answer is no, not without a potentially disastrous display of party disunity and in fighting that could have seen Cameron removed as party leader. In many ways, from the Prime Minister's perspective, it is understandable why he pursued the course of action he took. Cameron's formative experiences as a Conservative researcher, special advisor and then MP were dominated by periods of internal party conflict over the question of European integration. The prospect of revisiting this issue was not a priority given the party had restored some confidence in the public that the Conservatives could be trusted with the responsibility of government again. In the end it was Cameron's failure to convince voters, and not just the Conservative Party, of the wisdom of his vision for Europe that ultimately saw his political career end prematurely.

The greatest irony of all is, of course, the way Cameron might have ultimately succeeded in stopping the Conservatives from 'banging on about Europe', given his fateful decision to enable the UK vote to leave the European Union altogether.

# The Liberal Democrats: the EU Referendum's invisible party

One of the strangest features of the June 2016 EU Referendum was that the most pro-European political party in Britain was nowhere to be seen. Only 13 months before the then party leader, Nick Clegg, was Deputy Prime Minister and the party was embedded into every level of cabinet and senior coalition government. Yet come the Referendum campaign the Liberal Democrats and new leader Tim Farron were conspicuous by their absence.

The Liberals and Liberal Democrats have consistently been the most sympathetic to the European ideal. The *British Election Study* repeatedly demonstrated that the voting public identified the Liberal Democrats as the most Euro-friendly political party. This is not to say there hadn't been contradictions in sources of Liberal support. From the 1970s the party built a bridgehead in some of the most Eurosceptic regions, especially in the South West where agricultural and fisheries industries often sat uncomfortably with European community policy. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the party took such a backseat during the 2016 campaign.

Much of this was outside the party's control. Coverage in the mainstream media has frequently been a problem for the party and the collapse of the LibDem vote in 2015 General Election had unanticipated consequences. The reduction of Liberal Democrats to a miserly eight seats, and the triumphant rise of the SNP in Scotland meant that the party lost their third party status in the Commons. Consequently, Farron does not automatically get to ask a question in PMQs, further reducing the party's visibility. Meanwhile current affairs programmes looking for an alternative voice increasingly turn to the Scottish Nationalists, the Greens or UKIP to provide non-Conservative/Labour political viewpoints.

Not so long ago, it had been different. The Liberal Democrats were the focal point of the 2011 AV Referendum and prior to the 2014 European elections, Clegg took part in televised debates against the UKIP leader Nigel Farage. These didn't go well for Clegg or his party but the LibDems had been the face of pro-European narrative in British politics providing positive images about free European travel, work mobility and the benefits of migration – an agenda not addressed elsewhere.

The party could have stepped into the void left by Conservatives and Labour, fearful of alienating their core vote, and appealed to those voters in England and Wales who might have been receptive to a more positive European story. Nevertheless the LibDems didn't play – or were not asked to play – a significant role in the *Remain* campaign.

The EU referendum campaign included TV debates and set piece interviews with a vast array of supporting characters; David Cameron and Ruth Davidson, Alec Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon; Alan Johnson and Sadiq Khan, Michael

Gove and Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and Diane James, Gisela Stuart and Andrea Leadsom, even Jeremy Corbyn played a part. Tim Farron didn't feature in any of them.

Moreover any LibDems playing a bit-part in the campaign were from a bygone era. Paddy Ashdown briefly appeared alongside Neil Kinnock in a rerun of 1992, Vince Cable took time off promoting his book to interject on the inadequate Referendum campaign. Clegg warned of the dangers of Brexit on two separate occasions; the first overshadowed by President Obama's visit to the UK, the second on the eve of polling barely making a bigger mark. However it might be worth considering his prophesy to those still contemplating voting *Leave*:-

“Having woken on Friday to the news we're quitting the EU, you will assume that those who persuaded you to take that leap of faith have a plan about what to do next.

“So imagine how dismayed you will feel when you discover, instead, that Nigel Farage, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson can't agree among themselves what life outside the EU looks like?

“So you will look towards our leaders in Westminster to sort out the mess. Instead, they argue among themselves: the Conservatives descend into a bloody leadership election; Parliament enters years of constitutional gridlock ... Then you discover just how unprepared the Government is... imagine how you'll feel when you discover that they don't have a plan?”

After the Referendum Farron announced a Liberal Democrat commitment to non-implementation of Brexit and claimed a 12,000 surge of new members in the week after the result, but this fails to compensate for the party's invisibility during the campaign.

Structural problems caused the Liberal Democrats to go AWOL in the Referendum campaign. A party with a reputation for grassroots campaign strength might have been the backbone of the *Remain* cause, instead the evisceration of the party's Westminster base had a profound effect of its ability to break through to the electorate. The party is still playing the price for coalition in 2010; the referendum campaign suffered as a result.



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# The Durham miners' role in Labour's culture wars



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'It's no good. We can't do it. The Durham miners will never wear it'. With these words the Labour Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison refused France's invitation for Britain to join the European Coal and Steel Community formed in 1951.

They were almost prophetic. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, the children of Morrison's Durham miners, the potters of Stoke-on-Trent, the steel workers of Port Talbot, the car workers in Dagenham, and the 'left-behind' voters from the former industrial and mining towns of the Northeast of England and the Midlands showed that they could not 'wear it' anymore. They overwhelmingly voted to leave the European Union.

By doing so they exposed the schism in the Labour Party that could lead to its destruction. If there is a snap general election, 150 Labour MPs may lose their seats. In short, two thirds of the Parliamentary Labour Party might be obliterated.

The problem is that there is no easy fix to Labour's woes. The revolt of the so-called 'left-behind' in the party's heartlands showed the degree of disconnection between Labour and its traditional supporters. Whilst local Labour MPs campaigned for 'Remain' their constituents wanted Britain out of the EU. To compound this problem, Labour is bitterly – and has been for the past decade – divided about Europe and immigration.

This is not a new schism. In the past, some factions of the Labour Party invoked British (English) exceptionalism as a reason to oppose Britain's participation in the European Communities. Ernest Bevin, who was Foreign Secretary in the Attlee government, spoke of his fear of Britain 'chaining itself to a corpse'. A decade or so later it was the turn of the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell to share his worries. In his view, joining the EEC would represent 'the end of Britain as an independent European state' and 'of a thousand years of history'.

A modern version of Labour's British exceptionalism has been articulated by the MP John Mann and by the founder of Blue Labour Maurice Glasman who both voted Leave. Whilst Mann feared the urbanisation and the loss of quality of life that more immigration would create, Glasman argued that 'Britain was an island and was always at an angle to Europe' that had developed 'distinctive institutions based on the balance of powers within the Ancient Constitution'.

Apart from romantic notions about British exceptionalism, popular resistance to immigration has also informed the party's ambivalence towards Europe. Having fiercely opposed immigration controls right after the war, Labour was forced to reconsider its position in the 1960s when pro-immigration MPs started to lose their seats. Hence, Harold Wilson's government tightened controls over immigration in 1965 and 1968.

Under the leadership of Tony Blair, Labour

was a proud defender of immigration and ethnic and cultural diversity. But as the popular backlash against the new wave of migration of the early Noughties began to be felt, this policy of openness was accompanied by a coarsening of political language. In 2002, David Blunkett talked of British schools being 'swamped' by non-English speaking immigrants and in 2007, Gordon Brown promised to train 'British workers for British jobs'.

In the past decade Labour fudged the issue by offering an 'on-the-one-hand-and-on-the-other' approach to immigration. It was an attempt to unify two strands of the party – the Cosmopolitans and the Nativists – that represent constituencies which have been treated differently by globalisation. But as the 2015 General Election showed this fudge did not work. In the north east of England and the midlands Labour lost thousands of votes to UKIP, whereas in places like Brighton, Bristol and London it further alienated an urban, educated youth.

Some Labour politicians harbour the hope that a charismatic leader will heal the social divide among supporters. They invoke Clement Attlee, Harold Wilson and Tony Blair as prime examples of the leader Labour needs. But there are three problems with this strategy. Firstly, Labour does not have politicians of this calibre. Secondly, when Attlee, Wilson and even Blair were elected the world was a simpler place. At the time of Attlee and Wilson, party politics was more tribal and turbo-globalisation was yet to create havoc in the lives of Labour's traditional voters. In the case of Blair, eighteen years of Conservative rule certainly helped him to win a landslide in 1997. But in 2016, party politics is far more fragmented. Discontented voters know they have other options. Thirdly, the result of the Referendum suggests that voters will not be easily persuaded with a fudged approach to immigration.

Labour faces a fork-in-the-road decision. It needs to choose which coalition of voters it wants to represent: either the winners or the losers of globalisation. But whatever road it chooses it will not be cost-free.

# The immigration debate: Labour versus Leave in the battle to win public trust

The Labour Party struggled to win over its supporters in the EU Referendum because of the issues that came to dominate the debates. The choice between Remain or Leave was really a contest between economics and immigration.

Both issues are challenging for Labour. Since the global financial crisis came to Britain in 2007, Labour's credibility for economic policy was under threat as rival political parties placed blame for the crisis at their feet as the governing party. If the Referendum campaign had focused mostly on whether exiting the EU would amount to jumping off an economic cliff into a certain, and avoidable, recession – this was an argument they could make and find support. But that's not how things turned out.

Leave supporters addressed public anxieties about immigration and said that only by leaving the EU could Britain control its borders. This message resonated with voters who blamed the EU's free movement for record net migration putting a greater burden on already stretched public services.

Labour might have improved public confidence about their economic policies over the last decade, but they have performed increasingly less well on immigration.

The party's problems with immigration are partly a product of core constituency groups within Labour's broad political tent. Many supporters are well educated, aspirational and view globalisation more as an opportunity. But many other supporters – primarily, but not exclusively, in Labour's northern heartlands – are skilled workers who have seen their communities decline and see globalisation as more a threat. A general split in England and Wales between urban areas for Remain and rural communities for Leave is an indication of this.

But the real divide was not demographic, but more political. Leave won in large part due to public anxieties about immigration levels. 'Leavers' responded favourably to the message of taking back control from the EU because it was believed that Leave would mean stricter border controls leading to less immigration.

The simple Leave campaign claim that leaving the EU will mean improving borders is doubtful. Despite repeated assertions that EU free movement is 'uncontrolled', it is in fact subject to a number of restrictions like any other freedom. EU citizens can be denied entry to another member state if deemed a security threat and deported after six months – not unlike a non-EU tourist – should they fail to find work or have a realistic prospect for employment.

The Leave campaign also claimed they would introduce an Australian-styled points-based immigration system, but without noticing two key facts. First, Australia's system was designed to increase immigration – which it did. Secondly, the UK launched a points-based immigration system over a decade ago. The system is more something borrowed – to be extended to cover EU as well as non-EU citizens – than something new.

But these facts made little difference. Immigration has troubled successive governments since at least Tony Blair's time as Prime Minister. Each has rolled out ever more immigration laws and rules – changing now almost daily – that few border agents can keep up with the current policies let alone the public. As net migration figures reached record highs, the public became increasingly disappointed with growing support for stronger measures.

The Labour Party has had real difficulties winning back public confidence, in part, because they were blamed for early migration growth as the EU expanded. While net migration figures have grown the most during the current government's term in office, it has been Labour that has faced repeated criticism for opening the door that others have struggled to shut.

Much of the criticisms that Labour faces has come from northern communities like the North East. While Labour holds nearly every constituency seat from Blyth Valley to Hartlepool, voters strongly supported Leave and immigration was the leading issue.

A consequence is that Labour was at a disadvantage when trying to win over new voters the more the debate centred on which side commanded greater public confidence on immigration. It did not help that Labour generally avoided discussion about immigration for much of the campaign. Beyond criticising Leave's position, Labour's Remain supporters like Tom Watson did not float new policy ideas like restricting EU free movement as part of a renegotiated 'Remain' until days before the vote.

Labour's efforts are made more difficult by the fact that the areas most for Leave and stricter immigration controls have the lowest numbers of foreign-born migrants in the country – there are more migrants in the Shetland Islands than there are in Redcar and Cleveland. Providing greater confidence that migration is controlled is crucial for Labour to rebuild public trust. The party's concern for the future is that much of their heartlands chose Leave – rejecting Labour's campaign and perceived weakness on immigration.

The sad irony is that the foundations of the current immigration system supported by all parties were built by Blair's Labour government – from a points-based system, stricter English language requirements, tougher barriers to claiming asylum and policies like the Migration Impacts Fund that provided support to local communities to relief pressures on public services due to migration.

Despite having achieved so much, Labour has been rewarded very little for it.

Nevertheless, the problems that immigration caused Labour during the EU Referendum are unlikely to go away unless there is some substantial new offering to the public. The issue is whether such an offer can be made that is agreeable to both their more Eurosceptic supporters as well as their more urban and aspirational voters.



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# The age of Nigel: Farage, the media, and Brexit



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About twenty minutes into the BBC's live EU Referendum result show, David Dimbleby paused, touched his earpiece, and delivered the first big news of the evening: "We're hearing that Nigel Farage has conceded and has said that Remain has won". This must have been pure music to the ear of a broadcaster desperate for content to fill the chasm until the first declaration. And so, for the next twenty minutes, Farage's comment was the main topic of studio discussion. Then, Dimbleby touched his earpiece again. "We're now hearing that Nigel Farage has *unconceded* – if that's a word", as the camera cut to the UKIP leader addressing a crowd of supporters and reporters, saying that he was revising his initial assessment. Minutes later, television coverage of the most important British political event in at least a generation was still firmly focused on Farage. He was, as usual, playing the media like a fiddle.

In light of the referendum result, it is no exaggeration to rank Farage as one of the most significant figures in modern British history. His has been an extraordinary rise. In 2006, two months after Farage assumed its leadership, David Cameron described UKIP as a bunch of "fruit-cakes, loonies and closet racists". In the decade since, Farage has stamped his authority on his party, professionalised the outfit, and become a celebrity politician whose image as a supposed anti-establishment man of the people is constantly lapped up and spat out by a media with endless airtime to fill and a desperation for novelty in an era dominated by bland, career politicians. Even before the 2015 General Election, in which UKIP garnered nearly four million votes, Farage's power was such that he had exploited Labour's retreat from the working class, the dissolution of the BNP, and the historic split on Europe in the Conservative Party: the latter forcing a feeble Prime Minister to promise a referendum he didn't want but, in the event, never dreamt he'd lose.

This epic misjudgement will cement Cameron's reputation as a hugely inept and disastrous leader. Farage, meanwhile, will be judged by history as a central character amid an increasingly disorientated post-imperial British society. By channelling the insecurities about precarious working conditions, stagnant wages, and high rents, and focusing them on a specific target – the 'strain' on the UK's infrastructure from immigration for which he blames the EU, rather than on neoliberal austerity and Western foreign policy – Farage has taken his place among a wave of right-wing populist politicians across Europe (Le Pen, Wilders, Orban, Petry) and beyond (Trump) who inspire popular revolt by manipulating the media and appealing as much to emotion as to reason. To this, Cameron – with the full backing of the British state, and the huge collective weight of myriad establishment figures behind him – had

no effective answer.

Ironically, until the ballot boxes closed, Farage had endured a hugely problematic referendum campaign. With UKIP split along pro- and anti-immigration lines (with Douglas Carswell, its only MP, in the former faction), Farage's Grass-roots Out was usurped by the Johnson-Gove-Carswell coalition. Vote Leave as the designated official 'out' campaign. In response, Farage ran a parallel campaign with Leave.EU: one defined by increasingly provocative episodes. First, they released a video showing images of riots across Europe voiced-over by Donald Trump reading a poem about a supposedly injured snake that bites and poisons the person who had rushed to help. Then they released a photo of ISIS fighters accompanied by the message: "Act now before we see an Orlando-style atrocity..." in reference to the homophobic mass killing of 12 June. And then Farage thought it appropriate to be photographed in front of the notorious 'Breaking Point' poster featuring refugees fleeing Syria, on what turned out to be the morning of the heinous murder of Jo Cox, MP. Under pressure, Farage later apologised for the timing but not the content of the poster. For this, Farage was widely condemned; though he had yet to bottom out. On the morning of June 24, in his 'victory speech', he wondered at the historical achievement of Brexit occurring 'without a shot being fired' – forgetting (perhaps) the injuries to which the 41-year-old former Batley and Spen MP had succumbed.

Despite realising his own dream, Farage may now find himself personally vulnerable. He remains the ultimate 'Marmite' politician, repulsing as many as he attracts, and, though the media won't leave him alone, his popularity with the public may have hit a ceiling. His hold over his party is becoming increasingly tenuous, and, indeed, the very *raison d'être* of UKIP post-Brexit is rather unclear. That said, as a figure that changed the course of British politics, and as an icon that embodies the coarsening of public discourse in the neoliberal era, Farage's place in history is now secure.



UKIP leader Nigel Farage and Kate Hoey on board a boat taking part in a Fishing for Leave pro-Brexit "flotilla" on the River Thames, London. Picture by: Stefan Rousseau / PA Wire/Press Association Images.



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Social Media



# Leave versus Remain: the digital battle

Just as the 2015 General Election has been characterized as the first 'digital election' in Britain, so the 2016 EU Referendum could be characterized as the first 'digital referendum'. Both the official Leave ('Vote Leave') and Remain ('Britain Stronger in Europe') campaigns utilized key aspects of the successful Obama Model developed during the 2008 and 2012 US Presidential Elections – more specifically big data mining, data analytics, micro-targeting and social media – in an attempt to identify and then mobilize their respective supporters.

Campaign strategists Dominic Cummings and Matthew Elliott (who successfully organized the 2004 referendum campaign against a North East regional assembly and the 2011 referendum campaign against electoral reform respectively) directed the Leave campaign, while Stephen Gilbert and Craig Oliver (who were associated with the Conservatives' successful 2015 General Election campaign) headed the Remain campaign. With the exception of the adverts that were placed in the *Metro* freesheet in the two days before the poll, both campaigns eschewed the traditional political advertising approach and blanket distribution of campaign materials, in favour of a targeted and digital approach in their respective air and ground wars. The internet, social media and new political communication technologies were utilized for the purposes of voter registration; fundraising; intelligence gathering; and message dissemination.

In May 2016 Prime Minister David Cameron met with representatives from 30 leading technology companies – including Facebook, Instagram, The Lad Bible, Snap Fashion, Twitter and Uber – in an attempt to encourage voter registration. The key targets were young people who were less likely to be on the electoral register and who were more likely to vote to Remain. Research from the United States, and data pertaining to the 2015 British General Election, suggests that digital voter registration operations are highly effective.

The official Leave and Remain campaigns obtained government grants of £600,000 to fund their activities, and also received substantial donations from corporations and wealthy individuals. Moreover, they both used the internet and social media for fundraising purposes, specifically to elicit modest donations from activists and members of the general public – as did the dozens of other registered organizations that participated in the referendum.

Utilizing big data mining – drawing upon canvassing returns, social media traffic, voter records and other sources (e.g. consumer databases about newspaper readership, shopping habits, etc.) – the Leave and Remain campaigns also used the internet and social media for intelligence gathering purposes to construct detailed and personalised voter profiles. Using analytics software – the Voter Identification and Contact System, developed in-house, in the case of the Leave campaign and Nation-Builder in the case of the Remain campaign – with their in-built algorithms, the respective campaigns were able to assign each voter with scores (on a scale of one-to-five) based on how likely they were to vote and how likely

they were to vote to Leave or Remain. This data was then used to compile target lists for digital advertising, door knocking (e.g. Get Out the Vote operations) and telephone contacts.

For the first time in British election history, the Leave campaign developed an interactive smartphone app that was downloaded by tens of thousands of people. Encouraging subscribers to sign up their friends and family and asking permission for Vote Leave to be able to access their smartphone contacts, this app provided a further means of harvesting valuable data about potential Brexit supporters and disseminating key campaign messages.

The Leave and Remain campaigns both used the internet and social media for message dissemination purposes. The key messages of the Leave campaign were 'Take Back Control', particularly over immigration policy, while the key messages of the Remain campaign were the economy and the risks associated with Brexit. The Leave campaign had 554,297 'likes' on Facebook, while the Remain campaign had 561,277 'likes'. Both campaigns spent millions of pounds on Facebook and online advertising. The head of Labour In for Britain, a separate campaign to that deployed by Britain Stronger in Europe, confirmed that the Labour Party alone spent over £1 million on Facebook and online advertising and successfully reached 13 million people in the process. Although excluded from the Leave campaign, UKIP, Nigel Farage and Leave.EU played a significant role in the quest for Brexit. While generally ignored by the mainstream media, which tended to focus on the Conservative 'blue-on-blue' attacks and debates, UKIP contracted Facebook to distribute speeches by Farage, plus campaign video footage – and such clips were watched by millions of people.

In theory, the Remain campaign possessed a number of advantages. Firstly, maintaining EU membership constituted the status quo option, while withdrawal represented the choice of radical change. Secondly, much of the Establishment, in Britain and internationally, supported Remain. Thirdly, until the official period of 'purdah', Prime Minister David Cameron was able to deploy the political communication machinery of the state in support of Remain. Fourthly, although the Conservatives were officially neutral, the Remain campaign had the use of at least some of the party's resources (e.g. activists, voter data, etc.), plus the official support of the Labour Party and its political communication machine. The Leave campaign, which lacked the support of any political party and which was denied access to the resources of the state, had to build its infrastructure largely from scratch. In terms of political communication, both the Leave and Remain campaigns were fairly evenly matched – deploying similar digital approaches. The critical difference, however, was that the Leave campaign was much more successful at targeting than the Remain campaign. Although the result was close, that is the main reason why the Leave campaign was victorious.



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# The results are in and the UK will #Brexit: what did social media tell us about the UK's EU referendum?



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Throughout the EU Referendum campaign, Leave supporters had a more visible presence on Twitter. This balance shifted somewhat towards the end of the campaign with pro-Remain tweets becoming more frequent during the latter stages but the sentiment results always indicated a likely Leave result. Remain supporters mobilised on Twitter in the final stages, as they realised that Brexit was indeed possible and that the Leave campaign seemed to have the momentum but the volume of people motivated to Tweet in favour of Remain never achieved the level of Leave. Remain sentiment reached an all time high on referendum day itself (up to 38.5% from a regular 3-5% in Aug 2015). Twitter picks up, and likely amplifies, the extremes of debate so unsurprisingly the actual referendum results were less extreme than the proportions we were seeing in Twitter.

Our unique longitudinal data set allowed us to compare and contrast the way that the official campaign groups use Twitter as compared with the wider public in the Twitter stream and to begin tracking the trends in Twitter behaviour, including the use of hashtags. Tweeters are typically highly motivated and perhaps those who see themselves as the underdogs in the debate. Salience, coherence and intensity are key to motivation.

The Leave campaign were faster out of the gates on Twitter and dominated even when at a lower ebb in opinion polls. Leave continued to dominate in Twitter, throughout the campaign. This likely reflected the intensity of motivation for those in favour of Leave. Despite very public splits in the Leave camp, there has been an impassioned commitment from Leave supporters to their cause, and a shared anti-establishment position, that is clearly deeply motivating and highly salient to those individuals. It appears from the turn out that this cause had also motivated those who do not typically vote and often feel unheard in the current political system.

The Remain campaign got off to a much slower start on Twitter and never really caught up. Despite the greatly improved presence of the official @StrongerIn campaign on Twitter, it never attained the degree of impact on Twitter achieved by Leave. The picture is of a much less motivated public. This may reflect the lack of a positive cause to rally around. Early discussions around the renegotiation of the UK's deal with the EU inevitably focused on its current shortcomings.

The smaller proportion of pro-Remain tweets compared with pro-Leave may be explained by this lack of intense impassioned motivation to champion the cause of EU membership. Early on, any bumps in Remain support were clearly event-related, for example in response to David Cameron's letter to Donald Tusk on October 2015 and when the UK's 'new settlement' with the EU was announced in February 2016. Although by the end of the campaign we saw a solid 20-30% pro-Remain tweets.

The late increase in pro-Remain tweeting appears to have reflected the greater pressure that Remainers felt under in the late stages of the campaign and their increased motivation to vocalize support – with Twitter acting as the medium of the underdog.

Examining patterns in the Twitter debate also tells us what topics those motivated to tweet are spontaneously associating with the debate on the EU referendum. We can also begin to break this down geographically, allowing us to examine how the different nations within the UK are tweeting about the EU referendum. Scotland, although strongly Remain in the final referendum vote, had a higher proportion of Leave voters than many anticipated. This Leave presence was visible in the Twitter sentiment for Scotland. Meanwhile, two of the top twenty hashtags used by those in Scotland motivated to tweet on the EU referendum were #indyref and #indyref2. As Nicola Sturgeon confirmed in her statement the next morning from Bute House, the option of a second independence referendum is now firmly on the table.

Twitter analysis has strengths and weaknesses. Twitter users are not representative of the wider public – they are self-selected users not those chosen on the basis of careful sampling by opinion pollsters. Twitter users tend to be highly motivated (with an axe to grind), younger than average (though not exclusively young) and are likely more often men when engaged in political debate. So any insights are partial. That said, Twitter is a reflection of spontaneous, motivated behaviour – it helps us to see where those highly motivated individuals position themselves in relation to the debate, what appears to provoke peaks in motivated activity and also what the overall trends are in these vocal and active publics. Our unique collection method allows us to put the Twitter debate on the EU referendum into a more meaningful perspective.

In this case it has correctly echoed the results.

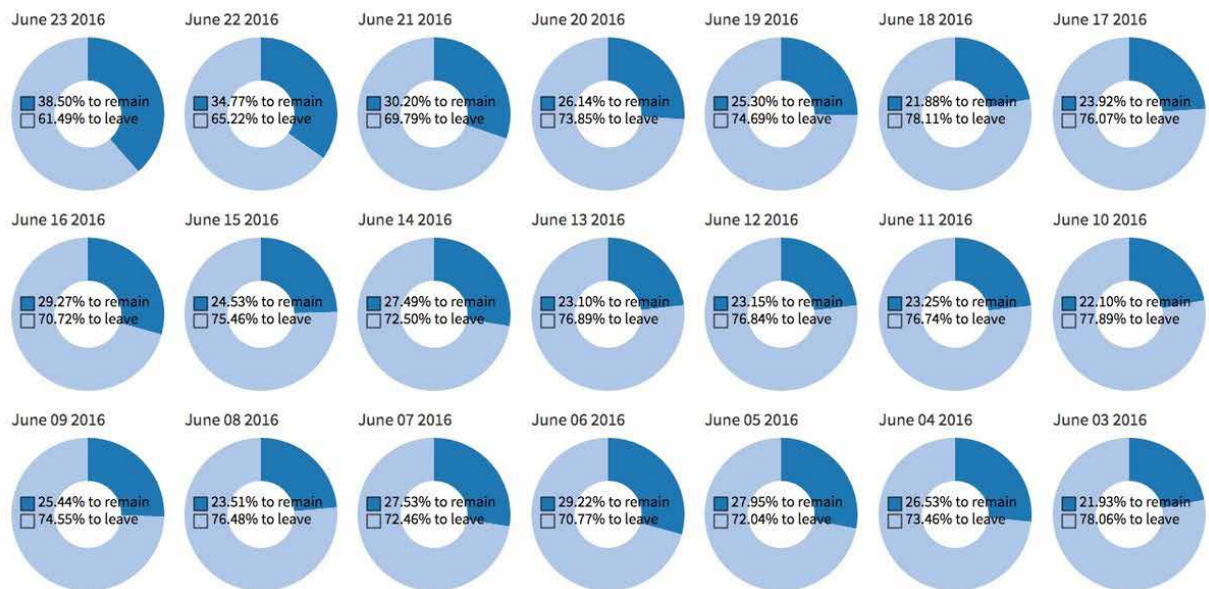


Figure 1: Pro-Leave and Pro-Remain Sentiment in Twitter June 2016

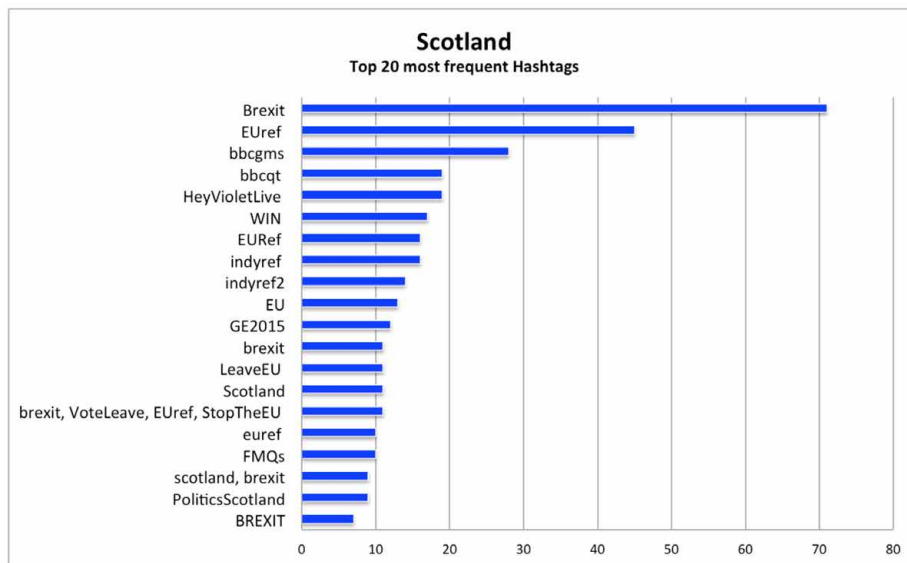


Figure 2: Top 20 Hashtags linked to EU referendum in Twitter in Scotland

# Automatic polling using Computational Linguistics: more reliable than traditional polling?



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The outcome of the 2016 EU referendum did not only spell disaster for the incumbent prime minister and the Remain campaign. It also amounted to a PR disaster for the commercial pollsters, with YouGov, Populus, ComRes, ORB Ipsos-Mori and Survation all failing to correctly predict the outcome. Of the larger pollsters, only TNS correctly ‘called’ the outcome, although still underestimating the LEAVE vote.<sup>1</sup> This follows hard on the heels of similar failures in both the 2010 and 2015 General Elections.<sup>2</sup> Public faith in commercial polling has, in other words, taken another serious blow.

By contrast, automatic poll prediction sites using Computational Linguistics (CL) techniques to automatically extract information from social media (methods also known as Natural Language Processing, or text mining), by and large correctly predicted that LEAVE would prevail. Indeed, the final prediction produced on our own site, SENSE-EU,<sup>3</sup> estimated the vote correctly to within one-tenth of a percentage point: 51.79% for LEAVE and 48.21% for REMAIN. While every new methodology is rightly treated with a degree of suspicion and while it is premature to expect traditional polling to disappear, there are grounds for both campaigners and the media to take CL techniques seriously in the future.

How do sites using CL methods work? The characteristic common to all is that they analyse a massive numbers of posts on social media websites such as Twitter or Facebook.<sup>4</sup> The posts about topics of interest are found (the simplest way to do this is by looking for tweets with a particular hashtag, such as #Brexit, although most CL sites use more sophisticated methods). What happens next depends on the site. The most popular approach is to use so-called sentiment analysis to classify the relevant posts according to their positive or negative sentiment towards that topic. By contrast our own site, SENSE-EU, uses a different method based on the assumption that posts on social media tend to be part of a conversation: after classifying these posts as favouring LEAVE or REMAIN, it classifies responses to these posts as being in agreement or disagreement with the statement in the post. These methods, of course, are by no means perfect: they often incorrectly assess the sentiment of a post, or whether the poster actually agrees or disagrees (e.g., when the poster is being ironic); nevertheless, the sheer volume of data analysed means that by and large CL-based automatic poll prediction sites tend to be a pretty accurate gauge of opinion towards a topic.

In the aftermath of the referendum, YouGov attributed the error in their predictions to higher turnout in LEAVE-oriented areas. Other pollsters will doubtless provide their own accounts of the debacle that will be worth considering. In the meantime, we think that there may be three reasons why CL sites may produce more accurate predictions

than traditional polling:

One reason is the sample size. Traditional polls typically interview at most 1,000 to 2,000 individuals. By contrast, CL-sites process a minimum of 200,000 posts by tens of thousands of people per day and their predictions are generally based on at least 800,000 posts. Aggregation of this order produces compelling evidence.

Traditional polling asks for the people’s behavioural intentions or opinions, whereas CL-sites try to infer opinions that motivate behaviour. Modern cognitive science has established that direct questions about opinions and behavioural intentions may produce unreliable and invalid responses. Asking subjects to fill questionnaires is only used when more indirect methods cannot be applied, such as measuring the time it takes to perform a task, or eye-tracking. CL represents just such an indirect method, since it focuses on opinions that are some distance from the behaviour.

CL sites may well cover posts coming from a wider range of geographical locations.

These are just speculations and require further study. To date, neither polling organizations nor the media have paid much attention to CL methods, but the results of this and previous elections suggest that these methods, with all their limitations, produce reliable forecasts. At the very least, campaigners and the media alike should consider using CL methods to compare with the polls.

1. See the final predictions reported at: <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/>

2. Market Research Society, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls* (London: MRS, 2016).

3. SENSE-EU was developed by the EU project SENSEI: <http://www.sensei-conversation.eu>. The primary developers were Fabio Celli, Carmelo Ferrante and Giuseppe Riccardi for UNITN, and Marc Poch and Hugo Zaragoza for Websays.

4. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/25/business/brexit-talk-on-social-media-heavily-favored-the-leave-side.html> for an interesting analysis of the discussion about the referendum on social media.

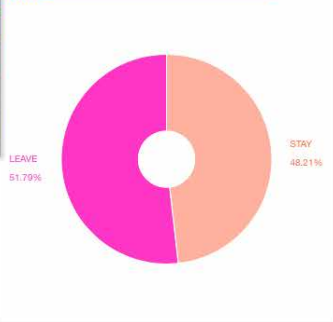
# WHO WILL WIN THE BREXIT REFERENDUM?

(Below predictions will be continuously updated today on the basis of yesterday data we are now processing)

Share



## OUR PREDICTION (data of last 2 DAYS)



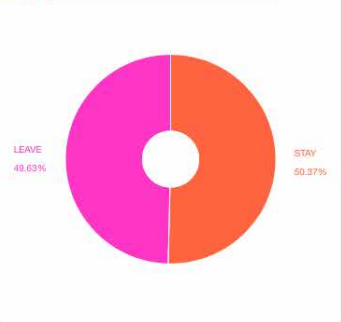
This prediction is based on 842,389 posts. Last update: 23 June 2016 16:15 (CEST)

## OUR PREDICTION (data of last 7 DAYS)



This prediction is based on 363,704 posts. Last update: 23 June 2016 16:15 (CEST)

## OUR PREDICTION (all data since 19th May)



This prediction is based on 1,809,978 posts. Last update: 23 June 2016 16:14 (CEST)

# Impact of social media on the outcome of the EU referendum



## Vyacheslav Polonski

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When Prime Minister David Cameron announced his resignation this morning following Britain's vote to leave the European Union, it was impossible not to notice the irony of his situation. In his 2009 data speech, he described the Internet as an *"amazing pollinator"* that *"turns lonely fights into mass campaigns; transforms moans into movements; excites the attention of hundreds, thousands, millions of people and stirs them to action."* This power has now been turned against him, as millions of people were motivated, persuaded and mobilised through the Internet to vote for Brexit.

For several months, the Leave camp has been building momentum online and has been setting the tone of the debate across all major social networking platforms. Our large-scale social media data analysis shows that not only did Brexit supporters have a more powerful and emotional message, but they were also more effective in the use of social media. We find that the campaign to leave had routinely outmuscled its rival, with more vocal and active supporters across almost all social media platforms. This has led to the activation of a greater number of Leave supporters at grassroots level and enabled them to fully dominate platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, influencing swathes of undecided voters who simply didn't know what to think.

For example, we have captured 30 weeks of data from Instagram, analysing over 18k users and 30k posts. This data indicates that not only were there twice as many Brexit supporters on Instagram, but they were also five times more active than Remain activists. The same pattern could be found on Twitter, where we found that the Leave camp outnumbered the Remain camp 7 to 1. The online momentum of the Leave camp was equally evident in the support they received from the community. On average, Instagram posts from the members of the Leave camp received 26% more likes and 20% more comments, while the most active users in the dataset were also all campaigning for a Leave vote. Furthermore, the top 3 most frequently used hashtags in the data come from the Leave camp and were well integrated into all networked conversations online: #Brexit, #Beleave and #VoteLeave. Using the Internet, the Leave camp was able to create the perception of wide-ranging public support for their cause that acted like a self-fulfilling prophecy, attracting many more voters to back Brexit.

This can be explained by a combination of factors. First, the main Leave camp message was much more intuitive and straightforward, which is particularly important for social media campaigning. Second, their message was also highly emotionally charged, which facilitated the viral spread of Leave ideas. There is evidence to suggest that high arousal emotions such as anger and irritation spread faster than messages focusing on rational or economic arguments, particularly on social media. In this regard, we have observed many instances where people expressed utter confusion about the economic arguments on both sides. Considering that the reasons for Leaving were more emotional, and that the

average Internet user was exposed to a deluge of Brexit posts on a daily basis—both from friends and strangers online—we warned that a British exit vote could be a real possibility.

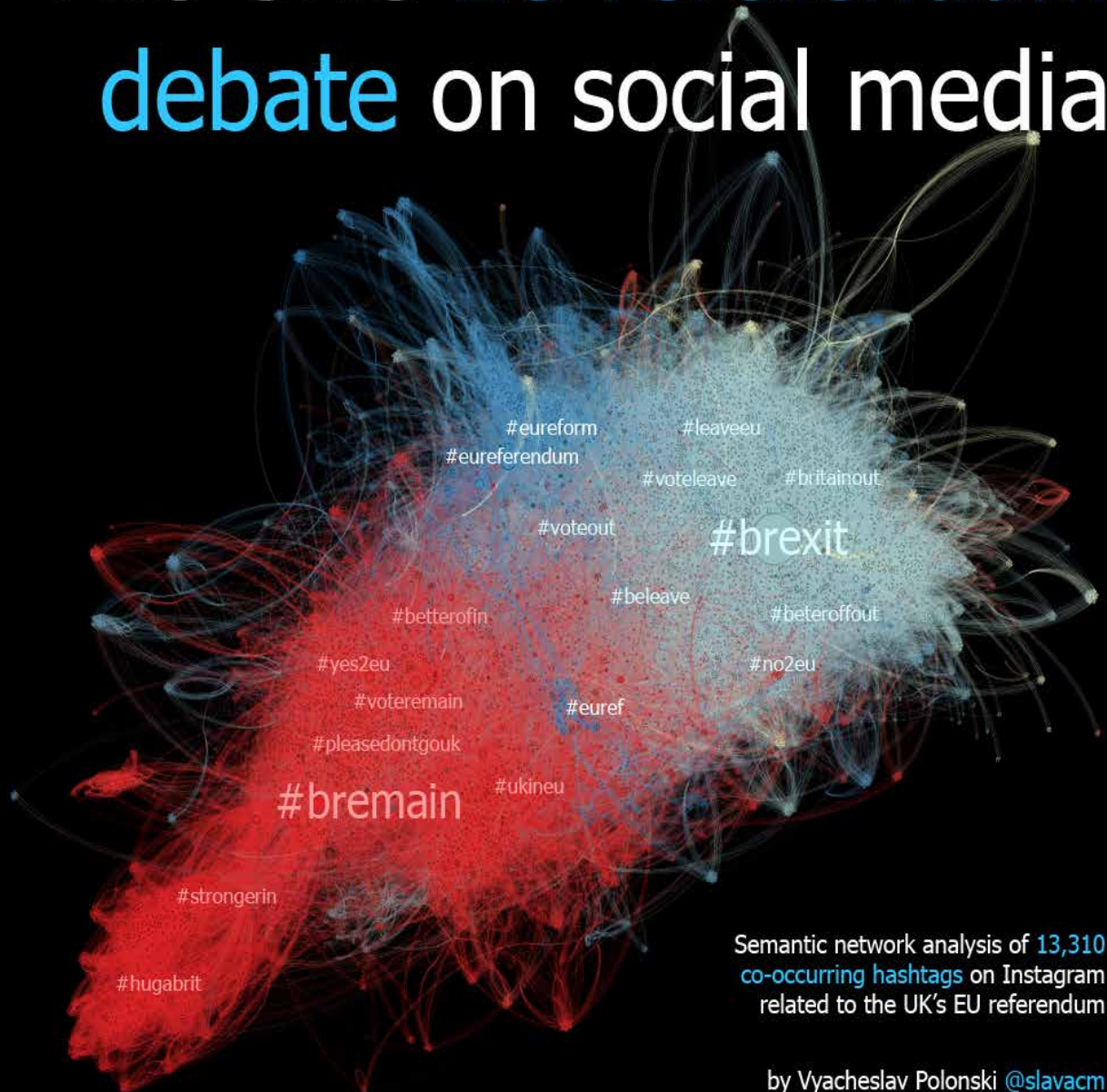
Remain lost the battle online long before it lost the political battle on the ground. The overwhelming Leave sentiment across all social networking platforms was consistent and undeniable, yet many Remain supporters chose to ignore the voice of the Internet as something that has no connection with the real political world. They believed that Britain would never vote to leave the EU and discounted social media as a playground for trolls and teenagers.

Instead of responding with more relatable emotional messages, the official Remain camp continued to rely on calculated rational arguments and a relentless tide of economic forecasts. When #CatsAgainstBrexit started trending, we saw a glimmer of hope for Remain, but sadly the whimsical power of Internet cats was not enough to turn around the debate. In fact, the volume of tweets that urged Britain to #VoteRemain was quickly dwarfed by the enormous turbulence caused by the trending #IVotedLeave hashtag on the day of the referendum.

Following the results of the referendum, 52% Leave and 48% Remain, the Internet public continued to be cataclysmically divided on this important issue and responded with a mixture of surprise, frustration and dark humour. On the one hand, the Leave side euphorically celebrated this new British #IndependenceDay from the EU. On the other hand, the Remain side reacted with memes and pictures to voice their intense frustration and sorrow – channelled through the trending hashtag #NotMyVote. And once again, the Internet is being used to mobilise people to protest against the referendum results across the country, join "vigils for our country's common sense", sign a petition for a second referendum and even to make London an independent state and join the EU with #Londependence.

Social media has changed the nature of political campaigning and will continue to play a key role in future elections around the world. As more and more people spend a significant proportion of their everyday lives online, social media is becoming a more powerful force to assist and influence the spread of political ideas and messages. What the EU referendum has taught us is that this accelerating technology is open to all and can be used to shape the public agenda and drive social change—for better or for worse.

# The UK's EU referendum debate on social media



Semantic network analysis of 13,310 co-occurring hashtags on Instagram related to the UK's EU referendum

by Vyacheslav Polonski @slavacm

# Talking past each other: the Twitter campaigns



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Online campaigning has become an increasingly important part of the modern political portfolio, as a way of reaching supporters and communicating core messages without the filter of the mass media. The EU referendum provided a good demonstration of these new approaches, with both sides aiming to extend their reach as much as possible, given the unusual situation of every vote having equal weight (unlike a General Election run under FPTP).

This has been the key motive for following the social media campaigns of those groups contesting the referendum, particularly on Twitter, to understand better the messages that they are making, the way in which they frame and the extent to which their followers have been picking these up. Here we summarise our [weekly analyses](#) from the campaign period itself, to give the bigger picture, drawing on over 31,000 tweets from ten different groups.

## Leave dominated online

Throughout the campaign, Leave groups have been both more visible and more popular than their Remain opponents. In terms of followers, this is true whether we look at the two lead groups – Vote Leave and Stronger In – or the Conservative and Labour pairs, or indeed the camps as a whole. This reflects the much longer establishment of eurosceptics online, plus the more visceral nature of their campaigning. Indicative of this is the dominance of Leave.EU, which even without securing the official designation, has maintained a clear lead over any other group, with 1.5 times as many Twitter followers as all the Remain groups in our sample.

If we consider volumes of output, then the disparity is smaller, although in only two weeks in our sample period have the Remain camp tweeted more than Leave. While the last three weeks saw a massive increase in tweeting by the two official groups, this still saw Leave produce more content. Incidentally, we should note the final week's volumes were brought down by two days when almost no activity took place online, following Jo Cox's murder.

## The campaign only belatedly caught the public's attention

Whatever might have been happening elsewhere, online there was only a very late uptick in public engagement with groups' Twitter activity, be that increased numbers of followers and improved rates of retweeting groups' content. Twitter follower growth did strengthen in the last few weeks, but it has not approached the rates seen around the time of Cameron's European Council deal. This suggests that the majority of those who are deeply engaged with the issue have been so for a long time and that it remained a marginal issue for many voters, the high turnout on the day notwithstanding. This suggests campaigners on all sides might need to reconsider strategies for subsequent contests.

Likewise, when we consider our standardised

measure for audience engagement – the average number of retweets per tweet per follower – then there is no clear movement either for groups as a whole or for individual groups. If there has been any pattern then it is that the more focused groups have a generally better rate of engagement than the broader ones. Of course, this measure masks the generally larger effect of engagement by Leave, driven by the much larger follower base. In short, Remain might have been more efficient in their reach, but Leave dominated in simple volume.

## Campaigns have become less positive over time, but negative campaigning doesn't clearly work

Both camps become more negative in their framing of content over time, as measured by the split between positive claims about their position or group, versus negative ones about the alternative or their opponents. This has also been true of the three main groups: Stronger In, Vote Leave and Leave.EU.

While the TV debates in the last weeks did contribute to this substantially, given the scope for immediate critiquing of opponents, the trend long predates these events. Our analysis does not yet offer up a convincing explanation for why this occurs, but one possibility is that there has been a shift from generic arguments to more specific reaction to events, which produces a similar type of effect to that found with the TV debates.

If there has been a growth in negative framing, then it has not been an unambiguous benefit to groups. Taking our sample as a whole, we do not find that negative framings clearly out-perform positive ones on our engagement measure (average number of retweets/tweet/follower). Positive arguments and negative comments about other groups shown very similar rates, while negative arguments and positive mentions of one's own group trail a bit behind.

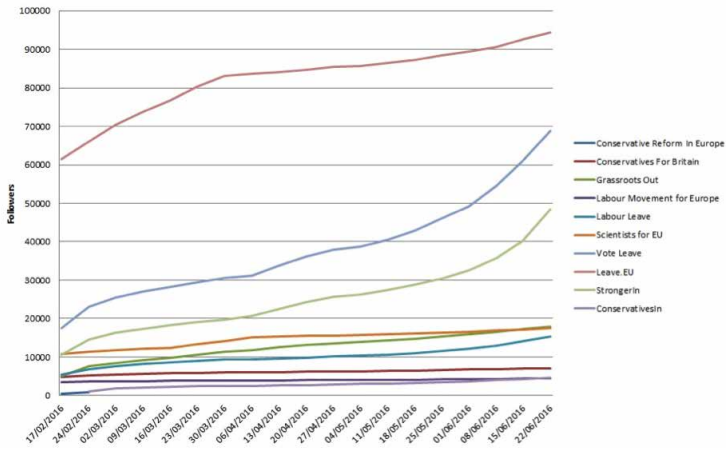
## The campaigns have been (mostly) consistent in their approach to Twitter

Stronger In's Twitter campaign was built primarily around business, trade and the economy, with spikes in other issues at certain times. For example, at the beginning of June there is a significant jump in the number of tweets related to domestic issues. Overall, the campaign has built its message around a core message on business and the economy and the actions of the other campaign.

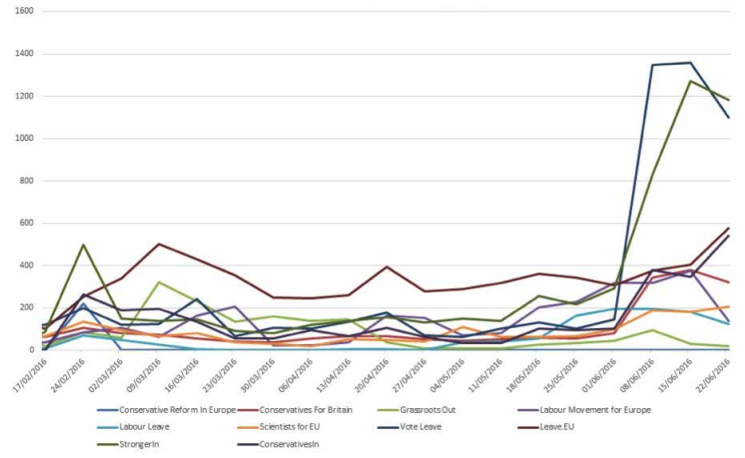
Vote Leave conducted a very different social media campaign to Stronger In, using Twitter to promote its own campaign efforts, rather than engaging the opposing campaign, or focusing on specific issues. Rather, the campaign has focused consistently on a range of issues – politics; domestic issues; immigration; business, trade and the economy; security – but none of these have come to dominate.



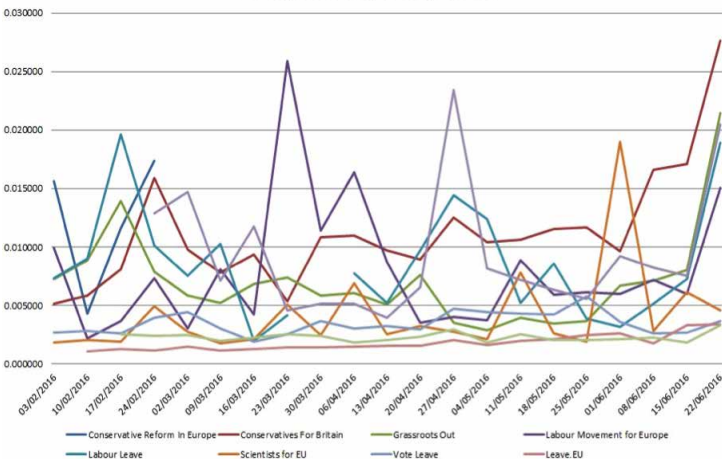
Total number of followers of group Twitter main account



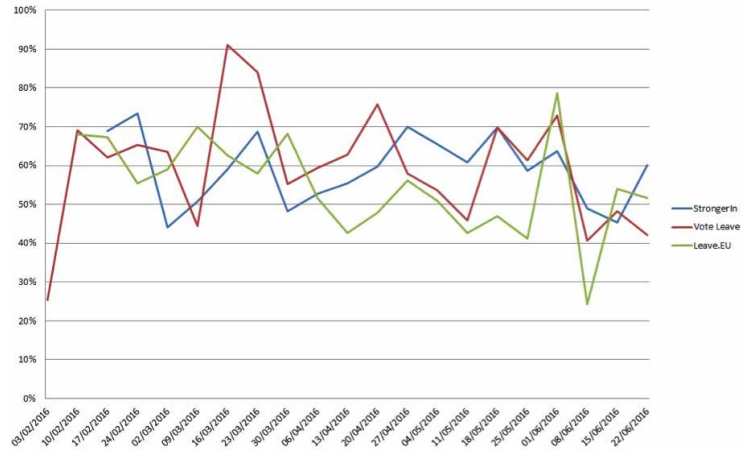
Number of tweets per week, by group



Average Retweets/Tweet/Follower



Percentage of positive tweets, by Group



# Political memes and polemical discourse: the rise of #usepens



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Memes are a useful site for understanding audiences and the relationships between politics and popular culture. Analysis of the #usepens meme unveils a microcosm of partisan politics and the impact of the divisive and antagonistic campaigning in the run-up to the referendum. It also underscores the emerging polemicalisation of internet discourse.

The #usepens hashtag first surfaced in a political context in reference to the Scottish referendum in 2014 reflecting a suspicion of vote tampering. The conspiracy theory involved the Conservative government using MI5 to rub out penciled in ballot papers to change the vote, thereby rigging the referendum, with the support and cover-up of mainstream media outlets like the BBC. The meme emerged again on Twitter amid claims of election rigging in Nigel Farage's constituency of South Thanet, the Eurovision Song Contest (with Russia as the conspirator), and the London Mayoral Election, and became synonymous with distrust of the ruling elite.

It was unsurprising then to see the meme re-emerging before the EU referendum alongside the now common election day meme #dogsatpollingstations. There were three common ways in which the meme was used. Firstly, and the least frequent, was by promoters of the conspiracy encouraging those voting leave to use pens. @danchamberlainx reminded voters: 'Don't forget your black pens tmoro people #usepens #voteleave' followed by the strong arm and union jack emoticons.

Secondly, the meme was used to tag those who were supporting the conspiracy theory online to alert others to their tweets and to bring them in to the wider conversation. This was initiated on May 4<sup>th</sup> during the London Mayoral election by Twitter user @trewloy in response to a now removed tweet from UKIP activist @AnishUKIP: 'if you see an advocate of using pens who believes the vote will otherwise be rigged please use the #usepens hashtag'.

The third, most common way in which the meme was used and spread, was as a way of satirising sympathisers of the conspiracy theory. Some uses of #usepens focused on the nationalism of those voting leave, such as @hrtbs tweeting: 'Most of our pens are made in the EU. No thanks I'm taking my own pen to the ballot box. #usepens' accompanied with photo of a Union Jack pen, while others implied racism, such as @cosmic\_serf to @trewloy, 'black pen?' for absolute certainty, use a Caucasian pen #usepens.' A majority hinted at a lack of intelligence of those who believed in the conspiracy and were voting to leave: '@yakhunt, 'Never mind #usepens, to be completely certain that your vote to leave counts, use blood, arterial blood, your own, thank me later.', @shewolfmanc 'I don't think #usepens goes far enough. I've tattooed my vote to my arm & will be presenting myself at the count tonight #inyourfaceMI5', @claire-phipp, 'Baffled by #usepens. What if evil returning officers burn your papers instead? Or eat them?'

## #UseFlameRetardantInediblePaper

The widespread nature of the belief in a conspiracy was revealed in the run up to the referendum by a YouGov poll commissioned by LBC radio. The poll, based on field work between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016, found that 46% of leave voters thought it was likely that the EU referendum would be rigged, while 28% thought that MI5 is working with the UK government to try and stop Britain leaving the EU. A third of those surveyed (36%) believed that the BBC and ITN are also connected to the conspiracy. Yet the main narrative at play in the use of the meme reveals a polemical mode of discourse which overstates its opposition (nobody actually thinks voters will use inedible paper or tattoo their vote to their arm) and satirises Brexit voters, undermining their real concerns of the establishment and refusing to truly listen to them.

Amid Project Hate and Project Fear, it has been all too easy for voters from either camp to caricature the concerns and opinions of the other rather than to engage in meaningful active listening and discussion (Bickford, 1996). An analysis of #usepens reveals a polemical mode of discourse, enabled and necessitated by social media's short attention span, which sits uneasily alongside the moderate, reasoned discussion of principles and values that we have come to accept as a foundation of democracy.

# E-newsletters, persuasion and the referendum

The referendum campaign was persuasive, but not automatically linked to past partisan behaviour. Yet clearly the parties tried to use the campaign as a means of talking to their supporters. This study focused on how three of the parties supporting the Remain campaign sought to persuade using one channel. I looked at the e-newsletters of three parties: Labour; Liberal Democrats; and Greens. This study looks not just at how the parties viewed the debate on this issue, but also how they clearly had in mind future elections.

Collectively these parties sent out 27 emails during the six-week campaign to those on their publicly available e-newsletter lists. The Liberal Democrats and Labour sent the most with 10 each and the Greens 7. One of the cores to persuasive communication is the credibility of the message sender, and there was a difference of approach here. The Liberal Democrats were most likely to send their emails from an internal staff member, the Labour Party were more likely to send it on behalf of the Leader, and the Greens a well-known politician. There were some interesting nuances on the source. On the eve of polling Labour's email including an emotive appeal in a short video from a World War two veteran. One email from the Greens took an interesting approach coming from the youth wing, and making an argument specifically about why the issue was important to young people.

The prime message projected by the e-newsletters was to raise money with fourteen messages mentioning or being only about financial resources required, though none of the Greens emails called for financial support (though the last one was an appeal to join). Thirteen messages aimed to mobilise people either to sign up for something or to attend an event. All seven of the Greens e-newsletters sought to achieve this. As might be expected the financial appeals were earlier in the campaign and more of the mobilising appeals were towards the end. There were also eleven messages that addressed the arguments why the receiver should vote a particular way, and again there was a party difference. Four of Labour's mentioned the arguments, seven of the Greens and only one of the Liberal Democrats. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats conducted an opinion poll once to see how people expected to vote, presumably to tailor later emails. We can sum up the approach of each party's e-newsletters to be:

- Labour – to explain why the issue is relevant to Labour voters;
- Liberal Democrats – we are doing more than everyone else, so please give us money;
- Greens – why the issue is important to the sustainable agenda.

The three parties appear to deliberately use a number of persuasion techniques. One of the most

obvious is the car-salesman technique of stressing scarcity, in this case how long we have to make a difference. So Tim Farron, leader of the Liberal Democrats said "We have 45 days to shape and secure the future of our country". Such an approach also stresses the importance of the issue, so referring to the campaign to get people to register; a Labour email said "This is the week that can make or break our campaign."

Probably the most common thread was to stress the importance of the vote. For example, it was referred to as "by far the most important vote of a generation." Such appeals were aimed at those who had a high interest in the debate. Both the Labour Party and the Greens provided rationally based arguments tailored to the needs of their supporters.

Another key component in the messages was fear, that something bad would happen if people did not vote. Thus a Liberal Democrat email said "last week the IMF said that Britain voting leave could range from 'pretty bad to very, very bad.'" They also used fear messages within their fundraising efforts, stressing that "Nigel Farage is on track to outspend us over the coming weeks," the hope being that this would prompt more donations. Indeed, the appeals for donations consistently demonstrate the use of persuasion. The requests for donations often had specific amounts, explained what a particular donation value would allow the campaigners to do, and what the effect would be.

This study was limited in terms of sample and communication channel, though there are clear themes. Email was used to help these parties talk to their supporters, and so focusing more on mobilising than changing opinion. Fear may have taken more of a role than it might in General Elections, but this can be explained by the one-off nature of the vote. All the parties seemed to have more than half an eye on the future, and their long-term relationship with e-newsletter subscribers by encouraging activity.



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# United by what divides us: 38 Degrees and the EU Referendum



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“People. Power. Change.” These three words represent the organisational mantra of the non-profit, political activist movement 38 Degrees. Over 3 million British citizens are affiliated to the group and use digital media to set its strategic priorities. Those involved are not tied into one fixed ideology, but pick and choose those issues to which they relate. By providing choice over the conditions of their participation the support behind each campaign tends to be fairly uniform. But what happens when an issue is so significant that it cuts across the interests of the entire membership and the “people” don’t agree?

The referendum on whether the United Kingdom should vote to remain in or leave the European Union divided friends, families, and communities. The group’s vast network of supporters reflected these splits. As is customary for 38 Degrees, the leadership polled their members on how the movement should respond to the referendum. Over 230,000 voted, with 59 per cent indicating that they wished to stay in the EU while a significant minority—28 per cent—would be backing leave. As a result, 38 Degrees did not pick a side during the referendum. However, there was evidence of widespread agreement on the role that the group should play within the referendum campaign, with 97 per cent outlining their support for neutral fact-checking of the claims made by the Remain and Leave campaigns.

This campaign took a number of different forms. The leadership coordinated a crowdfunding campaign for Full Fact, a non-partisan charity that checks the accuracy of claims made by politicians, the media, and pressure groups: lobbying for corrections where necessary. Leaflets and beer mats were distributed alongside a series of videos that outlined the findings of their research. 38 Degrees also worked with Crowdfunder to create a quiz to help citizens determine where they stand on the EU question. Rather than telling participants how to vote, the quiz compared their opinions against the main arguments from both sides of the EU debate. Over 230,000 people took part.

Members also took an active role, with 30,000 joining the “Fact Squad.” This group received live fact-checks over WhatsApp, with the intention of sharing this information with others. This tactic was both innovative and potentially impactful, as research showed that recommendations from family and friends were important sources of information during the campaign period. Crucially, 38 Degrees focused on providing advice and guidance rather than actively persuading citizens how to vote.

This campaign illustrates some important characteristics of 38 Degrees. It shows that the movement is not a “hard-nosed, left-wing Labour-supporting organisation.” Many of its members possess a wide range of views. When they are brought together en masse then conflicts between them can

begin to emerge. During my research I organised a meeting with a group of members. In this conventional, face-to-face setting some of the fundamental differences on key policy issues, like climate change, were abundantly clear. So what did unify these activists who were so divided?

We know from past research that tangible evidence of policy change is a key factor for understanding why citizens engage with the movement. But this campaign did not allow for such a real-world impact. Instead, we see the importance of members seeing evidence of their views being enacted upon by the leadership.

This helps us to understand the enduring appeal of this organisational form. The leader-led campaigns bring together the experience and judgment of a handful of political professionals with large groups of loosely connected citizens, who use widely available technologies to set the overall priorities of the movement. As a result, many of the group’s successes are a result of effective lobbying from those who may not actually agree with the position taken. I suspect this may have been the case in this campaign. But ultimately this is how the staff at 38 Degrees put “people power” into practice. By using digital technologies rank and file members are making the important decisions, not the staff based in London. Although the levers of power may remain the same, those who operate them, and the means by which they do so, are unique.

# Boris, Brexit or bust

While social media's influence upon voting trends remains unclear, their impact upon public debate among a growing demographic (that millennial generation whose political discourse is increasingly enacted online) – and among media elites who interpret Twitter as what Anstead calls “a proxy for public opinion” – seems evident. Through interviews with bloggers on either side (Nick Cohen and Paul Staines), this report explores how one tabloid column sparked controversy online.

On 22 April, as Barack Obama predicted a Brexited Britain would be at “the back of the queue” for American deals, Boris Johnson referred in *The Sun* to “the part-Kenyan President’s ancestral dislike of the British Empire”, as evidenced by his removal from the Oval Office of a bust of Churchill. The following day that paper defended Johnson against the disapprobation of “virtue-signaling Twitter morons” (though Johnson had himself, according to the *Mail* on 19 February, been recruited to the cause by “a social media campaign”).

This skirmish, in what *The Guardian* had (on 20 February) called the referendum’s “social media war”, was fuelled by traditional news institutions. On 22 April Jonathan Freedland wrote in *The Guardian* of Johnson’s “elastic relationship with principle”; on 1 May Stewart Lee in *The Observer* noted Johnson had “changed from being merely a twat, into a full-blown c\*\*t.” Both columns appeared in *The Guardian*’s blogging forum and were widely shared online. On 22 April Nick Cohen’s *Spectator* blog described that publication’s former editor as “a braying charlatan, who [...] uses the tactics of the coward and the tricks of the fraudster to advance his worthless career.” Cohen’s blog proved popular on social media: Cohen tweeted on 22 April that it was “trending in United Kingdom.”

The blogosphere was not entirely antagonistic towards Johnson. Paul Staines (aka Guido Fawkes) defended the accuracy of Johnson’s Churchill bust remarks (against claims to the contrary by *The Guardian*): “Boris is proven right”. Staines argues that social media’s speed of response “allows you to counter-spin. Anything that’s bullshit gets taken apart pretty quickly – for example the ‘back of the queue’ thing in Obama’s speech. You have an iterative process that constantly and quickly pulls apart inaccuracies – but you’ve got to separate that from the 90 per cent of noise.”

Cohen similarly notes that social media generates “a vast amount” of misinformation and that, by contrast, the trustedness of broadcast media underpins their influence: “in this referendum, the most important thing will be television coverage.”

Staines, however, repeatedly challenged the “diplomatic” tone of broadcasters’ scrutiny of the Remain campaign in such outputs as the BBC’s online EU Referendum Reality Check, criticizing its “mysterious” toning down of its critique of Remain campaign claims. *The Independent* noted on 28 February that the BBC would “not be able to avoid

social-media accusations of bias” and Staines admits that “a common theme on our side of the argument is that the BBC is biased. There’s a world view at the BBC that people who want to leave the EU are lunatics.”

Staines does not claim objectivity: “We are partisan. We deconstruct the Remain side more than the Leave side. I wouldn’t pretend to be the BBC and impartial – though I’m not sure the BBC is impartial!” In this sense, Staines echoes John Fiske’s 1987 argument against journalism’s claim to objectivity as a means to “increase its control”.

Cohen argues that old and new media outputs reach “different audiences” – and that online readers come “with fewer preconceptions.” *The Independent* asked on 17 February whether social media have “made us crude and dismissive in our judgements.” The *Telegraph* argued on 29 February that “social media have eroded the noble art of taking your time to think it through” and spoke on 27 April of the “corrosive influence of social media.” But in contrast to what Leveson described as the “ethical vacuum” of the internet, Cohen sees value online in being associated with a trusted organization: “people want the assurance that this is coming from a reputable news organization. That’s why personal blogs are dying out.”

Cohen suggests that “all journalists are essentially online journalists. The main way people read you is via Facebook or Twitter links.” But institutional anchoring allows both bloggers to gain audience trust.

Yet did the phenomenon of ‘Bregret’ reported in the wake of the vote suggest the electorate were swayed by a rhetoric unprecedentedly economical with objectivity? Did the discursive bias of broadcast coverage of the loveable underdog (“Boris”) against a distant authority (“Mr Cameron”) – trending even after the murder of Jo Cox to normalize xenophobia (as Cohen suggested on 26 June, a prioritising of entertainment over expertise) – favour the odds of Brexit? Was this because no one could see the result coming? Or did that outcome represent a fundamental rejection of that institutional attempt to foster balance?



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Voters

# What explains the failure of ‘Project Fear’?

A lot of attention has been paid to the motivations of people who voted leave. I want to turn the question around and ask what failed to motivate people to vote remain.

On EU referendum election night, at ITV, we used a forecast of leave and remain votes across each local counting area, using [British Election Study](#) (BES) data. Leave out-performed our expectations in the areas we expected to vote leave. Remain votes were broadly consistent with a 50:50 tie in areas we expected to vote remain. In Scotland, results were both less convincing than we expected for remain, and also in much fewer number in terms of turnout. The same was true in London - though not to the same degree vis a vis turnout. Turnout was lower in general across the counting areas that voted remain, and higher in areas voting Leave. Why may that have been the case?

One simple answer is that change was more mobilising than the status quo. While many expected a status quo bias, the momentum was with Leave.

Another simple answer is Britain’s euro-scepticism. Only 16% of our British Election Study (pre referendum campaign wave) respondents saw themselves as strongly European. That figure was 61% for those people seeing themselves as strongly British. These identities are predictors of attitudes to the costs and benefits of being in the EU. A majority (57%) of our respondents thought free trade with the EU had been good for Britain. The proportions seeing other aspects as positive (worker’s rights, bringing people from different countries together) were below 40%. The proportions seeing the negatives (sovereignty, enlargement, red tape) were above 60%. Remain needed to win votes from many people who held a very negative view of the EU.

Another answer might be to conclude that voters are not motivated by fear, or were turned off by project fear. 59% of our BES respondents saw the Remain campaign as being about fear. The equivalent figure for the Leave campaign was 43%. However, to conclude that fear is not a motivator ignores the fact that fear of immigration, change, of a future Britain following the same trajectory of one felt so far, was an underpinning of a vote to leave.

There is a bigger question for the Remain campaign. Given that the economy is sometimes thought of as a super-issue that so commonly decides elections, why did risks to the economy fail to win the argument for Remain?

The perceived economic costs of leaving the EU were not large in contrast to the perceived ‘benefits’ of reducing immigration. 31% of our BES respondents thought the general economic situation would get worse whereas 57% thought it would stay about the same. Contrast those figures with the 54% who thought immigration would get lower and the 27% who thought it would stay about the same. All of the other consequences of Brexit we asked about (higher unemployment, lower international trade, Britain’s

voice in the world, worsening working conditions, the NHS) provided little net difference in opinions comparing the proportions who thought things would get worse and the proportions who thought things would get better.

Second, if people thought the general economy would get worse they were not all convinced that they themselves would feel the economic impact. Only 18% thought their personal finances would get worse (before the campaign), in contrast to the 31% who thought the general economy would deteriorate.

The third explanation builds on the above two. The BES conducted a pre-EU referendum wave and then a daily campaign wave, from 8<sup>th</sup> May til 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Preliminary analysis of those data suggests there was no aggregate trend in public opinion about the costs or benefits of Brexit on the economy – nor on reducing immigration levels. This was not a campaign that convinced a majority of voters about the costs – or benefits – of leaving.

There is also the possibility that economic predictions were simply discounted. If people had low trust in MPs, the proportion thinking the economy in general would get worse if we left the EU was 29% whereas that figure was 38% if our BES survey respondents had trust in MPs.

Each of these explanations are general. There is a particular question, however, about Scotland. The Scots may have been less mobilised because of repeated elections, but I think this explanation unlikely. The Scots may have been so sure they would vote to remain that they were less likely to turnout to help ensure the outcome. This explanation doesn’t explain why the Scots had much lower turnouts against expectations, whereas Londoners were only slightly less likely to turn out than we expected. It may be the case that SNP support has begun to un-wind, and erstwhile Labour supporters were not mobilised by Labour and the same was true for the other pro-Remain parties. But there is little evidence so far of any substantial un-winding of SNP support. It is a possibility – as yet untested – that the Scots voted less enthusiastically for Remain because of the continued importance of the nationalist cleavage in Scottish politics. A vote for Leave, or a decision to stay-at-home, made it more likely that the UK would leave the European Union and Scotland would gain independence. Or the benefits of remaining in the EU were simply in conflict with the desire for Scotland to be independent. If this is true, it is ironic that the SNP are courting EU membership and another referendum on Scottish independence on the strength of Scottish votes for remain, when the absence of Scottish remain votes helped contribute to UK exit from the EU.



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# Workers rights in the EU and out: social class and the trade unions' contribution to the debate



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Since its announcement, the referendum result has been widely explained in terms of social class, but during the campaign class was rarely explicitly discussed. Even the Labour party seemed to not to notice the likelihood of a working class protest vote until late in the day, although polls showed this (and covariants such as education, newspaper readership and region) to be the only significant demographic difference between in and out voters other than age.

Although polling indicates that 63% of Labour supporters voted to remain in comparison with just 42% of Tories (whose voters tend to be older, if less working class), Labour have clearly failed to persuade many of their traditional working class supporters of the case for remain. Commentators such as Paul Mason and Owen Jones explain this as a rebellion by provincial working classes against a metropolitan elite who they believe despise their values and culture, and the reluctance of the Labour shadow cabinet to address the issue of immigration.

The other traditional voice of the working class, however, is the trade unions, who could be seen as closer to the shop floor, but also failed to connect culturally. Like the wider Remain campaign, the unions focused on the economy, and whilst the parties were recruiting the support of big business, the unions' were initially seen backing employers' warnings about job losses, likely fuelling the notion that EU membership principally benefits the elite. Interestingly, this suggests that many 'working people' didn't accept the dominant media assumption that the interests of big business are synonymous with the public interest because of their role as 'wealth and jobs creators', but neither did they accept the argument later put forward by union leaders in letters and comment pieces in the *Mirror* and *Guardian* – and picked up by Jeremy Corbyn and Sadiq Khan – that the EU protected workers rights and enabled unions to cooperate across border against employers that are increasingly multinational.

The Trade Union Congress (TUC) was the most prominent union voice, and its leader Frances O'Grady was sufficiently prominent to be given a place in the BBC televised debate, with the second audience question addressing employment and social rights. However, Loughborough University's research indicates that in general employment issues constituted just 4% of coverage, and unions made up just 0.4% of sources on TV and 1% in the press. Unsurprisingly, the voice of the unions has been largely absent in the conservative press and more prominent in the *Guardian*, 91% of whose readers supported Remain, but even more so in the *Mirror*. However, it is not clear from polling how the latter's readers stand on the issue, and it seems likely that many of them voted – along class and age lines (41% of readers being over 65) – to

leave. *Mirror* columnist Kevin Maguire reflected that people voted "in good faith" on the basis of a campaign of misinformation and are likely to feel in time that they have been "conned" – a prediction given some anecdotal support hot on the heels of the result.

Nonetheless, claims that propaganda from the Leave camp and their press cheerleaders created false consciousness are something of an oversimplification, with newspapers typically reinforcing their readers' existing views more than leading them – hence Murdoch papers were split along class lines between the Brexit-supporting *Sun* and Remain-backing *Times*. More significant is that many people apparently blamed the EU and immigration for the country's ills rather than the government, and Cameron must bear some responsibility for that.

Simon Kellner's analysis of YouGov polling found that the most striking difference between the two camps in terms of underlying beliefs was that Remain supporters blamed the banks, Conservative-led governments, and growing inequality whilst Leave voters blamed EU regulation, the previous Labour government, and immigrants willing to work for lower wages. This suggests that they accepted the Conservative rhetoric of a fiscal rather than financial crisis that left them with no choice but to impose austerity measures, and that they attribute globalisation to governmental bodies rather than multinational corporations. What the left failed to do is to give a convincing alternative account for why poor communities were suffering and what they could do about it – such as investment in social housing and public services – because they made the mistake of thinking the EU referendum vote would be about the EU.

It is not clear whether workers were unaware of the unions' argument or unpersuaded by them, or simply felt it was a price worth paying for the chance to stem immigration, but the misdirected blame for austerity is the result of public discourse over the long-term rather than the campaign itself, and symptomatic of wider problems in our media and politics.



# ‘I want my country back’: emotion and Englishness at the Brexit ballotbox

On BBC1’s *Question Time* programme broadcast on 15<sup>th</sup> June, an audience member pleaded that “*I want my country back... we’re all just so frustrated*”. Televised the day before the Brexit campaigns began, this single plea symbolised a referendum which has been dominated not by sober analysis and evidence-based reason, but by hysteria, hatred, savage emotions, and the sinister monster of exclusionary, ethnic nationalism.

The three phases of Brexit – campaign, referendum, aftermath – have revealed three urgent problems. First, the lack of public faith in establishment politics. Second, the emotional deficit of the EU. Third, the return of a particularly ugly English nationalism. All of these were intimately connected in a campaign whose nature was fundamentally emotional. While the EU is no longer an immediate priority for the next government, public lack of faith and the return of national identity in England are urgent issues which a new government must carefully address.

First, the erosion of political faith. An unforeseen consequence is that a campaign about Europeanism has brought to the fore severe tensions within Britishness. The accusations made by Leave against the EU – that it is an undemocratic, elitist network sustained by corruption – were appropriated by both cross-party campaigns as criticisms of the British establishment. In the aftermath of Brexit a lack of faith in the Referendum’s legitimacy, in the viability of the UK as a collective union, in party leadership, and perhaps in the very system of British Parliamentary politics, has manifested in the form of demands for another referendum, threats of balkanisation, and a dual Conservative-Labour leadership crisis. Lack of faith was not a sideshow restricted to conspiracy theories about ballot papers. It has underpinned the entire campaign and will likely trigger a general election even more emotional, bitter and unpredictable than the elections and referenda of 2010-2016. A probable election in later 2016 will require all factions to quickly restore public faith in parties, leaders, and the very system of government. This will not be easy, and will likely result in major party infighting and parties moving much closer to populism for years to come.

The second issue raised by Brexit is final proof that EU leaders and EU scholars must abandon the long-outdated assumptions of neofunctionalist spillover – the dominant, archaic belief that ever-closer political and economic integration would result in stronger feelings of ‘EU-ropeanness’. This has not happened. Euroscepticism is higher than ever. Upcoming French and German elections could see the same frustrations give birth to populist anti-EU governments in the Union’s keystones. Unless the EU, whose leaders have consistently failed to respond to an ever-louder Euroscepticism since 2007, act immediately to improve the EU’s image as a democratically accountable alliance rather

than an out-of-touch clique, Britain could prove to be the first of 27 closely-spaced dominos to fall.

Lack of faith in the British and European establishment are deeply emotional issues, and are intimately connected with the third consequence of Brexit – the rise of an aggressive, angry, ethnic Englishness. All three stages of Brexit have been characterised by contempt, anger and despair unseen in recent British politics. And these are issues with which the Remain campaign struggled to compete. The referendum was not fought on logical, sober, rational arguments. It was fought on raw emotion. No amount of economic data and well-meaning appeals to cosmopolitanism can compete with the pull of nostalgia and the primal savagery of resentment. This emotional surge was not most keenly felt in the nations or the capital but in those post-industrial provinces of England which have spent forty years as backwaters; such places have not shared the same degree of power and prosperity as the devolved nations and the metropolis. When asked to support the cause of a government and parties which have either harmed or simply ignored the provinces (“the North” acting as the media’s poor synecdoche for England), the consequence was the unleashing of English resentment traceable to the 1970s: resentment of those who campaigned for Remain, accused of being traitors; resentment of those who voted Leave, demonised as uneducated racists; resentment of immigration, of economic decline, of the Westminster consensus and the Brussels establishment. Ultimately it is resentment which has created a bitterly divided Britain and triggered an assassination on a city street.

Ultimately the Referendum was a test of Britain’s, and specifically England’s, faith and identity. Faith has been proven to be fallible, and identity has retreated into an ethnic nationalism, a yearning for a collective belonging which is given meaning not by appealing to a distant, nostalgic imagination but by appealing to a rejection of the present. This present is symbolised by a multi-party establishment which may soon discover that, like in Scotland in 2014, once the genie of nationalism has been released from its bottle, it turns on those who released it. And it cannot be easily put back. The next government faces the immense challenge of governing a severely divided society in which trust is weak, resentment is strong, and inevitable problems are blamed on a feet-dragging establishment. The next government must address English anger by focusing development and powers much more heavily in the overlooked English regions. This will be no easy task. But unless immediate and significant steps are taken to assuage the disillusionment and anger which the referendum has revealed, we must seriously question our future as a United Kingdom.



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# Mixed feelings: how citizens expressed their attitudes towards the EU



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The referendum frequently saw UK politicians and citizens expressing combinations of fact and feelings. The way one feels about an entity like the EU is important as, theoretically, feelings are expressions of the underlying attitudes likely to drive voting behaviour. In this article I offer a qualitative analysis of the dominant tone, based on a systematic reading and coding of the subject and discourse expressed in responses to posts to Facebook to the profile pages of Vote Leave (a community of 517,326 members) and Britain Stronger In Europe (with 505,064 community members), the official Leave and Remain campaigns within the final week of the contest.

Interestingly the tone of Vote Leave was dominated by negativity towards the Remain campaigners with supporters frequently posting vitriol directed at the ‘assholes’ whose arguments are described as hypocritical and their performances ‘slippery’. This, however, was interspersed by messages of hope demonstrating that, for some, the idea of Brexit has strongly positive connotations. The campaign posted numerous videos featuring leading pro-Remain figures making their case and each of these were met with a combination of derision and personal attacks. Hence the Leave community stoked the negativity constantly and, in doing so, were particularly focused on a group they referred to as the ‘Remainiacs’. This amorphous ‘other’ was described as ‘stupid’, easily-manipulated, cowardly and even ‘traitorous’.

There was a counterbalance, however, with many active supporters promoting pro-Leave messages to justify Brexit such as the economic costs of EU membership, the numbers of migrants entering the UK from the EU, and figures for benefit payments to migrants. But the reasons why the Leave supporters appeared most passionate reflected a sense that they had long wanted the UK out of the EU. They had previously been frustrated that not everyone had agreed and because of this their Brexit dream had gone unrealised- until now. Thus underlining the negativity and scare stories were hopeful messages from citizens who expressed their desire to create what they believed would be a freer country able to better determine its own destiny.

Many people posting in the Remain Facebook community expressed negativity towards the Vote Leave case as well as a dispassionate reiteration of the economic arguments for leaving the EU. Some citizens promoted more positive arguments for Britain to not ‘pull up the drawbridge’ and thereby be isolated. While the majority of content posted repackaged official arguments, some did make personal attacks on key pro-Brexit protagonists such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson as well as the credibility of their key arguments. Predominantly the feelings expressed were ones of uncertainty with citizens voicing their mistrust over the Conservative government’s ability to negotiate a post-Brexit settlement. Where supportive comments were made in response

to Facebook posts they tended to be reactions to messages from business leaders, such as Richard Branson. By contrast a general mistrust was shown towards statements by Cameron and Osborne. Few Labour figures featured at all, with the exception of the late Jo Cox, the Labour MP whose murder in the penultimate week of the campaign led to its brief suspension. Ms Cox’s pro-Remain article for the PoliticsHome site was widely re-published and circulated following her death. The support for her argument may have resulted from the tragedy of her murder, however it seems consistent with the general mood within a community that seemed to have only tacit support for the political leaders of the campaign. Hence, in contrast to the passionate belligerence of Vote Leave, Remainers seemed largely to be more driven by the emotion of fear than desire.

The feelings within the respective communities were reflected in the content posted and here there were similarities in how both campaigns used their Facebook profiles for posting videos, pictures or text to disseminate their own messages or portray opponents in a negative light. While Vote Leave supporters reserved their attacks for opponents, Stronger In members also demonstrated distrust for Cameron and Osborne, thereby reinforcing a general anti-establishment mood. Members also tended to reflect the general mood of each side with the Remain camp focused on the message of economic uncertainty and Leavers with figures showing the costs of immigration. Hope-filled messages tended to be more prevalent within the Vote Leave community, reflecting a dimension of the official campaign. For Stronger In it appeared a minority were inventing their own positive communications that often countered the official, threat-filled messages and suggested there were better reasons to vote to Remain than those offered by Cameron.

The Remain and Leave Facebook communities represent a microcosm of the UK population, and indeed many of the comments made on these platforms no doubt reflected many of those expressed on buses and in pubs and cafes. They may therefore have been the dominant feelings of the electorates on each side. Here, the economic argument offered by a majority of politicians, business leaders and economists appeared to have been ignored in favour of a more nebulous but hopeful future. Whether this reflects the longstanding Euroscepticism consistently seen in the media and reflected by opinion polls since the late 1980s is a moot point. The result may also be a reflection of a public disaffection for elites and the impression that the Remain campaign was hectoring citizens. What citizen interactions with the campaign suggests is that an anti-politics mood is an undercurrent among those who express their political views on social media. This mood is likely to remain a feature of political discourse and so might have considerable ramifications for UK politics at a time of great uncertainty.

# ‘We want our country back’ – stop sneering, start listening

The post-mortem is now well under way and the general consensus seems to be that those who voted Leave were gullible fools led astray by a combination of a partisan press and slick political operators selling a particularly potent brand of snake oil, one part false promises, two parts undiluted bigotry. Notwithstanding the quality of the overall political debate around Brexit (it was awful on both sides), such a view might make Remainers feel better about themselves but offers little in making sense of what actually happened last Thursday and why.

In the lead up to the vote, there were very few who actually got what this was about. John Harris of the Guardian was one of them because he actually bothered to tour the country and talk to people in unglamorous places like Nuneaton (66% Leave), Barking (62% Leave) and Hartlepool (70% Leave). On Wednesday he wrote;

Even those who understand that something seismic is afoot among predominantly working-class voters are still too keen on the idea that they are gullible enough to be led over a cliff by people with whom they would actually disagree, if only they knew the facts. But most people are not really being “led” by anyone. In my experience, (Nigel) Farage, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove et al are viewed by most people with as much cynicism as the people fronting the remain campaign.

What is now happening ... in the UK underlines a tangle of other stuff – to do with culture, belonging and community – that is going to require a completely different level of response.

I think Harris is right on all counts but it’s his nod to ‘culture, belonging and community’ that I want to briefly focus on here. For while the disconnect between ‘ordinary’ people, notably those in the former industrial heartlands that Labour used to consider its own, and politicians has been extensively discussed, this ‘tangle of other stuff’ has been somewhat neglected, often reduced to accusations of racism and xenophobia. Now, of course, this isn’t to condone physical or verbal attacks on the basis of skin colour, religion, accent or language but unless we understand what people are telling us about their own lives we aren’t going to get very far in changing things for the better.

The point that needs to be made is that those voting Leave were not only railing against an elite that they considered to be distant and disinterested but also, in the process, reaffirming their commitment to the nation and a national order of things. For many on the Remain side, nationalism continues to be seen as a poisonous ideology largely associated with far-right politicians and football hooligans. Likewise, the European project is seen by them as an antidote to such expressions of bigotry and violence. The problem with such a view is that in simply reducing nationalism to extremism, we risk overlooking why nations continue to matter to so many people, including a good number of those

who voted Leave. Simply put, national frameworks continue to offer a point of anchorage – a sense of identity, continuity, community, place and belonging – in an increasingly complex and threatening world. Similarly, for those who see themselves at the heart of national culture and territory, the nation provides a sense of status (I belong here) and power (I *should* be able to say what goes on here) where other forms (notably for men) have been increasingly eroded e.g. work, class, locality.

The sociologist Jonathan Hearn has written that ‘national identities, like all identities, are rendered salient when they seem to address personal issues of power over one’s own life’. At the moment, people in Britain, but in England in particular, are feeling a loss of control and a sense of anxiety that is palpable. In response to this they are drawing on a form of identity/community that, at least, gives them a way of making their own lives meaningful. We don’t have to like the fact that sometimes this leads to outbursts against migrants or boorish behaviour in the streets of Marseilles. And, to repeat, trying to make sense of such behaviour doesn’t mean condoning it.

But if we are really serious about trying to offer new political solutions and ways of imagining and being in the world, it means first trying to engage with people and not simply sneering at them when they happen to make choices we don’t agree with. It also means getting a bunch of better narratives about who we are and where we’re going than the current lot has been peddling for the last two decades. In Britain this not only means making the political system more responsive (ditching the First Past The Post electoral system and moving towards genuine devolution for the regions and cities) but offering a narrative of (national) community that is forward looking and acknowledges Britain’s current place in the world rather than continually banging on about the past. Britain is a small island in Europe. It once had an empire and its men and women (including those in the Commonwealth) made an important contribution to the overthrow of fascism in the Twentieth Century. Now, it punches above its weight when it comes to culture and science, but the world has moved on, whether it comes to military power, economic output or (whisper it) football.

Like the howls of rage from across the Atlantic, the slogan ‘we want our country back’ is only too easy to dismiss if you’re sitting (relatively) comfortably in a sleek office or coffee shop in London, Paris or Oslo. Unfortunately, the ‘stuff to do with culture, belonging and community’ is far too important to be left to the likes of Farage, Johnson and Trump.



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# Young people in a changing Europe: British youth and Brexit 2016



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In recent years, the relationship between young people and British democracy has become increasingly complex and fragile. In particular, Government austerity policies introduced in 2010 placed a disproportionate burden on young people who have arguably suffered more than any other social grouping from deepening spending cuts in welfare and public services (Birch, Lodge and Gottfried, 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, the perceived failings of the political class to champion the interests of young people has left today's youth feeling especially ignored and marginalised, and has exposed a widening gap in aspirations between the generations. It has also translated into continued abstention from formal electoral politics (Henn and Oldfield, 2016). In the run-up to the 2016 EU Referendum, a key challenge for the political class was therefore to activate the youth vote in a contest that in time will almost certainly radically re-shape Britain's relationship with itself and the rest of continental Europe.

Against this back-drop, we worked with young people to co-produce a project called 'Me and EU' to place accessible, timely and peer reviewed information in the hands of young people with just one click. The digital platform connected users to research and events organised by contributors to the ESRC-funded "UK in a Changing Europe" project. Critically, 'Me and EU' was designed to better help young people in their decision-making on whether and how to vote. This was important for two critical reasons. Firstly, although they represented a huge potential voting bloc, the UK's Electoral Commission identified that they were nonetheless massively under-represented on the electoral register in advance of the EU Referendum. Our project aimed to encourage young people to register to vote, and included a link that enabled them to do that.

Secondly, young people had a particular take on the EU Referendum and a vision on Britain's relationship with Europe that were distinct from those of their older contemporaries. For instance, using YouGov polling data collected in the months leading up to the Referendum, Fox (2016) tracked a strong correlation between attitudes to EU membership and age. The polls revealed that when compared with older age groups, young people were less hostile to the EU, more tolerant of immigration, and more likely to feel that the EU had been successful in securing peace across the continent. Importantly, the data from YouGov's May 2016 poll indicated that the under 25's were overwhelmingly most likely to support the Remain option, while the over-60s backed leaving the EU. As Table 1 (opposite) demonstrates, this generational gap was ultimately reflected in the final vote, with 73 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds voting to remain in the EU while the country at large voted to leave by a margin of

51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent.

In our 'Me and EU' research project, we asked respondents what underpinned their support to either remain in, or to leave, the European Union. Figure 1 summarises their responses. The majority of young people prioritised broadly "Remain" responses (shaded). The primary issue for this group was a concern that Brexit would have a negative impact on the economy, trade and employment. However, these young people also stressed the positive aspects of continued membership of the EU, including the benefits to be gained by offering collective approaches to such matters as global environmental sustainability, security and human rights. By way of contrast, a significant minority of respondents emphasised the benefits to be gained from leaving the EU in terms of strengthening national political sovereignty, re-directing investment from the EU towards the UK, and greater control over immigration. However, a sizeable group of respondents (16 per cent) expressed a lack of certainty about the claims and counter-claims of both the Leave and Remain campaigns. This supports previous research (Henn and Foard 2014) that young people found politics in general to be confusing and difficult to engage with. Typical responses (typed word-for-word by respondents) included:

- *I don't know enough about the consequences of voting to stay in or leave Europe. I don't think anyone truly knows the consequences... I don't think anyone can trust what the newspapers are reporting on it because they all have their own agenda and are completely biased.*
- *Nobody knows what will happen if we do leave.*
- *I honestly have no clue on the benefits of leaving the EU or staying in.*

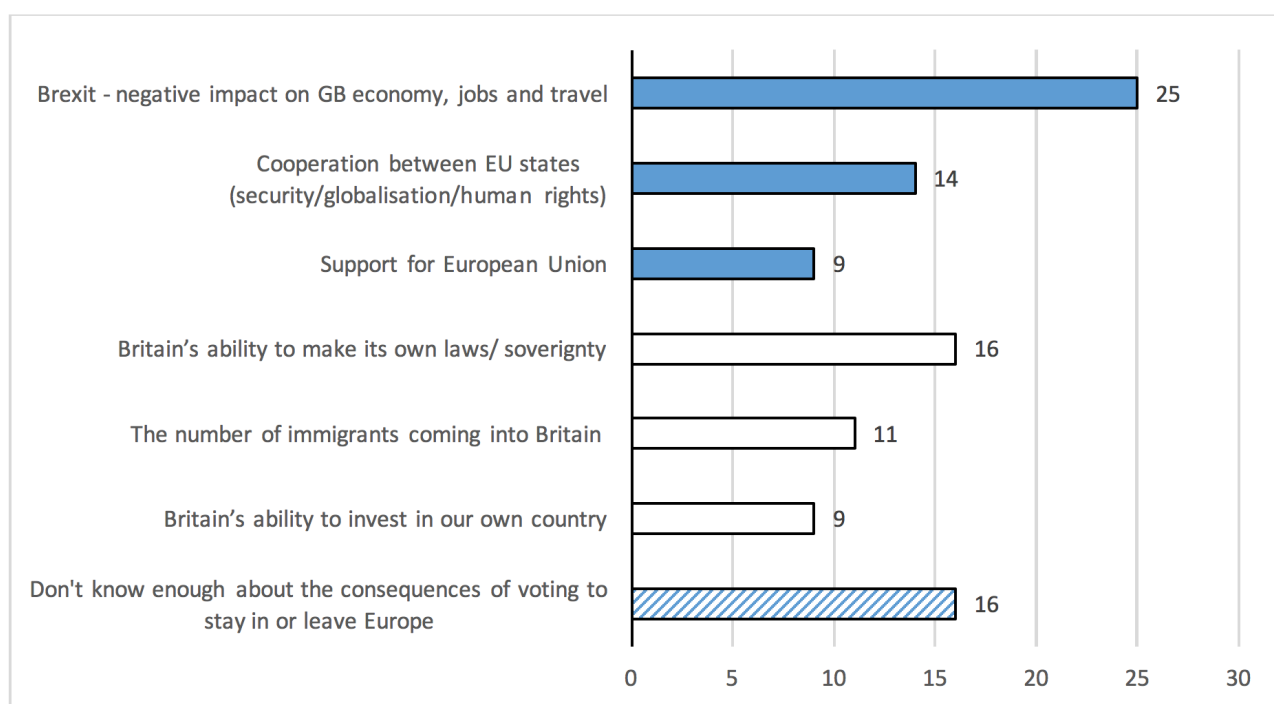
The decision of the UK population to support the Brexit option at the 2016 EU Referendum will have significant economic, social, political and cultural consequences - and none more so than for the futures of young people. However, the outcome would appear to be at odds with the instincts and preferences of the majority of young people who have indicated their broad support for the European project and who voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. Conceivably, the growing inequalities between the generations provides a significant challenge of our time. For a youth generation that has borne the brunt of recent austerity politics and which already feels poorly served by the political class, the Referendum outcome may serve to deepen the ongoing dissatisfaction that young people feel in relation to democratic processes in the UK.

**Table 1 - Vote by age at the 2016 UK Referendum on membership of the European Union (%)**

|               | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| <b>Leave</b>  | 27    | 38    | 48    | 56    | 57    | 60  |
| <b>Remain</b> | 73    | 62    | 52    | 44    | 43    | 40  |

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls (2016)

**Figure 1 - Main reasons for wanting the UK to either remain in the European Union or to leave the European Union (%)**



# Bonfires and Brexit: what's next for women?



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We could have quite a serious fight coming up. Whatever comes next, women's voices should not be so resoundingly drowned out as they were in the Referendum campaign. Women's rights need to be articulated starkly, bluntly, and loudly, since they were inaudible in the male echo chamber of pre-referendum debates.

According to Lord Ashcroft's Referendum poll, based on 12 369 people, the leave/remain split between female voters was exactly the same as that for male voters – 52/48. That figure, like the preceding debates, does not reflect the gendered nature of Brexit.

In terms of what comes next, Brexit is a feminist issue. During the debates, concerns over workplace rights were too often dismissed with a reference to the UK's legislative track record, suggesting that we were doing very nicely without Europe, thank you. But this argument is rather shallow and misleading. In law, detail is paramount. Yes, the UK stumped up its own Equal Pay Act. But it did not cover things like pension rights – it was up to the European Court of Justice to find that part time workers, more likely to be women, should be entitled to join occupational pension schemes. And it was the ECJ that found that women were entitled to equal pay for work of equal value when no job evaluation study had been done. Yes, the UK created its own Sex Discrimination Act, but it was the ECJ that found that no sick-man comparator was required, contrary to UK law. And it was the ECJ that found that women should not be deprived of their annual leave while on maternity leave. And it was the ECJ that insisted upon protection for a working mother from direct discrimination and harassment on the grounds of her child's disability. And it was the ECJ that lifted the cap that UK law had placed on compensation in discrimination cases. In short, the ECJ has repeatedly corrected the 'unprogressive tendencies' of the domestic courts.

Brexit raises the prospect of a 'bonfire of rights'. A number of those in the Leave camp have made their distaste for gender equality provisions abundantly clear. Priti Patel cited research by Open Europe on the '100 most burdensome rules' which included the part-time workers directive (which ensures equal rights for this group), the gender equality directive, and the parental leave directive. Martin Callanan (then the chair of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group) said he wanted to "scrap ... the Pregnant Workers Directive and all of the other barriers to actually employing people if we really want to create jobs in Europe". Boris Johnson – looking a contender to be the next Prime Minister, announced that he would scrap the entire social chapter of the EU.

Workplace rights are not the only gendered aspect of Brexit. Its attendant economic shock(s), may well be disproportionately borne by low-income women. Longer, and possibly deeper, austerity is

predicted. The effects will not be shared out equally. Austerity policies have already discriminated dramatically against women. House of Commons research found that 73% of the 2010 budget cuts in public expenditure fell on women. Some estimates put the proportion of UK welfare cuts coming out of women's pockets as high as 85% or over 90%. The National Institute for Economic and Social Research recently showed that post-Brexit welfare cuts would impact most heavily upon low income households, and particularly acutely upon working lone parent families. Lone parents are disproportionately (around 90%) women.

Whatever happens next, all parties must consider how to protect women's rights. The possibility of switching to an EEA/EFTA-like agreement is being floated increasingly within the Leave camp. Again, the devil will be in the detail. If we do move to EEA membership, then the UK would be bound by the key gender equality provisions. But we would lose access to the ECJ, being subject instead to the EFTA Court. If we move to 'something like', but not exactly, EEA membership, then the differences must be examined keenly, in case negotiators seek to siphon women's rights out of the package. If we move to something completely different, we must prevent the reckless incineration of gender equality measures and priorities. The vote for Brexit is not a mandate for Brexit. It could be claimed on the contrary that the vote was influenced heavily by suggestions that there would be greater, not less, public sector spending.

In navigating the unknown course ahead, women's interests must be equally represented and expressed. Society cannot afford to backslide into anachronistic, patriarchal economic reasoning, in which gender equality measures are at best whimsical luxuries for when the sun is shining, and at worst obstacles to business interests –unthinkingly elided with 'male' interests. And single mums, already shouldering the austerity burden, cannot afford to fund our constitutional reshuffle.

# The 'Referendum Bubble': what can we learn from EU campaign polling?

With the EU Referendum coming just thirteen months after a General Election in which the predictions were proven so dramatically wrong, pollsters were more cautious about publicising polls over the course of the Referendum campaign. The final figures from [YouGov](#) (52-48), [Populus](#) (55-45) and [Com Res](#) (48-42) may have disagreed on the extent of the victory, but in a binary choice they all had Remain comfortably across the line. With a recent history of methodological miscalculations and disagreement between the polls on the exact lead for Remain perhaps we should have taken these findings with a pinch more salt.

When the result was announced, YouGov stated that its miscalculation was [due to a much higher turnout](#) in those areas coming out in favour of a Leave vote. And in the days following the vote, the media began to focus on how David Cameron and his team had been isolated in a Referendum bubble, supremely confident in their own success and oblivious to the way that the campaign was really going. There were reports of [premature celebrations](#) among the Prime Minister and his Downing Street advisers that were quite unlike the 2015 General Election when David Cameron had reportedly written and even [practised a resignation speech](#). Cameron hadn't felt the need to do the same on Referendum night.

Predicting Referendum results is even more difficult than predicting General Election results, and estimating turnout is particularly complex. But if we draw on political science, two things should have been clear:

1. We should have expected a higher turnout among Leave voters: those in favour of change tend to be more likely to vote than those in favour of maintaining the status quo. Polling in early 2016 clearly demonstrated that those in favour of Brexit were [more likely to say they would definitely vote](#). So the fact that an even larger number of those who supported the Leave campaign actually went to the polling station should not come as too much of a surprise.

2. There was less incentive for Remain voters to go out and vote: we know that voters see the process of voting as collective action, but we also know from calculus models of voting that there is more incentive for people to turnout if they think that their own vote may actually make a difference to the outcome. Most of the polls through the latter parts of the campaign predicted that the outcome would be close. But polling gave a sense that the Remain campaign would be victorious. Polling commissioned by [The Telegraph](#), for instance, showed the proportion of voters who felt that Remain would win never dropped below 54% while the number who felt that Leave would win was never higher than 26%. This may possibly explain why Remain voters

were less likely to go to polling stations. They may have perceived that their vote would make less of an impact on the overall result. It also explains why so many Leave voters [expressed dismay at the result](#)— they had more incentive to turn out, but they never actually expected to win.

It seems then, that it wasn't just Downing Street that was in a Referendum bubble. The pollsters, the media and the majority of the public were too. And on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> June that bubble finally burst. But looking at polling on British attitudes towards the European Union is useful for other reasons. In fact, if we consider polls from the last two Parliaments we can see two things which help to put the Referendum result into context:

1. The vote for Leave was not as strong as it has been in the past: YouGov polling specifically on [EU membership since 2010](#) shows that the gap between those in favour of leaving and those who would prefer to remain has been as large as 23 points. This was in September 2012, in the middle of the Greek bailout crisis. Since 2013 the gap between the two sides narrowed considerably, with support for leave and remain regularly overlapping before the Referendum was formally announced.

2. Although there has always been a lingering Euroscepticism, attitudes to the EU have historically seen large swings. We can see this from polling data discussed above and we can also see it from the behaviour of our parliamentarians. It changed in line with milestones in the development and integration of the European Union, the accession of new member states, and changes in economic or political situations across Europe. It is likely then, that had the Remain side seen victory this week, attitudes towards the EU would have slowly picked up again.

Perhaps we should have foreseen this polling mishap. As last year's General Election result showed us, even the best polling can get the result - not just its magnitude - wrong. Those who rely on polling are always taking a gamble if they don't understand some of its biggest limitations.



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# Did the EU Referendum boost youth engagement with politics?



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The Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 was for many a watershed moment in the ongoing debate about youth political engagement. Against a backdrop of declining electoral turnout amongst young voters, and evidence that today's young people are the most politically apathetic to have entered the electorate in the last century, the 85% turnout among 18-24 year olds in the Scottish Independence Referendum – and 75% turnout among newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds – became proof that if elections were based on issues that young people care about and can connect to, they will participate in politics. While it is still far too early to know whether the 2014 campaign led to a sustained increase in political interest amongst Scottish young people, there is little doubt that their political engagement was at least temporarily boosted. A reasonable expectation, therefore, is that we should see a similar boost in youth political engagement as a result of the EU Referendum, given that this, too, was on an issue which young people care passionately about – EU membership – and was a contest in which their votes could have been crucial in stopping a Leave victory as a result of high turnout among their more Eurosceptic elders.

We could reasonably expect, therefore, that young voters would be receptive to campaign efforts to mobilise them to vote in the EU Referendum, and that they may become more engaged with politics as a result. To explore this, we surveyed two groups of voters about their attitudes towards the EU Referendum and their engagement with politics – one in March before the formal campaign began, and another around polling day – allowing us to see how the political engagement of young voters changed throughout the course of the Referendum campaign (for our methodology visit the project [website](#)). The data (summarised in Table 1) indicates that the under-30s' interest in politics was boosted by the Referendum, and this translated into greater participation on polling day.

Respondents to our survey were asked, for example, how interested they were in politics on a scale from 0-10 (with 10 meaning 'very interested'). In March, 7% of the under-30s said that they had no interest at all (i.e., gave a score of 0), while 40% were highly interested (i.e., gave a score of at least 8). By June, the proportion of uninterested young people had fallen slightly to 5%, and the proportion with low interest in politics (giving a score of 1-3) also fell by 4%, while the proportion highly interested rose to 45%. While there is little indication that completely disengaged young people become interested in politics as a result of the Referendum, there is evidence of an increase in interest among those who were engaged to at least some extent. This boost in political interest also appears to have increased the chances of many under-30s' voting in the Referendum, with the proportion who were certain that they would vote rising from 48% in

March to 71% by polling day. While voters have a tendency to over-estimate their chances of voting in surveys, there is clearly a marked increase in the number of young people expecting to vote, and the figure compares favourably with the fewer than 60% of under-30s who said that they were certain to vote in the 2010 and 2015 general elections (according to the [British Election Study](#)).

There are also indications that younger voters became more trusting of the messages they heard from the Remain and Leave camps as the campaign progressed. In March, 44% of under-30s said that they trusted one or both of the campaigns to at least some degree, whereas by June this proportion had increased to 55%. This is perhaps surprising in light of the effort the two campaigns spent attempting to smear and undermine the credibility of their opponents. But it is nonetheless positive from the perspective of youth engagement, as higher levels of trust are associated with greater political participation. 86% of voters (and 81% of under-30s) who had at least some trust in a campaign (either Leave or Remain) reported being certain to vote in the Referendum, compared with 73% of voters (and 68% of under-30s) who did not trust either campaign.

There is little question, therefore, that the Referendum campaign, and the issue of EU membership itself, has stimulated the political interest of Britain's young people to an extent not seen for some years. Whether this proves to be lasting remains to be seen, and will no doubt require a sustained effort from politicians and the media to keep young people interested despite the Referendum result, particularly because the majority were not on the winning side when results came in – as was the case in Scotland. What also remains to be seen, however, and is beyond the scope of this research to address, is whether there is any lasting effect on the faith of these more engaged young voters in our political elite and democratic debate following the most negative, personal and hostile political campaign for many years.



**Table 1: Changes in Political Engagement, March – June 2016**

| Political Engagement             | March |       |       |     | June  |       |       |     |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-----|
|                                  | 18-30 | 31-50 | 51-60 | 65+ | 18-30 | 31-50 | 51-60 | 65+ |
| No interest in politics          | 7%    | 9%    | 5%    | 5%  | 5%    | 6%    | 7%    | 5%  |
| Low interest in politics         | 20%   | 18%   | 14%   | 16% | 16%   | 18%   | 19%   | 18% |
| Some interest in politics        | 33%   | 33%   | 30%   | 30% | 35%   | 31%   | 27%   | 32% |
| High interest in politics        | 40%   | 40%   | 51%   | 49% | 45%   | 45%   | 47%   | 46% |
| Certain to vote in EU Referendum | 48%   | 56%   | 69%   | 74% | 71%   | 75%   | 81%   | 84% |

Source: Young People and the EU Referendum surveys

# Campaign frames in the voters' minds



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Following a historic Referendum on 23 June 2016, British voters decided to exit the European Union by a 3.8 per cent margin. What made the Vote Leave campaign swing the voters to its side?

Through an analysis of YouGov data, Figure 1 (opposite) shows that the questions of sovereignty and immigration were much more important in the hearts and minds of those who opted to leave the European Union compared to those who opted to remain. In contrast, economic considerations were at the heart of the Remain vote. The difference is staggering: whereas 40 per cent of Remainers opted to stay having jobs, investments and growth in mind, the economy influenced the decision of only 5 per cent of the Brexiteers. Similarly, just over a quarter of those who opted to leave did so in order to address the issue of immigration versus only one percent who identified with Remain. And just over twice as many Brexiteers reported sovereignty and the UK's right to act independently as the most important reason in deciding how to vote.

From a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis perspective, this choice is seemingly irrational. How is it that Brexiteers did not vote with their wallets in mind, and instead put sovereignty and immigration at the core of their decision?

The question of immigration is multidimensional, and as such it can become a very powerful frame especially at times of widespread insecurity and change as a result of the European crisis. Immigration taps into a variety of cross-cutting concerns. The first issue that arises is whether immigrants contribute to the national economy more than what they take out. Related to this is competition with non-natives for jobs and welfare provision. The second concern relates to security, i.e. whether the country has adequate border control and whether the free movement of EU nationals into the UK is associated with higher levels of crime. Lastly there is an obvious cultural component in immigration policy, as the entry of people from other cultures makes the social fabric of the country more vulnerable to change.

Both the official Vote Leave campaign and UKIP employed the immigration frame in their strategies. Although their campaigns primarily focused on immigration, they did so in a way that appeared also addressing other apparently related concerns. Multiple links were made: immigration and economy; immigration and security; and immigration and social change. This allowed them to successfully shift the debate to the question of immigration and portray sovereignty as the main solution to these concerns. This was only way the British people could 'take back control' of their country.

The Remain camp, on the other hand, put forward a one-dimensional campaign focusing on the economy. For those individuals who feel that

the economy is not a stand-alone issue unrelated to immigration, this frame was not convincing. For others, this gave a signal that the Remain camp did not accept this was a legitimate concern among sections of the population. By not addressing the question of immigration, the Remain camp essentially left a vacuum in its campaign strategy, which ultimately did not work in its favour.

So does this mean that the Brexit referendum is a case where identity trumps economics? Brexiteers did vote –at least partly– with their wallets in mind, but the economic solution to their problems was not to be found in market stability but in 'taking back control' of immigration policy.

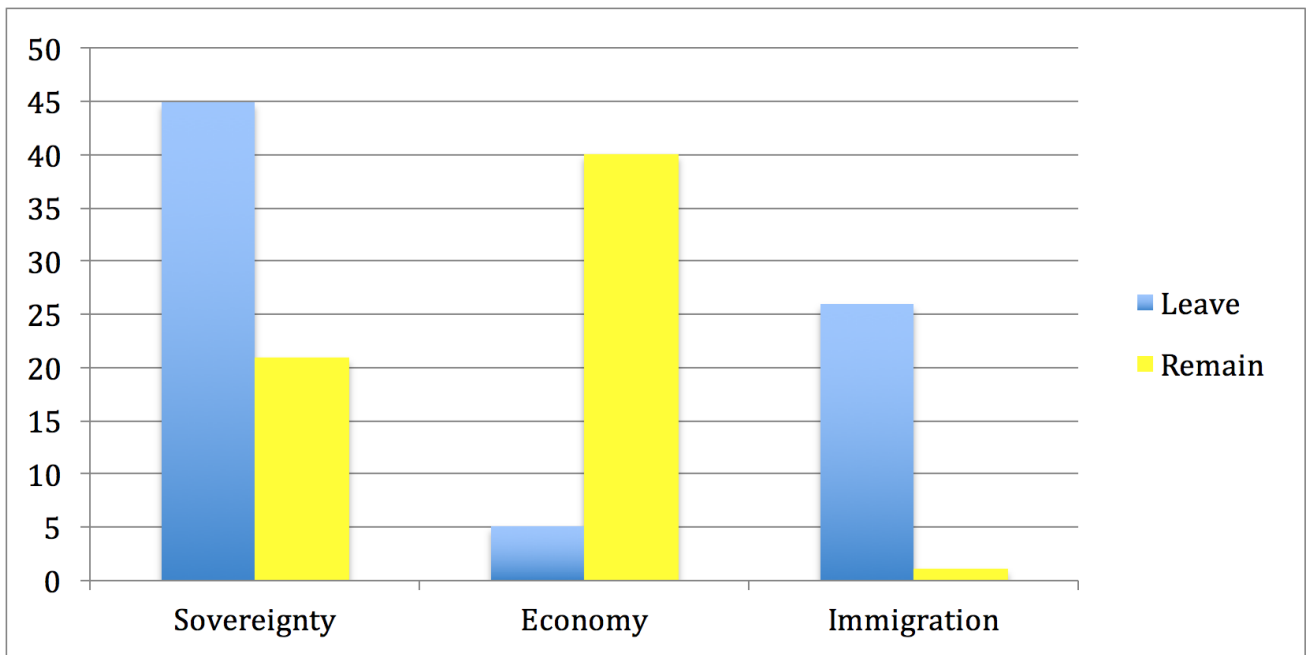


Figure 1: Most important issue in deciding how to vote  
Source: YouGov, Fieldwork 23 June 2016

# The emotional politics of the EU Referendum: Bregret and beyond



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The EU referendum debate has encompassed a bewildering array of issues and views, with a strong emphasis on immigration, the economy and national sovereignty. More than anything, what both the Referendum campaign and its immediate aftermath have demonstrated is that Brexit has played out an emotional politics. The feelings that dominated the campaign were overwhelmingly negative, and highlight the divisive nature of the debate.

Political theorists had long assumed that citizens' electoral decision-making is based on rationality. However, over the past few decades, scholars from a variety of fields have begun to query these assumptions, on the basis of evidence which suggests an emotional engagement in politics: people participate because they care or feel passionately about an issue.

Along those lines there is now a well-established research tradition at the intersection of cognitive psychology, political science and communication studies which looks at how emotional responses interact with cognition. As Drew Westen notes in his book *The Political Brain*, the "political brain is an emotional brain. It is not a dispassionate calculating machine, objectively searching for the right facts, figures, and policies to make a reasoned decision." Voters, though often well-informed and politically aware, think "with their guts," he suggests.

The ways in which the political is entwined with the emotional has been apparent in the Referendum campaign from the outset. Writing just before the campaign officially kicked off in mid-April, the BBC's chief correspondent, Gavin Hewitt, described the debate as driven largely by emotional appeals:

"The Leave campaign has decided to base its pitch on the ideal of control, of regaining control of the British economy, of borders (although the UK is not in Schengen) and of sovereignty ... It is an appeal to the gut, and the heart. The Remain campaign understands that passion as much as facts will determine the outcome.

The emotions that the campaign appealed to were overwhelmingly negative ones, with both sides were accused of widespread scaremongering.

But fear was not the only negative emotion at play in making up the minds of the voters. Analysis of the motivations of Leave voters suggested that disaffection and anger of working class and lower middle-class voters with the political establishment swung the vote. Groups who feel disenfranchised and alienated from political elites have long been the targets of populist politics. But many scholars agree that the current historical moment represents a particularly ripe one for populists. As John Cassidy wrote in the *New Yorker* on the day of the Referendum, making comparisons between the populist successes of Nigel Farage in the UK and Donald Trump in the United States:

Lacking grounds for optimism, and feeling remote from the levers of power, the disappointed nurse their grievances—until along come politicians who tell them that they are right to be angry, that their resentments

are justified, and that they should be mad not just at the winners but at immigrants, too.

As scholars have long noted, anger is a powerful political emotion, because it enables the collective expression of grievances that might otherwise remain personal and private. But it is also an emotion which has long been associated with irrationality, aggression and the potential for violence, and is therefore viewed as dangerous to democratic societies.

Once the result became apparent in the early hours of Friday, June 24, anger and fear were supplemented by a new wave of negative emotions. Remain voters went through the "Seven Stages of Brexit Grief," seeking to bargain against the result by signing a petition for a second referendum in their millions. But the grief and anger were not contained to the losing camp. Media reported a spike in hate crimes and racist abuse across the country. Leave voters in their droves expressed regret at the outcome – a feeling so widely discussed that new phrases were coined to describe it, including "Bregret" and "Bregrexit." High-profile Brexit supporter and former *Sun* Editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, came out to voice his remorse and fear for the future, stating: "I have buyer's remorse. A sense of be careful what you wish for. To be truthful, I am fearful of what lies ahead."

These emotions spilled over from public discourse into private lives. The vote caused bitter divisions and feelings of betrayal in families split over the decision, particularly over a generational divide in voting. Sarah Vine, the *Daily Mail* columnist who is the wife of Leave leader Michael Gove, wrote of how the bitter recriminations of the losing camp had devastated her family life and mental health.

How can we make sense of the outpouring of negative emotion that so dominated the EU referendum? First, it is a serious wake-up call about the depths of disaffection and division in society that will have to be addressed for constructive political debate to move forward. Secondly, the experience of the campaign has shown us that even if feeling and rationality may not be mutually exclusive, the overriding reliance on negative emotions has had a detrimental impact on political decision-making. Finally, although the Referendum outcome occasioned a range of humorous viral memes and hashtags that enabled people to laugh as well as cry, emotions continue to be raw as the gravity of the decision gradually sinks in while the political and economic instability remain. The emotional politics at the centre of the referendum cannot be ignored, and are unlikely to be overcome by reasoning and rationality. Rather, the way forward is to open a space for a positive emotional politics – built on hope, tolerance, and empathy, to mention just a few possibilities. These positive emotions may have been largely absent from the debate but they have driven change for as long as political life has been around.

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In memory of  
**Jo Cox MP**

22 June 1974 – 16 June 2016



ISBN 978-1-910042-08-3



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