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UKIP's Use of Valence Issues to Impact Attitudes Towards EU Membership

Abstract

In the book *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley suggest that certain valence issues, or issues “on which there is a broad agreement among the people and parties about what the policy should be,” are the determining factors that drove and continue to drive attitudes towards EU membership within the United Kingdom (Clark 2017, 68). These two main valence issues, public perceptions on economic conditions and immigration, are the central factors that determined whether or not UK citizens wanted to remain or leave the EU. Understanding these two main issues, the United Kingdom Independence Party, or UKIP, capitalized on these popular concerns of UK citizens and perpetuated the negative perceptions surrounding these policy matters. As a result, UKIP was able to successfully sway the public opinion of EU membership and eventually secure the Brexit vote by focusing their message on the two main valence issues.

The first valence issue, the economy or the perception of the economy, is able to indicate the level EU support since “successful economic performance is likely to increase support for continued membership of the EU while mismanagement of the economy is likely to reduce support” (Clarke 2017, 70). Therefore, perceptions of the economy, evaluated through perceptions of the overall economic situation and unemployment at the state level, will indicate support of or opposition of EU membership. As people increasingly perceive a decline in the overall economy or a rise in unemployment rates, then support for EU membership will decrease accordingly. The more individuals that perceive a declining economy, whether or not the economy is actually declining, the more people that will vote to leave the EU.

The second valence issue, the perception of immigration, similarly demonstrates attitudes towards EU membership since “an overwhelming majority of voters think that the British government should be able to control immigration and there is a consensus that successive British Governments have failed to do so” (Clarke 2017, 70). Since valence issues essentially evaluate whether or not EU membership ultimately benefits the UK and successfully delivers on issues that have widespread support, this negative public perception on immigration will lead to more negative attitudes towards EU membership. As the negative perception of immigration increases, measured through the percentage of the UK population that thought immigration was one of the two most important issues rather than whether or not immigration rates are actually increasing, then more UK citizens will want to leave the EU due to their increasingly negative attitudes towards EU membership.

Keywords

European Union, Brexit

Publication Statement

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UKIP's Use of Valence Issues to Impact Attitudes Towards EU Membership

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1 INTRODUCTION TO VALENCE ISSUES

In the book *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley suggest that certain valence issues, or issues “on which there is a broad agreement among the people and parties about what the policy should be,” are the determining factors that drove and continue to drive attitudes towards EU membership within the United Kingdom¹. These two main valence issues, public perceptions on economic conditions and immigration, are the central factors that determined whether or not UK citizens wanted to remain or leave the EU. Understanding these two main issues, the United Kingdom Independence Party, or UKIP, capitalized on these popular concerns of UK citizens and perpetuated the negative perceptions surrounding these policy matters. As a result, UKIP was able to successfully sway the public opinion of EU membership and eventually secure the Brexit vote by focusing their message on the two main valence issues.

The first valence issue, the economy or the perception of the economy, is able to indicate the level EU support since “successful economic performance is likely to increase support for continued membership of the EU while mismanagement of the economy is likely to reduce support”¹. Therefore, perceptions of the economy, evaluated through perceptions of the overall economic situation and unemployment at the state level, will indicate support for or opposition of EU membership. As people increasingly perceive a decline in the overall economy or a rise in unemployment rates, then support for EU membership will decrease accordingly. The more individuals that perceive a declining economy, whether or not the economy is actually declining, the more people that will vote to leave the EU.

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not EU membership ultimately benefits the UK and successfully delivers on issues that have widespread support, this negative public perception on immigration will lead to more negative attitudes towards EU membership. As the negative perception of immigration increases, measured through the percentage of the UK population that thought immigration was one of the two most important issues rather than whether or not immigration rates are actually increasing, then more UK citizens will want to leave the EU due to their increasingly negative attitudes towards EU membership.

2 FIRST VALENCE ISSUE: ECONOMIC PERCEPTIONS

In the UK, the data demonstrates that there seems to be some sort of connection between perceived economic conditions of the country and overall optimism or pessimism of the EU's future. While the UK had declining economic perceptions starting around 2008 or 2009 depending on the perceptions of unemployment or economic conditions, which is the time of “the Great Recession and the eurozone crisis that followed the 2008 financial meltdown,” the UK did not have majority pessimistic opinions about the future of the EU until 2011 (See Figures 1 and 2)¹. However, according to Clarke et al, “public disapproval of the UK's EU membership soared after the crisis began”¹. Pessimism toward EU membership increasing after the 2008 financial crisis and the 2009 Eurozone crisis further demonstrates how negative economic perceptions produced negative perceptions of the EU.

To corroborate the claim from Clarke et al, higher rates of dissatisfaction with the UK's economy appears to coincide with the higher rates of pessimism of EU membership the following years. Although this doesn't confirm whether or not economic concerns were the main valence factors behind EU membership support, it is clear that perceptions of the economy through perceived unemployment and overall economic conditions correlate with attitudes about the future of the EU. The perception of the UK's economic situation was rela-

tively negative after 2008 while the overall perception of the unemployment rate was most negative starting in 2009 (See Figures 1 and 2). More specifically, the perception of unemployment in the UK remained relatively negative from 2009 to 2013. From 2008 to 2013, citizens living in the UK reported that the economic situation and unemployment were some of the most important issues facing the UK today (See Figures 1 and 2). As seen in Figure 1, the greatest percentages of people who thought these issues were most important in the UK were 38 percent for the perceived economic situation in 2010 and 40 percent for the perceived unemployment in 2012².

During those peak times of economic discontent from 2010 to 2012 in the UK, the attitude of EU membership appears to reflect those perceptions. During the years 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016, and 2017, the UK as a whole was more pessimistic than optimistic about the future of the EU (See Figures 5 and 6). The highest percentages of either optimism or pessimism recorded were in 2011 and 2012. During those two years, 56 percent or a majority of UK citizens were pessimistic about the future of the EU (See Figures 5 and 6). The only other year that there was a majority attitude towards the future of the EU was in 2007 when 52 percent of UK citizens were optimistic about the EU's future. The majority optimism in 2007 occurred before the Eurocrisis beginning at the end of 2009 while the 2011 and 2012 majority pessimism occurred after the financial crisis (See Figures 5 and 6). This is supported by the claim that "those who are optimistic about economic conditions are more supportive of EU membership than those who are pessimistic" from Clarke et. al¹. When UK citizens were more optimistic about the economy, UK citizens were seemingly more optimistic about the future of the EU (See Figures 2 and 6).

Date	Econ Situation	Unemployment
Oct. 2005	9	9
Sept. 2006	5	11
Sept. 2007	5	9
Oct. 2008	34	16
Oct. 2009		38
May. 2010	38	32
Nov. 2012	30	40
Nov. 2013	23	35
Nov. 2014	13	22
Nov. 2015	12	16
Nov. 2016	18	15
Nov. 2017	13	10
Nov. 2018	17	12
June. 2019	15	10

Figure 1. Percent of population that think the following are one of the two most important issues facing the UK²

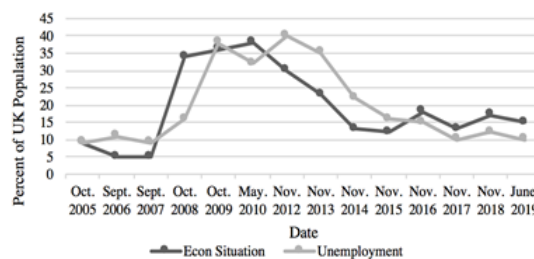


Figure 2. Percent of population that think the following are one of the two most important issues facing the UK²

3 SECOND VALENCE ISSUE : PERCEPTIONS ON IMMIGRATION

Immigration has remained a divisive issue in the UK, even though the UK has disproportionately accepted less refugees than other comparable EU member states. While the UK is not unique for harvesting anti-immigrant sentiments, the UK was ranked the tenth-most anti-immigrant member state out of the EU¹. Unlike how the perceptions of the economy correlated with attitudes towards the EU, the percentage of the UK population that thought immigration was one of the two most important issues doesn't clearly indicate attitudes towards EU membership. The years with the highest percentages of the UK population that thought that immigration was one of the two most important issues facing the UK included 2006 to 2007 and 2014 to 2015 (See Figures 3 and 4). The highest percentage of the population that thought immigration was one of the two most important issues was at the end of 2015 at a record 44 percent, which can be explained by the Syrian Refugee Crisis that occurred during that time (See Figures 3 and 4).

Even with the record concerns with immigration in 2007, a majority of UK's population was optimistic about the future of EU at 52 percent in 2007 (See Figures 5 and 6). In fact, this was the only year with a majority of optimism from 2007 to 2019, and it was tied with 2009 for the lowest percentages of pessimism at 38 percent (See Figures 5 and 6). From 2014 to 2015, when immigration concerns were relatively high, a higher percentage of UK's population was optimistic about the future of the EU at 49 percent and 47 percent, respectively (See Figures 3 and 5). The percentage of pessimistic opinions towards EU membership increased slightly relative to 2007 but decreased relative to 2011 and 2012 (See Figures 5 and 6). This demonstrates that there may not be a clear correlation between this specific valence issue and attitudes towards EU membership. Unlike the perceptions of the economy, increased concerns regarding immigration don't seem to have an effect on attitudes towards the EU. In fact, when immigration concerns were at its peak in 2015 during the refugee crisis, more UK citizens were optimistic rather than pessimistic. When a

majority of UK's population was pessimistic from 2011 to 2012 at 56 percent, only 24 percent of the population thought that immigration was one of the most important issues facing the UK (See Figures 3 and 5). Despite the lack of correlation between increased concerns regarding immigration and negative attitudes towards EU membership, UKIP still capitalized on these underlying immigration concerns¹.

Date	Immigration
Oct. 2005	29
Sept. 2006	40
Sept. 2007	39
Oct. 2008	23
Oct. 2009	29
May. 2010	28
Nov. 2012	24
Nov. 2013	23
Nov. 2014	38
Nov. 2015	44
Nov. 2016	25
Nov. 2017	20
Nov. 2018	14
June. 2019	13

Figure 3. Percent of population that think immigration is one of the two most important issues facing the UK²

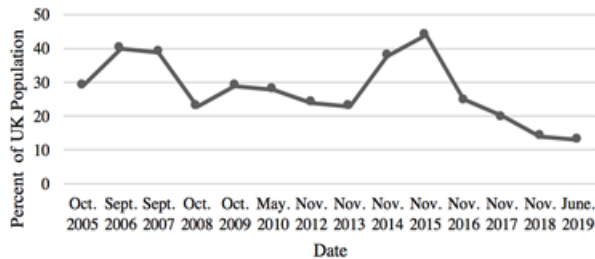


Figure 4. Percent of population that think immigration is one of the two most important issues facing the UK²

4 UKIP'S USE OF VALENCE ISSUES

UKIP was able to gain support in two separate waves, from 2009 to 2010 and 2014 to 2015. The first surge of support occurred when UK citizens indicated that the economic situation and unemployment rates were the most important issues, while the second surge of support occurred when UK citizens indicated that immigration was one of the most important issues facing the UK¹. Considering that the factors that drove the support for UKIP "included Euroscepticism, hostility to immigration, dissatisfaction with the performance of the established parties and a pessimistic outlook on life," UKIP certainly exploited these popular concerns

during particularly turbulent times¹. During the Great Recession starting in 2008, the eurozone crisis at the end of 2009, and the refugee crisis starting in 2014, concerns regarding the overall economy and immigration rose. UKIP then used these concerns to secure public support considering "people's negative judgements about how the Government of the day performed on key issues such as the economy, immigration and healthcare, all worked to UKIP's advantage"¹. UKIP capitalized on the nation's concerns regarding these key issues and offered leaving the EU as the solution.

While economic theory bolsters the notion that immigration boosts a state's economy, "Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, repeatedly claimed that the British Government was unable to control immigration because the EU mandates free movement of labour within the member states"¹. Farage especially capitalized on this perceived lack of control during the refugee crisis of 2014 to 2015, which is reflected in the high percentage of UK citizens who claimed that immigration was one of the biggest problems facing the UK (See Figure 4). The rise in net immigration during these times "fueled public concern about the issue and increased receptivity to UKIP's argument that Britain had lost control over its borders"¹. However influential it was to UKIP support, these increased concerns regarding immigration were not reflected in the overall pessimism or optimism regarding the future of the EU. That being said, "since the eruption of the refugee crisis, evidence of the increasing strength of the populist right in the EU has been clearly visible" including UKIP and other populist right parties¹. As a result, the rise of UKIP was one of the most significant forces that lead to the 2016 Brexit referendum due to their ability to appeal to UK citizens who were concerned with these valence issues.

Date	Percent Optimistic	Percent Pessimistic
Sept. 2007	52	38
Mar. 2008	50	40
Oct. 2009	50	38
Nov. 2010	43	46
Nov. 2011	36	56
Nov. 2012	38	56
Nov. 2013	45	48
Nov. 2014	49	42
Nov. 2015	47	44
Nov. 2016	40	51
Nov. 2017	45	48
Nov. 2018	49	45
June. 2019	47	46

Figure 5. Percent of UK's population that are either optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the EU²

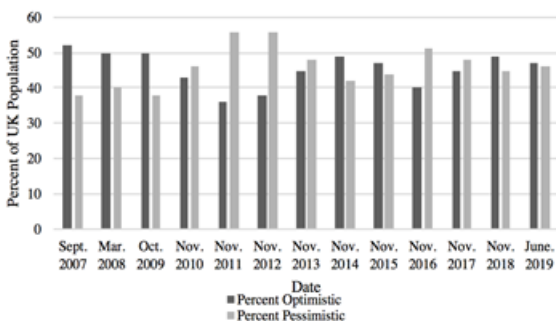


Figure 6. Percent of UK's population that are either optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the EU²

5 CONCLUSION

UKIP's ability "to attract voters who were unhappy with the Government's performance on these valence issues" was one of the main contributing factors that lead to the increasingly negative perceptions towards EU membership within the UK¹. UKIP recognized and then capitalized on the fact that these two valence issues, perceptions of the economy and perceptions regarding immigration, were popular concerns among UK citizens. While there was a clear correlation between negative perceptions of the economy and negative attitudes towards EU membership, there doesn't seem to be as clear of a connection between increasing concerns on immigration and increasingly negative attitudes towards EU membership. As negative perceptions of the economy increased, measured through the percentage of citizens who thought that the economic situation and unemployment were one of the two biggest concerns facing the UK, pessimistic attitudes towards EU membership increased (See Figures 2 and 6). The second valence issue, perceptions on immigration, did not have this kind of parallel relationship. Rather, in the year when immigration concerns were at its peak in 2015 during the refugee crisis, more UK citizens were optimistic rather than pessimistic in regard to EU membership (See Figure 6).

Despite this, UKIP capitalized on both valence issues to secure party support. While time periods didn't quite align for immigration concerns as they did for negative economic perceptions, it's clear that the UK still harvested overall negative sentiments towards immigration. Consequently, the increasing immigration and refugee crisis in the years preceding the Brexit referendum in 2016 fed into UKIP's argument that the lack of border security was contributing to the UK's perceived economic decline. It is also quite possible that even though immigration wasn't always a top two concern from the perspective of UK citizens, the perceived effect of immigration could have manifested as economic concerns. This would be reflected when either unemployment or economic concerns were listed as the

top concerns facing the UK, ebbing and flowing with when UK citizens had pessimistic attitudes towards EU membership. Either way, UKIP capitalized on these two valence issues and focused "on a syndrome of individual grievances based on economic marginalization and perceived threats from immigration and minorities" to affect attitudes towards EU membership and secure the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum¹. While this much is determined, continued research on how UK citizens perceive these two valence issues since the finalization of the Brexit referendum could lend insight into how UK citizens might vote in the future, especially regarding issues where public perceptions on economic conditions and immigration are concerned.

6 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer reviewed.

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- [2] European Commission Public Opinion (2020). URL <https://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/42/groupKy/208>.