

'The alternatives are worse' – the message that unites EU referendum campaigners

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Naturally the EU referendum campaigns differ greatly in how they target voters. However, the campaign leaflets all seem to be claiming that the “alternatives are worse”. **Daniel Belling** shows this with a sample analysis consisting of leaflets produced by eight campaigns supporting remain and leave, as well as the [disputed leaflet by the UK Government](#).



Differences can be best described in terms of political framing as it is increasingly applied in the analysis of political documents. Political framing is a general strategy of selecting and highlighting specific aspects of the political reality. An intended selection of political aspects does not mean to base arguments on false facts or bluntly constructed narratives about political causes and consequences. Yet it is to stress those aspects that might resonate most in the target constituency and to bring these specific issues in the spotlight of public attention.

Emphasis frames by campaigners are used to increase issue salience by highlighting one issue while putting less attention to others. From an expert point of view, the consequences of remaining or leaving on issues such as consumer protection, financial regulation or security might be far more worrisome. Yet the salience of issues in the British population is more dominated by their perceived reality – which is often drawn from day-to-day experience, underestimating indirect (positive and negative) effects of EU membership. In consequence, issues of immigration and the economic outlook are the [most salient issues](#). But is this divide between salient issues also reflected in the campaigns?

Table 1 Frame selection by campaign (% of text coverage in leaflet)

	Prices	Jobs	Trade & Investment	Public finance	Immigration	Security	Leadership/ democracy	Environment	Worker's protection
HM Government	6.4	1.8	12.6	2.0	8.3	5.7	2.7	0.6	0.3
StrongerIN	8.3	5.2	14.6	-	-	7.4	4.5	2.1	1.4
LabourIN	3.0	3.3	17.3	-	-	0.4	11.4	0.4	6.3
INtogether	6.5	8.1	11.1	-	-	14.4	-	-	-
GreenerIN	-	0.4	6.6	0.2	-	-	9.6	9.4	3.5
VoteLeave	1.0	0.7	8.2	6.3	2.8	-	21.6	-	-
Leave.eu	1.9	-	6.5	15.0	2.6	7.8	14.3	-	-
LabourLEAVE	1.5	2.0	12.9	5.3	0.4	1.1	8.0	5.0	3.4
Believe in Britain	0.6	2.9	3.3	9.6	7.3	-	26.7	-	-
<i>Remain Avg.</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>12.4</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>6.9</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>3.1</i>	<i>2.9</i>
<i>Leave Avg.</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>3.3</i>	<i>4.4</i>	<i>17.6</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>
Ratio	4.9	2.0	1.6	0.1	-	1.6	0.4	-	-

Maximum value for campaign leaflet in bold.

In order to appeal to the electorate, the remain-side supposedly tries to shape opinions by focussing on economic aspects while the leave-side aims to convince by promoting the immigration issue. This pattern is confirmed in the analysed campaign leaflets (Table 1). References to prices, jobs and most importantly trade & investment can be

found more frequently in the leaflets of the four remain campaigns and the government leaflet. Conversely, leave campaigns focus on aspects of immigration, public finance (specifically the EU membership contribution) and sovereignty. Interestingly, only the controversial government leaflet tries to appeal to all major issues, while the INtogether campaign is most selective in their choice of issues.



Equivalence framing focuses on the way that information is presented yet without changing the information content. Much attention in the EU referendum debate was drawn to the costs and benefits of EU membership and the consequences for Britain if it leaves the European Union. In this debate the campaigns apply a risk frame (a strategy dubbed as 'project fear') that highlights negative aspects of either leaving or staying, for example:

"It is most likely that we would risk jobs, trade and investment in exchange for less control over our own economic affairs." (StrongerIN)

"If we vote to 'remain', it is a vote for the permanent payment to Brussels of all this money. It will get worse." (VoteLeave)

They however also frame issues in a positive way, pointing out the opportunities of continuing or quitting EU membership:

"If we want Britain to be a leader in the world, we need to be in Europe helping to take the big decisions." (StrongerIN)

"We use our stronger international influence to work for closer international cooperation." (VoteLeave)

The analysis shows that the risk frame is employed more generously by leave campaigns while remain campaigns overwhelmingly use the opportunity frame highlighting the benefits of a EU membership to convince voters. However, by doing so, differences are observable between pointing out British interests in the European Union (most clearly shown by the government leaflet and the StrongerIN campaign) and the benefits of being in a community of nations to take joint action toward European and global challenges (GreenerIN).

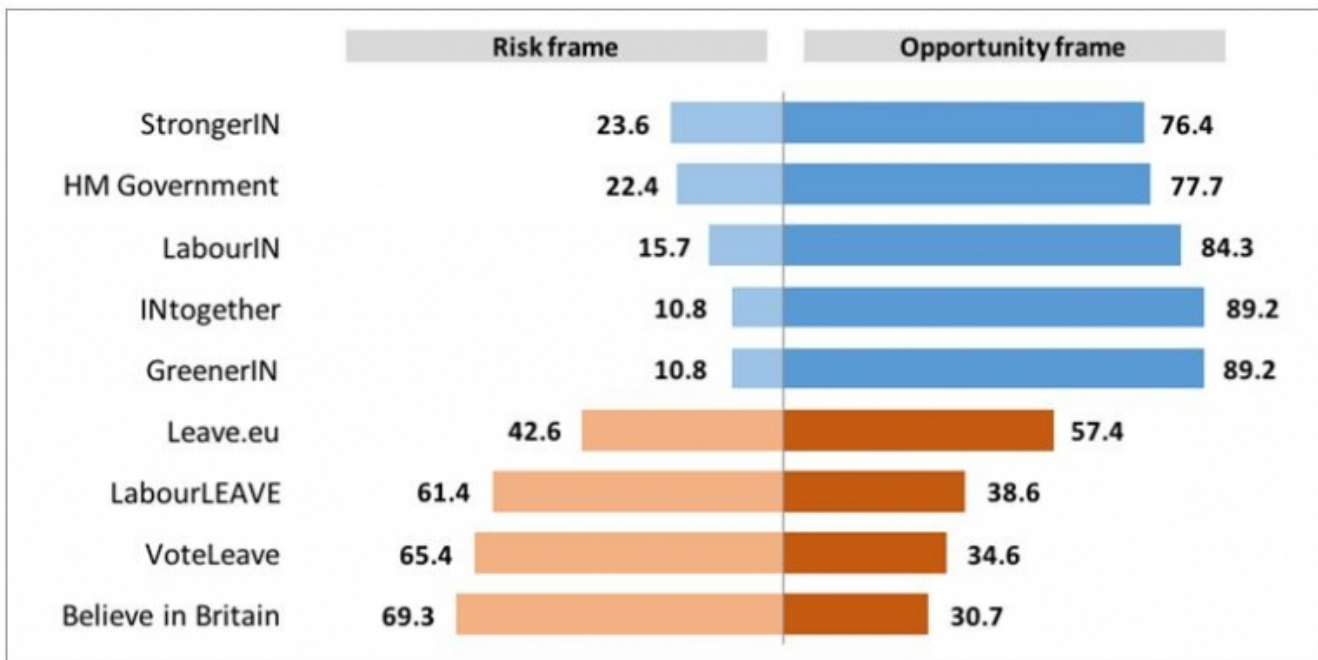


Figure 1 Equivalence framing in campaigns (% text coverage in leaflet, neutral text passages excluded)

Note that the important assumption that the information content is identical for both frames is unlikely to be met. Both sides cherry-pick those reports and studies that support their argument the most. Yet for the purpose of this short analysis this is negligible since the dichotomy itself is still valid.

The emergence and proliferation of a populist party on the right as a new political force can be explained by a strategy of constantly providing a causal narrative. [UKIP successfully appealed to the 'left-behind' voters](#) by connecting their destiny to the social changes induced by British membership in the European Union. With its clear causal story – the assignment of responsibilities to Brussels (for 'doing-wrong') and the UK government (for 'not-doing-enough') – UKIP provides a simple answer, thus making the story accessible to a broader (latent Eurosceptic) population.

This causal story is however presented differently across the campaigns (Table 2). All of them accuse the EU institutions for tying the hands of British politics and for damaging legislation coming from Brussels. Yet they vary in their emphasis on critical issues. The UKIP-based *Believe in Britain* campaign highlights the loss of national control over legislation and the costliness of British membership. By contrast, *LabourLEAVE* directs its attention to the consequences of EU legislation for worker's rights and the British industry – something that seems to resonate well among blue-collar workers. The official leave campaign *VoteLeave* brings in a lack of capacity and inefficiency of the EU institutions, which seems to be more directed toward business managers and entrepreneurs.

Table 2 Perception of the European Union (absolute number of mentions per leaflet)

	<i>Perception of the EU</i>						<i>N</i>
	Costly	Loss of control	Damaging policies	Democratic deficit	Lack of capacity	Prone to lobbyism	
VoteLeave	21	45	11	19	12	1	<i>(N = 109)</i>
LabourLEAVE	10	17	26	4	-	2	<i>(N = 59)</i>
Believe in Britain	13	15	7	6	-	-	<i>(N = 41)</i>

*Maximum value for campaign in bold
Leave.eu campaign excluded due to insufficient number of mentions*

All in all, although the ultimate objective of the campaigns is clear – persuading voters for voting remain or leave – they do so by using very different strategies. On the remain side the economic frame is emphasised just as the opportunities of EU membership. The leave side naturally focuses on the costs of membership and the loss of sovereignty by heavily applying a risk frame. Yet compared to the UKIP-based *Believe in Britain*-campaign, the official campaign VoteLeave has a more nuanced and broader pattern of EU criticism.

The analysis has shown that most campaigns (even cross-partisan groups) appeal to the core values and the political identity of their electorate. Since [turnout among various sections of the electorate is likely to be decisive](#) the question remains whether campaigns are able to reach out to undecided voters without clear political affiliation. In this respect campaigns fail to address the probably most important part of the electorate – young voters.

Daniel Belling is PhD candidate in Comparative Politics at the University of Kent, investigating the influence of policy experts on political agenda-setting and policy framing. He is also member of the Global Europe Centre and Comparative Politics Workshop at Kent. [@DanielBelling](#)

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