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3

Brexit: The Causes and the Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This argumentative paper addresses the question, why did the British public vote to leave the European Union in the June 2016 referendum? “Brexit” captivated the attention of countless scholars, journalists and political leaders, as most of the world was shocked that the “Leave” campaign, spearheaded by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), ultimately won out over the “Remain” campaign. Since the Brexit vote, debates have arisen, as perplexed outsiders attempt to discern the factors that contributed to 51.9% of referendum participants voting to leave the EU. I examine two dominant causes of the Brexit vote: first, the pervasiveness of anti-immigration rhetoric and sentiments; second, the powerful argument presented for economic independence. I discuss how the “Leave” campaign used and manipulated these arguments to ignite Euroscepticism and fear in the voters. After considering the causes of the vote, I analyze potential consequences of Brexit; specifically, how the restriction of the freedom of movement will impact the British economy and the possibility of another referendum on the independence of Scotland.

KEYWORDS

Brexit, immigration, Euroscepticism

INTRODUCTION

People end relationships for a wide variety of reasons: a lack of trust, different interests, miscommunications or fear of commitment. All of these reasons are evident in the most devastating, high-profile breakup of 2016: Brexit. On June 23, 2016, the citizens of the United Kingdom voted to break up with the European Union. In a referendum that 72.2% of the population participated in, 51.9% of people voted for leaving the EU (“EU Referendum Results,” 2016). To say the world was shocked would be an understatement. When former Prime Minister David Cameron announced in 2015 that there would be an in-out referendum by the end of 2017, other countries and many British people dismissed it in light of the many benefits of EU membership (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). While the United Kingdom had never historically been the strongest supporter of European integration, many thought that the logistical nightmare of leaving and the subsequent costs would be strong enough to deter voters from the out vote. However, in the six months following Cameron’s pledge for a referendum, the Leave campaign, championed by former London Mayor Boris Johnson, spearheaded a strong offensive against the economic and political effects of membership in the EU. Ultimately, in July 2016, the Leave argument won the votes of the majority of referendum participants.

The most pressing question that remains almost two years after the vote is, why Brexit? Why, against the warnings of countless domestic and international scholars, economists and political leaders, would the British public vote to leave the European Union? This question has captivated the attention and research of political analysts across the world, who point to a myriad of factors motivating UK citizens to vote “leave.” In this paper, I argue that the most important reasons for the results of the Brexit vote were the rhetoric surrounding immigration and British economic independence. These were the dominant arguments used by the Leave campaign to instill Euroscepticism and fear in the minds of voters.

The rest of this paper is divided into four parts. I will first discuss the importance of the pervasiveness of anti-immigration rhetoric in igniting fears and hostilities in the minds of British voters against the EU policy of free movement of people and against refugees. Second, I will outline the Leave campaign’s powerful argument for economic independence from the EU, an organization they insisted was hindering the potential growth of the United Kingdom. Third, I will examine two potential consequences over the next 10–20 years for the UK of leaving the European Union, specifically of the restriction of the freedom of movement and possibility of losing Scotland in an independence referendum. Fourth and lastly, I will discuss unanswered questions about Brexit and my plans for future research on the perception of Scottish students on the United Kingdom and the European Union.

IMMIGRATION

The Leave campaign capitalized on British fears of more and more immigrants coming to the UK, whether as EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe or as refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa. Both Theresa May and David Cameron openly opposed the free movement of labor, which is guaranteed within the European Economic Community. They argued that over the past several years, migrants from Eastern and Central Europe were taking advantage of state-funded services and putting a strain on social services, such as schools and health care (Dominiczak, 2013). Although the refugee crisis began

after the 2011 Arab Spring, beginning in 2015, hundreds of thousands of people, primarily fleeing political persecution in Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq, started making the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean to seek refuge in Europe. While the vast majority of refugees remained in neighboring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon, the European Union also felt the weight of the rapid influx of refugees (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016, p. 10). The northern spread of refugees contributed to the rise of right-wing, nationalist parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a populist party and the strongest backer of the Leave campaign, fueled anti-EU and anti-immigration sentiments (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 6). The Leave campaign constructed a panic-inducing narrative of the flow of EU citizens and the refugee crisis. The fear in British citizens justified xenophobia as a necessary measure to protect British security and economic stability.

Supporters of the Leave campaign argued that high levels of immigration to the UK would mean fewer jobs, lower wages and the inadequate provision of public services for British citizens. In the weeks leading up to the referendum, reports from the EU surfaced that there were 2.1 million EU nationals working in Britain. This information was skewed by the Leave campaign and presented as if immigrants were stealing 2.1 million jobs away from the British and driving down wages. However, jobs are not a zero-sum game because even if an immigrant takes a job, Travis (2016) claimed that “it doesn’t mean he or she [British worker] won’t find another one that may have been created directly or indirectly, as a result of immigration.” Former Prime Minister David Cameron played on fears of economic insecurity due to immigrants when he issued a report on immigration that “indicated that there were indeed fears that the British social system could be exploited by EU immigrants (Welfens, 2017, p. 147).” Cameron pinpointed immigrants as the cause of shortages of schools and appointments with general practitioners and used them as a scapegoat for the undersupply of local services (Stewart & Mason, 2016). The belief that immigrants were stealing jobs and services caught the attention of the British public and heightened xenophobic feelings.

In order to establish distrust and fear of non-EU immigrants, the Leave campaign presented them as a threat to personal and national security. Prime Minister David Cameron described refugees as a foreign invasion or a “swarm” desperately trying to gain access to Britain (Taylor, 2016). In a more dramatic way, Nigel Farage, a member of the European Parliament and the UK Independence Party, unveiled an anti-migrant poster approximately one month before the referendum vote portraying a line of mostly non-white migrants with the slogan “Breaking point: the EU has failed us all” (Stewart & Mason, 2016). The poster, which was compared to Nazi propaganda of migrants, was condemned by the official Vote Leave campaign as an extreme exploitation of the struggles of refugees. Yet, this type of image was just one of the more stark examples of exploiting British fears of immigrants in order to further the Leave campaign. According to Inglehart and Norris (2016), anti-EU advocates pointed to bombings in Dusseldorf and the attack at the Berlin Christmas Market as the hallmarks of refugee behavior, necessitating the closure of the flow of people into the United Kingdom (p. 11). Even though these terrorist attacks represent a miniscule proportion of refugee behavior, these were the images that the British were bombarded with leading up to the referendum.

While there were many reasons that the British voted to leave the European Union,

the issue of immigration was one of the most important. Hall (2016) explained that post-election polls found that “nearly 75 percent of prospective ‘leave’ voters cited immigration as the most important issue of the referendum.” Immigration became such a divisive factor because it was the strongest argument on the side of the Leave campaign, especially among voters who had minimal interactions with immigrants in their daily lives. Areas with high concentrations of immigrants were less likely to vote Leave because they had experienced the positive effects of these populations (Johnston, 2017). Questions and fears of immigrants were rising quickly from 2015 into 2016 as the number of refugees entering the European Union continued to increase. Immigration was such a pervasive topic that Welfens (2017) reported that the “subjective estimation of the share of immigrants in the UK amongst the British population was about three times as high as the actual share really is” (p. 70). Leave voters wanted to regain control over immigration to lessen the number of people, especially refugees and workers from East and Central Europe, that were entering into the United Kingdom.

ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Following the theme of regaining control, the other most pronounced reason that the Brexit Leave campaign ultimately won over Remain was because of the narrative of reestablishing British economic control. While there are obvious economic benefits of EU membership for the United Kingdom, such as boosting trade by eliminating barriers, the Leave campaign framed EU membership as a direct hindrance to the growth of the national economy. They claimed that “Britain was being held back by the EU, which they said imposed too many rules on business and charged billions of pounds a year in membership fees for little in return” (Hunt & Wheeler, 2017). Armstrong (2017) asserted that it did not even matter that the figures the Leave campaign cited, like that membership of the EU was costing taxpayers £350 per week, were incorrect (p. 86). Frightening statistics like these were plastered on posters and buses, so it was difficult to escape the idea that the EU was limiting the British economy. The Leave campaign argued that by taking back domestic agency over their trade deals and restructuring their economic framework from within, the United Kingdom would see growth of businesses and greater economic stability.

The European Debt Crisis, which began in 2009, was another example used by the Leave campaign to condemn the ability of the EU to stimulate economic growth and prevent downturn. While Britain was never a part of the Eurozone, the Leave campaign cited the massive debt, high unemployment and stagnation of Eurozone economies, specifically Greece and Spain, as evidence of the incompetence of EU economic policies (Hamdy, 2016). Moreover, since the financial meltdown and ensuing Eurozone crisis, Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2016) argued that “people’s judgments about the state of the national economy have become increasingly important for explaining their reactions to the EU.” This is evident because the most economically vulnerable populations, including those with no higher education and those earning less than £1,200 a month were most likely to vote Leave (“Brexit Vote: The Breakdown,” 2016). They were the people who felt that the United Kingdom was falling behind economically, especially in comparison to the economic powerhouse in the region, Germany, and that pushing blame onto the EU would solve their problems. Leave voters wanted greater economic independence because they widely discounted the benefits of EU membership and focused on its recent failures to stimulate

growth.

In general, Leave supporters adopted what Armstrong describes as a “transactionalist” approach to EU membership (Armstrong, 2017, p. 87). The transactionalist approach deemed that a relationship with the EU was only worthwhile if British citizens were directly benefiting. This was a persuasive tool within working class voters because they felt directly threatened by the open flow of EU migrants that were occupying poorly paid occupations and supposedly driving down wages. As earlier discussed, while the number of EU workers in Britain has increased over the past few years, the falls in wages are not due to the influx of workers, but rather the global financial crisis and slow recovery (Travis, 2016). It did not much matter that the rhetoric presented by the Leave campaign on job loss and depressed wages was untrue. It stoked fear in the minds of working class voters and drove them to accept the idea that economic independence from the European Union was the best way to ensure that their jobs would be safe.

Some journalists and scholars refer to Brexit as a “protest vote” because older, less-educated and poorer people turned up to vote and tended to vote Leave (Cross, 2016). The argument for economic independence was most effective among those individuals because, in the opinion of Senior Research Fellow at the Corvinus University of Budapest Zsolt Darvas (2016), “high inequality and poverty undermine personal well-being and social cohesion, and can also boost protest votes in referenda and elections.” The people working in traditional industries such as manufacturing and seaside jobs were feeling left behind by the pace of the increasingly globalized economy. They were struggling financially and the European Union was easy target to place blame onto. The Leave campaign honed in on the insecurities of these people and convinced them that greater economic independence would prevent the rapid flow of migrant workers, protect the jobs of native Brits and restore British economic fruitfulness.

CONSEQUENCES

It is difficult to predict what the long-term effects of Brexit will be for the United Kingdom. One potential consequence over the next 10–20 years will be economic challenges because of the disruption of one of the four founding principles of the EU: the free movement of people. Over the past three decades, Britain’s open labor market drove it to become a hub of international business, as both unskilled and skilled workers filled the entry-level jobs that Brits were not fulfilling. Cosmopolitan London was built by the Poles, French, Czechs and Italians, and its large service sector will not thrive without their continued labor, which is evident in that it is already suffering macroeconomic effects due to uncertainty surrounding the referendum (Blockmans & Emerson, 2016). Moreover, while many predict that “taking back control of the borders” will ultimately lead to an arrangement similar to the members of the European Economic Area, in the short-term, Britain’s younger workers will be punished by the restriction of their movement into other EU nations (Allen, Oltermann, Borger & Nelsen, 2015). They depend on the jobs in Germany and France that may no longer be available to them. These are just a few of the potential consequences for the United Kingdom over the next several decades by restricting the freedom of movement.

One of the most distinct regional voting results was in Scotland, in which only 38% of the population that participated in the referendum voted Leave, compared to the

52% of overall Leave voters (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 324). In the month leading up to the Brexit referendum, Nicola Sturgeon, the current First Minister of Scotland, was demanding a second referendum for Scottish independence from the UK. However, since her Scottish National Party (SNP) suffered losses in this year's election, she has backed down from referendum demands and the Scottish and UK governments are working to strike a Withdrawal Bill (Carrell & Stewart, 2017). While progress has been made with British and Scottish reconciliation, a referendum for Scottish independence is nevertheless possible because both Sturgeon and the Scottish Brexit minister Mike Russell have made it clear that they want Scotland to remain in the EU. Their desire for Scottish independence will only be exacerbated if the EU Withdrawal Bill ends up being a power grab that concentrates power in Westminster. There are few possible situations in which Brexit proves to be anything other than another division between Britain and Scotland.

QUESTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Brexit has been a slow and painful breakup. Though there is technically an end in sight, with the April 2019 withdrawal deadline, Brexit is still in the tedious, uneasy first stage of establishing the principles of the breakup. There are many unanswered questions, like can Brexit be reversed? If a deal for Brexit is met, then what happens to British citizens living in the EU, and EU citizens living in the UK? Will the UK be able to be a member of the Single Market? Do they want to be a part of the Single Market if it involves paying fees? Also, what happens if a Brexit deal is not met by April 2019? What is Theresa May willing to give up in the next year of negotiations? The European Union and the United Kingdom are in the awkward phase of the breakup where they are trying to figure out if they can continue to work together, especially for the sake of their mutual friends. Negotiations for a post-Brexit settlement are underway, but there is uncertainty about the UK's short- and long-term goals of these deals and the question of a financial settlement.

I hope to continue my research on Brexit when I study abroad at the University of Glasgow in the Fall of 2018. I plan on developing a descriptive study by interviewing native Scots attending the University of Glasgow to learn three new pieces of information. First, why do they think that "Brexit" became a reality? One of the weaknesses of my current research is that I did not have the opportunity to speak with citizens of the United Kingdom to directly hear what they were exposed to throughout the Brexit campaigns and if the rhetoric surrounding the problems of immigration and economic influence had any impact on why they voted the way they did. Many of the scholars I have referenced throughout this paper argued that the pervasiveness of anti-immigrant sentiments and arguments for greater economic control shaped the votes in the referendum. I would like to speak directly to voters and see if they saw or felt the influence of the Leave campaign and if it at all influenced them. The second goal of my study is to discover how the students feel about being part of the United Kingdom in light of Brexit. Do they believe there should be another referendum for Scottish independence? If so, do they think that the results would be any different from the referendum held in 2014? Though I can learn from the news much of what is happening at the Brexit negotiating table, that tells me little about how Scots are feeling about the process of Brexit and more generally in continuing to be a part of the United Kingdom. The third and final goal of my study is to find out why in Scotland the Remain vote won out over the Leave vote. Most studies of Brexit have focused on the Leave argument, but since

the majority of Scots voted to stay in the European Union, I would like to know why their perceptions of the EU differed from those of the majority of the voter turnout in England.

Though some pessimistic journalists described Brexit as the demise of the EU, it is unlikely that Brexit will cause a domino effect, in which other member states hold referendums and a majority vote to leave the European Union. However, the result has shaken the confidence of the once solid, internally favored political and economic bloc. Stokes, Wike and Manevich (2017) reported that while a majority of survey participants do not believe their country should leave the EU, many support a referendum on membership. Support for a national referendum was particularly steep in Spain (65%) and France (61%), but still more than 55% of individuals in both nations hold a favorable view of the EU. Nonetheless, we must not ignore the obvious discontent among millions of EU citizens, whether it be regarding immigration, economic struggle, or a number of other challenges the EU has faced in the past decade. Brexit was certainly a shocking, collective declaration of anti-EU sentiment, but the feelings expressed by voters are not so different from millions of other EU citizens. Brexit is a warning to the rest of the European Union that it must recognize and address the concerns of its citizens, but not with populism or referendums, because those turn into a real headache.

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