Explaining Brexit: A Bullingdon Dinner Gone Wrong?

Paper presented at:

EUSA 17th Biennial Conference, May 19-21, 2022

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Abstract

A plethora of explanations have been suggested about the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (also known as Brexit). This article aims to challenge these explanations' methodological isolationism by employing a broader perspective and including other EU members and/or the EU average arguing that on their suggested key indicators (e.g., levels/opposition to migration; cultural values; educational attainment; inequality and poverty levels; Euroscepticism), the UK is either similar or better performing to other EU countries. Moreover, the main difference between the UK and other EU members seems to be the behaviour of the UK executive namely the way the Tory PMs Cameron-May-Johnson dealt with the UK-EU relationship before, during and after the EU referendum. In other words, Brexit should be understood as a top-down elite driven accident/policy blunder and not as some bottom-up revolt of voters linked to structural/external forces, which can be observed in most EU members.

Keywords: Brexit, elites, blunder

Introduction

The result of the United Kingdom (UK) European Union (EU) membership referendum (henceforth: EU referendum) shocked European politics as the UK became the first (and the only as at time of writing) EU member to exit the club (also known as Brexit). A plethora of studies have attempted to understand the result with several explanations focusing on structural changes, such as the rise of globalization, migration, identity/value led voting behaviour and UK specific factors such as high Euroscepticism. It will be argued, however, that the UK is neither an outlier nor extraordinary but similar or better performing than other EU nations and/or the EU average in the main indicators of these explanations. Hence, although existing Brexit explanations provide valuable insights into UK voters' motivations, they cannot explain why only the UK left the EU when no other EU member state is contemplating such endeavour (as of time of writing) despite facing similar issues/pressures. Instead, this paper argues that Brexit should be seen as a top-down elite driven accident or policy blunder (cf. King and Crewe, 2014) resulting from a power game within the UK executive, namely the way the Tory Premiers Cameron-May-Johnson dealt with the UK-EU relationship before, during and after the EU referendum. Hence, the strongest predictor of any other member's exit will be the stance of the ruling elite and governing party instead of voters' grievances, identity, and preferences. To support these claims, the article will employ a broader perspective which will include other EU members and/or the EU average aiming to avoid the methodological isolationism/sui generis treatment of the UK to examine why it was only the UK that left the EU and whether such exit may happen elsewhere employing a wider European perspective as the more reliable way to test alternative Brexit explanations (cf. Mahoney, 2017).

The article has three sections. The first succinctly discusses the main explanations for Brexit highlighting their main propositions. The second examines these explanations in a broader perspective by including other EU members and/or the EU average arguing that that the UK is neither an outlier nor extraordinary but similar or better performing than other EU nations and/or the EU average. The third section will attempt to show that the best explanation for why it was only the UK that left the

EU and not any other EU member-state facing similar pressures seems to be the way the Tory PMs Cameron-May-Johnson dealt with the UK-EU relationship arguing that their behaviour before, during and after the EU referendum was the decisive factor behind Brexit.

I. Key Brexit Explanations: an inevitable bottom-up revolt?

The first and most widely cited explanation of Brexit is the so-called 'left-behind' thesis (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and Heath, 2016), which posits that Brexit was the choice of voters feeling economically and/or culturally neglected. In this vein, Brexit voters were generally older, white, working class with low educational attainment, incomes and/or had more traditional/conservative views on cultural issues such as race and immigration, national identity, gender, and Europe in contrast to the supposedly more liberal, affluent, younger, university educated, urban voters (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, pp. 278-79; Goodwin and Heath, 2016, p. 325). The left behind voters voted predominantly for Brexit as a mechanism to curb the (real or perceived as) uncontrollable EU immigration to the UK - especially from Eastern Europe (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). The more economic-led version of this explanation is the 'globalisation winners vs losers' argument, whereby young, educated voters benefited from a globalised economy and the EU's single market and thus supported Remain, while lowly skilled, older voters felt threatened by open borders and supported Leave (Hobolt, 2016). Hence, 'only a quarter of people with a postgraduate degree voted to leave, whereas over two-thirds of those with no qualifications did so' (ibid: 1269). Similarly, Hopkin, who also understands Brexit as the 'lagged consequence of the process of liberalisation and marketisation the British economy has undergone since the 1980s' (2017, p. 466), argues that the Brexit vote was 'fundamentally an economic phenomenon, part of a broad revolt against market liberalisation' (ibid).

One of the cultural variants of the 'left-behind' thesis comes from Goodhart (2017) who understands the Leave/Remain vote as a new division in British society between the 'Somewheres' and the 'Anywheres'. ‘Somewheres’ tend to have low educational/skills attainment, live in small towns or rural areas, are socially conservative and tend to be rooted in their community (often living in the

same area for generations). ‘Anywheres’ have higher levels of education (usually university graduates), live in big cities, are socially liberal and not attached to any location or the community they live in as they value 'autonomy and self-realisation before stability, community and tradition' (Goodhart 2017: 24). Goodhart argues that although ‘Somewheres’ constitute around 50% of the UK population and ‘Anywheres’ 25%, it is the latter group that dominates the elite, media, well paid professions, and thus dictate societal norms and values. Consequently, a clash between the many (Somewheres) and the elite (Anywheres) emerged, and Brexit was a vote of the ‘Somewheres’ against the ‘Anywheres’ which incorporated the ‘Somewheres’s hostility to immigration, economic liberalisation and diverse societies. Goodhart’s division is more cultural than economic usually found in the traditional ‘left-behind’ variants exemplified by the popularity of rightwing populist parties like UKIP and the emphasis on immigration instead of a more leftwing movement demanding a stronger redistribution of wealth (ibid). In a similar fashion, Kaufman argues that 'culture and personality, not material circumstances, separate Leave and Remain voters' (2016a) as 'age, education, national identity and ethnicity are more important than income or occupation' (2016b). For Kauffmann, Brexit supporters tend to have a more authoritarian stance in life akin to what has been labelled as Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) (Altemeyer, 2004). As Kauffmann puts it: 'Wealthy people who back capital punishment back Brexit. Poor folk who oppose the death penalty support Remain' (2016a).

Another value-led explanation for the Brexit vote comes from Bhambra who argues that these explanations suffer from 'methodological whiteness' resulting in legitimising grievances of the British white majority towards the 'other' especially regarding migration, which are essentially racist and not the result of injustices that need addressing (Bhambra, 2017). For Bhambra, the left-behind thesis puts emphasis only on class 'as a euphemism for a racialized identity politics that is given legitimacy' and neglects racial inequality within and between classes and thus 'willing to include workers who have been *left out* as well as those who perceive themselves as *left behind*' (Bhambra, 2017, p. 227). Hence, when Leave voters express opposition to immigration and/or globalisation, this should not be perceived as an issue of socio-economic inequality but should be viewed through the lenses of white

privilege and a racialist agenda against (usually darker) outsiders (ibid). A similar interpretation comes from Virdee and McGeever who argue that Brexit has been 'overdetermined by racism' (2018, p. 1804). In their analysis, Brexit can be understood as the result of a longer-term rise and politicisation of Englishness / English nationalism, whereby the UK is seen as both linked to Empire and the nation of the English. Moreover, Englishness has been replacing the class identities of English voters which have been eroded with the neoliberal policies of Thatcherism and thus 'Englishness has been reasserted through a racializing, insular nationalism, and it found its voice in the course of Brexit' (ibid). In this vein, Brexit is mainly an English issue, and this perspective can explain why Scotland and Northern Ireland voted for Remain (cf. Henderson *et al.*, 2017).

A further value-led explanation concerns the higher levels of Euroscepticism (see: Hobolt, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2016) or low levels of European identity (Carl *et al.*, 2019) that have been observed in Britain. Indeed, the UK has historically one of the lowest rates of enthusiasm for the EU and indeed voters have been either indifferent or hostile to the political aspects of the European integration process (Curtice, 2017). In this line of reasoning, leaving the EU was not surprising given that the UK voters were not enthusiastic about the whole project.

II. Why existing Brexit explanations do not seem to travel outside the UK

In this section it will be argued that, when examined in comparative perspective to other EU members, the aforementioned Brexit explanations cannot explain why only the UK left the EU since the UK is neither an outlier nor extraordinary but similar or better performing than other EU nations and/or the EU average. To begin with, the economic 'left-behind' hypothesis seems to be neither unique nor exceptional to Britain when the UK is compared to other key EU nations on personal incomes, poverty, and inequality rates. Firstly, the UK has been enjoying a higher than the EU average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS): during 2012-2016, the UK had a much higher than the EU-28 average GDP per capita in PPS; in 2016 it was the 10th wealthiest country in the EU using this metric, while several countries in Eastern and Southern Europe had almost half of

the UK rate (Eurostat, 2020a). Secondly, during 2012-2016 the UK had lower than the EU-28 average percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion and in 2016 the UK was 14th in the EU using this metric with several Eastern and Southern European countries having almost double the rate of the UK (Eurostat, 2020b). Thirdly, even though the UK had a higher than the EU-28 average Gini coefficient during 2012-2016, in 2016 there were 10 other EU members (mainly from Eastern and Southern Europe) with higher disposable income inequality (Eurostat, 2020c). In other words, the UK material living conditions were either better or close to the EU-28 average with several countries doing markedly worse in disposable income, risk of poverty and social inclusion and income inequality. If the economic left-behind hypothesis was the main driver behind Brexit, then there should have been more countries seeking to leave the EU and much earlier than the UK given that British citizens enjoy much higher living standards than most EU citizens. Likewise, the so-called 'neoliberalism' explanation whereby Brexit resulted from a long-standing policy of economic deregulation is unable to explain why other countries with similar or even arguably more neoliberal economic model – such as neighbouring Ireland (cf. Mercille and Murphy, 2015), are passionate pro-EU members with over 80% of EU membership and no plans to leave (Connelly, 2020).

The cultural version of the left-behind hypothesis is also seemingly not unique in Britain. Goodhart's main claim that higher education expansion led to a cultural divide between young university graduates 'Anywheres' and older non-tertiary educated 'Somewheres' seems problematic when the UK is examined in a broader perspective. Firstly, expanding access to tertiary education is not a UK phenomenon and has occurred in almost all EU nations with several EU members showing higher increase and/or participation rates than the UK (Koucky *et al.*, 2010, p.10); notably, as part of the Europe 2020 agenda, EU members almost doubled tertiary education attainment levels during 2002-2019 (Eurostat, 2020d). Secondly, such value-led divisions have been observed in other EU countries (cf. Werts *et al.*, 2013). For instance, the far-right National Front party in France resembles the Leave vote (and UKIP) in attracting rural voters with low education and hostility to minorities/immigrants (see: Stockemer and Amengay, 2015). No other EU member, however, is

considering leaving the EU, irrespective of any value led protest votes and/or reluctance to migration/multi-culturalism. Thus, even if Goodhart's cultural division exists, the division itself does not seem to be neither necessary nor sufficient condition for Brexit.

Levels of (English) nationalism and/or identity also seem to be neither unique nor exceptional in Britain. Firstly, surveys behind the Brexit vote found no statistical significance of any national identity measures except for Scottish identity who tended to vote Remain (Clarke *et al.*, 2017, p. 161). Secondly, the UK does not exhibit extraordinary or outlier levels of nationalism even though it tends to be on the higher range compared to some of the least nationalistic nations in the EU, such as Germany and Netherlands (Coenders *et al.*, 2021, p. 490). Thirdly, British nationalism remained stable during 1995-2013 (ibid: 6) a period covering a much more pro-European stance from the Blair governments and proactive engagement with the EU (cf. Daddow, 2011) and a period of rising Euroscepticism – especially after the Eastern Enlargement of 2004 (Vasilopoulou, 2016). Fourthly, several other EU members have considerably stronger nationalistic and right-wing movements and parties (see: Lubbers and Coenders, 2017) but none is contemplating leaving the EU. The same applies to Kauffman's RWA-led explanation as it turns out that RWA levels and support for far-right populist parties is very similar between the UK, the US, and key other European countries (cf. van Assche *et al.*, 2019; Donovan, 2019), making cultural context almost a constant when Britain is seen in a broader European or even Western perspective.

Likewise, Euroscepticism is also not unique or exceptional in Britain and can be observed both diachronically and synchronically in several if not most of the other EU members. Firstly, levels of European identity in the UK have been stable since 1992 and remained unchanged during the EU referendum campaign (Curtice, 2017, pp. 21-22), making it arguably a constant instead of a cause of leaving the EU. Secondly, Euroscepticism may have been a quirk of UK politics for some decades, but it is nowadays present in most EU members (cf. Usherwood and Startin, 2013). Tellingly, several other EU members have 'hard' Eurosceptic parties like UKIP who also perform much better in national elections than UKIP (Taggart and Pirro, 2021). Nevertheless, no other EU member is considering

leaving the EU, while support for EU membership has risen considerably in all EU member-states after Brexit (De Vries, 2017; Stone, 2019) or the desire to leave has been reduced (Reinl and Evans 2021). Moreover, Brexit did not provide any boost for the Eurosceptic parties in France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands with some parties ruling out EU-exit from their goals/discourse (van Kessel *et al.*, 2020). Thirdly, during the financial crisis there were countries with much higher levels of Euroscepticism than the UK but never contemplated leaving the EU. For example, in 2013 Greeks had one of the highest negative perceptions of the EU (approximately 50% versus 28% for the EU average), while in autumn 2015 they showed the highest levels of distrust in the EU at 81% (Vasilopoulou, 2018, p. 314). This did not result in Grexit, however, as leaving the EU was never contemplated by Greek Premiers.

Furthermore, although part of the Leave vote was indeed driven by prejudice and racism, even towards minority British citizens who were grouped together with recent migrants (Bhambra, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018), it would be problematic to suggest that such attitudes were dominant only in England and Wales but not to the rest of the UK given that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted for Remain (BBC, 2020). Additionally, the UK shows some of the lowest rates of discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin, religion, and age in Europe (FRA, 2017, pp. 26-27); on immigrant background (ibid: 31); access to public services (ibid: 37-38); harassment rates due to ethnic or immigrant background (ibid, p. 59). Furthermore, the UK showed some of the highest comfort levels with other ethnic minorities and LGBT people as neighbours (ibid, pp. 107-108). In addition, the UK had the second lowest rate of perceived racist harassment (FRA, 2019, p. 3) and the lowest in discrimination based on 'ethnic or immigrant background' compared to other EU member states (ibid, p. 9). In other words, without any intention to undermine or neglect the racist undertones of the Leave campaign and possibly racist motivations of some Leave voters, one could not persuasively argue that Brexit was linked to a UK special/high rate of racism or discrimination – especially if one compares the UK to other EU members/EU average.

Migration: the elephant in the room?

Migration (especially from Eastern Europe) has featured prominently both in several of the Brexit explanations or even as a stand-alone driver behind the Brexit vote (Aschroft, 2016; Clarke *et al.*, 2017; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). It is argued, however, that UK migration levels (real or perceived ones) were neither exceptional nor unique and several other EU members faced similar or even higher pressures without any other member-state seeking to leave the EU. To being with, the absolute numbers of permanent inflows of foreigners in the UK during 2007-2017 were stable (just below 500,000 for all years but 2014). Such numbers positioned the UK quite high among OECD countries but never at the top – a place usually occupied by the USA. It should be noted that Germany was always higher than the UK with sometimes double or triple the UK migration inflows (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2007-2017). Although during 2000-2016 migration to the UK increased by 80% (OECD, 2019, p. 3), this paled in comparison to other EU countries such as Italy and Spain that saw more than twice the UK's increase with an extraordinary 174% and 175% respectively.

Secondly, the UK permanent inflows of foreigners as a share of the country's population during 2007-2017 were always below 1% - placing it in the middle of the OECD rankings and with several EU members having much higher rates than the UK (see OECD, 2007-2017). Tellingly, with 9.1 immigrants per 1000 inhabitants the UK had lower levels than 15 other EU members (Eurostat, 2020e). Secondly, two thirds of the migration to the UK was from non-EU migrants; thus, EU membership was not the main driver behind UK migration flows. According to the 2011 ONS Census out of the 7,985,585 non-UK born residents, 33% were born in another EU member state versus 66% born outside the EU (ONS, 2013). In other words, EU migrants were approximately 4% of the entire UK population a figure that was raised to 4.7% in 2014 versus 8.2% for non-EU migrants (ONS, 2015).

Thirdly, UK voters were seemingly not that concerned or hostile to migration both diachronically (the years before and after the EU referendum) and synchronically (when compared to other EU countries). Using data from the Eurobarometer public opinion surveys (which run for all EU countries on a bi-annual basis), it is argued that the UK, as apart from 2010 and 2013, had lower migration

concerns than other (often several) EU member states. In 2016, the year the EU referendum was held, the UK was fifth compared to all EU members (see Table 1). Fourthly, the UK seemed to be more positive towards (EU/non-EU) migration than several other EU members. In 2015, just as the UK was preparing for the EU referendum, the UK public had a slightly more positive (48% total positive) than negative (46% total negative) view on migration from other EU countries, with the EU-28 average being similar (51% total positive vs 40% total negative) (Eurobarometer 83, p. 153). Notably, there were nine EU members (Greece, Hungary, Belgium, France, Slovakia, Cyprus, Latvia, Italy and Czech Republic) with more negative attitudes toward intra-EU migration (ibid). Moreover, the UK was ninth EU country in terms of positive views on non-EU migration as 19 other EU member states had more negative views to non-EU migration than the UK (Eurobarometer 83, p. 154). During 2010-19, therefore, the UK public was not exceptionally skeptical towards (EU/non-EU) migration both in absolute and relative terms and had, except for 2010 and 2013, lower immigration concerns than other EU members.

Table 1: Immigration one of two most important issue facing our country

	2010 (EB73)	2011 (EB75)	2012 (EB77)	2013 (EB80)	2014 (EB81)	2015 (EB83)	2016 (EB86)	2017 (EB87)	2018 (EB89)	2019 (EB91)
UK	8%	20%	21%	33%	41%	35%	25%	19%	17%	13%
EU average (EU-27/EU-28)	3%	12%	8%	12%	15%	23%	26%	22%	21%	17%
Ranking among other UK issues	9	4	3	2	1	1	1	3	5	6
UK rank among all EU members	1	6	2	1	2	3	5	6	5	6

Source: Eurobarometer surveys (2010-19) and author's own calculations on UK ranking.

III. Brexit as an accident/policy blunder of the Tory PMs Cameron-May-Johnson

If existing Brexit explanations, such as concerns about immigration; Euroscepticism; cultural and or economic grievances against globalisation, can be observed not only in the UK but also in other EU members, then how can one explain why only the UK left the EU? This article argues that Brexit should be understood as a top-down elite driven accident/policy blunder stemming from a power game within the UK executive namely the way the Tory Premiers Cameron-May-Johnson dealt with the UK-EU relationship before, during and after the EU referendum. In the following sections, this argument is supported by examining these actors' behaviour in dealing with the EU issue and identifying key decisions/events that led to Brexit.

Cameron's banging about Europe

It may seem improbable that the main figurehead of the Remain campaign, incumbent Premier David Cameron, would ever be ascribed responsibility for Brexit. Nevertheless, it will be argued that his stance on the EU, discourse on migration and his reckless EU referendum constitute one of the main differences between the UK and other EU members facing similar pressures against EU integration. To begin with, Cameron labelled himself vacuously as a 'practical, sensible' Eurosceptic (Kirkup, 2010 cited in Lynch, 2015, p. 186) and vowed as the new Conservative leader to discuss salient issues instead of 'banging about Europe' (Cameron, 2006; cited in Lynch, 2015, p. 189). Cameron was referring to an almost decade long esoteric and endless agony within the Tory party about the UK-EU relationship that did not gain any track with UK voters (Lynch, 2015, p. 189 – see also below). Nevertheless, after the 2009 European Elections, Cameron took the Tories out of the Centre-right party group of the European Parliament (European People's Party-European Democrats or EPP-ED) and formed a new European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. The ECR included some heavily Eurosceptic and nationalistic parties without any other mainstream centre-right party. This move has been explained as Cameron trying to pacify his Eurosceptic backbenchers to facilitate the Tories' transition to the more moderate centre-right (Lynch, 2015; Bale *et al.*, 2010). Leaving the EPP-

ED, however, resulted in Cameron's isolation from centre-right deliberations (Robinson, 2011), which were often crucial in pushing UK interests in the EU given the dominance of Centre-right leaders/governments in the Council (Johansson, 2016). No other centre-right party had left the EPP group until then. The only other such exit occurred in March 2021 by Orbán's nationalist and authoritarian Fidesz party to pre-empt an expulsion or suspension from the group (de la Baume 2021). The only Tory MEP of the time was enraged about Cameron's decision calling it 'pathetic', and that '*will sow the seeds of endless trouble. It will leave David Cameron and William Hague very isolated because it will leave bad blood with Christian Democrat parties throughout Europe. It is a stupid, stupid policy.*" (Watt, 2009).

After the EPP withdrawal, Cameron maintained his focus on Europe by conducting several stunts to keep his Eurosceptic backbenchers happy. As opposition leader, he called for a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty – a pledge dropped when he became Premier after pressure from his coalition partners Liberal Democrats. According to Tory (and UKIP) MP Douglas Carswell, a long-standing anti-EU membership zealot, Cameron's original promise 'established the legitimacy of a referendum' (Shipman, 2016, p.7). As Premier, furthermore, he vetoed the EU's Fiscal pact which forced the 27 other members to exclude Britain from that decision. He also introduced a 'referendum lock' – a law requiring that the UK will hold a referendum for any future EU treaty change (Fox, 2018). Moreover, at the 2015 elections Cameron promised to hold an in-out referendum on the UK's EU membership. When the Tories won a surprising outright majority, Cameron embarked into a botched re-negotiation attempt arguing for a supposed new but limited relationship UK-EU that had to be ratified in a referendum. In other words, for a leader branding himself as a moderniser who would push his party away from 'banging about Europe', Cameron spent a considerable amount of time and effort dealing with the EU issue and giving several headline pledges on the EU.

It is argued that it was Cameron's antics on the EU that raised the issue's salience instead of a bottom-up voters' revolt against the UK's EU membership. Firstly, during Cameron's leadership contest in 2005, the EU was an obscure and marginal issue with almost no tracking within the Tory

party members (Lynch, 2015, p. 188). Secondly, during the 2010 election only 1 per cent of voters considered the EU as the most important issue facing Britain (ibid, p. 189); a figure that remained constant until December 2015 (IPSOS-MORI, 2015). Thirdly, it was only when Cameron went ahead with his EU referendum that voters started paying any notice on the UK's EU membership resulting in the EU becoming the top issue with almost 40% in 2016 (IPSOS-MORI, 2017) and reaching an unprecedented 72% on December 2018 when Westminster was gridlocked about how to implement Brexit (IPSOS-MORI, 2021, p. 7). Thus, it could be argued that unless Cameron had not called for a referendum on the UK's EU membership very few if any voters would have even bothered about the issue. What is more, no other EU leader has flirted with the idea of calling a referendum on the country's membership.

Cameron's migration 'in the tens of thousands' (own) goal

Furthermore, it is argued that that Cameron unwittingly provided ammunition for Leave with his discourse on immigration that mainstreamed immigration control (Zappettini, 2019), a primary focus of the Leave campaign (Watt, 2016) and purportedly a key motivation for Leave voters (Aschroft, 2016; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Firstly, Cameron became the first UK Premier who set a numerical inward migration target of an annual 'the tens of thousands' to alleviate 'pressure on our public services, on health and education and housing' (Guardian, 2010). Cameron's migration pledge became a headline policy in his 'contract with the British people' widely distributed to voters where it was stated that the UK was suffering from an 'Uncontrolled, open-door immigration […] so we will get it under control' (Conservative Home, 2010). Arguably, this pledge was quite unrealistic since, as discussed above, the UK had approximately half a million of annual inward migration and probably unnecessary given that this was less than 1% of the UK population during 2007-2017. Furthermore, the claim that migration constituted a pressure to the UK public services was unfounded (Arai, 2005; Vargas-Silva, 2017). Nevertheless, Cameron's numerical target seemingly sanitised the debate on migration away from issues of race and class and turned it into almost a technocratic 'balancing the

books' argument which resulted in defining supposedly good levels of migration versus excessive ones (McNeil, 2020).

Using Eurobarometer survey data, it is argued that the trajectory of migration as a matter of concern for British voters almost mirrors the Cameron efforts to reduce immigration to tens of thousands: from ninth in 2010, immigration concerns became the fourth most important issue facing the country in 2011, third in 2012 and the number one concern of voters during 2013-2016 (see table 1). As Cameron's migration target was not being met, especially after 2013, UK tabloids were outraged and attributed this failure to the EU enlargement towards Bulgaria and Romania (Trilling, 2020). In 2014, UKIP capitalised on the issue linking excessive levels of immigration with the inability to control migration levels from the EU (McNeil, 2020). It was only after the EU referendum campaign and Cameron's standing down that migration waned in significance: it was the third most important concern in 2017, fifth in 2018 and sixth in 2019 with a mere 13% of voters listing it as their first concern - the second lowest rate recording during 2010-2019 closely following the 8% recorded in 2010 (see table 1). In other words, migration concerns were fluctuating during 2010-19 and seemingly mirror Cameron's term as Premier: migration gained salience after he got into power and dropped considerably after him standing down. This seems consistent with other studies establishing a strong link between the politicisation of migration and the actions/discourse of governmental/legislative actors (van der Brug *et al.*, 2015; Carvalho and Duarte, 2020).

Ironically, the catch-all slogan of the Vote Leave Campaign was to 'Take Back Control' – especially of borders and migration (Cummings, 2017). This slogan could not have emerged without Cameron's migration pledge: five years of government pledges, personal vows from both Cameron and Home Office Minister Theresa May and a media discourse that constructed a 'crisis of borders' (Pruitt, 2019), gave legitimacy and meaning to this message. Vote Leave used Cameron's words on 'controlled/uncontrolled' immigration to argue that leaving the EU to (inter alia) reduce immigration was not an extreme proposition belonging to the right-wing or Eurosceptic fringe but an effort to regain control/sovereignty (Allen, 2016). The fact that Boris Johnson, one of the Leave Campaign

figureheads, abolished Cameron's migration target in 2020 although he had become Premier on a 'Get Brexit done' platform was also an ironic but probably fitting end to this 'toxic' pledge (Trilling, 2020) that reshaped British politics (McNeil, 2020).

"Will of the People": why the EU referendum was not necessarily the end of the Brexit story.

There has been a great focus on the importance of the referendum campaign and the various actors and circumstances surrounding the referendum result (cf. Clarke *et al.*, 2017; Curtice, 2017; Hobolt, 2016). It has also been shown that voters in EU referendums vote based on other issues than their views on the EU, such as the wording of the referendum questions and turnout rates (Qvortrup, 2016). Moreover, the result was too close with a mere 4% difference between Remain and Leave vote and an almost equally divided nation over the EU issue (cf. Ashcroft, 2016; Curtice, 2017; Hobolt, 2016) making any generalisation about the actual result treacherous. Surprisingly, this view is shared by the architect of the official Vote Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings who wrote after the referendum (Cummings, 2017): '*The cold reality of the referendum is no clear story, no 'one big causal factor', and no inevitability – it was 'men going at it blind.*'' Surprisingly, this article agrees with Cummings and adds that none of this would have mattered if Cameron had not called a referendum on the UK's EU membership in the first place.

It would be erroneous, however, to assume that once the referendum result was finalised, Brexit was inevitable. Firstly, recent research on governments' responses to referendums shows that the UK case was neither unique nor exceptional given that 'the anti-integration side has won two-thirds (12 out of 18) of the referendums on European integration since the year 2000' (Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 1057). In addition, in 'Negative EU withdrawal referendums' like the UK one, governments are most likely to be most defiant and try to dilute or disregard the referendum result (ibid, p. 1063). Secondly, the referendum result did not give any specific mandate on Brexit implementation as pro-Leave arguments ranged from complete exit with no ties to the EU (so called hard Brexit), to varying degrees of access to the Single market (so called soft Brexit) or even a

"Norway" or "Swiss" relationship with UK participating in core EU policies as an affiliate/neighbouring country (see: Atikcan *et al.*, 2020). Thirdly, especially after the EU referendum there was an unprecedented widespread grassroots mobilisation against leaving leave the EU (cf. Brändle *et al.*, 2018). Astonishingly, the number of UK citizens identifying themselves as both British and European reached an unprecedented 48% in 2017 as opposition to Brexit increased (Brändle *et al.*, 2018, p. 811). In other words, the UK had both a considerable degree for manoeuvre over the EU referendum result in terms of what the EU-UK relationship would be and a strong constituency rejecting Brexit altogether.

None of these factors, however, played any role in the UK's post referendum journey to Brexit as it was again the Tory Premiers May and later Johnson who led the way to Brexit. Paradoxically, May had campaigned for Remain, while Johnson had expressed a mixture of Eurosceptic and pro-EU views arguing repeatedly that the UK was benefitting from the EU's Single Market (Worrall, 2019). It is argued, however, that in an identical fashion to Cameron, their main considerations were intra-party machinations and nullifying any discontent to deter any members/MPs/voters' leakage towards more Eurosceptic options such as the newly formed Brexit party of Nigel Farage. As with the EU referendum call (cf. Shipman, 2016, pp. 3-22), the actual implementation of Brexit relied predominantly on the Tory Premiers' party, political and personal agendas than a bottom-up ultimatum that had to be respected due to wider forces of discontent, economic globalisation, or cultural change.

Even though the details of May and Johnson premierships go beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to summarise their responses to the EU referendum result. To begin with, May did not try to dilute the referendum result nor find a compromise that could unite both sides of the vote (Menon and Portes, 2019). Instead, she declared that 'The referendum result was clear. […] Brexit means Brexit - and we're going to make a success of it.' (BBC, 2016). Moreover, she dismissed any objections to leaving the EU as elitist and going against the 'will of the people' (ibid). Her negotiations outcome was announced in November 2018 with the so-called Withdrawal agreement that was unable to pass in the House of Commons. After a seemingly never-ending crisis management period, May resigned in

July 2018 and Johnson became the next PM elected on a pro-Brexit message/policy from the Tory party members as head of the party and PM.

Johnson as PM tried to leave the EU immediately, but his efforts were repeatedly blocked by Parliament and Courts in these efforts. After the Liberal Democrats sided with him in calling a snap election in December 2019 with the main slogan "Get Brexit done" he won a landslide (for a detailed timeline, see: Walker, 2021). The election result was not purely down to voters craving for Brexit, but also linked to longer-term trends of a considerable part of the working class shifting its support from Labour to the Conservative party (Cutts *et al.*, 2020). After his resounding victory, passing his own Brexit deal (almost identical to May's) in January 2021 was a formality. Five years after Cameron's miscalculated EU referendum, the UK became the first (and until now only) member state to exit the EU with the hardest of exits as it will not be part of the EU's Customs Union or Single Market. Therefore, Brexit should not be seen as a natural phenomenon or an unavoidable/inevitable policy outcome. Rather, it required three UK premiers and almost four years of constant efforts towards this outcome.

Conclusion

This article tried to explain why the UK left the EU and whether such exit may happen elsewhere, employing a wider European perspective as the more reliable way to test alternative Brexit explanations. It argued that although existing Brexit explanations provide valuable insights into UK voters' motivations, they are ultimately unable to explain why only the UK decided to leave the EU because on their suggested key indicators (e.g., levels/opposition to migration; cultural values; educational attainment; inequality and poverty levels; Euroscepticism), the UK is either similar or better performing to other EU countries without any of them contemplating leaving the EU (as of time of writing). Additionally, the EU salience was low among UK voters until Cameron called his UK-EU referendum which resulted in an almost evenly split vote. More importantly, the referendum result was not a fait accompli and there was ample room for manoeuvre over its management. Furthermore,

as the UK was approaching its exit from the EU, pro-EU/European feelings intensified. None of this mattered, however, as the UK executive and especially the Tory PMs Cameron-May-Johnson took the country out of the EU as a result of their own management of the UK-EU relations seeking short-term electoral benefits vis-à-vis a vocal populist anti-EU minority within the Tory party and the Eurosceptic UKIP party. Thus, one could understand Brexit an "accident" in the sense that no UK PM was a long-standing proponent of leaving the EU or a policy blunder (cf. King and Crewe 2014) in the sense that Brexit will have a serious detrimental effect to the UK's economy (BBC 2021) but also detaching the country from one of its most important alliance and club next to its borders. Thus, this article concludes that the strongest predictor of any other member's exit will be the stance of the ruling elite and governing party instead of voters' grievances, identity, and preferences.

Consequently, this article aims to bring researchers' attention to the role of agency and political elites not just as 'elite cues' (cf. DeVries, 2017, p. 40) but as 'elite actions/choices'. In this vein, Brexit should not be seen as inevitable or a structural outcome/process but rather linked to certain actors and their actions/choices. It also attempted to end the methodological isolationism observed in the field of Brexit and UK-EU relationship more broadly which seems to be dominated by a sui generis approach whereby the UK has become a 'Brexitland' (cf. Sobolewska and Ford 2020), without any references to other EU members and/or European countries which face very similar issues in terms of identity politics, anti-immigration sentiment, economic, social, and cultural cleavages. Hence, this article hopes to stimulate further comparative and/or wider European analyses where Brexit and its suggested explanations can be applied beyond the English/British Isles so their validity and usefulness can be apparent beyond the UK.

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