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The Vote Heard 'Round the World

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The British voters' decision to exit the European Union (Brexit) produced an existential crisis among some proponents of European integration. The worries come out of the rise of eurosceptic tendencies on the continent with the UK vote being only the start of a disintegrating process. Another view claims that the UK is an outlier. The British public has long been weakly supportive of European integration, with levels among the lowest among the member states. Along this logic, Brexit is not the beginning of the end. The Brexit vote is an opportunity for researchers to study the mechanisms underlying citizen decisions impacting their country's economic and political future. Researchers have quickly established a strong foundation of findings regarding the Brexit vote, allowing us to delve into discovering more precise mechanisms. In doing so, we are able to better conclude if the UK referendum result was indeed an outlier or if it a harbinger of things to come.

First, we need to understand whether or not the decision to leave reflected dissatisfaction with current UK politics. Second-order election theory hypothesizes that results regarding European integration are not truly about the EU but are primarily due to the current government's performance and its views on the EU (Reif and Schmitt 1980 and Franklin et al. 1994 and 1995). If the government is popular and favors greater integration, then we will likely see a positive vote. The opposite is true if the government is unpopular and favors integration. Vasilopoulou (2016) demonstrates with survey data that second-order considerations were not in play. This was due to splits within the major parties. Although the Conservative Party leadership, including PM David Cameron, campaigned to remain, strong voices within the, like MP Boris

Johnson, campaigned to leave. In addition, voters were exposed to the Labour Party's official remain position, yet party leader MP Jeremy Corbyn executed a lukewarm campaign with notables in Labour voicing a leave position. Hobolt (2016) also notes that second-order mechanisms were not present in the referendum since issue salience was high and there was a great focus on the EU itself.

Current research focuses on many factors that explain the Brexit election outcome at the individual and aggregate level. The variables can be split between the utilitarian and affective considerations (Gable 1998). One utilitarian test demonstrated a puzzling result regarding the level of EU trade dependence on local economy. Simply, we should see that districts with higher levels of such trade would be more likely to vote to remain in the EU since remaining would maximize their economic interests. However, Becker et al (2017) demonstrate that a one-standard deviation increase in total economy EU dependence leads to a 2.4 percentage point increase in the local area voting to leave.

Another interesting finding is the impact of EU migration to the UK. Much of the leave campaign was couched in an anti-EU immigrant rhetoric, one that charged that this population threatened British workers.¹ The Becker et al (2017) analysis shows different modeling results between the level of migrants from the first 15 member states and the level of migration from Eastern European member states. The former has a negative association with the leave vote and the latter has a positive association with the leave vote. In addition, changing levels (i.e. growth) in migration from Eastern European member states was also positively associated the leave vote and changing levels among the first EU-15 was not statistically significant. This difference is interesting because the polar opposite results may be more to due to culture differences with the

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¹ "Brexit by Accident." Euobserver Magazine. December 2016. Benjamin Fox.

newer members given that the local communities that have EU-15 migrants would have many more years to adjust. Therefore, the anti-immigration variable may not be exclusively a utilitarian consideration.

If pure economic concerns are not very helpful in laying a sound foundational explanation, what factors will help? Two variables that stand out in many studies, whether in the aggregate or individual levels of analysis, is education and age (Goodwin and Heath 2016, Hobolt 2016, Vasilopoulou 2016, Becker et al 2017, Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, and Henderson et al 2017). Lower educated and older voters were more likely to cast a leave ballot. One explained relationship between the two variables and Brexit is tied to nationalism and identity. This is not necessarily a new finding given past research on general support for European integration (Carey 2002; McLaren 2002). Other scholars take national identity in the UK context a bit further by focusing on English identity (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017 and Henderson et al 2017). They find that identifying as English, rather than British, produces independent results and that English identity has greater explanatory value and is consistent in its statistical significance. What is interesting is how this runs counter to other studies that demonstrate that sub-national identities tend to correlate with support for integration (Chacha 2013). So either being English does not fit into the concept of sub-nation or it has unique properties.

Age and education also helps explain the association between “national culture threat” and voting to leave, both substantively and statistically (Clarke et al 2016, Hobolt 2016, and Vasilopoulou 2016). The threat in question is the immigration of laborers, along with their values and norms, and therefore linked to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the leave campaign. Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) believes that the link has to do with belief that the UK has lost control of the immigration issue and can only regain it by leaving. Goodwin and Heath (2016) gives us a more

nuanced finding by seeing how the effect of identity is more polarized when factoring education levels among the English identifiers. Interaction terms indicate that individuals with low education may be competing with migration from Eastern Europe. What is not clear is to what extent this competition is economic and the degree of nationalism plays.

Nationalism as conditioned by age and education does demonstrate powerful predictors. However, questions arise as to why nationalism, age, and education were not important in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Since these areas voted to remain, are we to believe that they have less old people, more educated citizens, and possess greater levels of European identity? The evidence does not show this to be the case. What may be driving the age and education results is the type of information given to and processed by the average voter. When interacted with the level of tabloid news penetration in areas of high leave votes, we see that the type of information matters (Becker et al 2017).

The type of information needs to be considered alongside how information is processed. We do see a “taking back control” impulse among the leave voters (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). The issue of control speaks to the lack of trust for those that assumed to be in control coupled with the desire to be influential. Therefore, one possible path forward is in theorizing and testing the roles trust, influence, and identity have in influencing national and individual self-esteem. To state that nationalism produced a rejection of supranational authority only hints at the explanation. Instead, we need to first characterize individuals’ image of the EU, and more importantly, the UK’s perceived influence in the organization.

International image theory posits that information is filtered through the image one has about other countries as well as the image of one’s own country (Herrmann et al 1997). Negative images are connected to a sense of threat from an outside force, regardless if the threat is real or

not. Images also help with understanding the intergroup dynamics posited by social identity theory. Since individuals, it is assumed, desire high self-esteem, they will tend to gravitate towards a positive social identity that will enhance the image of the in-group country relative to an out-group one, thereby influencing the images of both (Alexander et al 2005).

Connections between images and identity can help explain the anti-EU message that influenced leave voters. Much of the associated identity literature points to the likelihood of feeling threats and opportunities among individuals who are deeply attached to their nation (Brown 2000, Cottam and Cottam 2001, Herrman et al 2009). Also, social categorization transforms individuals regarding how they think and feel (Hogg 2001). So images of one's own and other countries are, in part, conditioned by the identity one holds. A negative image of others will harm one's self-esteem if individuals perceive others as having higher influence. Self-esteem can be preserved if nationalists believe the UK has high influence. Their choice would be to stay in the EU and see how to guide the integration project along their preferences. High nationalistic voters who's image of the UK as having low influence are more likely to vote to exit.

Among the five images one can hold (Bilal 2010), a leave voter will likely hold one of the following three when thinking about the EU: enemy, imperialist, and barbarian. Each of these images each produce different feelings, yet, each of them can, in the minds of Brexiters, lead to the conclusion that leaving the EU is beneficial. Primarily, each image includes the perception of incompatible goals. How each type of individual voices the problem of incompatibility is due to a mix of perceived power relations and cultural status. Individuals that hold an enemy image will voice that the UK is strong and the country can therefore go at it alone instead of sharing power with other member states. The imperialist minded could view the EU as

exploiting the UK through its bureaucratic interference. Last, the barbarian image holders see the influx of European immigration as harming British citizens and culture. These are among the primary reasons the leave campaign voiced in the run-up to the referendum. In the end, it did not matter which of these images the Brexit voter held because they all agreed to mark the leave option on their ballots.

The explanatory power image plays in the Brexit vote is the common emotions images can produce. Bilali (2010) has empirically demonstrated that diminished trust is the emotion linked to each of the enemy, imperialist, and barbarian images. Trust is a feeling individuals have when they believe that outcomes of interactions will be acceptable even if the individual does not monitor interactions (Gamson 1968; Wintrobe 1995). Bilali (2010) also demonstrates that trust is negatively associated with the feeling of threat produced by each image because of the incompatible goals and strongly associated with gratitude and respect. Such feelings are associated with the perception that individuals are being treated fairly, which is also shown to produce trust (You 2012). Believing that goals are compatible, it is more likely that individuals perceive that they are being treated fairly and accept decisions and outcomes. Therefore, all of the three negative images are due to incompatible goals that would lead a referendum voter to distrust the target actor.

Like international image theory, social identity theory states that individuals make intergroup status comparisons (Tajfel 1978 and 1982). Social identity theory goes further, however, when it posits that individuals take action when they perceive their lower status position as illegitimate (Tajfel and Turner 1979). At its core, the theory posits that people adopt the identity that helps elevate their self-esteem (Tajfel 1978 and 1982). Once identities are formed, in- and out-group dynamics develop. Consistently, research shows that individuals will

bias favorable opinions and resources towards in-group members and exclude them from out-group members (Turner 1978 and Tajfel and Turner 1986). Biases help promote self-esteem and protection of group status (Tajfel 1982). The theory also indicates that strong political cohesion among group members develops when their group's status is threatened (Huddy 2013). The perception of an illegitimate lower status can negatively affect individuals' views of their national self-image. National self-images are how individuals see themselves as a whole and include both negative and positive idealized concepts and perceptions that are shared and perpetuated in society (Kaplowitz 1990 and Hirshberg 1993). Like holding images of external actors, national self-image can affect decision-making. National self-images are strong enough to influence the recall of newly acquired information (Hirshberg 1993). The type of self-image can also influence individuals' approach to external actors. A negative self-image is more likely associated with a desire for zero-sum outcomes (total victory on the part of the image holder) and a positive self-image more likely to be associated with a desire for non-zero-sum outcomes (cooperative strategy) (Kaplowitz 1990). Like hypothesized by social identity theory, the desired outcomes stem from individual self-worth. Distortions of memory and/or total victory over an opponent serve as a means to accentuate self-worth.

While it may seem as though the quest for self-esteem through group cohesion is always admirable, there are some negative effects. One positive effect would be national liberation from oppressive metro-poles. Negative effects, however, include zero-sum views when competition for resources and power are in play (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003). This can cause the threatened and disrespected in-group to lash out in order to demonstrate superiority (Horowitz 2001). The leave vote may be an example of such a negative effect. In order to improve self-

esteem by gaining more control, Brexit voters opted to reduce, if not eliminate, cooperation with their European counterparts.

Current research on the leave vote has more empirical support for explanations based on nationalism and identity rather than utilitarian factors. Evidence indicates that British voters voted more with their hearts than with their heads. Examination of area voting patterns indicate higher than expected leave votes even though their economic self-interests were at risk. The fact that age and education are the strongest empirical factors, and that they generally do not follow a consistent utilitarian pattern, lead us to consider more affective factors such as nationalism and identity. To fully understand how these two factors impact a decision to leave the EU, researchers can begin to explore how national and individual self-esteem and trust may have impacted the Brexit vote as well as similar attitudes towards the EU among voters in other member states.

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