

## **Brexit Britain: The Causes and Consequences of the Leave Vote**

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On June 24 2016, I was stood on College Green in Westminster. A journalist turned and said: 'The country has just voted for Brexit; the value of sterling is crashing through the floor and the Prime Minister just resigned. It is a strange day. The resignation of the Prime Minister is only our third most important story'.

David Cameron's decision to resign ensured that he would become only the third Prime Minister in post-war Britain to be forever remembered for one thing. After Anthony Eden and Suez, and then Tony Blair and Iraq, future historians will chiefly frame Cameron as a gambler who set the stage for Brexit.

The vote to leave the European Union (EU) marked a watershed moment. As Vernon Bogdanor noted, it was the first occasion in the country's history when a majority of voters opted for something that most of those who had been elected to parliament did not support. Only 156 MPs had campaigned for an outcome that was supported by a majority of people in 401 seats. The result thus threw light on a tension between a sovereign parliament and a sovereign people, a situation that is largely without precedent.<sup>1</sup>

The disconnect between the rulers and the ruled was reflected in the widespread shock that met the result. Like that journalist on College Green, most observers of British politics had been stunned to discover that amid the highest turnout at a nationwide contest for nearly a quarter century 52 per cent of voters (including 54 per cent in England) had rejected the status quo. Most observers had failed to successfully diagnose the national mood.

This was best reflected in a survey which asked more than three hundred journalists, pollsters and academics to predict the result. Just 5 per cent had forecast a victory for Leave. The betting markets were not much better. On the day of the referendum, and even as polls showed a clear swing to Leave, a £100 bet on Leave would have returned a £300 profit in the morning, a £500 profit in the evening and,

shortly after the polls closed, £900. Only a few analysts had seriously charted a plausible pathway to Brexit.<sup>2</sup>

Nor could analysts blame the polls. Certainly, during the campaign there was a different story according to whether you had relied on polls conducted over the telephone (which tended to give Remain a healthy lead), or online (which suggested a tighter race). But evidence that Brexit loomed large had been readily available.

In May 2016, the online polls had put Leave on an average of 42.7 per cent and Remain on 42.2 per cent. This had then become more visible during the final days when both the phone and online polls reported a clear swing to Leave, which averaged 53 per cent.<sup>3</sup> In short, you could have seen Brexit coming had you wanted to.

The problem was that many people interpreted evidence in a way that confirmed their existing beliefs. As one pollster noted, data was often treated differently according to the implied result. Whereas one poll that put Leave 2-points ahead was barely reported and did not move financial markets, a later poll that put Remain 4-points clear was ‘reported across the world as a confident prediction of a Remain victory’.<sup>4</sup> Some saw what they wanted to see.

Others were likely influenced, albeit unknowingly, by the ‘LeDuc Law’, named after political scientist Larry LeDuc. Referendums are high stakes events that are characterized by great uncertainty. For this reason, LeDuc had contended that while people might voice support for the riskier option, as polling day neared they would drift back to the less risky status quo – they would side with the devil they knew.<sup>5</sup> In Britain, the law had seemingly been confirmed by the results of referendums on electoral reform in 2011 and Scottish independence in 2014.

But this too could have been challenged and indeed was, though few people noticed at the time. Shortly before the referendum academics Stephen Fisher and Alan Renwick analysed more than 250 referendums held since 1990. The ‘change’ option won nearly 70 per cent of the time.<sup>6</sup> Voters were more open to challenging the status quo than many assumed.

There were also good reasons to expect voters in Britain to be especially open to doing so. As we will see, by the time of the 2016 referendum many had come to doubt the idea that the status quo (of remaining in the EU) was actually the ‘safer’ of the two options on the ballot paper. Rather, and before Cameron had even come to power, many had concluded that the EU was at the root of an array of perceived threats

to their national identity, sovereignty and way of life. Seen through their eyes the status quo was actually not that safe at all.

So why did a majority of voters overturn the status quo by voting to leave the EU? Since the referendum, the Leave vote has often been presented as a desire to stage a political protest, reject austerity or voice irrational grievances. Drawing on studies that were undertaken both before and after the vote, this essay rejects those interpretations. Many of those who voted Leave held clear and coherent preferences about how they wanted Britain to change.

### **The Foundations of Brexit**

Support for Leave has been traced to an array of incredibly short-term factors specific to the campaign: promises that were made about funding for the National Health Service; claims about the financial costs of EU membership; the influence of individual campaigners; alleged links between pro-Leave groups and Russia; or the possible role played by tech firms like Cambridge Analytica.<sup>7</sup>

It will always be difficult if not impossible to ascertain the effect of these factors, or if indeed they had any effect at all. What is clear is that this short-term view routinely glosses the fact that public support for radically reforming or leaving the EU was widespread long before the race to win the referendum had even begun.

Leave had already led Remain in several polls in early 2016 and during the decade that preceded the referendum numerous studies had pointed to a large reservoir of latent public support for leaving the EU which these short-term accounts cannot explain and usually ignore. The currents that powered the Leave vote were decades in the making, if not longer.

These currents can ultimately be traced to a long and entrenched tradition of instinctive scepticism toward the European continent. Historians would point to the formation of a British (or more specifically *English*) national identity that ever since the sixteenth century had been forged by a combination of Protestantism, fear of the ‘Catholic Other’ across the Channel and popular belief in a providential destiny, shaped by successive wars with European powers, a jingoistic press and experience of Empire.

‘This was how it was with the British after 1707’, noted Linda Colley in her seminal *Britons*. ‘They came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores’.<sup>8</sup>

Much later, academics would point to a more specific tradition of Englishness, which in 2016 became a major tributary of the Leave vote; whereas 64 per cent of people who felt ‘English not British’ saw their EU membership as a bad thing, this slumped to 28 per cent among those who felt ‘British not English’. The more English that people felt the more they saw their EU membership as a bad thing and, if given a chance, would turnout for Leave.<sup>9</sup> Englishness was by no means the whole story but it was an important part.

This instinctive scepticism had been on display throughout the post-war era. The British had always been content to trade with their continental neighbours but they had never shown much desire for taking the relationship further.

At Britain’s first referendum on its relationship with Europe in 1975, just over two-thirds of voters had opted to stay in what was then called the European Community (EC). But this had never been a convincing victory for the integrationists. As Sir David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger noted at the time: ‘It was unequivocal but it was also unenthusiastic. Support for membership was wide but it did not run deep ... It did not result in a girding of the loins for a great new European adventure’.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, within only one year of that earlier referendum the number of voters who saw membership of the Common Market as a ‘bad thing’ outnumbered those who saw it as a good thing, while one poll in 1980 suggested that 71 per cent favoured withdrawal.<sup>11</sup> Britain stayed in the club but over the next three decades the tradition of scepticism remained on display.

Consider the long-term picture. As shown in Table 1, between 1992 and 2015 an average of 52 per cent of voters either wanted to leave the EU altogether or stay in but reduce its powers. In the four years that preceded the 2016 referendum this jumped to 65 per cent.

**Table 1: Public Attitudes towards Britain’s Relationship with Europe, 1992-2015**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Strengthen relationship</b>	<b>Leave things as they are</b>	<b>Leave/weaken relationship</b>
1992	38	16	40
1993	31	22	38
1994	36	20	36
1995	36	20	37
1996	14	19	58
1997	23	18	46
1998	17	23	50
1999	17	20	56
2000	17	19	55
2001	17	21	52
2002	19	23	50
2003	17	27	48
2004	12	23	56
2005	14	24	52
2006	13	27	51
2008	12	24	55
2012	11	16	67
2013	9	19	65
2014	14	18	62
2015	11	19	65

*Source:* British Social Attitudes data. ‘Strengthen’ = ‘work for single European government’ and ‘stay in EU and increase its powers’. Weaken = ‘leave the EU’ or ‘stay in the EU but reduce its powers’.

Meanwhile, during the early years of the twenty-first century never more than 19 per cent of citizens wanted to strengthen Britain’s relationship with the EU, either by working for a single European government or increasing the powers of the EU. The ‘fundamentals’ of the Leave vote were in place long before anybody looked at what was written on the side of a bus.

It may have been possible to win these sceptics over had their anxiety been rooted solely in transactional assessments about the economic costs and benefits of

EU membership. But this was not the case. Rather, this scepticism was anchored in how the British thought about their wider national identity and community.

The idea of a supranational 'European' identity might have appealed to small numbers of middle-class cosmopolitan-minded liberals. 'We are one people in Europe', proclaimed a *Guardian* columnist during the referendum campaign.<sup>12</sup> But the reality, at least as far as the vast majority of voters were concerned, was quite different.

It was economic pragmatism not affective attachment that led the British to reluctantly reconcile themselves to European integration. When asked about their identity, between the Conservative premierships of John Major in 1992 and David Cameron in 2016 an average of 62 per cent of voters felt 'British only'. Just 6 per cent prioritised a European identity.

Even as the British prepared for the 2016 referendum, after a relationship with Europe that spanned more than four decades, they were the most likely of all peoples in Europe to prioritise their national identity. The cosmopolitan dream of a European demos had only ever been celebrated by a very small minority.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, these trends hide differences between different groups in British society. While the foundation of the Leave vote was an instinctive Euroscepticism and strong attachments to national identity, it was the working-class, older generations and people with few or no educational qualifications who consistently held values and attitudes that made them far more receptive than others to leaving the EU altogether.

As shown two years before the referendum, it these groups that had long held a more restrictive conception of what it meant to be 'British' (one that puts ethnic attachments and ancestry before civic ties), had long felt strongly that newcomers and minorities should make more effort to subscribe to British values and traditions, and, even before a sharp rise in immigration during the 2000s, had been more likely than others to think that immigration should be reduced and was having negative economic and cultural effects.

During the twenty-five years that preceded the referendum, support for leaving the EU had consistently been two to three times higher among these groups than among the liberal middle-class and graduates (see Table 2).

**Table 2 – Support for Leaving the EU by Social Group, 1993-2012 (%)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>People with no quals</b>	<b>University graduates</b>	<b>Working Class</b>	<b>Middle Class</b>	<b>Born 1931-45</b>	<b>Born 1946-60</b>	<b>Born 1961-75</b>	<b>Born 1975-</b>
1993	13	5	10	8	9	15	7	
1994	11	7	13	8	14	13	7	
1995	16	9	12	11	20	14	9	
1996	24	15	22	14	21	16	17	
1997	23	10	22	11	18	14	14	
1998	21	7	18	7	17	13	8	
1999	23	7	21	8	18	14	7	5
2000	22	12	18	13	21	16	13	14
2001	21	8	21	9	21	16	11	9
2002	19	8	17	12	19	16	11	10
2003	22	10	20	10	23	17	10	7
2004	26	12	24	15	23	19	14	15
2005	25	10	21	12	24	17	13	10
2006	22	10	14	11	22	17	12	11
2007	24	10	20	12	25	19	16	11
2008	28	11	27	13	28	22	19	11
2009	33	13	20	16	32	25	22	14
2010	39	16	22	18	35	28	25	17
2011	44	18	26	20	38	30	28	20
<b>2012</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>23</b>

These divides then widened considerably. Between 1993 and 2012, the percentage of voters with no qualifications who backed Brexit surged from 13 to 50 per cent while the percentage of working-class voters who felt the same jumped from 10 to 40 per cent. Just 20 per cent of middle-class professionals and graduates backed leaving the EU.

It is important not to completely discount the latter groups, however. An exclusive focus on the so-called ‘losers of globalization’ is misleading. More affluent, secure and highly educated voters were less likely to back Leave but as the 2016 referendum approached they too became more sceptical; support for leaving the EU among graduates jumped four-fold while support among the middle-class increased three-fold.

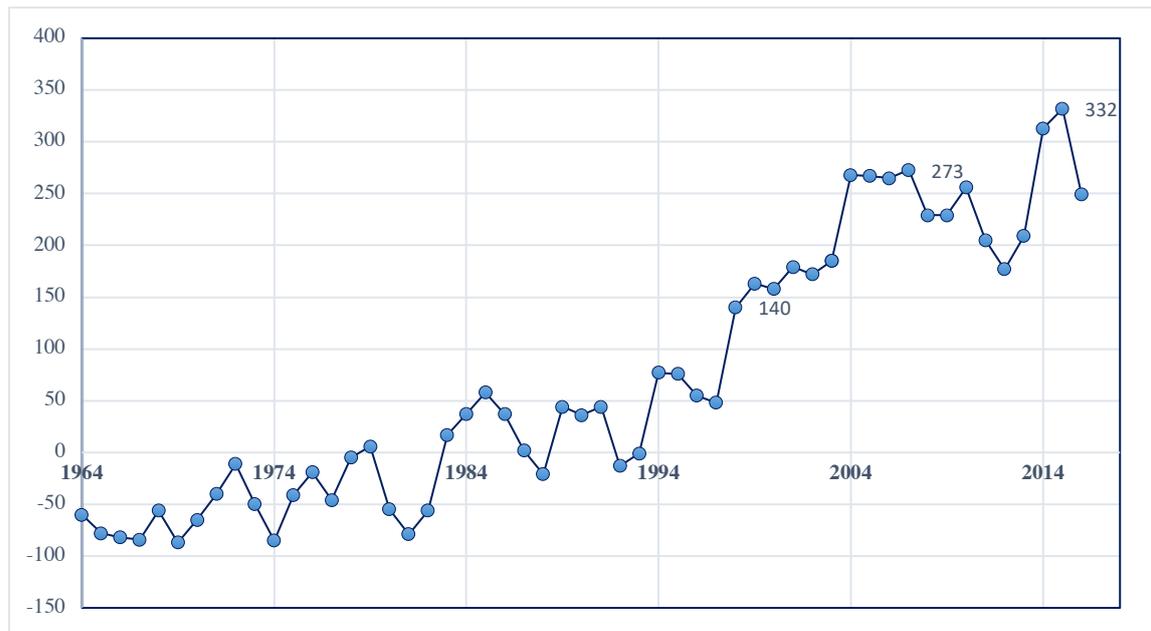
These underlying divides, shaped by education and socialization experiences, were compounded by a generational gap. During the 2010-2015 coalition government, only one in four of those who had been born after 1975 backed leaving the EU. But this jumped to one in three among the older Baby Boomers, born between 1946-60, and to more than four-fifths among the ‘silent generation’ or traditionalists, born before 1945.

A significant number of these Leave voters did feel economically left behind but not all of them did. Yet most felt left out by a new mainstream liberal consensus that had come to dominate much of Britain’s media and political debate.<sup>14</sup>

These currents might not have found their full expression had it not been for a major external ‘shock’ that arrived during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Rapidly rising and unprecedented rates of immigration had a profound impact on party politics and public opinion and would ultimately set the stage for Brexit.

Unlike most other governments in the EU, in 2004 New Labour, with bipartisan support in parliament, decided that Britain would immediately open its labour market to citizens from the ‘A8’ states that had just joined the EU, such as Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. Considerable demographic change followed. Between 1991 and 1995, the annual average level of net migration (i.e. the number of people coming in minus the number leaving) had been 37,000. Between 2012 and 2016 it averaged 256,000.

**Figure 1 – Net Migration in Britain 1964-2016**



*Source:* Long-Term International Migration data, 2011 census revisions, Office for National Statistics

The effect of this shock was four-fold. First, it stoked a rapid increase in public concern about the issue. Between 1997 and 2007, and before the financial crisis even arrived, the percentage of voters who saw immigration as a key issue facing Britain rocketed from 4 to 46 per cent.

In 1997, the issue had been ranked fifteenth in the list of people’s concerns. It was eclipsed by drug abuse and mad cow disease. Ten years later, voters saw it as one of the top issues facing the country. By the time of the 2016 referendum immigration had dominated the list of people’s priorities for more than a decade.<sup>15</sup>

Not everybody felt the same way, of course; whereas 69 per cent of people who have no qualifications felt that immigration should be reduced ‘a lot’, this tumbled to 29 per cent among graduates. Nonetheless, large and overwhelming majorities wanted immigration to be reduced either a little or a lot. Shortly before the referendum no less than 77 per cent did.<sup>16</sup>

Second, this concern was not narrowly rooted in worries about the economy but also about the perceived impact of immigration on culture and identity. As the referendum neared, the British Social Attitudes survey revealed that nearly half of the population felt that EU membership was ‘undermining Britain’s distinctive identity’. Only 31 per cent disagreed.

One person who would not have been surprised by these findings was academic Lauren McLaren. Thirteen years before Britain voted for Brexit she had already demonstrated that public hostility toward the European project was not chiefly powered by people's worries about the economy. Far more important were people's worries about how the arrival of new ethnic and cultural groups seemed to threaten their own national identity, values and ways of life. As McLaren pointed out: 'people do not necessarily calculate the costs and benefits of the EU to their own lives when thinking about issues of European integration, but instead are ultimately concerned about problems related to the degradation of the nation-state'.<sup>17</sup>

This reveals not only the critical role played by cultural rather than economic forces but sheds light on why a Remain campaign that focused almost exclusively on transactional and dry arguments about financial costs and benefits found itself on the losing side.

The third effect was to wed the cause of Euroscepticism with a potent and far more emotionally resonant issue. This separated the referendum of 2016 from its predecessor in 1975. Whereas in earlier decades attempts to mobilise public opposition to the EU had focused on dry technocratic arguments about institutions, constitutions and trade, from 2004 they expanded to include opposition to immigration. This widened the circle of tacit public support for radically reforming Britain's relationship with the EU, or leaving altogether.

Finally, the immigration shock and perceived failure of the main parties to address this issue contributed to a broader erosion of trust in Britain's political system more generally. Immigration had always been 'owned' by the Conservative Party. But by the time of the 2016 referendum both the party and the mainstream had lost public confidence.<sup>18</sup>

One year before the referendum, nearly 70 per cent of voters felt that the government had handled immigration badly while just 8 per cent thought it was handling the issue well. This unease was not just focused on the government of the day. By the referendum only 38 per cent of voters felt that one of the two main parties were best able to handle immigration best while a striking 58 per cent either backed UKIP, another party, none of the parties or did not know who to support. This really mattered. Research showed that the consistent failure of the main parties to address

people's strong concern about the pace and scale of immigration had eroded public faith in the overall system long before Britain arrived at June 2016.<sup>19</sup>

This makes it all the more remarkable that so few observers saw Brexit coming. One of the miscalculations made by Remain was to focus almost entirely on the alleged domestic and risk of Brexit to the economy while ignoring the perceived external risks that lots of voters associated with the EU.

Consider the last Eurobarometer survey that was undertaken before the vote in early 2016: the British were among the most positive about their own economy but among the most pessimistic about Europe's economy (only 25 per cent felt Europe's economy was 'good'); they were less likely than average to think Europe's economy would improve (only 18 per cent thought so); and they were only behind the Estonians in being the least likely of all to think that the 'EU has sufficient power and tools to defend the economic interests of Europe in the global economy'.

There were other warning signs. They were more likely than average to see immigration as a priority, were the most likely of all to voice concerns about terrorism and, when asked what the EU meant to them personally, were more likely than average to choose 'not enough control at [the EU's] external borders' and were only behind the Austrians and Cypriots as being the most likely of all to say 'loss of our cultural identity'.

These concerns also extended to democracy in the EU, another issue largely glossed by Remain. Long before they were asked to 'Take Back Control', British voters were already alongside the Greeks as the least likely to trust the European Parliament (only 26 per cent did). They were more satisfied than average with how democracy worked in their own country but among the least satisfied when it came to how democracy works in the EU (only 37 per cent felt satisfied). More than half felt that their voice counted in their own country but only one in three felt that it counted in the EU. Only 35 per cent felt that British interests were 'well taken into account in the EU'.

These views were wrapped in a general sense of pessimism about the EU. The British were more likely than average to rate the quality of life in their own country as 'good' but were behind only the Cypriots and Italians as being the most likely to rate the quality of life in the EU as 'bad'. They were more likely than average to think things in their own country were moving in the 'right direction' but were among the

least likely to think the same about the EU. Only 17 per cent felt the EU was moving in the right direction. But this dropped further to 15 per cent among school leavers, 14 per cent among manual workers and 12 per cent among the retired, all of whom would play a key role in the Leave vote.

The British were also among the least likely of all to hold a positive image of the EU (only 30 per cent did) and were among the least optimistic about the EU's future. Revealingly, though few noticed at the time, they were only behind the Cypriots as the most likely to believe that their country 'could better face the future outside of the EU'. Given such findings one might ask not why Leave won the referendum but why it attracted only 52 per cent of the vote.

For many voters, the EU was not only plagued by economic woes but suffered from a lack of democratic accountability and was linked closely to an array of perceived threats to the nation. The Leave slogans– 'Take Back Control' and 'Breaking Point'– were not only emotionally resonant but tapped into what was actually driving Euroscepticism.

These threats were then amplified as the referendum neared. The eruption of a major pan-European refugee crisis in 2015 underlined external risk and exposed divisions between EU member states, who seemed unable to resolve the crisis. The events also coincided with several high-profile terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists.<sup>20</sup>

It now seems remarkable that David Cameron confirmed the date of the referendum in February 2016, against the backdrop of more than one million refugees and migrants entering Europe, a further 150,000 arriving in early 2016, and terrorist atrocities in France that left 148 dead and more than 350 injured (suicide bombings in Brussels would follow in March 2016).

There is no doubt that these events had effects. Following the November 2015 attacks in Paris, polls in Britain reported a 22-point increase in the percentage of voters who wanted to accept fewer or no refugees at all; while half of the population held these views only 20 per cent wanted to accept more refugees. Meanwhile, shortly before the referendum almost 80 per cent of citizens felt worried about the possibility of terrorist attacks in Britain.

This sense of threat was clearly linked in the minds of voters to the refugee crisis; 52 per cent saw the refugees and migrants entering Europe from states such as

Iraq and Syria as a ‘major threat’; and 52 per cent also felt that refugees would increase the risk of terrorism.<sup>21</sup>

These strong yet unresolved anxieties led to what psychologist Karen Stenner has called ‘normative threat’; a sense that sudden or fundamental changes in the surrounding world threaten an established order, a system of oneness and sameness that makes “us” an “us”, a demarcation of people, authorities, institutions, values, and norms that define who “we” are, and what “we” believe in. When normative threats appear to challenge the broader community and shared norms they can produce a sharp public backlash.<sup>22</sup>

In Britain, this sense of threat was likely further amplified by a view, held by large numbers of voters, that their representatives were failing to respond or, worse, encouraging these unsettling events. There were few meaningful differences between the two main parties on EU membership and immigration; despite some scepticism both were basically supportive. Pro-EU and pro-immigration liberals were never a majority yet because of their dominant positions in politics, the media and business they wielded disproportionate influence. EU membership and immigration were seen as beneficial, national identity a matter of civic rather than ethnic attachment, and individualism was generally prioritised over communitarianism.

Whereas Stenner argued that the threatened tend to backlash, in Britain things took a different form, at least initially: the threatened hunkered down. By the 2000s, many working-class voters had started to lose faith in politics and were drifting into apathy.

This was the canary in the Brexit coalmine. In parts of northern England, the Midlands, Yorkshire and outer-London a rising tide of disillusionment was initially reflected in isolated pockets of support for the extreme right British National Party (BNP). The middle-aged and elderly white men who voted BNP shared intense concerns about immigration, strong political distrust, read tabloid newspapers, lived in white areas that were close to Muslim communities, and also often in safe Labour seats where there was a glaring lack of political choice.<sup>23</sup>

But just as important were the large number of citizens who had simply stopped voting altogether. While debates about turnout routinely focus on differences between the young and old, observers missed a more important gap in turnout among different social classes.

One person who had noticed was academic Oliver Heath. Until the 1980s there had been little difference in turnout rates among the working-class and middle-class (this was less than 5-points). By 2010 it had jumped to 19-points, which made it just as significant as the difference in turnout between young and old.

As Heath pointed out: whereas in earlier years the working class and middle-class had been divided on who to vote for, now they were divided on whether to bother voting at all.<sup>24</sup>

The apathy and disillusionment that was simmering across blue-collar Britain was not only rooted in unresolved worries over immigration but also a clear belief among some voters that they had been excluded from the national conversation. And they had a point.

Between 1964 and 2015, the percentage of elected politicians who had worked in manual occupations had crashed from 37 per cent to a record low of 3 per cent. Meanwhile, the percentage that were elected after previously working in politics as an advisor or organiser had increased to a record high of 17 per cent. Such findings leant credibility to the perception of a political class that was increasingly insular and detached from the average voter.<sup>25</sup>

The marginalisation of key social groups that were about to become central to the Leave vote was also on display in many other areas of British life. The educational divide that would underpin at least part of the Leave vote was reflected across society; whereas only 7 per cent of the population are privately educated this jumps to 16 per cent for Labour MPs, 19 per cent for BRIT award winners, 31 per cent for prospective parliamentary candidates in 2015, 32 per cent of all MPs, 42 per cent of British BAFTA winners, 44 per cent of Tony Blair's post-2005 cabinet, 48 per cent of civil servants, 61 per cent of top doctors, 67 per cent of British Oscar winners, and 74 per cent of the top judiciary.

Similarly, whereas only 1 per cent of the population attended Oxbridge this jumps to 19 per cent of prospective parliamentary candidates, 26 per cent of MPs, nearly half of David Cameron's post-2015 cabinet and just over half for civil servants. Members of Corbyn's first shadow cabinet in 2015 were three times more likely than average to have been privately-educated while nearly half attended Oxbridge. The desertion of many Labour voters to the national populist UKIP coincided with rising numbers of privately-educated Labour MPs.<sup>26</sup>

The disconnect was also visible in media, which consistently struggled to make sense of public support for UKIP and then Brexit. Given that 81 per cent of leading journalists and nearly 80 per cent of newspaper editors had gone to private schools or grammars while more than half of the nation's leading columnists attended Oxbridge it was perhaps unsurprising that so few had seen these heavily working-class revolts coming.<sup>27</sup>

Such divides were certainly not the only factors at play but they did seem to validate the populist claim that Britain's political and media communities were increasingly turning in on themselves. Prominent columns that urged the mainstream to abandon left behind coastal communities like Clacton or the apparent dismissal of voters who raised concerns did not help counter these claims.

By the time of the 2016 referendum working-class voters and those with no educational qualifications were twice as likely as middle-class professionals and graduates to feel strongly that 'people like me have no say in government'; by 2012, nearly 40 per cent of the working-class felt this way.

Such voters might not have been mobilized had they not had a vehicle through which they could regain voice. Between 2012 and 2016, the UK Independence Party appealed to the working-class and social conservatives who felt left out of the mainstream consensus. Such voters had different backgrounds yet shared strong opposition to EU membership, distrust of established parties and intense anxiety about immigration.<sup>28</sup>

Nor were they Thatcherites on steroids. When it came to economic questions they often had more in common with those on the left; 71 per cent agreed with a series of left-wing economic statements compared to 43 per cent of Conservatives, for example that big business takes advantage of ordinary people, there is one law for the rich and another for the poor, and that workers were not getting their fair share of national wealth. UKIP subsequently won the European Parliament elections in 2014 and at the 2015 general election polled nearly 13 per cent of the national vote, though was handed only one seat in parliament.<sup>29</sup>

UKIP cultivated the Leave vote. Though some Conservatives would later disassociate the Leave victory from the national populist party this is misleading. There was a positive and significant relationship between areas that had given strong support to UKIP and then strong support to Leave. Prior to the referendum nearly

seven in ten Leave voters had either voted UKIP or considered doing so.<sup>30</sup> The evidence suggests it is unlikely that the Leave campaign would ever have won without the preceding rise of national populism.

### **The Leave Vote**

On June 23 2016, a coalition of voters seized what they saw as a unique opportunity to regain their voice in a political system that had become less representative of the nation as a whole and largely unresponsive to their concerns. But what motivated this vote?

Contrary to popular claims that Leavers did not know what they were voting for they held a clear and consistent outlook. Most saw the status quo of remaining in the EU as the riskier of the two options; the vast majority (70 per cent) felt that leaving the EU would be 'safe' and only 23 per cent saw it as a risk. Conversely, most (76 per cent) felt that *remaining* in the EU would be 'risky' while only 17 per cent saw it as safe. Remain focused on the internal risk of Brexit whereas Leavers were thinking far more about external threats.

The overwhelming majority of Leavers were unconvinced that leaving the EU would be bad for Britain's economy (only 3 per cent agreed), bad for jobs (4 per cent), bad for pensions (3 per cent), their own finances (5 per cent), or Britain's global influence (4 per cent). But much larger numbers felt that only by leaving could Britain lower immigration (85 per cent), and also help the NHS (69 per cent).<sup>31</sup>

These views underpinned a 52 per cent vote for Leave, although this increased to 54 per cent in England, 58 per cent in households that earn less than £20,000 per year, nearly 60 per cent among pensioners, 71 per cent among routine manual workers and 75 per cent among those with no qualifications.<sup>32</sup>

The Leave vote has since been routinely misrepresented. Politicians like Vince Cable, leader of the Liberal Democrats, have suggested that this vote was driven by pensioners who longed for a world where 'faces were white'.

Such views do not sit easily with the actual evidence, including the fact that one in three black and ethnic minority voters opted to leave, as did highly diverse areas of the country, like Birmingham, Luton and Slough. The heavy and sometimes exclusive focus on pensioners also distracts from the fact that Leave was supported by a far from

insignificant 25 per cent of 18-24 year olds, 44 per cent of 36-45 year olds and 57 per cent of 46-55 year olds.<sup>33</sup> Had these other groups that are routinely written out of the public debate not decided to vote Leave then Britain would most likely have reaffirmed its membership of the EU.

Similarly, the fact that Leave was endorsed by 40 per cent of people in London is often ignored. The popular portrayal of Leavers as old white men draws attention away from the fact that the Leave vote was actually powered by a fairly broad coalition.

Three groups were key.<sup>34</sup> The most strongly supportive (though not the largest group) were Left Behind Leavers; people who identified as working-class, were only just about getting by or struggling financially, almost never had a degree, were usually in their forties or fifties and in households that earned less than £2,200 per month. They appeared absolutely convinced that immigration has made things worse (91 per cent felt this way).

Left Behind Leavers had struggled for years if not decades and so it is unsurprising to find that only 1 per cent felt that the economy would be worse off if Britain did leave the EU. Seen through their eyes, when the status quo had consistently failed to improve their lives the idea of rolling the dice for a new settlement was never a gamble.

People who felt they had been left behind relative to others were not only more likely to vote Leave but were less likely to see Brexit as a risk.<sup>35</sup> During the spring of 2016 a global elite lined up to tell them that only by keeping the status quo could they reap financial benefits. It is unsurprising they were not convinced.

By this time Left Behind Leavers were already withdrawing from the mainstream; only one in four aligned with Labour or the Conservatives whereas two-thirds did not identify with any party or sided with UKIP.

The second (and slightly larger) group were Blue-Collar Pensioners; people who also saw themselves as working-class and lived in lower-income households but who because of their retired status were much less likely to feel as though they were struggling to get by (only one in four did). They too almost never had a degree although this is more because of the way in which they came of age before the expansion of higher education.

Nearly half of this group aligned with the Conservatives and more than one-quarter with Labour, although while they were still plugged in to the mainstream they were deeply unhappy with the direction of travel. They too felt that immigration into Britain had made things worse (69 per cent agreed) and while they were more likely to think that the economy would suffer after Brexit only a small minority (21 per cent) thought so.

The third (and largest) group were Affluent Eurosceptics who differed notably from their allies: they were much less likely to identify as working-class (only half did); were more likely to have a degree (nearly one-third did); were the least likely of all to live in lower-income households or to feel as though they were struggling financially; and were much more likely to align with the Conservatives (nearly two-thirds did). They too were similarly unconvinced that Britain's economy would be worse off if it left while nearly two-thirds agreed with their counterparts that on balance immigration had been bad for the country.

While Leavers often had different backgrounds, they shared two core concerns: they wanted to see powers returned from the EU to their nation state and they wanted to reduce the amount of immigration into Britain. Crucially, these motives are often identified after having controlled for an array of other factors, such as income.

These key drivers had been identified before the campaign even began. Goodwin and Milazzo found that people who felt dissatisfied with how democracy worked in the EU and who believed that immigration was having negative effects on Britain's economy, culture and welfare state were significantly more likely to be preparing to vote Leave.

The National Centre for Social Research found that people who felt that leaving the EU would give Britain more influence in the world, lower immigration, help the economy and strengthen the nation's security were more likely to back Leave, as were those who believed that immigration had damaged Britain and EU membership had undermined the nation's independence and identity. Others likewise found that whereas nearly 90 per cent of people who thought immigration had been bad for Britain backed Leave this tumbled to less than 10 per cent among those who thought that immigration had been good.

The British Election Study asked Leavers to cite their motives in their own words. The two key reasons were 'Sovereignty/EU bureaucracy' and 'Immigration'.

Yet, crucially, while sovereignty and immigration dominated people often saw these as linked: ‘In fact, reading responses shows that many respondents mention both sovereignty and immigration together, showing that these two issues were closely linked in the minds of British voters’.

People who felt that the EU undermined Britain’s distinctive identity, who thought Britain should have fewer immigrants, and people who were not convinced Brexit would hurt the economy were all shown to be significantly more likely to back Leave.<sup>36</sup>

These attitudes reflect the deeper value divides discussed above. Following the vote, Eric Kaufmann pointed to how support for Leave or Remain reflected a more fundamental political cleavage between ‘order and openness’, which can be tapped by probing the extent to which people support the death penalty (a classic measure in social psychology); whereas 71 per cent who backed capital punishment supported Leave, only 20 per cent of those who opposed the death penalty planned to do the same. Whereas the former put a premium on order, stability and group conformity, the latter feel more relaxed amid different and rapid change.

Other studies similarly found that opponents of equality for women, same-sex couples and those who favoured stiffer sentences for criminals were far more likely to support Leave – to the tune of around 50 percentage points.<sup>37</sup> Not all Leavers thought this way but many did.

Since the referendum other studies have added further to this picture. YouGov found that Leavers were overwhelmingly motivated by two factors: ‘to strike a better balance between Britain’s right to act independently, and the appropriate level of co-operation with other countries’; and ‘deal better with the issue of immigration’.

Lord Ashcroft pointed to the same motives: ‘the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK’; and that leaving the EU ‘offered the best chance to regain control over immigration and borders’ (a distant third driver was a sense among some voters that remaining meant ‘little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership of powers’).

Similarly, Harold Clarke et al. found that Leavers were not only more optimistic about how Britain’s economy and influence in the world would evolve after Brexit but believed that only by leaving the EU would the country be better able to lower the amount of immigration and counter terrorism. People who felt that migration into

Britain had been negative for the country were also more likely to play down the risk of Brexit and turnout to vote.

A unique survey by three academics likewise found that immigration from both within and outside the EU was the dominant concern among Leavers; the average Leaver wanted EU and non-EU net migration reduced to below 50,000 per year.

Sir John Curtice pointed out that people who felt that the EU undermined Britain's distinctive identity were more likely to back Leave, as were those who felt little affective attachment to a 'European' identity. Yet even after these factors were taken into account the expectation that Brexit would lower immigration remained key: 'So, the way that people voted in the EU referendum was related both to what they thought the instrumental consequences of leaving would be and to their sense of identity'.<sup>38</sup>

The Centre for Social Investigation also asked Leavers to rank their reasons. The most popular was 'to regain control over EU immigration' followed by 'I didn't want the EU to have any role in UK law-making'. Contrary to the popular idea that the Leave vote reflected a general and largely incoherent backlash against the establishment, the motive 'to teach British politicians a lesson' had by far the lowest ranking.

Another study that used an original survey found that support for Leave was especially strong among people who wanted to halt immigration and who also distrusted established politicians, while others found that people who became more aware of the rising levels of immigration were more likely to switch from Remain to Leave.<sup>39</sup>

That concern over immigration was a core predictor of the Leave vote should not have been a surprise. Rather, it should be seen alongside a much wider body of evidence across Europe which has shown how a feeling of threat to the ethnic group and national identity has become key to explaining what drives public hostility to the European project.<sup>40</sup>

There is also a growing pile of research on the role of local context in support for Leave. Political economists suggest that economic interests related to trade, freedom from regulation and employment had little relevance in explaining the Leave vote, which tended to be higher in areas that had witnessed a significant increase in racial and religious diversity since 2001. Other work suggests that the Leave vote was

powered by the negative impact of imports from China and while finding no relationship with overall immigration they do find a positive association with immigrants from EU states. This general picture is consistent with other work which found that public support for Leave was strongest in areas that had large numbers of people without qualifications, older voters and areas that experienced significant demographic change in only a short period of time.<sup>41</sup> The claim that the Leave vote was delivered by all white enclaves is actually deeply misleading.

Most Leavers, therefore, had clear preferences: they wanted their nation state to have greater control over its economy and institutions and for immigration to be reduced, which they felt could not happen while the country remained a member of the EU.

### **Consequences**

All revolts are symptomatic of deeper currents. On the surface, the 2016 referendum offered citizens an opportunity to express their view about Britain's EU membership. But this always looked set to become an outlet for broader divides that had long been visible, as well as a long tradition of instinctive scepticism toward European integration.

Aside from having to negotiate and finalise its new relationship with the EU, within the domestic arena three challenges now face British politics.

The first is how to resolve the deep social and value divides that found expression at the 2016 referendum and were then entrenched by the 2017 general election. Amid a highly volatile environment, where lots of voters are switching from one election to the next, there are already the beginnings of a realignment.

At the 2017 general election, the pro-Leave Conservative Party benefitted from the fall of UKIP and polled strongest in white, less well educated, working-class and pro-Leave seats. Despite ambivalence on Brexit, the Labour Party gained most in middle-class and pro-Remain seats, reflecting how the divides that we explored have become even more rather than less central to explaining electoral choice in Britain.

Given that these divides are especially visible among the memberships of the two main parties, with Labour becoming even more socially liberal and the

Conservative Party more socially conservative, they look set to remain firmly on the landscape for many years to come.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, consensus seems unlikely. Consider what Leavers and Remainers want Britain to prioritise in the coming years: Leavers say Brexit, sharply reducing immigration, curbing amount spent on overseas aid and strengthening the armed forces; Remainers want to build more affordable homes, raise taxes on high earners, increase the minimum wage and abolish tuition fees. The only point of consensus is that both want to increase funding for the NHS.<sup>43</sup>

The second challenge is to deliver meaningful political and perhaps electoral reform. There remain big gaps in turnout; for example, at the 2017 general election the difference in turnout between middle-class degree-holders and working-class voters with no qualifications had soared from just 3 per cent in 1987 to 31 points.<sup>44</sup>

For some voters, the Leave vote was partly an exercise in regaining voice in a political system that had seemingly stopped listening to them years ago. The left behind and left out remain central to contemporary British politics yet since the referendum few have advocated ideas that might address these strong feelings of political, economic and social inequality, or deal with the considerable variations in levels of social mobility and educational attainment that plague modern Britain. We talk a great deal about the economy but little about the broader political settlement and how it might be improved. We talk a great deal about London but little about coastal, northern and rural Britain, where the Leave vote was strongest.

Aside from negotiating a Brexit deal that will adequately address the desire for greater national sovereignty, a final challenge is the need to reform immigration. Retaining the status quo is clearly unsustainable, not least because it is eroding overall trust in our political system. Most people want control yet they are also pragmatic; skilled migrants, international students and those who are seen to contribute to the broader community are supported; large amounts of unskilled or low-skilled migration are not. It is possible to deliver a reformed system that offers control and which is also progressive although that requires flexibility and compromise, both from the EU and Westminster.

A failure to address immigration will have political effects, although what these will be remains unclear. One possibility is that apathy continues to erode democracy from below; unresolved grievances translate into a general withdrawal from political

life. Another is that voters turn to a new populist and perhaps more extreme challenger. Given all that we have learned during the past two decades, the idea that Britain can 'fudge' immigration reform and that these voters will return to the mainstream fold seems unlikely.

As Britain approaches 'Brexit day' in 2019, therefore, the task of negotiating an exit from the EU is the primary challenge of today. But articulating and responding to the divisions that were laid bare by the events of 2016 will be the primary challenge of tomorrow.

## Notes

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- <sup>11</sup> In the 1976 (No.5) Eurobarometer survey, 39 per cent of UK respondents said their Common Market membership was a 'good thing', 45 per cent a 'bad thing'. They were significantly more likely than their counterparts to think it was a 'bad thing'. Eurobarometer July 1976. Available online: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/General/index> (accessed November 10 2016). On MORI polling see Menno Spiering (2004) 'British euroscepticism', *European Studies*, 20(1): 127-149.
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