Explaining Brexit in Terms of Political Identification

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Over the past decade, in a poll conducted by the EU in the standard Eurobarometer, there has been persistent sentiment of Europeans (55% in 2011 to 47% in 2019) indicating that things are going in the wrong direction from the perspective of the EU. It comes as no surprise that some countries have considered leaving the EU and political parties in such countries have been able to build a platform on anti-EU sentiment. One only has to think of UKIP in the United Kingdom, succeeded by the eponymous Brexit-party, which both took as their raison d'être the exit of the UK from the EU and its institutions.

A decade ago, hardly half of Britons defined themselves as what later became known as Brexiteers and yet this is now a common form of self-identification, the other camp being EU-Remainers. In fact, these new political identities are more strongly held than traditional party identities (Begum et al, 2021). While the vote in favour of Brexit was held in 2016, the lasting effect is still noticeable. During the 2019 General Election, Brexit was still seen as one of the two most important issues facing the country (the other being the coronavirus) and the current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was in part elected to "get Brexit done" (Begum et al, 2021).

Research by the British Election Study Internet panel (Evans & Schaffner, 2022) found that the Brexit identity became even stronger after the referendum. Before the 2016 referendum, as well as in 2017, the panel study found that voters were frequently switching allegiances, whilst major parties and their representatives were deciding what their position on Brexit was. Voters were deciding which party most clearly represented their view on the issue. Around 2019 Conservative support was made up to 80% of Leavers whilst for Labour it was 80% Remainers. The study found that voter volatility around this time in 2019 then fell to the lowest level since 1992.

Whilst Brexit identities within a short period of time have blossomed and Leave politicians were able to convince Britons soon to vote for their side, citizens self-identifying as Europeans rather (or in addition) to their own nationalities has been hesitant. This, despite the formation of two dedicated committees – in 1984 the Adonnino Committee – and the 'Committee for a People's Europe' promoting the European identity and the public image of the European Community. But as the polls show, European identity is still not present in the minds of citizens. So how were politicians

able to convince British nationals of their identity as Leave voters rather than Remain voters and what can be learned in terms of fostering a European identity rather than (as a complement to) national identities in the broader sense?

Brexit

The Importance of Culture in Explaining Brexit. Carl, Dennison and Evans (2019) review and discard existing explanations for why the UK's exit from the EU may have happened. They argue that previous explanations are insufficient at explaining why people voted for the UK to leave the European Union. Though there was significant circulation of misinformation, and dishonest arguments were used to deceive the voter throughout the campaign, Carl et al. write that the false arguments during the relatively short duration of the campaign were insufficient to be a determining factor in influencing the vote, this is also substantiated by Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley (2016). Carl et al. also discard district-level variations for the Leave campaign as a factor that is unable to change in the short-term (Becker, Fetzer & Novy, 2017). Euroscepticism as a proxy for voter frustration is discarded, since measures of Euroscepticism are found to be only minimally correlated with measurements of inequality and austerity across the EU (Carl et al., 2019). The accumulation of economic "losers" due to globalisation, and thus voting for Brexit, was similarly found to be insufficient as a measure. Globalisation losers in other EU countries are, after all, not found to be Eurosceptic (Carl et al., 2019; de Vries & Hoffmann, 2016).

Instead Carl et al. (2019) argue that all of these explanations are insufficient, as they only focus on national level phenomena rather than being generalizable to other countries. They hypothesize a weak sense of European identity in the UK, which instils doubt about the legitimacy of EU institutions. They provide data positing the UK's net opinion of their membership of the EU to be a bad thing over many years, implying that Britons were consistently less positive about their relationship towards the EU than other countries.

While Carl et al.'s article is not without inconsistencies (e.g. they doubt whether the Eurosceptic press in the UK, played a crucial role in forming opinion and cite the 1975 referendum in

which 67% voted to stay in the European Community, at which time the press was overwhelmingly in favour of the European Community in 1975), they provide an important argument for the cultural importance in explaining the decision of the UK to leave the European Union.

Identity.

Social identity theory holds that individuals derive their self-concept from knowledge of their membership in a group (or groups) and that they place value and emotional significance on that group membership with resulting perceptual and attitudinal biases (Tajfel, 1978; Turner et al. 1987).

Tajfel (1978) first suggested that the groups to which people belong - be these family, the social class or even the local football team - are an important component of self-esteem and provide individuals with a sense of belonging. Tajfel hypothesized, when putting people into groups and categories, the similarities within a group become exaggerated, while simultaneously highlighting the differences between the groups. Individuals will form groups based on the distinction from an out-group. The formation of groups extends also into the political realm where Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) first described party identification as a central aspect of political behaviour.

As an individual will maximize the difference between the in- and the out-group, it is hypothesized that this maximization will extend to the language that is used by the individual; in this case, the political or public actor.

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) people classify themselves into different categories and different people may use different categorization schemas. It is therefore hypothesized, in this research idea, that people may have multiple identities, which they may refer to and layer upon each other. Particularly self-categorization theory, an extension of social identity theory, supports this hypothesis as the theory postulates that a focus association with a group membership may shift dependant on the social context (Turner et al., 1987).

Language and Identity. The use of language is closely intertwined with a sense of nationalism. Benedict Anderson (1991) elaborates in detail how the formation of separate nations is closely linked to the creation of separate languages. For example, he recounts how Finland's national

language in the 18th century was originally Swedish and then became Russian after the union with the Russian empire but by 1820 the sense of nationalism seemed to awaken an interest in Finnish and the leaders of Finland's nationalist movement were all professionals that were closely linked to the Finish language by their profession (e.g. lawyers, teachers and writers). Anderson (1991) explains how the creation of folklore and thus the telling of stories went hand in hand with the publication of dictionaries and the standardization of the national language upon which further political action could be taken.

Populism and Identity.

According to Oliver and Rahn (2016) populism originates when existing political parties, which are often referred to as mainstream parties, are not responding adequately to the desires of large sections of the electorate. They term this difference the representation gap. They define the central aspect of populism to be a type of political rhetoric that pits the common people against the elite, while the groups are pitted as antagonistic towards each other and the elite is nefariously trying to undermine the sovereignty of the people. As such it is clear to see the parallel to social identity theory, since both have as an outcome a group dynamic of "us" versus "them". The sense of "us" according to Iliver and Rahn (2016) is created by defining the people as everyone that is not the elite, thus establishing sharp lines between the groups. Cohesion of the "us" is fostered by appealing to a solidarity that the people have been ill-treated by the elites therefore transcending regional and class cleavages between the people. The people are united under a common label despite having potentially different values or demands (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Additionally, appeals to social and economic nationalism are made to foster national identity. Only referencing and appealing to the people is the minimal defining characteristic of populism as a communication strategy by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), thus named "empty populism".

There are two other characteristics that are central to populism: anti-elitism and the use of simple language together with anti-intellectualism. Through the appeal against elites, tension is created between the in-group and the out-group. Elites are portrayed as living in ivory towers and only following goals for their own interest. (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Simple language is used through

the employment of colloquial terms and informal language. The goal is to create proximity between the politician and the public. According to Jagers and Walgrave (2007) complex language is to be feared, as it is able to deceive the ordinary citizen and consequently common sense is championed whilst expert knowledge is decried.

A good example of the employment of all three characteristics is former US President Donald Trump who utilised a simple rhetoric that is rife in anti-elitism and contains a high degree of collectivist language. Olivier and Rahn (2016) found that Trump scored high in targeting political elites particularly using blame language which invoked both foreign threats and collective notions of "our" and "they" and the simplicity and repetition of his language firmly engrained the message in the minds of the voters.

It is argued that particularly the use of populist rhetoric by the politicians in favour of Leave, was one of the catalysts which was able to evoke a strong sense of common identity. Thus, it is hypothesized in H2 that populism is mirrored in the rhetoric language of the campaign.

European Identity.

While in the 1980s the European Commission started promoting European identity and, in an effort reminiscent of nation-building, created symbols associated with the EU. Eco (2013) argues that the sense of European identity goes back even further than the European Coal and Steal Community in 1951 to the founding of the University of Bologna in 1088.

European symbols can be conventionally employed by nations, such as the creation of the European flag and the EU anthem, which was composed in 1823 by Ludwig Van Beethoven as his Ninth Symphony and is the musical interpretation of Friedrich von Schiller's 1785 poem "Ode to Joy". The anthem reflects both Beethoven and Schiller's vision of the human race being unified and is played at official ceremonies to celebrate European values. The most recognisable symbol of the EU is its flag dating back to 1955 when the then Council of Europe chose it to promote the European ideals and culture. It was adopded since then by the European Parliament (in 1983) and as emblems in the logos of six of the seven organs of the EU (the exception being the judiciary).

It is, however, not only the UK where anti-European public sentiment has reached the level of favouring a complete withdrawal from the union. In a 2016 poll, conducted by the Pew Research Centre before the British referendum on leaving the EU, a median of merely 51% across ten surveyed EU countries held a favourable view of the European Union. Favourability varies wildly, with Greece (71%) and France (61%) holding the most prominent of unfavourable views (Stokes & Stewart, 2016). The EU's reputation is that it is a somewhat technocratic institution and does not understand the needs of people (Wike, Fetterolf & Fagan, 2019).

Previously support for European integration has been characterized as an economic phenomnenon but with a shift in the process of European integration from a mostly economic to a more political project. Feelings of national vs European identity have been given increasing weight and the criteria under which the EU has been evaluated have included, apart from economic, also political considerations (Hooghe & Marks, 2004). Akbaba (2020) argues that political integration as defined by the EU does not mean forgoing national identities but instead aiming to integrate the diversity and pluralism of society in a post-national environment. Akbaba (2020) makes the argument that this is at odds with the minimum level of integration required in the relationship between the UK and the EU. The British voter according to Akbaba (2020) would be in favour of economic integration though is more Eurosceptic regarding a political integration and the influence it would have on sovereignty. This is reflected in the fact that one of the main slogans of Brexit Leavers was to «take back control» and with it British sovereignty as a more politically integrated Europe is not wanted.

Proposed Research Idea

As explained above, one of the major factors influencing the decision for Brexit is that of culture. The argument of national identity as opposed to European identity has played a prominent role in the arguments used by politicians to vote to leave the European Union. One of the main populist strategies is the "us vs them" appeal aimed at fostering campaign cohesion (us) and highlighting differences (them). It is evident that this appeal was featured prominently in the Brexit campaign. Due to the multi-layered identities present in Britain, who exactly the "us" is is highly dependent on the region in Britain. Although it was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and

Northern Ireland that voted for Brexit, only certain parts of the kingdom – namely England and Wales – voted to leave the European Union. Wales followed in the footsteps of England but only by a narrow majority. In contrast Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU.

This paper argues that learnings can be drawn from the failure of the Remain campaign to foster a sense of European identity as opposed to (in particular) English identity in order to strengthen European integration in the future.

It is suggested that research should, rather than on the voters' sense of identity, focus on the use of language by politicians in fostering identity. The case of Brexit is chosen for the unique parallels to the European integration project since several identities are at an interplay, notably English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish, which may be contrasted by politicians with British, Irish and European identity. Populist rhetoric may highlight in particular the in- and out-groups and make the distinctions between the identities more present, which is why RQ2A focusses on the distinction between populist and non-populist politicians use of language. Not strictly speaking part of the definition of populism, populist politicians are often characterised as being overly emotional and particularly employ negativity in their language (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). Politicians evoking emotions in voters through their use of language may mobilise them to vote resulting in H1. Though the populist Brexit party campaigned for Leave, as Gerstlé & Nai (2019) demonstrate in aggregated expert judgements, "mainstream" politicians may also be employing some populist tactics though in a weaker manner, thus H2 is worth investigating.

Manucci & Weber (2017) argue that future research on populism should investigate to what extent political actors employing populist discourse make different use of social media compared to other political actors. For this reason, both RQ 2a and 2b are specifically referring to the use of language on social media. Specifically Twitter, a tool frequently used by politicians to interact with their constituents is focussed upon.

Therefore, the following research question and hypotheses are formulated:

RQ1: What can Brexit and British identity or the lack thereof teach us about “Europeans” self-identification?

RQ 2a: Can populist rhetoric be related to identity in the arguments made by political and public actors in the UK and Northern Ireland regarding Brexit on Twitter?

RQ 2b: Are campaigners for Brexit more likely than their Remainer counterparts to use campaign messages based on group-identification to increase turnout on Twitter?

H1: Politicians in favour of Leave are more likely to use emotional arguments to motivate voter turnout.

H2: Politicians in favour of Leave used more populist rhetoric than politicians campaigning for Remain.

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