Fundamentally what factor of the European integration led the British people to vote to leave the EU?

Historically the European Union seems to be an elite-driven project, whether it is by top-down that European officials shaping institutions and policies of member states or bottom-up that member states' officials influencing the European-level institutions and policies (Borzel and Panke, 2019). In the European Union integration process, the citizens seem to have been taken for granted as passive recipients. For a long time, neither the EU officials nor the states' politicians took into consideration the public opinion about the EU. This negligence of public opinion and lack of interaction between the elites and the public may have created a big knowledge gap. In January 2013, when the British prime minister David Cameron outlined the British agenda for EU reform, he acknowledged the information gap between the EU and its citizens (Cini and Borragan, 2019). Due to this knowledge gap, citizens of the UK were uncertain about EU integration. This eventually led the Brexit. After 43 years of membership in the EU, the British citizens voted to leave the EU in 2016 with a narrow margin of 51.9% to 48.1%.

 The generic European Union integration refers to the process of political, legal, economic, industrial, social, and cultural integration of states wholly or partially in Europe. The starting of the EU integration goes back to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952. The initial objective of this cooperation was to build a war-torn economy and prevent wars between the member states through economic integration (Glencross, 2014). This led to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC) in 1958 (Jensen, 2019). Ultimately the EEC became today's EU, the European Union. The EU is composed of four main institutions. The European Commission, which is made up of commissioners chosen by the heads of state. Its role is to propose European laws in the common interest of its members. The European Council, which consists of ministers of the member states, whose role is to approve, modify, or reject the proposals of the Commission. The European Parliament, which represents the people of Europe, also gives its opinion on Commission proposals. And the European Court and Justice that rules over the legality of decisions taken (Bomberg, Peterson and Corbett, 2012). However, the question arises whether these political elites were and are sufficiently able to connect with citizens in formulating shared perspectives of the EU integration.

In the early days, the agreements and negotiations about European integration were seen as complicated for ordinary citizens (Guerra and Trenz, 2019). The neo-functionalists theorist of European integration, Haas argues that the drivers of the European integration are bureaucrats and elite officials. For Haas, it was impractical and unnecessary to have recourse to general public opinion surveys. This means that the elites of the European Union would make member states to do things whether they necessarily want it or not (Jensen, 2019). This still today reflects how citizens think about European integration. On the other hand, the intergovernmentalists argue that the member states are the drives of European integration. This is in the sense that commissioners are chosen by the heads of state must have national interests in European-level decision making (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter, 2015). Both of these theories share elite-driven perspectives as they focus primarily on what European officials do one way or the other.

However, even though consult with mass publics began recently due to increases in Euroscepticism among member states and the public sphere, it is still limited and primarily focused on around referenda campaigns. This public knowledge gap and limited involvement in the EU polity could be seen in the UE referendum's outcomes. For instance, France and the Netherlands voting against the constitutional treaty in 2005 and the subsequent rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland in 2008 highlights the importance of the public role in the integration project (Guerra and Trenz, 2019). However, the British people voting to leave the EU in 2016 was a turning point in EU integration.

The Brexit referendum leave campaign emphasized the cost of being a member of the UE, suggesting that UK spending money on the EU should be spent on domestic priorities. However, emigration seemed to be the primary concern. They strongly argued that the UK could have a fairer migration policy outside the UE. Meanwhile, the remain campaign failed to emphasize the benefit of EU integration. The costs and benefits of the EU membership have not been discussed effectively in the public sphere before apart from the referendum agendas. Therefore the British citizens might not have been fully aware of the benefits of its membership in the EU. Citizens' lack of knowledge about the actual trade-offs of being in the EU can expose them to manipulation of rising far-right ideologies like Nigel Farage and the UKIP party in the UK in the Brexit context (Webber, 2014).

To reduce the Euroscepticism among citizens and prevent possible disintegration can be achieved by making citizens understand concretely the costs and benefits of the EU membership and integration. The discussion between the commissioners and the citizens between the ministers and the citizens has to take place transparently. Politicians and policymakers have to inform their citizens about their aims and plans in a simple language instead of technocratic and technical debates. Therefore, if Europe is still only dealt with from the diplomatic efforts and perspectives the public distrust may rise and gradually leads to populism and exit (Guerra and Trenz, 2019). Therefore, the key element of protecting the EU from disintegration is to communicate and interact with its public effectively.

From its root, European integration seems to be an elite and enterprise led project. Citizens' opinions are not considered to be an important factor in the decision-making arena and are seen as passive recipients. The lack of interaction between the EU legislators and the public could have created a knowledge gap between them. This has created uncertainty about EU integration among citizens. However, public opinions shape election outcomes, and these outcomes shape politics as a whole.

(words: 1005)

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