PART I

THE UK AND BREXIT

2.   Why did the UK leave the EU? The state of the science of explaining Brexit

James Dennison

INTRODUCTION

Explaining why the United Kingdom (UK) left the European Union (EU) has become something of a cottage industry since 2016. Not only was the outcome a notable electoral upset, a constitution rupture for the UK and a clear vote of no confidence for the EU, but the campaign exposed seemingly hitherto hidden forces in society, existential questions for Britain and, arguably, advanced post-industrial democracies elsewhere. Moreover, the UK's long and difficult relationship with 'Europe' and the myriad dramatic political and economic events in the decade prior to the referendum offer observers a large choice of potential causal explanations for why Brexit happened. In this chapter I attempt to critically overview and connect this literature. I argue that there are roughly four categories of explanation for Brexit, each of which includes multiple distinct theoretical contributions.

First, historical and identitarian explanations have explained Brexit as the result of Britain's long-term discomfort with integration resulting from a lack of European identity, Eurosceptic political and media elite and, ultimately, a distinct political history, culture and geography. Second, socio-political explanations have focused on social transformations in the UK and beyond, notably in terms of immigration, the so-called 'losers of globalisation' or 'left behind' and an emerging 'value divide' and 'cultural backlash' based on tertiary education, amongst other things. Third, a range of explanations have argued that the vote was a proxy for discontent over other issues beyond Britain's relationship with the EU, primarily opposition to austerity, anti-establishment sentiment, non-political psychological motivations and English nationalism. Fourth, more proximate explanations have focused on the campaign itself – notably the weaknesses of the Remain campaign and the strengths of the Leave campaign. Despite being theoretically distinct, the numerous mechanisms within each category tend to have common strengths and weaknesses. Finally, I argue that, despite a rich literature that includes robust advances, there are important shortcomings to our understanding of why the UK left the EU, particularly (1) in terms of understanding over-time variation in British attitudes to membership and (2) in considering retrospective voting towards the object of the referendum, the EU itself.

HISTORICAL AND IDENTITARIAN EXPLANATIONS

The first group of explanations for Brexit focuses on the UK's long-term, anomalous character within the EU. Many of these explanations directly build on observations about the UK public's attitudes to and relationship with the EU prior to Brexit, or even to accession. Indeed, the UK had long been characterised as a country of 'reluctant Europeans' (Gowland and Turner,

1999) and an 'awkward partner' (George, 1998) within the European project. This has been explained primarily as either a result of the UK's anomalous lack of popular European identity or the UK's anomalous Eurosceptic media and political class and, more profoundly, its distinct constitutional and legal system, trading and migratory patterns, and historic trajectory, not least in terms of its Second World War experience.

Survey evidence, such as that from the Eurobarometer, clearly supports the notion that British scepticism towards the EU was deeper and more long-standing than that of other member states. Put most simply, as shown in Figure 2.1, optimism towards the effects of EU membership was consistently lower in the UK than across the EU. Furthermore, over the course of the UK's membership, the British public were the least likely of all member state publics to believe that EU membership had been a good thing. In 45 per cent of the Eurobarometer's (typically biannual) pan-EU surveys, the UK was bottom on this measure, and in 83 per cent it was in the bottom two, with British respondents typically offering anomalously Eurosceptic responses on a range of other questions (Carl et al., 2019). In terms of actual voting intentions, data from the 2016 European Social Survey further supports the view that the UK was particularly Eurosceptic. Whereas a slight majority supported withdrawal in the UK, in every other member state large majorities stated that they would vote Remain in a hypothetical referendum (Dennison et al., 2021; though this is liable to contagion effects), underscoring the fact that the UK's exceptional decision was not simply the result of being the only country to have a referendum on the subject. Furthermore, as Carl et al. (2019) point out, the UK's unique post facto referendum reflected rather than caused uniquely Eurosceptic pressures from the electorate on politicians.

However, the genuine anomalousness of the UK may have been exaggerated or, at the very least, such a narrative is simplistic. After all, in the 1970s the term 'reluctant Europeans' was used to describe the Nordic countries (Miljan, 1977; see also Gstöhl's 2002 application of the term to the Swiss), demonstrating, first, how such 'reluctance' need not be set in stone: by 2016, Denmark, Finland and Sweden had become more integrated than the UK and showed greater public support for membership. Moreover, the UK was a relatively *early* joiner to the then European Economic Community (EEC), being the primary motivation and driver of the organisation's first enlargement and the UK was, and possibly remains, less reluctant than other countries that never joined, such as Iceland, Norway or Switzerland. Finally, there are important differences between member states in how attitudes to European integration have evolved.

The notion of the UK's 'awkwardness' as a participant has also come under scrutiny from historians of European integration. Ludlow (2019, p. 35) characterises Britain's participation as simultaneously 'awkward' and 'an active – and successful – partner', notably in terms of the creation of the single market and enlargement. Ludlow goes on to explain the popular and academic emphasis on 'awkwardness' as the result of the UK's direct, confrontational approach vis-à-vis the EU and other member states and popular and media allusions to the Second World War and other historical 'continental' threats, as well as 'kith and kin' beyond Europe (for similar argument see Daddow and Oliver, 2016; though see Thompson's 2021 geopolitical interpretation of British 'awkwardness').

Social scientific attempts to theoretically explain this reluctance in the UK and elsewhere have typically built on social identity theory. Social identity theory predicts that identifying as 'a European' is a key cause of support for one's country's membership of the EU (McLaren, 2004; Hooghe and Marks, 2005), with national variation seen as rooted in history and Second
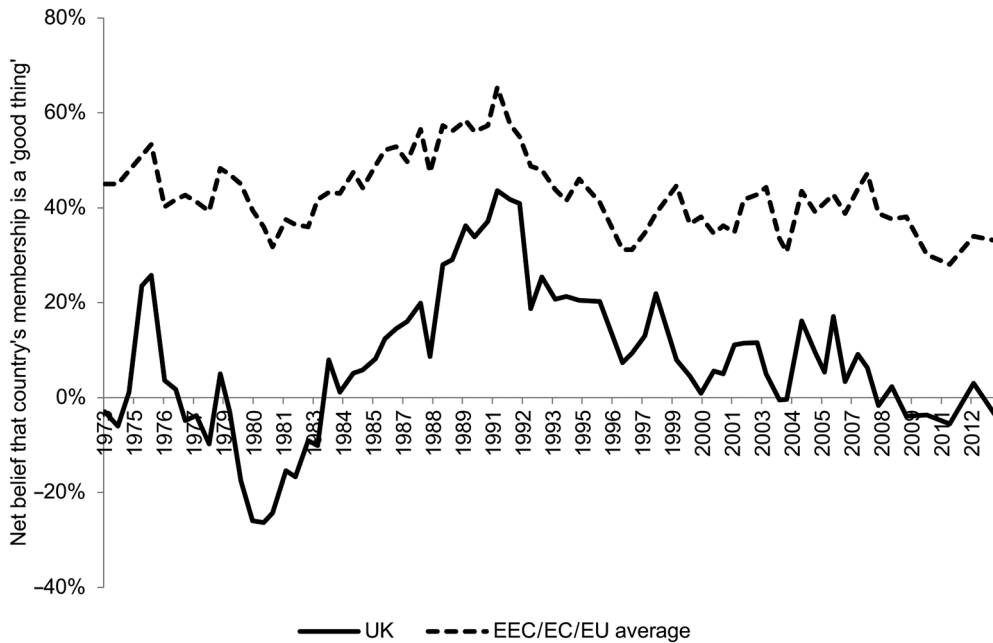
Figure 2.1   Net belief that membership of the EU has been a good thing for one's country, 1973–2013

World War experience (Díez Medrano, 2000). In terms of the vote itself, Carl et al. (2019; see also Dennison and Carl, 2016; Curtice, 2017; Evans et al., 2017) argue that the UK public was, in identitarian terms, 'European but not European Enough' for post-1992 levels of European integration and post-2004 rates of immigration. They highlight its anomalous and long-term lack of a European identity, showing that European identity explains a far greater proportion of national-level variation in support for membership than socio-economic, values-based or 'losers of globalisation' accounts, and that the UK is not an outlier on these alternative explanations *anyway*. They speculate on the deeper causes of this lack of European identity, which might be summarised as geographic isolation, a distinct legal and political system, a national-church (e.g. Kolpinskaya and Fox, 2021), notable constitutional and social links with former colonies outside of Europe (with some academics arguing about the effect of 'imperial nostalgia', e.g. Beaumont, 2018), and its Second World War experience, as well as its contemporary trading patterns, capital flows and emigration rates – all of which were the least Europeanised of any member state.

There are, however, good reasons to be sceptical of a purely identitarian explanation. First, as is shown in Figure 2.1, British attitudes to Europe experienced considerable variation, albeit in the form of secular trends, suggesting that, in some circumstances, Britons could be *overwhelmingly* pro-European. Second, European identity is unlikely to be entirely exogenous to attitudes to European integration. Although the former remained relatively stable in the UK in the 30 years prior to Brexit, it experienced an uptick after the referendum in the UK

and had been on the rise consistently across the rest of the EU, both of which suggest that such responses are more labile than 'social identity theory' might presume. Third, as Carl et al. (2019) point out, the UK had been 'European enough' for membership for 43 years so any explanation must also explain 'why now?'. They can only speculate on four important over-time explanations: (1) the 1992 Exchange Rate Mechanism crisis; (2) greater integration from the 1992 Maastricht Treaty onwards; (3) the Eurozone crisis and post-2004 enlargement; and (4) subsequent high levels of immigration.

On the latter point, Dennison and Geddes (2018) build on identitarian arguments to show how immigration to the UK became increasingly 'Europeanised' in legal, economic and demographic terms, ultimately clashing with Britons' stubborn lack of European identity. This resulted in an unwillingness to see fellow European citizens as anything but immigrants, which coupled with a public and elite-level consensus that effective immigration policy necessitates a balance between control and numbers. These trends made 'the Europe question' electorally difficult for Conservative politicians to ignore both as a threat and opportunity, particularly as it became linked to broader patterns of prejudice (Hutchings and Sullivan, 2019) and anti-immigration sentiment (Evans and Mellon, 2019; Dennison et al., 2020).

A second set of explanations for the UK's long-term reluctance focuses instead on the UK's anomalously Eurosceptic print media and political class. The British print media had long before the referendum been noted as Eurosceptic, emphasising the threat to Britain posed by EU institutions and integration (Hawkins, 2012). Daddow (2012) shows how the British print media became more Eurosceptic at the end of the 1980s, arguably preceding the popular turn against Europe in 1992 and potentially explaining the divergent trajectory between the British public and other West European publics. Gavin (2018) furthermore argues that the media may have increased attitudinal uncertainty over the years prior to the referendum. Hinde (2017, p. 81) notes the unusually political nature of the British press and that calls for a referendum on membership were made by tabloids as early as 1990, though is resigned to the effect of the media 'preparing the ground' for the referendum being 'impossible to calculate'. Although Carl et al. (2019, p. 299) offer reasons to doubt the causality and magnitude of the effect of media Euroscepticism on Brexit (notably in terms of the decline of print media), Foos and Bischof (2020) use the quasi-experiment of the widespread boycott of *The Sun* newspaper in Liverpool after 1989 to argue that avoiding this newspaper had an immediate negative effect on Euroscepticism in the city, lasting until the referendum.

Just as Britain's print media was probably an outlier in terms of its Euroscepticism, so was its political class, with sizable minorities of British MPs and MEPs advocating withdrawal in the years prior to the referendum. Moreover, a cursory glance through party election manifestos shows just how common and long-standing the use of referendums was across the political spectrum in attempting to appeal to an electorate of 'reluctant Europeans'. In the two general elections of 1974, the Labour Party promised (and then delivered) a referendum on membership. In 1979 and 1983 the Scottish National Party also promised such a referendum, while at the latter contest Labour promised immediate withdrawal. Only at the 1987 and 1992 general elections did no major party offer any form of referendum on Europe.

From 1997 onwards, however, the referendum manifesto pledges came thick and fast: that year, each of the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats promised a referendum on Euro membership while the Referendum Party secured 2.6 per cent of the vote on the single issue of a vote. UKIP promised immediate withdrawal and would do so again at every subsequent election. At the 2001, 2005 and 2010 general elections, the Conservatives promised

a referendum on any treaty change or joining the single currency, while Labour and even the 'pro-European' Liberal Democrats promised a referendum before joining the Euro at every election prior to 2015, with the latter *also* promising a referendum on membership in 2010. Finally, at the 2015 general election, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Greens each promised a vote on membership. Though the increasing promises of a referendum partially reflect electoral expedience, it may also be that Britain's post facto 1975 referendum on membership set a precedent (enabled by an uncodified constitution) that, uniquely, left its participation in European integration as the subject of legitimate questioning and reliant on a popular majority rather than being a fait accompli.

Overall, these historical and identitarian explanations for Brexit have several strengths. Most importantly, they explain the national-level phenomenon of Brexit – and the UK's long-standing relative 'discomfort' with membership – with various national-level factors on which the UK was indeed anomalous: popular identity and a Eurosceptic print press and political class. However, they thus far only speculate on, first, the deeper historical, constitutional, cultural and geographic causes for British deviation and, second, on the over-time variation in the UK's membership, begging the question of 'why now?'. Finally, they may be wrong to assume that the vote to Leave was a genuine reflection of a desire to leave, overlooking, first, the expansive findings on the complex determinants behind voting in referendums and, second, the similar socio-political forces transforming other western countries at the time of the referendum.

SOCIO-POLITICAL EXPLANATIONS

Perhaps the most voluminous set of explanations for Brexit are those that see it as one result of socio-political changes to Britain over preceding decades. Most of these explanations share the suppositions that: (1) the referendum reflected issues far deeper than the UK's membership of the EU; (2) it presented a unique opportunity for changing societal divides to be articulated in a way that had been previously concealed and constrained by the British party system; and (3) that these emerging societal divides are found across other advanced democracies, manifesting in the rise of populist radical right parties in Europe and the 2016 election of Donald Trump, to which Brexit is interpreted as analogous.

Hobolt (2016, p. 1260) argues that 'the sentiments that led to this outcome are by no means a distinctively British phenomenon' and reflect a 'divide between those who feel left behind by the forces of globalisation and mass immigration and those who welcome such developments'. Goodwin and Heath (2016, p. 331) use district-level analysis to conclude that:

> [T]he vote for Brexit was delivered by the 'left behind' – social groups that are united by a general sense of insecurity, pessimism and marginalisation, who do not feel as though elites … share their values, represent their interests and genuinely empathise with their intense angst.

Sobolewska and Ford (2020, p. 2) describe the Brexit vote as 'a moment when the social and political processes long underway finally became obvious, and the different groups of voters finally recognised themselves as two distinct and opposed camps', tracking the development of these groups – defined and exacerbated by educational expansion and demographic change, in ethnic and immigration terms from the post-war period onwards. They argue that these groups were activated by:

> [T]he gradual erosion of links between the traditional political parties and the electorate, the return of conflicts over immigration to the top of the political agenda and the emergence of a new party (UKIP) mobilising one pole of the identity divide. (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, p. 3)

In this sense, they also take a historical and identitarian approach, albeit one focused on social groups within Britain.

These explanations are influenced by and align neatly with cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) and the applications of that theory to explaining Europe's transforming party systems in the years prior to (and after) the Brexit referendum, notably in terms of the 'winners and losers of globalisation' and the expansion of higher education (e.g. Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Indeed, Sobolewska and Ford (2020) contribute to this literature by measuring 'Brexit identities' and how they endure after the vote.

These explanations share considerable empirical strengths. First, a variety of sources show that 'Europe' was hardly at the forefront of the British public's mind in the years prior to the referendum (Figure 2.2). Indeed, the proportion of British citizens listing it as one of the most important issues affecting the country declined quickly as membership of the Euro became a distant prospect. By contrast, 'immigration', typically assumed to be the defining issue of the emerging globalisation cleavage, chief lament of the 'left behind' and lightning rod of the radical right, soared in the years prior to the referendum. Second, the referendum's unexpectedly high turnout added further plausibility to the notion that it exposed social
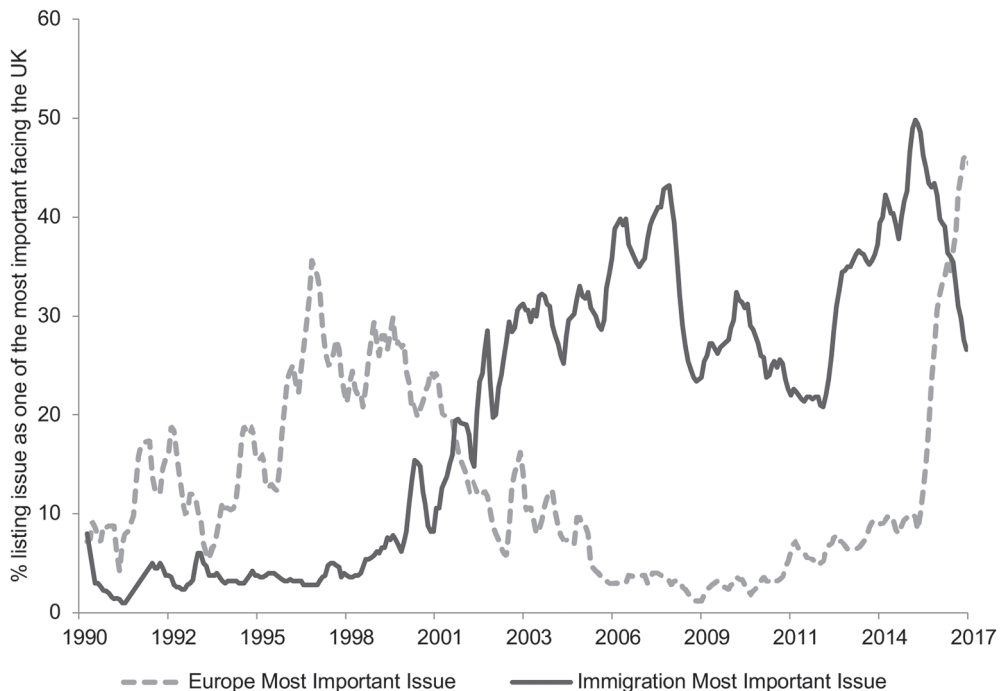
Source: Ipsos Mori, 'What are the three most important issues facing Britain today?' (from Dennison and Geddes, 2018, p. 1144).

Figure 2.2   Public issue salience of immigration and Europe

cleavages usually not expressed in general elections. Third, the proposed analogies between Brexit and other contemporary political events are by no means arbitrary – Euroscepticism, anti-globalisation and, particularly, anti-immigration rhetoric were all shared by analogous contemporary radical right parties and candidates.

However, evidence that Leave voters can genuinely be conceptualised as being 'left behind' or 'losers of globalisation' (both often conceptually underspecified) remains mixed (Chan et al., 2020). In Table 2.1, we can see how Britons who would go on to vote Leave and Remain, respectively, compare on variables that can be thought of as forming a basis for the 'winners and losers of globalisation', measured a few months before the vote (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). On objective measures of income and social grade, as well as self-described social class, Remain voters do appear more well off. However, in terms of economic pessimism, worsening financial circumstances, risk of unemployment and risk of poverty, there are only marginal differences between those who would go on to vote Leave and Remain.

Moreover, Green and Pahontu (2021) show that voters who have little wealth were far *less* likely to vote Leave, highlighting the importance of considering wealth – including home ownership – rather than just social grades and current income in any test of the 'losers of globalisation' thesis. This underscores a potential lack of conceptual clarity: how exactly have the 'losers of globalisation' lost from globalisation? Why have younger generations – in an arguably worse position in terms of home ownership, debt and an ability to start a family – not 'lost' from globalisation? Moreover, Carl et al. (2019) show that although some 'losers of globalisation' measures (e.g. views of globalisation, bad or worsening job situation, lack of trust in politicians) correlate positively with Euroscepticism at the national level, the UK low scores relative to the rest of EU member states suggest it would be one of the *least* likely countries to withdraw.

Table 2.1   *Differences between Leave and Remain voters according to the measures of key theories of referendum voting*

| Measures of key theories (with date at which the question was asked)	Leave voters	Remain voters
'Losers of globalisation'/'left behind' measures		
% household finances situation will get 'a lot' or 'a little' worse over next 12 months (June 2015)	32.8	32.4
% household finances got 'a lot' or 'a little' worse over last 12 months (May 2016)	33.6	31.0
% risk of unemployment over next year 'very' or 'fairly' likely (May 2016)	15.4	15.1
% receiving unemployment benefit (from May 2015)	1.8	1.4
% risk of poverty over next year ('won't have enough money') described as 'very' or 'fairly' likely (from May 2016)	21.0	19.0
Mean gross household income (£000s; May 2016)	27.0	33.0
Social class/Grade		
% self-describe as 'working class'	49.6	36.4
% social grade A-C1	55.4	72.4
% social grade C2-E	44.6	27.6
'Calculation, cues, community' (all from May 2016)		
% leaving EU will make personal financial situation 'better' or 'much better'	15.6	1.8
% who received and read the Government's official pro-Remain leaflet	51.2	50.0
Mean European identity (1–7 scale from 'not at all' to 'very strongly')	2.4	4.6

Source: British Election study, Fieldhouse et al. (2020).

Following Hooghe and Marks's (2005) classic theory of attitudes to the EU as based on 'calculation, cues and community', in Table 2.1, we also see how Leave and Remain voters varied across measures of each of their three factors. Only a small minority of 15.6 per cent of Leave voters thought that Britain leaving the EU would make them personally more well off, though this is far more than the percentage of Remainers who thought similarly. In terms of cues, Leave voters were actually slightly more likely to have read the government's pro-Remain official pre-referendum leaflet, though there was only a tiny difference between the two groups. Finally, in terms of community, we see that Leave voters had a far lower sense of European identity than Remain voters.

Though less clearly in the vein of cleavage theory, Evans et al. (2017) and Evans and Menon (2017) similarly see Brexit as resulting from previous concealed social divides. However, rather than viewing the social divides as particularly new, they see the key divide as a long-standing class division concealed by the party system, which had seen the working class electorally marginalised as the mainstream parties converged on a socially liberal consensus from the 1990s onwards, abetted by Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system. In this view, the referendum was a chance for long-standing working-class attitudes on immigration and Europe to be articulated for the first time since Labour took on a pro-European position – and the higher immigration and more modest European integration in the meantime – reflected in the high turnout of the referendum compared to recent low turnout general elections.

However, one of the major changes in British attitudes to the EU was the sharp drop in pro-European attitudes amongst the highest social grades. In Figure 2.3, we see how those in 'professional' and 'manual' occupations changed their preferences regarding European integration between 1993 and 2013. Manual workers have consistently been less pro-European than professional workers, however, in 1993 there was considerable enthusiasm amongst this group for either greater integration (21 per cent) or the creation of a single European state (10 per cent) – with the two figures falling to 4 and 2 per cent, respectively, by 2013. At first glance, the 'losers of globalisation' thesis stands up based on this decline. Yet almost the exact same fall in support happened amongst professional groups, albeit from a higher constant. Whereas in 1993, 21 per cent of professionals wanted further integration and another 19 per cent wanted a single European state (!), by 2013 these figures had fallen to 7 and 4 per cent, respectively. The major class divide by 2013 was not about positivity or negativity to European integration, but whether it should be reduced (57 per cent of professionals and 36 per cent of manual workers) or Britain should withdraw altogether (15 per cent of professionals and 36 per cent of manual workers). This all goes to show, however, that amongst all social grades, support for *outright* withdrawal from the EU was a minority position in the years prior to the referendum. How, then, did this change after 2013? This is discussed in the next section on proxy explanations and cleavage effects.

However, a further, final set of socio-political explanations also frame Brexit as the result of an emerging political cleavage common to many 'western' countries, but place less emphasis on the social underpinnings of this cleavage and more on its psychological basis, primarily in terms of values. Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that Brexit was one manifestation of a 'cultural backlash' against the earlier 'silent revolution' in values, with the referendum seeing 'populist' values pitted directly against 'cosmopolitan' ones (see also Chan et al., 2020). Other scholars have similarly argued that 'all told, the Brexit story is mainly about values, not economic inequality' (Kaufmann, 2016) and claimed that the referendum reflects an increasingly important value divide (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Evans and Menon, 2017; Ford and
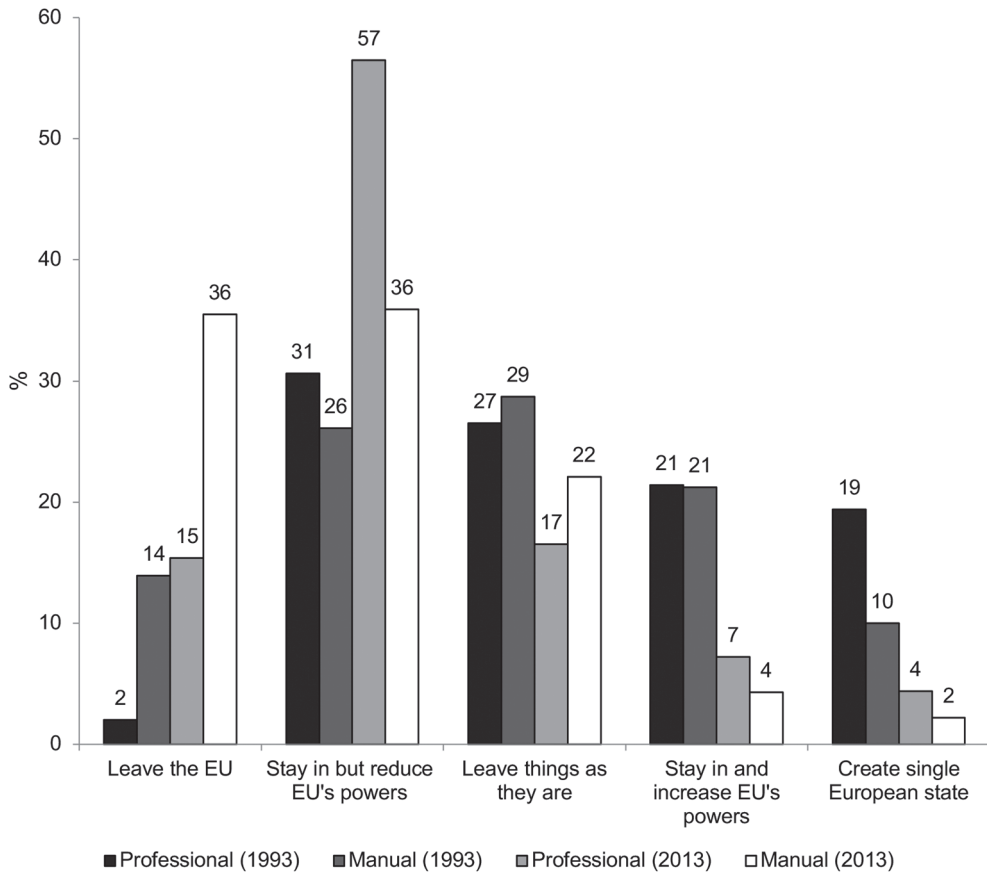
Source: British Social Attitudes (1993, 2013).

Figure 2.3   *Attitudes to the relationship between the UK and EU, professionals and manual workers in 1993 and 2013*

Goodwin, 2017; Koch, 2017; Arnorsson and Zoega, 2018; Andreouli et al., 2019), operationalising values as political attitudes towards social issues such as the death penalty. Dennison et al. (2020) also take a values-based approach to explaining individual-level voting variation, however, instead of using political values or attitudes, they introduce a non-political, personal psychological schema – Schwartz's theory of basic human values, 'one's guiding motivational goals in life'. They show that, of these, valuing universalism increased the chance of voting Remain whereas valuing conformity, security and tradition increased one's chance of voting Leave, with the effects primarily indirect, via attitudes to immigration and European identity (see Dennison et al., 2021 for comparison with dynamics in other member states).

PROXY EXPLANATIONS AND CAMPAIGN EFFECTS

Several explanations for Brexit argue that the referendum was not actually fought over Britain's relationship with the EU, but instead the referendum was a proxy for other issues. While these accounts offer insights into how an outright majority for Leave was attained, they tend to share common shortcomings in terms of underspecification of the causal mechanism and considerably smaller effect sizes than the factors mentioned above (see Chan et al., 2020). The first set of explanations – relating to anti-austerity sentiment, inequality and poverty – saw widespread popularity in the aftermath of the referendum, not least in the popular press. Indeed, poorer areas of the UK were found to be more supportive of Brexit (Becker et al., 2017), while later dynamic analyses at both the individual and district levels found a positive effect of austerity-induced welfare reforms on support for Leave (Carreras et al., 2019; Fetzer, 2019). That said, Carl et al. (2019) point out that measures of inequality and austerity show little relationship with support for the EU at the national level, while surveys of voters that directly asked why citizens voted as they did found little evidence that 'austerity' or 'inequality' were driving factors (Prosser et al., 2016).

Second, some academics and pundits interpreted the vote as a reflection of widespread anti-incumbent or anti-establishment sentiment (e.g. Iakhnis et al., 2018). Again, this interpretation received widespread popularity in the immediate aftermath of the vote but also receives considerable theoretical and empirical support from past referendums on European integration across Europe (e.g. Franklin et al., 1994; Frankin et al., 1995; Hobolt, 2009). It also aligns with UKIP's clearly anti-establishment messaging in the years and decades prior to the referendum (Dennison and Goodwin, 2015), a tactic that worked particularly well after the Conservatives moved to the centre under David Cameron's leadership from 2005 onwards (Goodwin and Dennison, 2018).

Third, a range of psychological predictors have been applied to predicting voting in the referendum, aside from values as discussed above, not all of which can be overviewed in this chapter. For example, the personality trait of 'openness' (one of the Big Five) has been shown to predict voting Remain (Garretsen et al., 2018), while unhappiness (Liberini et al., 2019) has been shown to predict Leave voting. Although at risk of pathologising opposition to British membership of the, at that point, crisis-beleaguered EU, there are several psychoanalytic explanations (see Nielsen and Capelos, 2018) and ethnographic-based findings, for example, regarding 'apathy, anger and frustration' (Mckenzie, 2017) or 'anger, hate and passion' (Manners, 2018) as drivers of the vote to Leave. Aside from political psychological and psychoanalytic approaches are a number of cognitive studies that find that both Remainers and Leavers held similarly widespread and ideologically informed misperceptions about the EU, though the magnitude of misperceptions may have been greater among Leavers (Stoeckel et al., 2021).

The fourth and final proxy-based explanation argues that the vote to Leave was an expression of English nationalism (Henderson et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2017), as evidenced by (1) England being one of two of the four 'home nations' in which a majority voted Remain and (2) the repeatedly demonstrated effect that English identity was positively associated with support for Leave. However, others have offered caution about the plausibility of this explanation (Kenny, 2016). Indeed, a majority in Wales (52 per cent, the same as England) and large minorities in Scotland (38 per cent) and Northern Ireland (44 per cent) voted in favour of Brexit, few of whom are likely to be English nationalists. Moreover, few, if any,

voters surveyed since the referendum have listed English nationalism as a motivation for their vote decision. Indeed, it seems more likely that British nationalism, which is most prevalent in England, Wales and amongst Northern Irish unionists, though existing to various extents across all four home nations, explains support for Leave. Henderson and Wyn Jones (2021), building on earlier work, show that Britishness has different meanings in different parts of the UK and that support for Leave in England is associated with grievances about England's treatment in the Union. All that said, Hobolt (2016) shows the effect size of European identity on vote choice was at least four times larger than either English or British identity. Chan et al. (2020) add further nuance by showing that British identity predicts greater Leave support when considered on its own, but greater Remain support when juxtaposed against English identity.

A second group of explanations that seek to explain Britain's turn towards a pro-Leave majority in the final years before the referendum focus on dynamics during the referendum campaign and the preceding renegotiation. During and after the referendum, commentators have argued that the Leave campaigns actively misled the public, summarised succinctly as 'the lies we were told' (Wren-Lewis, 2018; see also Cooper, 2021 on misinformation and populist rhetoric during the campaign). These arguments build on earlier works regarding Britain's long-term anomalously Eurosceptic media that primed and legitimised a campaign based on 'strategies of fear, resentment and empowerment' (Zappettini, 2021, p. 277). Glencross (2016, p. 35) argues that '[n]othing was inevitable about the Brexit vote: the campaign mattered profoundly' and that the campaign was undermined by the Remain campaign's focus purely on economics at the expense of positive arguments about integration or identity issues (see also Goodwin et al., 2020). Clarke et al. (2017) show how the renegotiation did little to absolve Eurosceptic fears so that when polls are compared using dynamic factor analysis (Clarke et al., 2016), Leave had the lead throughout the entire campaign. Others (e.g. Williamson, 2019) have argued that the lack of an emphatically pro-EU, social democrat political leader outside of Scotland during the campaign undermined Remain, with David Cameron leading a divided Conservative Party and the historically Eurosceptic Jeremy Corbyn leading Labour. Moreover, Shaw et al. (2017, p. 1020) argue that Leave won because its campaign 'focused on a more consistent and tightly focused set of campaign themes, provided more explanation of those themes, and focused more on their own core issues than Remain'.

THE STATE OF THE SCIENCE OF EXPLAINING BREXIT

In the years following the referendum, a wealth of explanations has been offered to explain voting dynamics and, ultimately, why Britain voted to Leave the EU, something that had seemed an unlikely prospect only a few years earlier. All of these have strengths and weaknesses, and many are beginning to be incorporated into the wider literature on Euroscepticism in the UK and beyond (e.g. Gastinger, 2021).

Historical and identitarian explanations have linked Britons' evident long-term 'reluctance' to integrate with the 2016 result, pinpointing it as the primary reason for Brexit and explaining it either, with external validity, as the result of an anomalously low popular sense of European identity or, less robustly, as the result of a particularly Eurosceptic media and political class. However, neither of these explanations can explain the considerable variation across time in attitudes to the EU throughout membership, including periods of high levels of support even

for further integration. Indeed, over-time explanations so far have been speculative, focusing on high-profile events related to the EU – the 1992 ERM crisis, treaty change (particularly Maastricht and Lisbon), the Eurozone crisis and post-2004 immigration from Central and Eastern European countries. Similarly, the roots of this lack of European identity have also been postulated but less commonly tested. Furthermore, the extent to which variation in European identity is genuinely exogenous to attitudes to the EU is debatable (although this is probably even more the case for explanations based on a Eurosceptic media or political class) while other EU member states have seemingly resolved early worries about sovereignty to become comfortable with membership, highlighting the shortcomings of any deterministic accounts.

Socio-political accounts see Brexit as just one political result of ongoing changes to British society and other 'western' democracies, particularly in terms of globalisation and its economic and migratory effects, but also the expansion of higher education. According to this explanation, the victory of Leave was the result of 'those who feel left behind by the forces of globalisation and mass immigration' outnumbering 'those who welcome such developments' (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1260). Indeed, the referendum secured an unexpectedly high vote share amongst those with less education and those in social grades C2 to E. That said, Leave voters have also been shown to have relatively *higher* wealth and there is little difference between the Leave and Remain voters in self-described financial or employment worries, despite Leave voters being far more likely to self-describe as 'working class'. Moreover, Britons in professional positions turned against Europe in a similar fashion to those in manual occupations in the 20 years prior to the vote, albeit from a higher constant, begging the question of how exactly people had lost from globalisation, if at all and when. Other scholars have similarly framed Brexit as the result of socio-political divisions, but in terms of the social psychology of values, rather than the threat of globalisation. However, it remains unclear why moves to post-material values, greater higher education or otherwise should make the UK *more* Eurosceptic over time and, more pressingly, why it was the UK that voted to Leave rather than one of the numerous other member states in which the (ever more conceptually stretched) 'losers of globalisation' are more prevalent by reasonable measures.

Several theoretically distinct explanations have seen the referendum as a proxy vote for other issues, so that Brexit was caused by, respectively, austerity, anti-establishment sentiment, numerous psychological indicators or English nationalism. These explanations, alongside those focusing on the effects of the campaign, share the strength that up until the years before the referendum there was no overwhelming appetite for outright withdrawal, with reducing the powers of the EU instead a considerably more popular position. Similarly, some of the findings about the local or individual-level effects of austerity do seem robust, if somewhat small. That said, they still cannot explain why the UK, rather than another member state, left, given far harsher austerity, higher inequality and more prevalent deprivation elsewhere. The same is the case for the explanatory plausibility of anti-establishment (or anti-incumbent) voting – why not elsewhere? It may be, then, that these proxy explanations were enough to push Britain over the edge, while more fundamental factors did the causal heavy lifting. One analytically distinct approach focuses on the four 'home nations' of the UK and argues that widespread frustrations over national identity in one – England – caused Brexit. While it is true that English identity is positively associated with Leave voting, its explanatory power is still far weaker than that of European identity and it remains a theoretical stretch given the majority

for Leave in Wales and large minorities in Northern Ireland and Scotland, as well as the lack of an obvious causal mechanism.

Finally, one of the more considered factors in the months after the referendum was the controversial and even violent nature of the campaign, which has been portrayed as misleading and 'to blame' for the victory of Leave. However, evidence about the effect of the campaign remains mixed and certainly insufficient, thus far, to label it as the cause of Brexit, even if its unprecedented and eventful nature give scholars plenty of causes to point the finger at and primary accounts from those involved in respectively managing the Remain, and especially Leave campaigns argue for this notion (Blanchard, 2021).

With all of this in mind, I argue that, despite a rich literature, there are still important shortcomings to our understanding of Brexit and two in particular. First, while the differences between voters are well known, if not over-determined (a weakness in itself), and the UK's various anomalous characteristics are at least analysed, the temporal dimension of the UK's departure remains overlooked. This is a crucial shortcoming given the clear, secular trends in support for the EU throughout membership – which, to an extent, were common across the EU – suggesting important causes of over-time variation that, at the very least, are currently underexplored. Second, the object of the referendum – the EU – has almost entirely escaped analysis for what was, after all, a successful vote of no confidence (though see de Vries, 2019 for relative assessments of national and EU government, and Vasilopoulou, 2016 for pre-referendum consideration of the likely importance of retrospective voting). This is all the more stark given the numerous crises affecting the EU at the time of the referendum and the importance of 'retrospective voting' across other areas of electoral studies (Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Scholars hoping to better under Brexit should consider these as two pressing areas of research, while integrating the theories listed above and, hopefully, building on their strengths and overcoming their weaknesses. Doing so would further improve the already rich state of the science of explaining Brexit.

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