

## Democracy in the 2016 Brexit Vote

The controversy surrounding the United Kingdom's decision to remove itself from the European Union may prove to be more intense than the storm of conflict surrounding Henry VIII's break from the Catholic Church. The United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum, a 2016 vote nicknamed the "Brexit" for its proposed plan to have the United Kingdom (UK) leave the European Union (EU), quickly rose to fame all over the world. Part of this fame stemmed from the fact that groups on both sides of the decision proved to be ruthless in their campaign efforts. Moreover, with the actual vote being determined by a 51.9% majority from the pro-Leave side, one can only imagine the intensity of disagreement and strife rampant among the United Kingdom's population as it waits to see the results of this decision play out in Britain's political and economic spheres (Hobolt 1259). When viewed through a democratic lens, the Brexit vote derives its importance as one of the biggest catastrophes in recent British history due to its polarizing effect on the United Kingdom and the hazy implications the decision has for the future of the British political and economic structures. Beyond this, the Brexit vote also raises questions on the morality of secession and the process with which it should be conducted within a democracy.

Started in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way to unite the European continent after almost 100 years of brutal warfare, the European Union provided a necessary structure of solidarity among its member nations intended to stymie any future conflicts. Since then, the EU has played a major role in every important decision within the United Kingdom. Overall, it has given the UK a close connection to its neighboring countries that has added diversity and strength to the nation (Bachtler 745-746). Though this union may seem extremely beneficial to the UK, the Conservative Party has disagreed on this topic for years. In an attempt to reduce mounting

internal tensions over the issue of immigration, the Conservatives added a referendum to their 2015 party platform that would allow citizens to vote on whether or not they believed the UK should remain in the European Union. After the Conservative Party came away with a victory in that 2015 election, the government started preparations for the referendum. Though many political officials were convinced the country would vote to remain in the European Union, the nation became more polarized than expected. The pro-Remain side, nicknamed “Britain Stronger in Europe,” seemed poised to walk away with victory at first. But as it got closer to the date of the vote, the pro-Leave campaign, called “Vote Leave,” began to pick up speed. The pro-Leave side ultimately won the vote, sending Britain into a whirlwind of intense conflict (Hobolt 1261-1262).

Groups on both sides of the referendum employed scare tactics that severely divided the nation. The lenient immigration policies within the European Union created a strong sense of fear in Britain and caused many people to favor leaving the organization. The fact that being a part of the EU makes it easier for people in regions like Eastern Europe and the Middle East to move in and out of the UK raises questions about national security and highlights a need for more border control. Not only does immigration affect safety, but in many people’s minds, the addition of more people means less availability in the job market (Johnson S19). Because the system of democracy runs on the principle that the side with the most votes wins everything, it became important for each side of the referendum to garner as much support as possible. One of the most effective ways to gain this necessary support is to promise people that by choosing your side, their fears will be eliminated. This is exactly what the pro-Leave side did. Though the extent to which the EU’s loose immigration policies affect the UK can never fully be quantified, the Vote Leave side capitalized on a national problem of security in a world that is anything but

secure. Members of this side saw secession as a nationalistic opportunity to finally take back control of their country and take the problem of immigration and safety into their own hands (Hobolt 1262-1263) (Taylor-Gooby 827).

But the pro-Leave side was not the only campaign to catch wind of the value of using scare tactics to augment the number of their supporters. The pro-Remain side stirred up fears of economic turmoil associated with leaving the European Union. Though it may be an unfortunate truth, there are few things people care more about in life than money. It is an innate part of human nature to protect what is close to us, and the fact that money is one of those things demonstrates the degree to which the thought of losing it can inspire people to do anything in their power to keep it, which in this case meant voting to remain. The Britain Stronger in Europe group not only induced fear into the electorate by insinuating an inevitable economic crash if Britain left the European Union, but it also spread fears that the UK would be leaving behind beneficial economic strategies associated with the EU. This use of fear tactics on both sides further demonstrates just how catastrophic this vote was within Britain. This intense magnitude of polarization created through the use of scare tactics is bad for the UK in the sense that internal division in a nation disturbs the peace and prevents any effective political progress towards a sound and successful nation (Hobolt 1262-1263) (Taylor-Gooby 827).

Demographics associated with the two sides created out of the use of fear tactics discussed above resulted in even further divisions within the nation. Because the only guaranteed way to win through the democratic system is to win a majority of the votes, people must ally with large groups of the population that will likely dominate the vote in order to have their voice heard. This means that people with common backgrounds and experiences find it beneficial to associate themselves with one another in the same party in hopes of expressing their

thoughts. This strategy explains why demographic factors like education level are major reasons for the establishment of different sides of the vote. Typically, people with a higher level of education are the ones who reap the rewards of the current state of global interconnectedness that can be seen within the EU. This is because better-educated people are more able to clearly understand the benefits associated with this cooperation among nations and can better appreciate the diversity that comes with the different cultures and beliefs around Europe. Unlike the less-educated people in labor-intensive jobs, highly educated people are not in constant fear that a flush of immigrants may steal their jobs. Likewise, people with a better education are more able to understand the economic benefits of remaining part of an integrated European system rather than having Britain try to maintain a powerful economy on its own. Because of this, the better-educated people were less likely to be struck by a fear of immigration and more likely to be afraid of economic problems discussed in the previous paragraph that could result if the UK left the EU. Therefore, the more highly educated people were much more likely to vote with the pro-Remain side, whereas poorer, less-educated people were more likely to ally with the pro-Leave side. This discrepancy in education pitted the educated and uneducated against each other in the political sphere, highlighting even further the intense amount of separation the Brexit created within Britain. This separation is even more intense than the case of separation described earlier in that it now divides people based on their own personal attributes. This makes citizens personally feel like enemies, and this level of animosity is bad for a nation in that it is extremely difficult for lawmakers to create a functioning nation with so much hatred rampant among its citizens (Hobolt 1267-1269).

Much like the issue of education discussed above divided the nation between the pro-Leave and pro-Remain sides, the way in which a person identified himself or herself within the

UK also split up the nation between the two groups created through the use of the scare tactics discussed previously. Many of the people in the UK choose to either identify themselves with Britain or choose to more broadly assert their identity with Europe as a whole. The side with which people identified themselves during the campaign certainly affected the vote, causing even more enmity among the British citizens. Not unexpectedly, people who identified themselves as British were more likely to vote pro-Leave. This is because people who claim themselves to be British and not just European recognize that there is an obvious difference between the UK and the rest of Europe, and they choose to associate themselves with only Britain. In order to do this, a person must have an extreme sense of pride in their home country, and therefore these people for the most part voted to leave the European Union in order to take back the country that they love so much. On the other hand, people who more broadly associated their identity with that of Europe as a whole did not feel the same intense pride as the people who simply claimed British nationality; therefore, they sided with the pro-Remain side of the campaign in order to preserve what they perceived as their home. The fact that this vote inspired people of the same nation to solidify definitions of themselves with different identities just further shows how much the Brexit divided the British people. This again causes problems for Britain in that if people within the same nation do not even identify themselves together, it becomes impossible for the nation to create a strong, unified front necessary to create policy and protect itself (Hobolt 1266-1270).

Beyond causing great divisions between the British people, the Brexit vote was also disastrous in that it left the UK with a number of political and economic problems. One of the biggest perks of being a member of the European Union is the free trade agreement among the member nations. Once the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, they will no longer be a part of this system. Britain has relied on this system of trade since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the

fact that it will now have to adjust to trading without it will be a difficult change for the nation. Trade is a major part of what makes up a nation's GDP, which is an indicator of how healthy a nation's economy is; therefore, any reduction in the amount of trade a nation does is a severe blow to its economy. Because of this, the Bank of England has lowered its expectations in the amount of expected growth in GDP (Johnson S17). The lower the GDP, the worse the nation's economy, and the worse the nation's economy, the harder it is for the nation to protect the rights of its citizens and support their needs (Taylor-Gooby 829).

Leaving this EU trading agreement behind sparked one of the most obvious and immediate economic effects of the Brexit vote: directly following the Brexit decision, the value of the British pound dropped, reaching the lowest it has been since September of 1985 (Johnson S16). Now, a year after the referendum, the pound has fallen 15% compared to the Euro. This drop in the value of Britain's currency is bad for Britain in that like the loss of free trade discussed above, this lower value of the pound also lowers the nation's GDP. This is because a lower currency does not allow the nation to trade as much. This decline in the value of the pound also demonstrates the power with which a single election in a democracy is associated. By simply casting one vote to leave or remain in the European Union, the people of the UK were able to immediately impact the economy of their nation in a very poor way (Taylor-Gooby 829).

But the problems associated with trade and currency are not the only adverse economic effects of the referendum. Predictions of future implications of the UK's secession from the European Union highlight the amount to which this decision will impact the lower classes economically. There is a big divide between the rich and the poor in the United Kingdom. As a nation with 23.5% of its population in poverty, the highest level of poverty in Western Europe, Britain has for a long time been trying to establish policies to alleviate this burden from almost a

fourth of its population. However, with the intense amount of polarization mentioned above and the compounding economic effects of the Brexit also previously noted, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a new, independent Britain to create effective policies to efficiently fix this problem in the future. Without fixing these issues, productivity will stay down and quality of life will fall, eventually making it hard for the UK to raise enough taxes to support its welfare systems, most important of which is its healthcare system. With the stress of a poor economy comes even more intense internal divisions, creating a spiraling effect of difficult division and economic problems that more or less compound on each other and produce no feasible solutions. Once again, this shows the disastrous effect the Brexit has had on Britain (Taylor-Gooby 822-831).

Not only did the Brexit vote have harmful economic effects on Britain, but it also gave birth to a plethora of political issues that are sure to plague the nation in both the near future and for generations to come. First and foremost, the decision to leave the European Union forced Prime Minister David Cameron to resign, causing a transition of power that was not ideal for a time period in which the government already had enough problems to deal with. On top of all the commotion rampant in Parliament during the vote, the addition of a leader with little experience and different beliefs only added to the immense dilemmas caused by the Brexit. The fact that this new leader was not as experienced in the role of prime minister links back to the economic effect discussed earlier about the need for effective policy creation in order to remedy the division between the rich and poor in the UK. This is because it is much harder for an inexperienced leader to create effective policy, once again demonstrating how the political and economic effects of the Brexit vote are disastrous for the UK (Wincott 429).

Much like the vote polarized the people within the UK, it also caused political problems to rise up among member nations within the UK, specifically Scotland and Northern Ireland. Because both of these regions voted to remain in the EU rather than secede, both nations found it unfair that they were forced to comply with what the UK voted for as a whole rather than their own individual preferences. This feeling of unfairness prompted Scottish Prime Minister Nicola Sturgeon to ask for permission from the UK to hold an independence referendum within Scotland in 2019 (McHarg 524). Likewise, the idea of Northern Ireland leaving the EU after it had voted to remain a part of the organization brought up the possibility of a vote in Northern Ireland on whether or not to secede from the UK and unify with Ireland (Gormely-Heenan 505). The fact that two out of the four states that make up the United Kingdom have intentions of trying to secede from Britain as a result of the decision in the Brexit vote demonstrates how disastrous the vote was for the UK politically. Not only does the potential loss of one half of the UK's states influence its political power across the globe, but the fact that the UK will no longer be a part of the EU also diminishes the size of its authority worldwide. This further demonstrates the harmful effects of the Brexit vote in that by leaving the EU and becoming a smaller nation, the UK loses some of its political influence worldwide, therefore also losing its power to trade and negotiate with other nations effectively (Dee 528-531).

Lastly, after polarizing the nation and creating lasting political and economic impacts within the UK, the Brexit vote was also bad for Britain in that it raised questions about the morality of secession and the process of doing so within a democracy. One famous evaluation on secession presented by Buchanan offers an in-depth analysis on this topic. This discussion talks about how the state seceding must consider the moral principles already defined within the organization it is leaving behind in order to deduce whether the act of secession would be



promoting these morals. Based on the general theories of ethics already discussed within the EU, did the act of secession fit within those ideas of morality? This is the question Britain should have asked itself before deciding to jump ship. The fact that the UK held a vote solely within its own nation and did not consider how this decision would fit within the moral principles of the EU is unethical. The principle of democracy states that all parties involved in a decision should be able to voice their thoughts on any proposed plan of action. Great Britain's disregard for the impact of their secession on the rest of the European Union proves immoral in that the entire decision was one of a selfish nature in which the UK put its own well being ahead of the well being of the rest of the organization. This further demonstrates how the Brexit was bad for Britain in that in this specific scenario, the process of secession was not handled in a just way and set a bad example for the way secession should be conducted within a democracy (Lee 209-211).

Much like the discussion talks about how a nation should consider the morals within the institution it is leaving before it decides to do so, it also discusses that in order to be ethical, it is important for any region attempting to secede to also consider the secession's impact on the state or organization it is leaving behind. Applying this notion more specifically, it means that it was only moral for the UK to decide to leave the EU once it had considered the impact this would have on the rest of the EU. In this case, if the idea of Britain leaving the EU produced any possible negative impact on the organization, then the UK ought to have stayed in the EU, and if the UK's secession was projected to benefit the EU, then the UK ought to have seceded. This highlights further how the principle of democracy is designed to involve and benefit all territories within either a state or a region, and in order to be morally just in the process of secession, one must consider the impact on all parties and not just on their own region. The fact

that Britain did not do this is again bad in that this means the UK is setting even worse of an example of immoral secession that might prompt other nations around the world to also secede in an unjust way (Lee 209).

Furthermore, now that the UK has set an example of unjust secession, who is to say that regions within the UK or other nations will not try to follow this example and attempt to break away on their own? This also becomes dangerous in that the threat of nationalistic secessions would cause governments to put preventative policies in place in order to put down these nationalistic groups. Their reasoning in doing this would be to stop any regions within their country from leaving. This violates the entire purpose of democracy in itself. If people are no longer able to express their own nationalistic beliefs, then the idea of being able to voice an opinion and vote on it is all a lie. This all shows that the Brexit vote was ruinous within Britain in that, as discussed above, it produced an example of unjust secession that could be reproduced in other regions or nations within the UK or Europe, creating an entirely new political problem within these nations or organizations and compounding on the political problems already discussed above (Lee 212-213).

The Brexit vote draws its importance democratically as one of the most disastrous events in Britain's recent history in that it severely polarized the nation and caused horrible economic and political implications for the future. To add insult to injury, the Brexit also demonstrated an immoral example of secession in not complying with how the process should be conducted justly in a democracy. Though the full effect of the Brexit vote on the UK will remain unclear until the act of secession is complete, the effects already seen have been bad enough to indicate that the decision of the vote was one of poor choices that caused problems likely to hinder the growth of Great Britain for generations to come.

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