

1 *Brexit Introduced*

On Thursday 23 June 2016, 26.3 million people in the United Kingdom headed to their nearest polling station to cast a vote in a national referendum. Another 7.2 million had already cast their ballot by post. When voters looked at their ballot paper they would have read the following question: ‘Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?’ That this was a question that aroused strong passions in the electorate was reflected in the fact that, at 72.2 per cent, turnout at the referendum reached the highest level of any political contest since the general election in 1992.

The 2016 referendum was not the first time that the people were asked for their view about their country’s relationship with continental Europe. In 1975, at the first ever referendum to be held in the United Kingdom, an earlier generation of voters had been asked whether they wanted to stay in what was then called the European Community (the Common Market). In that earlier referendum the people had voted by a margin of two to one to stay in the European Community. Although public support for EC membership seemed commanding, it is important to keep it in perspective, as academics David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger (1996: 279) observed at the time: ‘It was unequivocal but it was also unenthusiastic. Support for membership was wide but it did not run deep.’ The decision to stay had been influenced by two factors. The first was a stagnating national economy that had left the UK as the ‘sick man of Europe’, a country that was grappling with what was then called ‘the British disease’ – a pernicious combination of steep inflation, high unemployment, low productivity and industrial unrest. Not surprisingly, the UK looked at the economies across the Channel with envy. The second factor was a relatively strong and widespread sense of loyalty to the main political parties (Clarke et al. 2004), which were competing in a stable party system, enjoyed support from what was still a largely deferential public and which had collectively recommended that the people vote to stay – which they did.

At the referendum in 2016, however, both the result and wider context were entirely different. The country's Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, had initially promised to hold the referendum during his so-called 'Bloomberg speech' in January 2013, a move that many interpreted as an attempt to fend off growing pressure from a group of backbench Eurosceptic MPs and the sudden rise of a new Eurosceptic party in national politics, UKIP. The latter was drawing much of its voting strength from disgruntled Conservatives who opposed EU membership (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

Standing in the London headquarters of Bloomberg News, Cameron began his speech by outlining a European continent that looked fundamentally different from that which the UK had looked towards with envy during the 1970s. By 2013, the EU had enlarged from nine countries in the 1970s to 28 member states, some of which had much weaker economies than their West European counterparts. Beginning in 2008, the continent had been hit hard by the Great Recession and a major debt crisis that was especially severe in southern EU member states such as Greece, Spain and Portugal. Unemployment and sovereign debt reached disturbingly high levels, while the continent struggled to revive economic growth, pay down debt and implement necessary reforms. In sharp contrast to the picture that had confronted Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1975, Cameron now talked of a continent that was blighted by a lack of competitiveness, excessive regulation, a deficit of democratic accountability, and that had taken too many powers away from individual member states.

Cameron, who less than 10 years earlier had warned the Conservative Party that its tendency to 'bang on about Europe' had alienated voters, now committed his party to holding a referendum on the country's EU membership should it form a majority government after the next general election in 2015. When that contest arrived, the Conservative Party asked the electorate for a mandate to negotiate a new settlement with the EU, after which it would hold an 'in or out' referendum. Cameron stated: 'It is time for the British people to have their say. It is time to settle this European question in British politics. I say to the British people: this will be your decision.'¹

Cameron had always been a gambler. Ever since rising to the top of the Conservative Party in 2005, his political legacy had been defined by a series of gambles – that he could 'modernize' a party that put a premium on tradition; that after the election in 2010 he could successfully

lead the first Coalition Government in the country for nearly 70 years; that in 2011 he could convince voters to retain the ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system in a national referendum on electoral reform; that in 2014 he could preserve the United Kingdom by winning a referendum on Scottish independence; and in 2015 that he could not only return to power but deliver to Conservatives something they had not had for nearly 20 years, a majority government. By promising a referendum on EU membership, a move that could potentially and profoundly alter the UK’s place in the world, the youngest prime minister for nearly 200 years had gambled once again.

Although Cameron would not have known it at the time, by committing the country to a vote on its EU membership he had set himself on a path that would leave him as the third prime minister in post-war Britain who would forever be remembered for only one thing. After Anthony Eden and the Suez crisis in 1956, then Tony Blair and the war in Iraq that began in 2003, Cameron’s legacy would soon forever be associated with the result of the 2016 referendum. But all of that was yet to come. At the time of his Bloomberg speech the young leader believed that his lucky streak would continue. As Tim Bale, a leading authority on the Conservative Party, observed:

That belief stemmed, at least in part, from his natural self-confidence: so many of his gambles over the years had paid off, and he was far surer than he should have been that he would be able to extract the kind of eye-catching concessions from other EU member states that would persuade a majority of British voters (if not the diehard sceptics in his own party) that he had achieved a fundamental change in the UK’s relationship with ‘Brussels’. (Bale 2016)

Cameron placed his bet. It would be his last.

Many expected Cameron to win. During the campaign one ‘expert survey’ of nearly 600 journalists, academics and pollsters asked them to share their predictions of the result. Overall, some 87 per cent thought that the country would vote to remain in the EU and only 5 per cent predicted a Brexit (the remainder thought that both sides had an equal chance).²

This widely held belief that, in the end, people would vote to remain in the EU had, in turn, been driven by an assumption that they would choose the least risky path and side with the status quo. The idea was

supported by what we call ‘LeDuc’s law’, a regularity in people’s voting behaviour in referendums discovered by Larry LeDuc (2003), a professor of political science at the University of Toronto. After studying referendums around the world, events that are characterized by high stakes and abundant uncertainty about the consequences of the different outcomes, LeDuc noted that while people often expressed support for the ‘change option’ at the start of the campaign they would increasingly side with the status quo, the less risky option, as the campaign progressed. They would, after a period of indecision, bet on ‘the devil they knew’. In the UK, this belief in aversion to risk and bias towards the status quo had been further cultivated by the outcomes of both at the 2011 referendum on changing the electoral system and the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence.

As the country hurtled towards the 2016 referendum this consensus was reflected in an assessment made by *The Economist’s* Intelligence Unit that outlined why the status quo would prevail. One factor was Cameron himself, the nation’s newly re-elected leader, who only eight months earlier had won a majority government and was about to throw his full weight behind campaigning for Remain. Then came the voters; while they looked restless, the analysts concluded there was ‘little risk’ of an anti-establishment backlash. ‘Although it is true that anti-establishment feeling is running higher than usual in the UK, and that much of it is directed – albeit in a rather inchoate way – towards Europe, we do not believe that it is strong enough to sway the final result’. In the end, they would side with the status quo. ‘As is often the case when a constitutional referendum is held, defending the status quo is easier than arguing for a radical departure from it.’³

But the pundits were wrong and David Cameron lost his wager. When the ballots were counted on the night of 23 June, 51.9 per cent of the electorate had voted to leave the EU, a figure that jumped to almost 54 per cent in England. The result sent shockwaves around the world. As we will see in this book, despite being confronted with an avalanche of advice from national and international figures to vote to remain, and apocalyptic warnings about the consequences that would follow a Brexit, a majority voted to leave the EU. By doing so, they chose to reject the recommendations of their prime minister, most of the Cabinet, a large majority of their elected MPs and countless businesses, global political leaders and international organizations, from the World Bank to the International Monetary Fund. As Bogdanor

(2016) observed, the vote marked the first time in the nation's history when the House of Commons would be asked to follow a policy recommendation to which around three-quarters of MPs had been opposed.

All of this underscores the need for research into what led the United Kingdom to vote to leave the European Union. Since the vote there has emerged a lively debate about the drivers of the 'Leave' vote. Some argue that this was driven chiefly by public concerns about a perceived loss of national sovereignty to the EU. Others focus instead on an economically 'left-behind' section of society that saw the 2016 referendum as an opportunity to vent their deep frustration about their relative deprivation. Another view has focused instead on the role of public anxieties over immigration, which in particular since 2004 has moved to the forefront of the issue agenda. As we will see, these debates are also mirrored in academic research that has sought to shed light on the factors that influence public attitudes towards the EU and European integration. One key question that we address in this book concerns the relative importance of these and other explanations for understanding the referendum vote.

Meanwhile, in recent years there has emerged a parallel debate over the role of the populist right party, UKIP, which since 2010 has actively campaigned to mobilize anti-EU and anti-immigration sentiment among the public. The presence of UKIP is another important difference from the context surrounding the 1975 referendum. Far from a fringe movement, the party has been a major contributor to the increasing fragmentation of the UK's party system that has occurred in recent years (see Goodwin and Milazzo 2015; Clarke et al. 2016a). By the time of the 2016 referendum UKIP had attracted a surge of popular support, which we explore in Chapters 5 and 6, replaced the Liberal Democrats as the third most popular party in the polls, won the 2014 European Parliament elections, two parliamentary by-elections in Clacton and then Rochester and Strood, and attracted nearly 4 million votes at the 2015 general election in 2015. But whereas some suggest that UKIP is an important element in the 'Brexit story', others argue that Leave won *despite* the populist right and its divisive leader, Nigel Farage. In the following chapters, we examine in detail the impact of Farage and his party on the politics of the EU referendum and efforts to win a Leave majority.

There are already several books that explore the referendum campaign, including the various personalities and groups that shaped this

unique moment in British history.⁴ Nor is this the first academic study of Euroscepticism in the UK (see Ford and Goodwin 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo 2015; Clarke et al. 2016a). But it is the first to draw on longitudinal aggregate- and individual-level survey data to examine the drivers of support for leaving the EU in a more holistic fashion, investigating each of several steps that led the country towards voting for a Brexit.

Most of the data on public opinion and political behaviour that we employ in this book were gathered in a lengthy series of representative national surveys conducted virtually every month from April 2004 to the time of the EU referendum in June 2016. It should be noted that the June 2016 survey has a panel design such that respondents were contacted a few days before the referendum and then contacted again right after the balloting so that we could ascertain if they had voted and, if so, whether they had voted Remain or Leave. All of the surveys were conducted online by YouGov, plc. under the direction of the project supervisor, Joe Twyman. Funds for the surveys were provided by a series of research grants from the National Science Foundation (USA) and the Economics and Social Research Council (UK). Major funding for the June 2016 surveys was provided the ESRC's UK in a Changing Europe programme.

The monthly Essex Continuous Monitoring Surveys (ECMS) provide a wealth of information on a wide range of important topics including levels of support among the public for the various political parties, people's feelings about party leaders like Cameron, Jeremy Corbyn and Nigel Farage, perceptions of important problems facing the country and their evaluations of how the Government has performed in key policy delivery areas, such as the economy, the National Health Service, immigration and crime. Other questions tap feelings of whether the country's political and economic systems treat ordinary people equitably and fairly, whether Government is honest and trustworthy, and levels of (dis)satisfaction with how democracy is currently working in the UK. Importantly for this book, each month the surveys also asked people about their attitudes towards the UK's continued membership of the EU, their desired levels of immigration and perceptions of whether Britain or the EU controls the national economy. Taken together, these data provide the information needed to understand the dynamics of public opinion towards the EU and why, in the end, the electorate decided to opt for Brexit.

In addition, we also employ data gathered in a large-scale survey of nearly 15,000 UKIP members. This unique survey was conducted over the period November 2014–January 2015 and contains a number of questions on key topics such as the economy, immigration, the NHS, feelings about various groups in society, perceptions of the behaviour of political and economic elites and the larger political system that are identical to those asked in the monthly surveys of the general public. The ability to compare the men and women who decided to join Nigel Farage's so-called 'People's Army' with the electorate as a whole helps us to understand the bases of UKIP's support and its' appeal (or lack thereof) in wider society.

The remainder of this book is organized as follows. In the first two chapters we 'set the scene' by outlining the referendum campaign. In Chapter 2 we examine the background to the campaign, including the country's mood in the period that preceded the referendum and the role and impact of David Cameron's renegotiation of the terms of EU membership. In Chapter 3, we continue the story of the campaign by examining the competing narratives to voters that were put on offer by the Remain and Leave campaigns and trends in support for the Remain and Leave options in the run-up to the vote.

In Chapter 4 we turn to examine trends in public support for EU membership since 2004. This allows us to show how public attitudes towards this issue have been volatile over a long period of time. Making sense of this volatility and what is behind it is important background information to understanding why the country went on to vote for Brexit. After reviewing recent research on what shapes people's attitudes towards the EU, we put forward a 'valence politics' theory of attitudes towards EU membership, arguing that at root the nation's debate about EU membership has turned on whether membership is seen to have delivered things like economic prosperity, controlled immigration, national and personal security, value for money and, more generally, if the EU is seen as responsive and accountable to people.

In Chapter 5 we explore a development that helped to bring the issues of Europe and also immigration to the forefront of the country's political debate – the rise of UKIP. Several important questions about the party remain unanswered. While UKIP voters have received attention (see Goodwin and Milazzo 2015; Clarke et al. 2016a), there has been almost no research on the men and women who joined the party

as members and campaigned at the grassroots for Brexit. What are their social and political backgrounds? What do they believe? What motivates their higher level of commitment to campaigning to leave the EU and how do they compare to the public at large? Contrary to widespread assumptions we show how many rank-and-file members of the populist right party are not radically different from the public at large. Both those who have joined UKIP and those who have not appear deeply concerned about rapacious banks, corporate greed, economic inequality and social injustice and feel they have been economically ‘left behind’. UKIP-ers and much of the public at large also share very similar feelings about various minority groups in British society, revealing how the potential for populist revolts in the UK is unlikely to disappear in the short-term.

In Chapter 6, we investigate how UKIP was able to break through during elections to the European Parliament in 2014 and then the general election in 2015. We argue that these two critically important contests ‘set the stage’ for the historic 2016 vote for Brexit. After examining different theories that seek to account for why populist right parties like UKIP attract support, we investigate the aggregate dynamics of the party’s support by drawing on monthly surveys that were undertaken between April 2004 and April 2015, just before the general election. These data allow us to develop an individual-level model to analyse the UKIP vote at the 2014 European Parliament elections and 2015 general election. This allows us to show that while UKIP was propelled into the mainstream by public opposition towards the country’s EU membership, there have also been other sources of support for the party. These include the people’s negative judgements about how respective Governments have managed the economy, the NHS and immigration, and how the Labour Party was damaged by its perceived incompetence while managing the Great Recession and a surge of immigration that took place during its time in public office. Furthermore, we show how these results provided clear signposts for what was to happen at the 2016 referendum.

In Chapter 7 we study the drivers of support for the Leave vote at the 2016 referendum. Was the decision to leave motivated by instrumental considerations over the perceived costs and benefits of EU membership? Were judgements about adverse economic effects of EU membership concentrated mainly among people who felt they had been ‘left behind’ by the country’s economic transformation? Or was

this vote driven more strongly by feelings of national identity and anxiety over perceived threats to the native in-group, from immigration and the free movement of EU nationals? And, also, how influential were ‘cues’ from individual politicians such as David Cameron, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage in motivating people to get into the polling booth for Remain or Leave? Drawing on data gathered in our pre- and post-referendum surveys, we show how there was not one ‘single’ reason for Brexit. Rather, the narrow Leave victory was made possible by a complex and cross-cutting mix of calculations, emotions and cues.

In Chapter 8, we consider the longer-term economic and political consequences of Brexit. Though the full consequences of this momentous decision will not be known for a long time, it is possible to examine some plausible scenarios about what – at a broad level – is likely to happen to the country’s economy, society and political system. The analyses demonstrate why, in terms of economic growth, it is hard to discern clear positive effects of membership either in the UK or in many other EU member states, apart from a handful of former ‘Warsaw Pact’ countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The general conclusion of that chapter is that the adverse effects of Brexit have been exaggerated both by the media and by the UK Treasury.

In Chapter 9, the concluding chapter, we consider three topics that are relevant for understanding the possible futures of the UK and the EU in the post-Brexit era. First, we examine what would have happened if everyone had voted in the EU referendum. In the wake of the referendum, disappointed Remainers claimed that the result did not represent the sentiments of the electorate as a whole. ‘If only everyone had voted’, some argue, ‘then Remain would have won.’ Data gathered in our pre- and post-referendum panel survey enable us to assess this claim. The second topic concerns the public mood since the referendum. Have voters suffered from ‘Brexit remorse’ leading to a groundswell of public opinion to hold a second referendum and give people a chance to undo the decision? A special survey we carried out in the UK, France and Germany in late September 2016 and several opinion polls conducted since the referendum help us to address this question. Third, how do attitudes towards the EU in the UK compare with attitudes elsewhere in Europe? Using our September 2016 survey data and also data from the European Social

Survey, we investigate similarities and differences in the attitudes of the UK, French and German publics towards the EU and the key issue of immigration. We also compare the long-term dynamics of public attitudes towards EU membership in the UK with those in several other EU countries. Chapter 9 concludes with a summary of our major findings and their relevance for understanding the future of the British party system and UK politics more generally in the post-Brexit world.