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What Brexit Means for Britain

MATTHEW GOODWIN

On June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. The result of the national referendum, the first such British vote on the question of Europe since 1975, marked a watershed moment—not only in the UK’s relationship with its continental neighbors but also in the overall evolution of the EU. Against the backdrop of a financial crisis, public dissatisfaction with core EU institutions and the pace of European integration, and, since 2015, a pan-European refugee crisis, the vote for Brexit presented another severe challenge to political elites in Brussels, as well as in London.

Voter turnout for the referendum was 72 percent, the highest in any British political contest for nearly a quarter-century, since the general election in 1992. The referendum had galvanized the nation. But what led a 52-percent majority of the British people to vote for Brexit, defying expectations? What roles did public concerns over immigration, sovereignty, and public services play? To what extent, if at all, did political elites influence the vote?

And what is the response of a divided British public to the Brexit strategy now being pursued by the Conservative government led by Prime Minister Theresa May, as it faces the daunting task of negotiating a new relationship with the EU and finding a new role in the world for Britain? In a January 17 speech, May announced her plan to pursue the course known as a hard Brexit, namely exiting the single market and customs union and ending the current model of free movement of people between Britain and the continent.

CHANGED LANDSCAPE

Compared with the previous plebiscite on this question in 1975, when the British people voted

by a margin of two to one to stay in what was then the European Economic Community (also known as the Common Market), the context of the 2016 referendum differed in several important respects. In 1975, the UK was grappling with a stagnating economy and rampant inflation, leading some to describe the country as the “sick man of Europe,” a fading power that seemed unable to solve its problems of low productivity and industrial unrest. Politically, however, there was a fairly stable two-party system and a largely deferential population, with still-high levels of public loyalty to the main parties. At the preceding general election, in October 1974, three in four voters had opted for either Labour or the Conservatives; and while the Liberals remained active (though they had not held power since their heyday in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries), there were few insurgent challengers on the radar.

Forty-one years later, the landscape was entirely different. By the time of the 2016 referendum the EU had enlarged considerably, from nine to twenty-eight member states, and there was talk of further enlargement to include Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and possibly Turkey. Since 2008, the EU had struggled with the Great Recession, a major sovereign debt crisis, high unemployment, and a lack of growth and competitiveness. Discontent with EU institutions and a perceived lack of accountability gave rise to a debate about how to resolve Europe’s “democratic deficit.”

In 2015, a major refugee crisis erupted as more than one million asylum seekers and other migrants entered the EU, approximately twice as many as during the last peak in 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The inward flow of refugees and migrants, with the largest numbers coming from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, had a clear and demonstrable impact on the political agenda. According to the Eurobarometer survey, which tracks public opinion across the EU, in the

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spring of 2016 the two most frequently cited concerns among voters were immigration and terrorism, ahead of economic conditions and public finances.

Domestic UK politics had also changed by the time of the 2016 referendum. In the 2015 general election, the combined vote share of the two main parties had fallen to 67 percent: a sign of a fragmenting political system. Insurgent challengers such as the Scottish National Party had demonstrated their strength (a proposal to make Scotland an independent nation was defeated by a narrow margin in a 2014 referendum).

When Prime Minister David Cameron promised in 2013 to hold a referendum on EU membership, the move was seen not only as a concession to the “awkward squad” of backbench Conservative members of Parliament, some of whom had been agitating for such a vote since the 1993 Maastricht Treaty, which accelerated European integration. It was also a bid to defuse the insurgent appeal of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which since 2012 had drawn votes largely from older Conservatives who disapproved of EU membership and immigration, as well as Cameron’s more socially liberal brand of conservatism.

CAMERON’S GAMBLE

Squeezed by these pressures, which reflected the nation’s long tradition of Euroskepticism, Cameron, who had previously warned the Conservative Party against obsessively “banging on about Europe,” committed himself in January 2013 to holding a referendum. “It is time to settle this European question in British politics,” he declared. “I say to the British people: this will be your decision.”

Although Cameron sought to quell the Euroskeptic revolt, first by promising to hold a referendum and then by renegotiating the terms of EU membership, he failed on both counts. UKIP had retained its standing in the polls as the third most popular party in the country, while voters felt there was little to gain from Cameron’s renegotiation in Brussels. In February 2016, Cameron announced that he had secured an opt-out from a declaration in EU treaties that committed member states to “ever closer union.” He also obtained an “emergency brake” that would potentially allow the British government to temporarily suspend welfare benefits for citizens of other EU member states residing in the UK—an attempt to pacify populist anger over allegedly uncontrolled immi-

gration, especially from Eastern Europe. But opinion polls showed that voters thought it was a “bad deal,” a conclusion encouraged by hostile right-wing media outlets.

Concerns over immigration and sovereignty were then targeted relentlessly by the two campaigns for Brexit—the official “Vote Leave” vehicle and the unofficial UKIP-led campaign. While Vote Leave, led by prominent Conservatives such as former London Mayor Boris Johnson, spent much of the earlier part of the run-up to the vote attempting to win the economic argument by claiming that Britain would prosper with an independent trade policy outside the EU, in the final month the two campaigns converged on the issue of immigration. Vote Leave, in particular, sought to frame EU membership and the resulting inward migration from EU nationals as a threat to overload the National Health Service (NHS) with foreign patients.

This focus on social and cultural themes marked a clear difference in strategy between the two Leave campaigns and the Remain side, which, with its slogan “Stronger In,” focused almost exclusively on appeals to economic self-interest. Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne led the way in issuing warnings about the economic risks that would accompany Brexit. Opinion polls and surveys showed that while most voters accepted that Brexit was economically risky and could result in a recession, large majorities also believed that the country would be better able to lower immigration, reduce the risk of terrorism, and improve the NHS if it left the EU.

The officially pro-EU Labour Party, meanwhile, was quiet and divided. The party’s newly elected and radical left-wing leader Jeremy Corbyn, known for his long-held Euroskepticism, was widely criticized for failing to deliver a clear and compelling case for remaining in the EU. Labour’s ambiguous position was noticed by voters. According to an opinion poll by YouGov, almost half of the population was unaware that Labour wanted to remain in the EU. Such confusion was likely encouraged by the fact that several renegade Labour members of Parliament adopted high-profile positions in the Leave campaigns, while UKIP and its flamboyant leader Nigel Farage were also investing significant efforts in Labour areas.

The result of the referendum was a shock. Only minutes before the results were announced, the betting markets had given Remain a 93-percent chance of victory. Of the last seven opinion polls, only one had put Leave ahead (though

that too underestimated the margin of victory). Even on the day of the vote, one poll put Remain 10 points ahead. Yet the people decided to leave the EU. When all the votes were counted, 51.9 percent of the electorate opted for Brexit. The Leave vote extended to 52.5 percent in Wales and to nearly 54 percent in England. Only in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and London did a majority vote to remain in the EU.

Cameron promptly resigned in the aftermath of the referendum, thus becoming the country's third prime minister in the postwar period whose entire legacy had been reduced to a single event. After Anthony Eden and the 1956 Suez Crisis, and Tony Blair and Iraq, Cameron would now be remembered for only one thing: Brexit.

LEFT BEHIND

Exploring the dynamics of the vote at the regional level helps make sense of the underlying political geography. While a large majority of areas in England backed Brexit, the more ethnically diverse, socially mobile, and affluent constituencies of London and the university towns such as Cambridge and Oxford voted to remain in the EU. Of the 50 local authorities where public support for remaining in the EU was strongest, only 11 were not in London or Scotland (and most of those were university towns). The percentage of constituencies that voted to leave the EU was 88 percent in the Midlands, 78 percent in the South West, 77 percent in northern England, 72.5 percent in Wales, and 69 percent in the South East, all of which contrasted sharply with the equivalent figure of 22 percent in London.

In terms of individual constituencies, the strongest support for Brexit across the entire country emerged in working-class, economically disadvantaged, and Conservative-held districts near the east coast—all of which, after giving above-average vote shares to UKIP in general elections, now saw more than seven in ten voters opt for Brexit. Of the 100 most pro-Brexit constituencies in the country, more than half had Conservative members of Parliament.

Support for Brexit was strongest in areas where large percentages of the population had left school without any formal qualifications or were pensioners. These places had often experienced some

of the largest inflows of EU nationals over the 10-year period that preceded the vote, as a result of the enlargement of the EU that brought in a number of new Eastern European member countries in 2004 and 2007. After controlling for factors such as education, age, and the overall level of migration, my colleagues and I found that communities that had experienced an increase in migration from EU member states were more likely to have voted for Brexit.

The result also threw a spotlight on divisions among the Labour Party's electorate, revealing how the closely linked issues of EU membership and immigration had cut directly across the center-left coalition. Overall, nearly seven in ten Labour constituencies opted for Brexit; just like elsewhere, concerns over European integration, mass immigration, and distant elites had drawn mainly white, working-class, and economically "left behind" voters under the Brexit banner. This was on full display in working-class Labour heartlands where the Leave campaign won commanding majorities.

These were often historically safe Labour areas, where intra-party competition was virtually nonexistent and voters were given scant choice in elections. Before the referendum,

though, such areas had similarly given strong support to the populist UKIP in general elections. Farage had never succeeded in winning a seat in the House of Commons, but he and his party had nonetheless assumed a central role in cultivating the vote for Brexit.

However, while 46 of the 100 most pro-Brexit constituencies were held by Labour, so too were 41 of the most pro-Remain seats. Labour's more middle-class, socially liberal, and better-educated constituencies had voted in large numbers to remain in the EU. This presented the center-left with a major strategic dilemma. Across much of the West, the underlying and growing divides in social democracy's coalition of blue-collar workers and new middle-class liberals had been visible for decades, but the result of the 2016 referendum (and, a few months later, the election of Donald Trump) brought them into the spotlight.

STRUCTURAL SHIFT

The deep social changes that generated public support for leaving the EU began long before Cam-

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eron's 2013 pledge to hold an "in or out" referendum. The drift toward Brexit reflected a slow but persistent shift in the overall structure and attitudes of the country's electorate. Since at least the 1960s, as in many other Western democracies, the rise of a new, more professional and socially mobile middle class, alongside a rapid expansion of the higher-education sector, led to the emergence of a large bloc of socially liberal voters. Whereas in the 1960s more than half of all employed people held manual jobs and fewer than one in ten had an undergraduate degree, by the early 2000s the working class had dwindled to around one-fifth of the employed electorate while more than one in three benefited from a degree and the accompanying social networks.

Such changes encouraged the UK's two main parties to reorient their appeals toward the middle class, while simultaneously attempting to retain support from traditional social conservatives and blue-collar workers. They also led to the rise of liberal values on issues such as race, same-sex couples, and gender. Among political and media elites, a liberal consensus formed on the need for historically unprecedented levels of immigration and also on the desirability of EU membership.

While these underlying shifts propelled Tony Blair and his centrist "New Labour" to three successive election victories, they also created space for extremist or populist insurgent parties to forge connections with less-educated white working-class voters who were economically left behind and socially conservative. These voters displayed political apathy, distrust, and dissatisfaction—and lower rates of identification with Labour, which had traditionally been the party of the working class throughout the twentieth century.

While these trends might have facilitated the Conservatives' recovery, the party had turned in a different direction by installing David Cameron as its new leader in 2005. Like Blair, he sought to appeal mainly to university graduates and middle-class professionals who were concerned with issues like environmental protection. Cameron and his close colleagues were largely wealthy graduates of elite schools.

Between 2001 and 2010, some of those voters who had lost faith in Labour and felt little political affinity with Cameron turned away from the lib-

eral mainstream to endorse the extreme-right British National Party (BNP), particularly in northern Labour towns like Burnley and Oldham and parts of Yorkshire, the Midlands, and outer-east London. In 2009, the BNP won two seats in the European Parliament, helping to cement a link in the public mindset between the issues of EU membership and immigration. Marginalized because of its white-nationalist views, the party soon lost support. Nonetheless, in deindustrialized localities grappling with economic and educational disadvantage, and in close proximity to settled Muslim populations, the BNP had forged relatively strong connections with white, middle-aged, and elderly working-class voters, a precedent that arguably helped clear the way for UKIP.

IMMIGRATION ANGST

Aside from the evolution of Britain's overall class structure, a second important change overlapped with, and amplified, these political shifts. As in other Western democracies, below the surface of

daily political debates a growing divide emerged over social and cultural issues like immigration, ethnicity, and liberal values. Whereas the newly ascendant social groups including the professional middle-class, ethnic minorities,

and young university graduates were mostly at ease with shifts toward greater diversity, sharing a more socially liberal or even cosmopolitan outlook, the traditional working class, elderly conservatives, and aspirational lower-middle classes felt profoundly anxious over the pace of change and its broader effects. These latter groups stressed the centrality of ancestry and nationhood; they often held authoritarian attitudes on issues like gender and same-sex equality or the death penalty.

By the time of the 2016 referendum, these groups had become especially concerned about the historically unprecedented levels of immigration into the UK, which were partly a by-product of Blair's decision not to impose transitional controls on the inward migration of EU nationals when a group of Eastern European nations became member states in 2004. Between 1997 and 2016, overall net migration into Britain surged from below 50,000 per year to more than 300,000. Immigration soon became the most important political issue in the country and was clearly linked in the public mindset with parallel concerns about the

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economy and public services, especially the NHS.

Undelivered promises by Cameron to return net migration to the “tens of thousands” fueled this intense public dissatisfaction, and started to erode public trust in the political system overall. The 2015 refugee crisis in Europe underlined these concerns over perceived threats to the national community, borders, and security. There was growing anxiety over the failure of elites to demonstrate control and competence in this crucially important policy area.

Concerns over immigration and relative economic deprivation were especially strong among those socially conservative voters who had already begun abandoning the liberal mainstream. The elite response to immigration reinforced the values divide and put these voters profoundly at odds with the liberal consensus. From 2013 onward, large numbers of them were drawn back into the political arena by the populist radical-right appeal of UKIP—which offered a more socially acceptable narrative than the BNP, but similarly linked the case for ending the country’s EU membership with the perils of mass immigration.

Farage and his self-anointed “People’s Army” were especially active in working-class and left-behind white communities. In 2014, UKIP won the European Parliament elections in Britain, drawing a larger share of the national vote (27 percent) than any other radical-right party in Europe. Half of those who voted for UKIP in the European elections had voted for the Conservatives in the 2010 general election. In the aftermath, two Conservative politicians defected to UKIP and the insurgent party went on to poll nearly four million votes, or almost 13 percent of the national total, in the 2015 general election. UKIP was entrenched as a serious political force by the time of the Brexit referendum.

On June 23, these various political dynamics came together as a majority of the electorate voted for Brexit. Support for leaving the EU was strongest among older voters who were more likely to be semi- or unskilled members of the working class, to lack a university degree, and to feel pessimistic about their relative economic position. There was no gender gap in the Brexit vote, despite the fact that men are consistently more likely to endorse the radical right.

Data from the monthly Continuous Monitoring Survey showed that the Leave vote share was 66 percent among those over 65 years old and 57

percent among the 46–65 age bracket, compared with just 25 percent among 18–25-year-olds and 44 percent among 36–45-year-olds. The Leave vote among those without a degree was 60 percent on average, compared with just 37 percent among degree-holders. Among semi-skilled and unskilled workers, the Leave vote share was between 63 and 64 percent.

NO REGRETS?

The Brexit referendum exposed divisions among social groups that had been widening for decades. In this historic moment they found their expression in the vote to leave the EU. Seven months after the referendum, Cameron’s Conservative successor as prime minister, Theresa May, gave a speech in which she outlined the government’s intention to exit the single market and to end free movement from the continent in its current form.

While May’s speech was widely criticized by pro-EU Remainers as offering a “hard Brexit” vision, subsequent polls and surveys showed strong support for the core pillars of her plan. Large majorities have endorsed May’s position on controlling immigration from the EU and leaving the single market. Almost no evidence has emerged that those who voted for Brexit regret their decision or support the idea of revisiting the question in a second referendum.

May’s strategy, however, will likely contribute to further polarization of British society. The electorate will remain divided between Remain voters who want to retain strong links to the single market and the EU, and Leave voters who prioritize their preferences for stronger controls on immigration and a restoration of undiluted national sovereignty. Although May’s focus on traditional social conservatism is likely to resonate strongly among Leave and UKIP voters, this stance risks alienating the middle-class professionals and social liberals who continue to wield considerable electoral power.

Fortunately for the Conservative Party, these latter social groups are currently forced to choose between an openly divided Labour Party and the resurgent but still weak Liberal Democrats, who are struggling to recover from major losses in the 2015 general election that decimated their parliamentary ranks and ended their participation in a coalition government with the Conservatives. Strong and unified opposition to May and the Conservative Party may be a long time coming. ■