

Brexit and everyday politics: an analysis of focus group data on the EU referendum

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Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of lay political reasoning on the UK EU referendum drawing on data from nine focus groups conducted in England in the few weeks preceding the vote. Participants were from across the political spectrum and with varied voting intentions in the upcoming referendum (Remain, Leave and some undecided). A rhetorical analysis of the data showed that the ideological dilemma of nationalism (between safeguarding national distinctiveness and sovereignty, on the one hand, and valuing international collaboration and exchange, on the other hand) was a key organising principle in participants' accounts, as was the distinction between reason and bias. Participants intending to vote Leave as well as Remain engaged with both sides of the nationalism dilemma, seeking to present themselves as both open to cosmopolitan values and as concerned about preserving national sovereignty. Further, the liberal distinction between reason and bias in the data often took the form of a distinction between politics (as biased and corrupt) and the economy (as rational), thus de-politicising the economy as a neutral and post-ideological sphere. The implications of these findings for contemporary politics are discussed.

Keywords: Brexit; nationalism; ideological dilemmas; European Union; everyday neoliberalism; EU referendum

The UK Brexit vote

On 23 June 2016, following a heated campaign period that polarised the public, 52% of British voters opted for 'Brexit' while a very significant minority of 48% opted for 'Remain' in the European Union. Despite the UK's historical Euroscepticism, this was something of a surprise, given that all major British political parties (apart from the UK Independence Party, UKIP) predominantly supported remaining in the EU.

At one level, the referendum result can be explained in terms of socio-demographic factors. The Leave vote was greater among the more economically disadvantaged working classes and the less educated, older and 'whiter' voters (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Swales, 2016). These findings have been described in terms of a 'left-behind' narrative (Goodwin & Heath, 2016), which suggests that Leave voters are the so-called 'left behind', or 'losers of globalisation', who have been particularly hit by the effects of the 2008 financial crisis and by subsequent austerity policies. However, the narrow use of this explanatory framework has been critiqued for patronising the working classes (Mckenzie, 2017) and for placing too much emphasis on the white working classes to the exclusion of other ethnic groups (Bhambra, 2017). Further analyses also show that the Leave vote was wider, including older working classes, economically deprived voters with anti-immigration views, but also more affluent Eurosceptics (Swales, 2016).

The above suggests that support for Brexit cannot be easily explained by simple schemas nor by traditional political cleavages. It has been observed, for example, that the referendum result does not fit established political divisions, but it can be better explained in terms of social values. Swales (2016) found that Leave voters were more likely to be authoritarian than libertarian (see also Peitz, Dhont & Seyd, this issue) and anti-welfare than

pro-welfare, while there was no significant difference between left-wing and right-wing orientation. In light of these cultural-political shifts, it has been suggested that politics are better understood through the study of cultural values rather than structural cleavages (Kriesi, 2010).

In this paper, we argue that in order to study these new and emerging ideological constellations, we need a bottom-up approach. This enables us to move beyond a narrow 'culture wars' explanatory schema which has too often been used to account for recent unanticipated political events in the West, such as Brexit (Koch, 2017). We also challenge simplistic and polarising narratives of contemporary politics, which divide citizens into neat either/or categories. This paper provides instead a qualitative in-depth analysis of everyday ideologies in order to shed light on this changing political landscape from the perspectives of citizens themselves. This is particularly important in today's increasingly populist politics whereby the trope of 'the people' has become a powerful rhetorical tool used by politicians claiming to speak on behalf of 'ordinary' citizens.

To achieve an in-depth understanding of common-sense views about the EU referendum and Brexit, we use the theoretical framework of rhetorical psychology which studies lay political thinking as a complex and dilemmatic practice (Billig, 1987; Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988; see also Mahendran's dialogical approach in this issue). In what follows, we explain our theoretical rationale, before presenting our methods and findings.

Everyday ideologies

In this paper we explore lay understandings of the EU referendum in the UK. We see these lay understandings as being grounded in ideological systems and cultural traditions. There

are different ways of conceptualising ideology in psychology (see Curtis & Hassing Nielsen, this issue). Here, we draw on work from the ideological dilemmas tradition in discursive and rhetorical psychology (Billig et al., 1988). The ideological dilemmas approach bridges what is considered 'internal' (e.g. attitudes and beliefs) and what is considered 'external' (e.g. ideologies and cultural traditions) to the individual. This approach sees ideology as a cultural resource (at the more macro level) which is drawn upon and used in everyday interactions (at the more micro level). This social psychological approach is distinct from more mainstream psychological approaches (which focus on the individual level, e.g. attitudes) and from traditional Marxist approaches on ideology (which broadly see ideology as an external system of beliefs that exists above and beyond popular common-sense). Billig et al. (1988) refer to this latter conception of ideology as 'intellectual ideology' to differentiate it from 'everyday' or 'lived ideology'. While intellectual ideology is produced by 'expert thinkers', from philosophy, politics, religion and other domains of intellectual production, lived ideology is a non-formalized cultural system of knowledge that is actively drawn upon and negotiated in everyday interactions. This is an understanding of 'ideology *in process*' (Haste, 2004, p. 415, italics in original), that is, ideology as a cultural resource that is actively used to make sense of and engage with the social world.

The ideological dilemmas approach challenges the idea that lay thinking is neutral and a-political. On the contrary, it brings to the forefront of social psychological analysis the politics of everyday sense-making. Further, as alluded by the term 'dilemma', this approach suggests that lay thinking is not internally consistent but draws on a diverse range of values and ideological themes which may be in tension with each other. The dilemmas of everyday ideologies provide people with the seeds for arguing, which is the foundation of thinking itself (Billig, 1987).

Work in this field has studied a range of ideological dilemmas. Most relevant for this paper, given its focus on Europe and the UK, is Billig's (1995) work on nationalism. Billig has shown that the ideology of nationalism is not simply an extreme ethnocentric ideological position. On the contrary, nationalism contains within it both an inward and an outward looking perspective. It requires that we see our nation as distinct, but also that we see it as part of an international system of nation-states. So, any instance of 'flagging the nation' is also an instance of reproducing the world of nations as a natural state of affairs. Nationalism is *done* in 'banal' practices, such as everyday language use. For example, words such as 'us', 'our' and 'here' can invoke and reproduce an implicit national frame of reference. Further, nationalism is not a one-dimensional ideological theme, but it contains within it the seeds for reflection and debate. Condor (2000) has showed, for example, that English interviewees, while accepting national categorisation through banal national referents (e.g. 'we', 'they', 'here'), also questioned the legitimacy of national categorisation by treating talk about 'this country' as potentially xenophobic.

Another important focus of work in the ideological dilemmas tradition has been the liberal dilemma between reason and prejudice, e.g. against migrants. This dilemma has featured in discussions about Brexit in the UK, particularly about whether Brexit is associated with anti-immigration sentiments. This is a commonly held view, especially in Remain-supporting accounts, but (as we will also show) it is also strongly resisted. This is due to the norm against prejudice. According to Billig et al. (1988), this norm is anchored in the ideology of liberalism which elevates the value of individual reason against the irrationality of biased or prejudiced thinking. The norm against prejudice requires that people do not judge others on the basis of ethnic or racial categorisations, but that they ground their assessments in logic and reason. In this context, the expression of views that can be heard as prejudiced or racist

(e.g. against immigration) raises accountability concerns for speakers (see also discussion of Condor, 2000, above). As has been shown in previous research on talk about immigration (e.g. Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016; Figgou & Condor, 2006; Goodman, 2010), people use rhetorical strategies to 'dodge the identity of prejudice' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). For instance, people may employ disclaimers in their talk about immigration (e.g. 'I'm not racist but), or they may try to deracialise arguments against immigration (see Augoustinos & Every, 2007 for an overview).

In the current neoliberal ideological context (Harvey, 2005), the ideological dilemma of reason/prejudice can be said to take on a new form that prioritises the economy and naturalises the 'logic of the market' as free from bias. Contemporary Western societies have been described as 'econocracies', that is as societies where 'political goals are defined in terms of their effect on the economy, which is believed to be a distinct system with its own logic that requires experts to manage it' (Moran, Ward-Perkins & Earle, 2016). Importantly, in these econocracies, the 'logic of the market' does not only define political decision making; it also describes more micro-level discursive practices (Davis, 2016). Hall and O'Shea (2015) have described this in terms of a neoliberal common-sense, where self-interest and economic cost-benefit calculations are taken as a natural, and unbiased, way of understanding the world. In our analysis in this paper, we suggest that the liberal dilemma between reason and prejudice/bias is rearticulated under neoliberalism, so that reason is associated with the market and bias is associated with non-market driven spheres of activity (such as politics, as we discuss below).

Our study explores how focus group participants reasoned about the EU referendum just days before casting their vote. In light of the discussion above, we focus specifically on the

ways that participants navigated the dilemma between national particularism and internationalism and the dilemma between reason and bias.

Method

Data collection and participants

Our aim in this study has not been to generalise our findings to the larger population but to explore in depth a variety of views on the EU referendum. Participants for the focus groups were selected so as to capture a range of representations on this issue. We recruited participants from across England (other regions of the UK were excluded, as we did not want to delve into UK constitutional issues), who were supporters of the main political parties (Conservative, Labour, Green, Liberal Democrat and UKIP), and who intended to vote both Leave and Remain. We also sought to have a balance in terms of age, gender and socioeconomic background. Age, social and educational background and party affiliation were all factors that, at the time, were expected to influence the vote (Curtice, 2015), and they were indeed associated with voting patterns in following analyses (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Swales, 2016). Details of the participants in each focus group are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' table

Focus group	No of participants	Gender	S/E	Age	Location	Political party support	Voting intention
Pilot interview	1	1M	B	20	London	Conservative	Leave
1	4	2F, 2M	B	50-60	Cumbria	Liberal Democrat	Remain

2	4	2F, 2M	A/ B	30- 40	London	Green / Labour	Remain
3	6	3F, 3M	B/C	30- 45	Kent	Conservative	3 Remain, 2 Leave, 1 Undecided
4	2	2F	A	40- 60	London	Conservative	Remain
5	4	3M	C/ D	40- 50	Hertfordshire	UKIP	Leave
6	3	2F, 1M	C/D	30- 40	Hertfordshire	Labour	Leave
7	3	3F	B	30- 40	London	Labour	Remain
8	6	6M	C/D	30- 55	London	Conservative /Labour	2 Remain, 2 Leave, 2 Undecided
9	6	4F, 2M	B/C	40- 70	Hampshire	Conservative	3 Remain, 2 Leave, 1 Undecided

Nine focus groups with thirty-eight participants in total were conducted. One pilot interview was also conducted to test the topic guide. The topic guide was semi-structured, and it contained questions and prompts on the meanings of Europe and on the UK's relationship with the EU and the upcoming referendum. At the beginning of each focus group participants were asked to complete individually a word association task with the term

'European'. This served as a prompt to start the discussion. Participants were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire at the end of each focus group, where they recorded socio-demographic data, their party affiliation, and their intention to vote in the referendum.

The focus groups were all conducted by a female English interviewer, the second author of this paper. They lasted from around 45 minutes to about 1 hour and 40 minutes. They were all conducted in June 2016, with the last one taking place two days before the vote. The focus groups varied in their size (the largest consisted of six participants and the smallest consisted of two participants) due to participants withdrawing at the last minute.

Analytic approach

We first conducted a thematic analysis to map the semantic content of the focus groups. We coded our transcribed data using a hierarchical scheme of themes and sub-themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). With this analysis, we identified two interrelated thematic networks in our data. The first was structured around the distinction between nationalism and internationalism. These global themes were present in all focus groups and grounded ideas of smaller sub-themes (such as sovereignty). Our second thematic network was structured around three global themes: the economy, politics and culture/identity, which functioned as the lenses through which issues around the referendum were discussed. For example, immigration could be discussed in terms of Britain being able to control its own borders as a sovereign nation (political aspect), in terms of its impact on the UK economy (economic aspect) and/or in terms of its impact on Britain's culture. The theme of culture was much less prominent in the data compared to politics and the economy and it is not explored in this paper (see Andreouli, 2018, for a discussion of this theme).

Following this thematic overview, we proceeded to conduct a more detailed rhetorical analysis of these themes. In line with a rhetorical-discursive approach (Billig, 1987; Billig et al., 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), we were interested in studying both the specific argumentative lines and the cultural common-places that grounded participants' talk. We did this by (i) examining the micro-context of each focus group, looking particularly at issues of identity management and accountability within each group. We also (ii) examined the macro-context of talk, that is, the broader cultural and ideological resources in which discursive interactions are anchored using the framework of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988).

Analysis

Our analysis shows that participants' accounts were grounded in the ideological dilemma between national particularism and internationalism, and also in the ideological dilemma between reason and bias, which, in the data, was reconfigured in terms of an opposition between 'biased politics' and 'neutral economy'. Below we present our findings in detail.

Nationalism and internationalism

In the accounts of participants, the internationalist pole of the nationalism dilemma (Billig, 1995) took the form of cosmopolitan values, as has been shown in other qualitative research on representations of Europe (Andreouli & Howarth, 2018), in support of cultural diversity, international collaboration, peace and human rights. Unsurprisingly, this type of accounting was most common in Remain-supporting accounts, as in the extract below.

Extract 1

Jenny: There's like, I guess, like the European Convention on Human Rights, and the European Court of Human Rights, and, I mean, I personally think it's fabulous, and its judgements are brilliant. It's kind of like, I see it as a kind of collective better wisdom that can override the discrimination of certain countries. So some of the cases like, for example, the UK had with not wanting to allow gay people in the Army - even though I'm not a big fan of the Army, obviously - but discrimination against gay people - and they were saying that you know, using religious arguments, and that it would be too much of a distraction for the other men, and it took it going all the way to the European Court of Human Rights to kind of overrule it and say, 'no, you are being ridiculous', you know, and not allowing countries to discriminate like that, by having this kind of overarching sensibility and more sensible decisions, so countries can't just get away with discriminatory things?

Lisa: Yes, so in that vein, similarly I would say, for me, like, I feel safer being a part of Europe, because I feel like it balances - well, not just us, but all countries, it's a balance, and whatever extreme perspective you're going to invite, it's going to balance from all political perspectives. (FG2)

In the above extract, international collaboration is presented as counterbalancing the bias and discrimination that comes from national politics. Jenny uses the specific example of not allowing gay people in the British Army which was overruled by the European Court of Human Rights. This is cast by Jenny as discrimination against gay people on the basis of religious arguments. Lisa agrees with this assessment and argues that being part of Europe is safer because it balances out extreme perspectives. The EU is constructed here as a moderating force that counters instances of intolerance that are found in national politics.

This internationalist argumentative line is nonetheless still inscribed within an ideological frame which sees nation-states as naturally part of a world of nations (Billig, 1995). While the value of diversity and international cooperation is pronounced in the extract, this basic ideological assumption is not challenged.

The particularistic pole of the nationalism ideological dilemma in our data had to do with arguments about enhancing national sovereignty, and it was very salient in Leave-supporting accounts. Sovereignty was one of the key issues for determining people's EU Referendum position, particularly among those who voted Leave (Swales, 2016), and it has been discussed as today's central political demand in the context of a general dissatisfaction with globalisation (Gerbaudo, 2017). This ideological position took different forms in our data. It could take the form of an economic argument (for example, protecting national interests over European ones in terms of trade agreements and labour mobility). It could also take the form of an identity and culture-based argument – this primarily was about limiting immigration, which was sometimes seen as a cultural threat. The sovereignty argument could also relate more specifically to the political sphere, i.e. leaving the EU would allow the UK to make its own laws. Extract 2 is an illustration of this latter argumentative line (see also Andreouli, Kaposi & Stenner, 2018).

Extract 2

Nicole: That's what I was going to say. So, I think the whole thing with poverty or, you know, perceived poverty in this country and the people not going to work and getting off the government, isn't it something to do with the fact that the EU dictates to us about our actual policies like that?

Interviewer: But do you think they do dictate?

Scott: About what policies?

Nicole: Because, you know, like our, not housing benefit but you know like-

Scott: No, we're the biggest givers in the world.

Nicole: The dole, because we cannot actually take the dole away because of the EU rules.

[Discussion continues about whether the EU dictates national policies or not]

Julie: Some of the rules and regulations have come into force because they are EU. In my industry, there are certain things that we have to do because it's part of the EU.

Scott: Yeah, what are they then, Julie? Safety things? Making sure you've got fire alarms? Great idea. Who would go and vote against that?

Nicole: It's common sense though, isn't it? Why can't we write our own laws ourselves? (FG3)

The extract above comes from a mixed focus group that included participants intending to vote both Leave and Remain. The extract starts with a discussion about welfare benefits and Nicole, who intended to vote Leave, argues against the abuse of social welfare ('getting off the government') by people who should be in work and are not really poor ('perceived poverty'). This argument is quite common in Britain and it is frequently directed against people on benefits, migrants and against governments that are seen as being 'too soft', as Scott alludes to ('we're the biggest givers in the world'). This idea was salient in this focus group, which consisted of participants who were self-employed and particularly work-oriented. In this extract, Nicole is using the commonplace (c.f. Billig, 1987) of welfare abuse to argue against the EU which is presented as dictating these policies. The conversation continues about whether or not the EU does indeed dictate such policies. Towards the end,

Scott suggests that EU rules are about minor and non-political matters, such as health and safety regulations. Nicole, however, counters this point by making an appeal to common-sense. She argues that it is simply 'common-sense' to 'write our own laws', irrespective of the magnitude of the law, and this settles the discussion. Thus, the actual effect of EU laws is presented as beside the point; what is presented as important and beyond doubt is the value of national self-determination in itself.

Such pro-Leave arguments could be construed and delegitimised as prejudiced, in line with the norm against prejudice. This is not surprising given that Brexit has been commonly associated with prejudice and xenophobia in public and academic discussions. Accusing Leave voters of prejudice is a culturally available line of argument that can be easily mobilised in discussions about Brexit. In our data, a counter-argument to pro-Brexit sovereignty arguments was frequently encapsulated in the 'little England' trope. Using this trope, pro-Leave positions could be dismissed as narrow-minded, outdated and xenophobic, as the extract below from a Remain group shows.

Extract 3

Rob: He [Gove] and Boris Johnson are just... [They] are just incoherent, bumbling, irrational. I want a cool, calm, logical 'out' argument and I've never heard it.

Leslie: I get the feeling that people who want to get out, it's all on emotion rather than logic.

Nick: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, what lies at the base of the heart-

Leslie: The wish to, as they say, take control

Rob: 'Little England' attitude.

Leslie: To be 'Little England'.

Nick: Immigrants is a big thing, you know, full stop.

Leslie: Close our borders, immigrants is a big thing. (FG1)

In the extract above, Rob and Leslie build up a distinction between rationality and emotion to suggest that Leave voters are driven by emotion, rather than logic. The dichotomy between 'hot' emotion and 'cold' reason in this context (what Rob refers to as 'cool, calm, logical 'out' argument') positions Leave voters as violating the principle of rational thinking that is so highly valued in Western liberal democracies like Britain. With some prompting from the interviewer, Rob and Leslie mention 'taking back control' and having a 'Little England attitude' as the elements that make up this irrational Leave position. Nick agrees and elaborates further by bringing in the issue of immigration as the determining factor behind the Leave position ('Immigrants is a big thing, you know, full-stop'), with which Leslie agrees. Nick and Leslie do not articulate what they mean by immigration being a 'big thing', which suggests that the relationship between Leave voting and anti-immigration prejudice is taken as a given and does not require further explanation.

In this context, supporting Leave can become accountable as a potentially prejudiced position and it can prompt identity management concerns. This is shown in the extract below:

Extract 4

Mandy: ... I don't think of Europe as being - I certainly don't feel it like family. I think that it is still very segregated....

Interviewer: Do you feel that you identify with being a European? Or is it - are we British or English?

Mandy: I don't feel British in the sense that I think - you know how some people are very patriotic. I don't feel like that. I take from other countries some of the things - some of their cultures. I like some of their cultures. I think being able to travel, we're fortunate that we are able to - we've seen further afield and we're able to bring all those different elements, be it America - because every country has good and bad points. But I don't stand and think, oh, Britain first. (FG9)

During this mixed focus group, Mandy had expressed her intention to vote to leave the EU on the basis that Britain would be better off by deciding its own laws and controlling immigration. Mandy and others in the group also criticised nationalism (using the example of Scottish nationalism) for breeding tensions and they supported international collaboration and intercultural exchange. The extract above is an example of Mandy navigating this dilemma between safeguarding national distinctiveness and being open to international exchange. In particular, Mandy argues that she does not see Europe as a 'family' but as being 'segregated'. In response to the interviewer's either/or question about whether she identifies with being European or being British or English, Mandy disclaims a 'very patriotic' British identity which would make her vulnerable to potential accusations of nationalistic prejudice (see Condor, 2000). She manages these accountability concerns by arguing in favour intercultural exchange ('I take from other countries some of the things - some of their cultures') and by presenting a balanced argument about every country having 'good and bad points'. In the end of the extract, Mandy reinstates her point about not being nationalistic ('I don't stand and think, oh, Britain first'). Such accountability concerns against

being seen as prejudiced when voting Leave may have been particularly prominent at the time this focus group was conducted. This was five days after Jo Cox (a pro-EU Labour MP) was murdered by a white supremacist. Mandy's use of words is indicative: 'Britain first' are the same words that Thomas Mair, Jo Cox's killer, shouted before killing her.

As is alluded by the term 'dilemma', the ideological distinction between national particularism and internationalism is not an either/or matter of siding with one side or the other. Rather, people as 'argumentative thinkers' (Billig, 1987) orient themselves towards both sides, mobilising arguments and counter-arguments in their accounts. Identity management was thus not just a concern for participants intending to vote Leave who could be seen as prejudiced. Participants intending to vote Remain could also be potentially seen as not respecting the value of national self-determination and putting foreign interests above national sovereignty and integrity.

Extract 5

Sarah: Well, I think the European is about culture and people and belonging. With the EU, it's for me, it's a trade organisation.

Jessica: It's the trade, economics.

Sarah: I don't want to personally be involved in the EU for anything else but trade. But with trade comes so many other things. So, like all the directives about how things should be produced, and tariffs, and health and safety aspects of products, and the free movement of people. That's all part of trade. I don't expect them to interfere with any of our laws.

Jessica: So that's the EU.

Interviewer: Yeah. And you're okay with all of that, you know, having to carry that baggage as it were.

Sarah: I just think we've got to the stage where we are in it so deeply. And yes, I absolutely appreciate that the people who voted to come in in '75, which I wasn't one of them, I think they signed up for something and it's changed. And I'm no fan of the EU and I don't think many Brits are particularly happy with the EU. But with a pragmatic head on, it's the trade and the economy element. (FG4)

The extract above comes from a small focus group, with only two participants who both intended to vote Remain. During the discussion both participants appeared Eurosceptic arguing against further EU integration. The extract above follows from a discussion of whether, and to what extent, the UK is part of Europe, where the participants argued that they felt culturally more Western (and closer to Australia and America) than European. In his context, Sarah argued that the UK is 'more part of the EU rather than Europe'. At the very beginning of the quote above, Sarah distinguishes between culture and trade and then between trade and national legislation. According to this line of argument, developed by Sarah and endorsed by Jessica, the UK should only be European in terms of trade but not in terms of its culture and its politics ('I don't expect them to interfere with any of our laws'). With prompting from the interviewer to explain her position, Sarah argues that Remain is the pragmatic option, suggesting that it is not an emotionally invested choice ('I'm no fan of the EU'). Here again, as in Extract 3, the distinction between pragmatism and reason, on the one hand, and emotion, on the other hand, is mobilised to argue, albeit reluctantly, in favour of the EU. We suggest here that the phrase 'I'm no fan of the EU, but...' functions as a disclaimer. Disclaimers have been mostly discussed in discursive analyses of immigration

talk as rhetorical strategies that enable speakers to appear non-prejudiced when they argue against immigration (e.g. 'I'm not racist, but'). As we saw in Extract 4, such accountability concerns were indeed present in the talk of participants intending to vote Leave in our sample. What Extract 5 further shows is that, in the context of Brexit, an additional accountability concern seems to be at play: not appearing as too Europhile in a way that appears to disrespect the valued principle of national self-determination.

Like in the focus group above, several other groups made a distinction between an economic and a political union; the former seen as beneficial for Britain and the latter being seen as too interventionist. While Leave-supporting accounts tended to not make a distinction between an economic and a political European union but argued against the EU as a whole, in Remain-supporting accounts this distinction was used to argue for *both* political sovereignty *and* for the benefits of an economic union. In other words, the distinction between politics and the economy helped to navigate the dilemma between national sovereignty and international engagement, as is the case of Extract 5. Another observation that can be made here is that the economy appears to be associated with pragmatism and with rational cost-benefit calculations. In the next section, we show that this representation of the economy is juxtaposed to the sphere of politics, which is constructed as prone to bias.

Politics and the economy

In addition to the ideological dilemma between national particularism and internationalism that was discussed in the previous section, our analysis also points to another important ideological tension that grounded participants' accounts about the EU referendum. This was

a distinction between the supposed cold logic of the market against the corruption and bias of the political sphere.

The idea that politics are corrupt and that politicians are not to be trusted was very common in the data across political orientation and voting intention. As has been noted by others in the wake of the Brexit result (e.g. Goodwin & Heath, 2016), our focus groups point to a sense of disillusionment with the political establishment, what can also be understood as a broader crisis of political representation (Koch, 2017). This took different forms in our data. Participants intending to vote Remain, for instance, were particularly concerned about what they saw as the rise of right-wing populism against values of tolerance and respect for diversity in Brexit-supporting political rhetoric. Participants intending to vote Leave also stressed their lack of trust in politicians with specific reference to austerity policies and National Health Service (NHS) cuts, but also more generally, by arguing against a corrupt political establishment. That politicians lie for personal and political gains was almost commonplace across the dataset. Below are two examples of this mistrust of politics (see also Capelos & Katsanidou, this issue, and Rico & Guinjoan, this issue, on public frustration and mistrust towards politics). The first comes from a group intending to vote Remain and the second from a mixed group.

Extract 6

Rob: The sad fact is that everybody arguing for 'out' has got a personal agenda.

Nick: Yeah.

Leslie: Well, how else can you vote? You can't just –

Rob: Boris is not leading the 'out' campaign because he wants us out. He's leading it because he wants to be Prime Minister.

Linda: He's leading the 'Boris wants to be in charge' campaign. (FG1)

Extract 7

Nicole: I feel a little bit like just throwing my toys out the pram, because I'm just so annoyed with the politicians. And specifically, this campaign to stay in, and just the stuff that they say. I think, do you think we're stupid?

Interviewer: What sort of things are they saying then?

Nicole: Just loads of stuff, all this emergency budget and like, other people saying it's illegal. And there's no... They haven't, if they came and said, 'right, so we're in the EU and this is what the EU is put into our country this year or in general' and 'this is what... Look at this amazing project they've done and look at this, what they've done here.' And, 'we take this EU money and we do this with it'. But why don't they do that? Why, if they've got all these facts and figures, why aren't they?

Gina: They're not telling you, is that what you mean?

Nicole: Yeah, and I think, well if you're not telling me and all you're trying to do is just scaremonger continually, then I don't trust you. And that's basically why I'm going to vote out. (FG3)

In Extract 6, the focus group participants argue that Boris Johnson, a leading Conservative Leave campaigner is leading the 'out' campaign to pursue his personal interest in becoming Prime Minister. In Extract 7 Nicole, who was intending to vote Leave, says that she is 'annoyed with the politicians' because they act as if they think the public are 'stupid'. With prompting from the interviewer and from Gina, another participant, Nicole expresses a grievance with politicians who try to manipulate voters into voting Remain. She refers to the

emergency budget¹ and to the general tendency of politicians, particularly Remain-supporting ones, to withhold information from the public (which would enable them to make informed decisions) and to try instead to scaremonger voters (see also Andreouli, Kaposi & Stenner, for further analysis of this focus group). The data overall indicated a sense of anti-politics on behalf of the participants. Participants did not argue that politics are not important, at least not with regards to the particular issue at hand, but they often suggested that politics are actually harmful.

Contrary to that, the economy was very often seen as a sphere of reason and pragmatic decision-making. As argued in the introduction of this paper, in so-called ‘econocracies’, the economy is seen as a the most important factor to be taken into consideration in political decision making. In our data, participants commonly tried to support their arguments for and against EU membership by mobilising economy-based backings. As the extract below from a mixed group illustrates, economic arguments were presented as neutral and rational against the bias and irrationality of politics.

Extract 8

Julie: Can I just say, I think the bestest [sic] person to have spoken out about either staying in or out of the EU... is actually Carney, the Bank of England man. Because he’s not influenced

Interviewer: So, he doesn’t represent a political party.

Julie: He is just a number cruncher.

¹ George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time of the EU referendum, released what he called an ‘emergency budget’ which would be used in the case of a Leave vote. This announcement was seen by some as evidence of the economic risks of Brexit and by others as an attempt to scaremonger voters into voting Remain. Following the Brexit vote, Osborne was sacked from his position by the new Prime Minister Teresa May. The emergency budget was never implemented.

Sam: And what has he said?

Julie: He has said that we should stay in. And he's got a very good case, a good case forward about the reasons about staying in and it's all, you know, monetary. You've got to have a little bit of faith in somebody, out of all the politicians saying this and that, whatever. But he is, 24/7, he is a number cruncher. (FG3)

The extract above challenges the idea that people are 'fed up with experts' (as was famously stated by Michael Gove, a Conservative MP and leading Leave campaigner). Rather, participants were concerned with identifying the facts within a very fragmented and mistrusted political field. The extract above illustrates the juxtaposition between economic expertise and political bias in our data. Julie argues that Mick Carney, the director of the Bank of England, is the 'bestest' [sic] person to have spoken out about the referendum. Julie argues that this is because 'he's not influenced' (by a political party) and because he is a 'number cruncher'. This constructs an image of Carney as a neutral advisor who has no political interests in this matter. His advice is presented as based on 'monetary' considerations which are assumed to be objective. For this reason, Julie concludes that she can trust him. This is juxtaposed with politicians whose statements are dismissively referred to as 'this and that, whatever', suggesting that they cannot be trusted. So, while an economist's perspective is presented as neutral and rational, politicians are presented as biased. This can be understood in terms of the well-researched ideological dilemma between reason and prejudice. In the context of these focus groups, this dilemma appears to take the form of an opposition between the economy, as a sphere of reasoned decision making, and politics, as a sphere prone to bias and instrumentalism.

The following extract comes from a mixed focus group:

Extract 9

Mark: The way I feel the media has portrayed it along the lines of, if you are intelligent and sophisticated you will vote Remain; if you're a bit stupid and uneducated you'll vote to leave... One media listed all these people. Look at these brilliant academics. We've got this banker, this investment banker, we've got this politician, this politician is...

Philippa: Versus Trump and Nigel Farage.

Mark: Who's on this side? Farage and Boris Johnson....

Jim: Michael Howard was really good on telly the other day. I was quite impressed with him.

Interviewer: What was he saying?

Jim: I can't remember what he was saying, but to be fair to him, it was a really balanced view... I thought he was quite clever.

Mandy: And that man I was listening to the other day.

Jim: Oh, I liked him.

Mandy: The financial chap. I don't know him.

Jim: Fifty-three years in the...

Mandy: Fifty-three he'd been a...

Jim: In the City. (FG9)

The participants above are well aware that Leave voters have been represented as bigoted.

Mark, who is undecided, makes reference to the media depiction of Remain voters as 'intelligent' and 'sophisticated' and of Leave voters as 'stupid' and 'uneducated'. He also

refers to a specific programme that listed 'brilliant' academics and an investment banker as supporters of Remain. Philippa, who supports Remain, complements Mark's point by drawing what is presented as an unfavourable comparison between supporters of Remain and Leave-supporting politicians (specifically Trump and Farage, and then Boris Johnson by Mark). As in the previous extract, the economy is juxtaposed to politics: the Remain-supporting investment banker is positioned against untrustworthy politicians. This prompts a response by Jim and Mandy who intended to vote Leave. They bring in the discussion the views of esteemed Leave supporters, first a politician, Michael Howard, and then a City financier. In line with our argument about the distinction between economy and politics, the expertise of the City financier is evidenced in the very nature of his work (having worked for fifty-three years in the City), while the credentials of Michael Howard do not simply stem from his service but need to be built up (Jim argues that he is clever and balanced).

Discussion

Following the UK EU referendum of June 2016, several explanatory frameworks have been put forward to explain the Brexit vote, which went against mainstream political party lines and was, arguably, evidence of a disconnection between citizens and political authorities. Analyses of the Brexit vote have focused on identifying the differences between 'Remainers' and 'Brexiters' in terms of their demographics and also in terms of their social values, with (several versions of) the distinction between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism being employed to explain new political orientations. In this paper, we have drawn on these ideas, but we have also highlighted the intersections across ideological themes in lay political thinking about Brexit by employing a discursively-oriented qualitative approach.

Our study consists of nine focus groups, conducted across England with participants intending to vote Leave, Remain and some undecided, in the few weeks preceding the vote in June 2016. We do not claim that our empirical findings can be generalised to the entire population of England or the UK. But, by examining in depth the intricacies of lay political reasoning towards Brexit, our work adds a much-needed layer of complexity to existing research in this field. Understanding citizens' perspectives both in their breadth and in their depth is key for gaining insights into the shifts and changes of political positioning in the volatile context of Brexit.

Our study illustrates how ideological themes associated with (neo-)liberalism and nationalism are entangled to produce complex ideological narratives (see also, Gibson's (2016) discussion of the links between American nationalism and capitalist ideology). Our findings also suggest that, contrary to the polarising rhetoric that has emerged around the referendum (e.g. 'the people' and 'the elites'), citizens' ideological positioning is much more complex and entwined than is commonly assumed.

In our analysis, we found that the ideological dilemma between protecting national distinctiveness and sovereignty, on the one hand, and being open to international collaboration and exchange, on the other hand, was an organising principle in participants' accounts. The value of cosmopolitanism, in terms of diversity, intercultural exchange and cooperation, was important in arguments supporting the UK's continuing membership of the European Union. Conversely, preserving national sovereignty against European interventionism, in terms of controlling national legislation and borders, was the most salient theme of Leave-supporting accounts.

These positions were not mutually exclusive. Our data show that participants intending to vote Leave and Remain, as well as undecided participants, all oriented themselves towards both sides of the argument. This was evident in how participants navigated the ideological dilemma between the value of protecting the nation against foreign influence and the value of international openness. For participants intending to vote Leave, appearing non-nationalistic was a key concern. This is not surprising given the widespread assumption that Brexit is associated with prejudice. In order to abide by the norm against prejudice, Leave supporting accounts were often interweaved with rhetorical attempts to establish liberal identity credentials.

While presenting oneself as tolerant was rhetorically easier for participants supporting Remain, other types of identity stakes emerged in these accounts. In particular, a concern over protecting national sovereignty was not only evident in Leave-supporting accounts but also in Remain-supporting ones. In their efforts not to appear as disrespecting the value of national sovereignty, participants intending to vote Remain presented Remain as the pragmatic choice, based on the demands of the economy *only*, and not as an emotional or identitarian choice. Our analysis suggests that, in addition to the well-researched disclaimers against potential accusations of prejudice (e.g. 'I'm not racist but'), in the context of Brexit discussions, a type of 'I'm not a fan of the EU, but' disclaimer also emerges. While the former seeks to establish liberal identity credentials for speakers, the latter seeks to inoculate speakers from accusations of disrespecting the highly valued principle of national sovereignty. In these latter accounts, the economy was foregrounded as the sphere of neural cost-benefit calculations, according to which remaining in the EU was the sound thing to do. Nevertheless, these participants were clear that the EU-UK economic union

should not extend to UK politics. The separation between politics and the economy as two distinct spheres thus enabled participants to navigate the dilemmas of nationalism.

The separation between politics and the economy can be understood as an instance of everyday neoliberalism or neoliberal common-sense (Hall & O'Shea, 2015). As was argued in the introduction of this paper, contemporary liberal democracies are characterised by the widespread assumption that the economy is a neutral, a-political sphere of activity. In this context, reason is not only evidenced by the absence of prejudice, as has been eloquently shown in Billig and colleagues' (1988) analyses of liberal ideology; it also takes the form of the naturalisation of economic self-interest as common-sensical and un-objectionable. On the basis of our analysis, we suggest that the ideological opposition between reason and bias, central in liberal thinking (Billig et al., 1988), appears to be rearticulated into an opposition between the economy and politics in the context of neoliberalism, and particularly with regards to the political debates of the EU referendum in the UK. Reason thus becomes associated with the supposed merits of a market-oriented logic and bias becomes associated with the supposed shortcomings of political and ideological thinking. Separating the economy from politics and, at the same time, elevating economic issues as the most important issues in political decision-making have the double effect of depoliticising the economy and side-lining political values and ideologies as irrelevant, even harmful, to politics. This creates fertile ground for a supposed non-ideological populism which claims to speak in terms of a 'reasonable' common-sense against the political establishment. This was, for example, a key element of Trump's Presidential campaign (see Reicher & Portice, this issue, on how political leaders seek to gain popular support by mobilising antagonisms, e.g. against migrants). Nevertheless, while right-wing populism has

gained momentum, the left also appears emboldened in many countries of the West, with disaffected citizens turning to more radical left-wing parties and candidates (such as Corbyn in the UK). In this context, some scholars have argued that we may be witnessing the end of the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism (Streeck, 2017), which has characterised the political centre for the past few decades. Hence, while our analysis points to the persistence of the ideologies of nationalism and (neo-)liberalism in lay political thinking, it is imperative that we remain open to the possibility of the emergence of new political ideas in these particularly volatile times.

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