

Patriotism, pessimism and politicians: understanding the vote to Leave

Ben Worthy reflects on the numerous overlapping reasons for the Brexit vote, the parallels with previous elections, and why a second vote risks exacerbating the anti-elite sentiments that underpinned it.



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Why did people vote for Brexit? I thought I'd take up the challenge of Robert Saunders and John Curtice. As Saunders put it in a [tweet thread](#) 'With honourable exceptions, academia has spectacularly failed to meet the intellectual challenge of the Leave vote'. I agree that most of us left-leaning academics have reacted with confusion and horror to the referendum result, myself included, and failed to 'ask hard questions of ourselves, about how much we really know about the electorate'. So I want to try and explain and understand what I don't want to explain and understand.

I'll admit it is hard for me to understand Brexit on a personal level. I'm pro-EU and pro-European. I am, in Theresa May's words, a citizen of nowhere. George Orwell would probably accuse me of taking my 'cooking from Paris and my orders from Moscow'. Almost no political event, except Trump, made me feel as lost or as politically homeless as the Brexit vote. Partly, I think working together is a good thing and partly because the alternative is worse. I believe, [like Thatcher](#), that 'our destiny is in Europe, as part of the community'.

It is also hard to understand Brexit in another sense. It means journeying to parts of England and Wales I rarely visit, while thinking through or confronting ideas and beliefs I'd rather ignore. Ground zero for any understanding is a long, long way from London. In fact, as Martin Rosenbaum's great analysis shows, the most representative ballot box was in the [Mundy Arms pub in Mackworth, Derbyshire](#).

Thinking through Brexit as a teacher of politics also means accepting that there are no simple explanations: Brexit was not wholly the 'revenge of the north' or 'left behinds', though these are all important. It is a febrile mix of economic division, political distrust and '[tail winds](#)' of '[Englishness, anxiety about immigration and economic pessimism](#)'. Leave voters were themselves a '[broad-based coalition of voters \[that\] included three main groups; affluent Eurosceptics, the older working class and a smaller group of economically disadvantaged, anti-immigration voters](#)'. It becomes all the more complicated, of course, in [Northern Ireland](#) and Scotland.

So here's my brief attempt at understanding. If you want to read more systematic, proper evidence I'd very strongly recommend reading these two great pieces of analysis by [Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath](#) and [Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker](#).

It's important to begin by working out what Brexit isn't. I think us Remainers, when we meet in our Facebook covens, have some easy explanations that are reassuring, simple and wrong.

Easy explanation number one is that people were misled. We can all tell the story of Brexit as being one where sections of the electorate were bombarded with numbers on buses and Boris and Turkey. There is some truth in all of this, and it is very reassuring. But it concerns me. The fact Brexit was the result of long-term shifts, and was [such a long time coming](#), undermines these arguments. It also presupposes somehow 'Leave' voters didn't understand what they were voting about, when the British Social Attitudes survey [concluded](#) they did. The referendum campaign and debate meant people are now 'better informed' about the EU, not duped.

Yes, the 2016 referendum was packed full of misinformation and lies. One response to this is to say, well, welcome to politics. I distinctly remember David Cameron playing the ['we'll have World War Three if we left' card](#). You can also ask how many elections and referendums have not misled us? The EEC referendum of 1975 had some [downright odd arguments](#), with the (pro-EEC) *Daily Mail* claiming there'd be no ['coffee, wine, beans or bananas'](#) and rows over butter and the Queen. As for elections, remember Labour and Liberal Democrat promises on tuition fees in 1997 and 2010? Didn't Obama promise to close Guantanamo bay?

The second easy explanation is that that Leave voters are all hidden (or not so hidden) racists. This is re-assuring partly because it is unprovable, as few people would tell pollsters they were racists. Again, there was some seriously vile dog-whistle racism in the campaign but the hidden racist theory has been undermined by what's happened since. This great analysis by Rob Ford shows how both Leavers and Remainers are more [positive about immigration post-Brexit](#). If all Leavers are all racist, I doubt they would suddenly stop being so after a referendum result. That's not how racism works. There's a big question of responsibility here, too. David Cameron, less than a year before pleading with all of us to stay in the EU, was talking [about 'a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain'](#).

So what did cause Brexit? It is, as I said, complicated but study after study has concluded that [the two biggest issues](#) were 'controlling immigration and greater sovereignty' (and very much in [that order](#)). I'd normally run a mile (or kilometre) from these two phrases. Together these two ideas built, as Saunders points out, the 'largest electoral coalition in British history'. So how can we understand it?

The vote was about indeed about controlling immigration. This is partly about the supposed effects on wages or jobs. This is not about reality but deep, pervasive myths. As Clair Wills' [book shows](#), since the 1950s immigrants have always been held responsible for other changes that had nothing to do with them. But how can [dry reports](#) balance with [Thatcher's](#) 'I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture' or Gordon Brown's 'British jobs for British workers'? Even Corbyn has spoke of migrant labour being ['used to undercut or suppress better working conditions or higher pay'](#). Stepping back a bit, who doesn't sometimes believe in things that the facts don't bear? Take, as an example, the idea that the EU is a democratic project with our best interests at heart. How can Remainers explain what happened in Greece?

Alongside this is a sense that Brexit was driven by the belief that the country is now 'different'. This is sometimes a covert way of being racist, but sometimes it's not. It can be about those who feel (across many classes and positions) that Britain is somehow less good, driven by a mixture of patriotism, pessimism and politicians. It's easy to mock as people wanting to 'turn back the clock' to a gentler (and whiter) time. But, perhaps, you can see that a country with fewer old maids cycling to Holy Communion and more pay-day lenders is not always 'better', and sometimes it's a hankering after the certainty of community and work. And some things were better in the past – look, for example, at levels of [economic equality](#) in the 1970s compared to now. This sense of loss was made all the worse by the financial crisis.

I can also sympathise, or perhaps understand, the appeal of 'taking back control'. Brexit was a protest at a remote power governing their lives that seems to be all-powerful and unmoveable. At least, at Westminster, they can be pretty visibly thrown out and you can see the removal vans outside Downing Street. Again, the economic crisis only increased the sensation of being buffeted by forces beyond most people's control. Parts of the electorate that voted Brexit had been told for years or decades things would get better or we were all in it together. The evidence of their eyes told them it didn't and they weren't, at least not where they were.

Brexit was above all an [experiment in risk](#). But can we understand the appeal of taking a political risk? Especially when elites are telling us how terrible it will be? Voting in Attlee's Labour government in 1945 seemed a supreme risk, upsetting all the right people. Even, arguably, voting Yes in 1975 was a risk of sorts, joining the unknown of the EEC instead of staying 'as you were'.

In some sense, if the Brexit vote was all these things, in a perfect storm of austerity and immigration, as John Curtice says, then I can sympathise with voters using the referendum to wrest control over impersonal forces governing their life. If [freedom is the right to say things others don't want to hear](#), the referendum was a resounding, loud and unhappy message. Yes, it was mis-directed against 'Brussels'. But every Prime Minister since Attlee has blamed 'Europe', that 'other place', for their own mistakes. And they continue to do so, even when they turn up to negotiate a new plan jam-packed with things that the EU has said they wouldn't accept.

So where does this leave us? Both Remain and Leave voters agree the government [is doing Brexit badly](#). The government adopted the novel approach of not preparing or planning while insulting those they are negotiating with. The deeper problem is that Brexit is not even the beginning of a painfully long process of leaving. The starkness of the words 'Leave' and 'take back control' were always going to clash with the painful compromises and dull grind of agreements and procedures. So the negotiations make Leavers more frustrated, as they see elites in London and Brussels doing what elites do.

Into this comes the Remainers cavalry over the hillside, the 'people's' referendum (we should be wary of any government, state or idea that embodies 'democratic' or 'peoples' – see North Korea, East Germany etc). Not only does the idea of second referendum fit Einstein's (or Mark Twain's) [definition of insanity](#) (as would a second general election in two years), it also open us up to endless referendums and counter-referendums. As much as I'd like not to leave the EU in whatever way I can, I fear that the view in the Mundy Arms is that this is exactly the kind of shoddy elite trick they voted to stop.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.



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