

Isaiah Berlin and Brexit: how the Leave campaign misunderstands “freedom”

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The Leave campaign’s understanding of “freedom” as the absence of external constraints is one-sided, writes [Alexis Papazoglou](#). The UK has autonomously decided to be bound by EU rules and so compliance with those rules does not make it a less autonomous country. Similarly, the freedoms that the UK gains from being an EU member are greater than those it gives up. More importantly, if a Brexit were to happen, external constraints might indeed disappear but so will the UK’s power to freely act in the ways it wants.



Freedom has been the core value in the rhetoric of the Leave campaign. Boris Johnson has called for people to “[choose freedom](#)” while Nigel Farage has said that 23 June could be “[independence day](#)” for the UK. But the way that the Leave campaign understands freedom is one-sided, and even mistaken. In fact, the Remain campaign’s ideal is also freedom, and ultimately its claim should be that by remaining a member of the EU, the UK would be more free than if it didn’t.

In his classic essay [Two Concepts of Liberty](#), Isaiah Berlin made a distinction between positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom represents freedom *from* constraints and interferences, and positive freedom represents freedom *to* do things on one’s own volition. Philosophers have pointed out that Berlin’s analysis in fact contains more than just two concepts of freedom, and that the dichotomy might not be as clear-cut. But at least one way of understanding negative freedom is as freedom from external interference, and positive freedom as autonomy, the freedom to legislate for oneself, to decide the laws that one is bound by.



Positive freedom

One of the Leave campaign’s main arguments is that by being a member of the EU, the UK is not free to be the maker of its own laws. In Berlin’s distinction, being a member of the EU undermines Britain’s autonomy. This is to some extent true: some of the laws that the UK is bound by are not voted in Westminster. Yet that does not mean that the UK is not an autonomous, free country. The UK has freely decided to bind itself to the laws of the EU. This is a voluntary participation, and one that can be terminated at any point by a UK government, or in fact directly by UK voters this month. At the same time, if the UK votes to stay, this would not signal a loss of autonomy, as it has autonomously *chosen* to bind itself to EU rules.

The Leave campaign’s claim that the UK’s autonomy is compromised because it is bound by EU legislation is also mistaken because of the way that legislation is made. EU legislation is not conjured up by some arbitrary despot, or ‘faceless bureaucrats’ as it is often said. These laws are democratically decided upon in the European parliament, with the participation of the UK’s representatives, who are directly elected by the citizens of this country. The UK is active in the decision-making process that shapes EU legislation, and as in any democratically-governed institution, it is wrong to claim that participants are not free because they are bound by democratically-arrived decisions.

Negative freedom

So much for positive freedom, but what about negative freedom – that from external interference? Leavers claim that the EU doesn’t allow the UK to always do what it wants, and that amounts to limiting the UK’s freedom. That’s certainly true. So if the UK government wants to turn away EU citizens who arrive at its borders, for example, it

currently cannot. But the limiting of one's negative freedom in a political context usually also means a gain in negative freedom: the UK might have given away its freedom to close down its borders to other EU citizens, but at the same time UK citizens gain the freedom to cross the borders of all other EU countries without any interference, freely. So one way that the Remain campaign can respond to that argument is this: the freedom that the UK gains by being a member of the EU is greater than the freedom it gives up. Having access to the common market, having the freedom of movement, of trade, freedom of selling services and so on is far greater a gain in freedom than the freedom the UK gives up.

Most of those on the Leave side of the campaign recognise the enormous benefits that come with the freedoms that the common market provides. The argument often is that somehow the UK would be able to negotiate its way into enjoying these freedoms, without giving up any of its own. That would be the equivalent of wanting to live in a society where I am the only citizen enjoying all the negative freedoms everyone else does, but without giving up any of my own corresponding freedoms.

Effective freedom

At the start of this piece I defined Berlin's concept of positive freedom as autonomy. There is at least one more way of understanding positive freedom, and that is as effective freedom. Effective freedom amounts to having the *power* and *ability* to act in the way one wants, and not merely as the absence of an external constraint. Even if one grants to the Leave campaign that the UK's freedom would be increased in the negative sense if it left – in that it will be free of the external constraint that is the EU – its effective freedom might in fact diminish.

The argument that the Remain campaign often makes is that the UK will be less powerful to do the things it wants, including strike international trade deals and influence global issues such as climate change. So even though the UK would be *nominally* free to do so, *effectively* it wouldn't, as it wouldn't have the power to strike such deals or the capacity to influence the rest of the world. By being a member of the EU, then, the UK's effective freedom is greater than if it were not, as being a member of the EU makes the UK more powerful and able to ultimately achieve its goals.

The Leave campaign has had a monopoly over the value of freedom at the rhetorical level. but when it comes to actual arguments, the campaign's understanding of freedom is one-sided and misleading. The Remain campaign has focussed on the economic benefits that come with EU membership, shying away from engaging with arguments to do with freedom. Freedom, however, is an emotive ideal, capable of motivating voters, especially those who feel less powerful in society and who yearn for some control over their lives. Those who support the UK's membership of the EU should not allow citizens to be misguided by the idea that a vote to leave the EU is a vote for freedom.

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