

Brexit voters: misled victims or conscious agents?

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The vote to Leave is usually explained along the lines of voters' socio-economic background. But by focussing on their circumstances it is as if we see voters as a manipulated group rather than as individuals who made a free and conscious decision, explains [Alexis Papazoglou](#). Regardless of how one chooses to explain the result, key Leave campaign promises were false, and so a general election, where parties set out detailed and costed plans for citizens to decide on, must be the next step.



As the initial shock of the referendum result is beginning to fade away, how are Remain supporters supposed to feel towards those who voted Leave, and how should their reaction guide the next steps? Most Remain voters believe that Brexit will be harmful for the UK and its citizens, including those who voted Leave.

At the same time, [analysis has shown](#) that the Leave vote was made up of those who have benefited less from social and economic progress. One might think, then, that being critical towards them would be inappropriate. After all, the argument goes, their vote is a direct result of the socio-economic conditions they find themselves in; it was those circumstances that guided their judgement, not allowing them to see why a vote to Leave would not get them what they hoped for – and that it will probably leave them worse off. Popular as this reasoning might be, it has a serious consequence: it removes any real agency from those voters. It treats them as victims, rather than as free agents who made a conscious, rational choice.

But this is not the only possible reaction to the referendum result. One can insist on seeing Leave voters as rational agents, fully responsible for their decision. Whichever approach one takes – and one might find themselves switching between the two – what needs to happen next is clear: a general election.



The Reactive vs the Objective standpoint

In his essay “[Freedom and Resentment](#)” the Oxford philosopher Sir Peter Strawson drew a distinction between what he called the reactive and the objective standpoint. When I react to someone’s behaviour with anger, resentment, gratitude or forgiveness, I am occupying the reactive standpoint. I am treating them as an agent, morally responsible for their behaviour, and taking into account their motives for action. If, for example, you step on my foot deliberately, I might resent you for it. If you do so accidentally, because you weren’t paying much attention, and apologise, my foot might hurt just as much, but I will probably forgive you.

I can, however, take a different stance towards someone when trying to explain their behaviour: the objective standpoint. When occupying the objective standpoint I explain someone’s behaviour not as motivated by conscious reasons, but as dictated by causes that are out of the person’s control. If you step on my foot because someone else pushed you, I will not see that event as a conscious action on your part. It was out of your control. At that moment you were merely a physical body, not a moral agent that I can hold responsible.

The Leave vote from the two standpoints

The narrative that tries to explain away a section of the population’s vote by making recourse to their circumstances and other causes external to their own rational judgement corresponds to occupying the objective standpoint. The external causes that can be cited are many: poverty, poor education, misleading politicians, and biased media coverage. But trying to explain voters’ behaviour by focussing on *factors* leaves out of the analysis the *people*. It is a way of exculpating their behaviour, trying to explain what made them behave in the way they did, but without attributing any responsibility, and hence any agency, to them.

On the other hand, taking up the reactive standpoint means treating those voters as morally responsible agents, who acted on conscious reasons. But being recognised as an agent who acts on reasons, rather than as someone who is simply manipulated, means that one can be held accountable for one’s actions when the latter are based on bad reasons and bad judgement. If those who voted Remain believe that leaving the EU will result in their country being harmed, it is a legitimate reaction for them to feel anger towards those who helped bring about this result.

Which stance to choose and why it matters

The importance of the choice of stance towards Leave voters does not have to do only with calibrating Remain voters’ moral attitude. Ultimately it should guide the way that Remain-supporting MPs – the [majority](#) in the House of Commons – move forward.

In picking the objective stance as the appropriate one, MPs need to come to terms with the fact that they think the agency of some voters was undermined, and find ways to ensure the full agency of people is protected in the future. If they think, for example, that the systematic propagation of misleading claims during a political campaign undermines the agency of voters, then pursuing [new rules](#) dictating that issuing untruthful statements during a campaign can annul an election result, could be one way of preventing this from happening again. Addressing inequality is another obvious option.

If, on the other hand, the result of the referendum is seen as a case of bad, yet conscious reasoning, a different strategy has to be adopted. The stark contrast between the outcomes people thought they were voting for – more funding for the NHS, reduced immigration, continued free trade with the EU – and imminent reality should be exposed. Leave campaign leaders have already [backtracked](#) on claims to do with reduced immigration as a result of Brexit, and the *Health Foundation* [foresees](#) that the money saved from the EU subscription “would be more than cancelled out by the negative economic consequences of leaving”, thus making it impossible for the NHS to receive the promised increase in funding.

At the same time Cornwall and Wales who voted Leave, [expect their EU subsidies to be covered](#) by the [new government](#). Those who opposed Brexit need to make it crystal clear that these promises and expectations are simply incompatible.

The Conservative and the Labour party leadership have said that the result of the referendum has to be respected. Doing otherwise, they claim, would undermine democracy: the rule, and therefore the agency, of the people. But whether one believes that some Leave voters' agency was already compromised, or that what Leave supporters voted for has now been exposed as impossible to realise, going ahead with Brexit without further consultation of the electorate would be just another way of undermining the agency of voters.

A general election, where those seeking executive power put forward a detailed plan before the judgment of citizens, seems the only way to salvage some of the otherwise lost agency of voters.

About the Author

Alexis Papazoglou is Lecturer in Philosophy at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Royal Holloway, University of London.



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