Theory and Brexit: can theoretical approaches help us understand Brexit?

The unprecedented and complex nature of Brexit presents us with a daily avalanche of events, gossip and facts. We need a way to sift through developments to focus on those that are the most important. As *Tim Oliver* *argues, using various theoretical approaches can help us better understand Brexit.*

Brexit is the defining issue of British politics. Not an hour goes by without the emergence of some new speech, gossip, debate, statement or policy proposal. Anyone seeking to understand Brexit can face an overwhelming challenge. Brexit is, therefore, a topic in urgent need of theoretical analysis. We need to find a way to sift through all the developments in order to focus on those that are the most important. This is where theory plays an important and necessary role.

Many students, to say nothing of decision makers or members of the general public, recoil at the word 'theory'. It can suggest abstract rather than practical thinking, the sort one suspects is best left in the Ivory Tower. Yet we all use theoretical approaches and do so every day as a way of making sense of our world and our lives in it. Theories can be tools we use to narrow down the chaos and complexities of life so we can focus on what is the most important. One way to think of theory is of it as a torch we use to light up only that which is important.

Theory can be applied to different aspects of Brexit. We could use theories to explain why the British people voted as they did. Historians will use theories to explain Brexit in a longer-term framework. Generations of students (especially PhD students) will soon use Brexit as a case study in their various theoretical discussions of European integration or disintegration. We could use theories to focus on the UK, but that overlooks that Brexit is a two-way process that involves 27 other member states to say nothing of the numerous EU institutions and international players that will shape it. We can try to use theories to predict what might happen during the process of Brexit, giving us pointers of what to look for.

There are four theoretical approaches we can use as a starting point to analyse Brexit: neoclassical realism, constructivism, bureaucratic politics and cognitivism. These four approaches have a history of being used to explain British foreign policy, most notably in the recently updated book *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy since 1945* by David Sanders and David Houghton. Each can be refined to become more nuanced theoretical approaches. Here we look at them in a general way.

Neoclassical Realism

Realists view international relations as defined by the distribution of power around the international system. Neoclassical realism includes an appreciation of the role decision-makers outlooks and thinking play, but where a key element of the theory remains that decision makers – and therefore their state – act in calculated, rational ways to maximise the national interest. The power that Britain or the EU has in Brexit is therefore shaped by structural factors such as material capabilities, wealth or military power and how decision makers use them. But focusing on capabilities alone gets us only so far given overstretch can be a common enough development for even the most powerful states. Neoclassical realism, therefore, helps us understand how the UK or the EU handle the constraints they face in Brexit. The UK risks overstretch given the remaining EU's $13.8 trillion economy dwarfs that of the UK's $2.4 trillion. Other structural factors, however, may afford Britain more room for manoeuvre. Britain has its military power on the table in the form of its commitment to NATO, runs a considerable trade deficit with the remaining EU, and the election of Donald Trump and Russian behaviour towards Eastern Europe create a European political and security system in flux. For the remaining EU, the biggest challenge may be in finding the necessary unity in decision-making. The EU is not a traditional state and as such may struggle to wield its capabilities in a calculated

and coherent way.

Constructivism and Brexit

Constructivism focuses on the norms, conventions and rules which make up international and European politics. It is not material capabilities that matter as much as how 'we' view our place in the world. As such, constructivists focus on how identities are formed and their role in foreign policy making. In the context of Brexit, the national interests of Britain or the EU will be shaped by whom they think they are and what role they think they should pursue in the world. For constructivists, any understanding of Brexit will require an explanation of the way in which the UK and the remaining EU's construct their identities and how these play out vis-à-vis each other. Britain's self-image of itself as a great power and ideas of 'parliamentary sovereignty' can be used to explain its approach, as will the EU's commitment to 'ever closer union' or ideas over the free movement of people. Theresa May has been accused of putting politics before economics in her approach to Brexit negotiations. The remaining EU, as Eurosceptics rightly point out, is a political project, and so could also put political ideas before economics.

Bureaucratic Politics and Brexit

Theories of bureaucratic politics focus on how the output – the foreign policy or individual policy position – is produced from within the bureaucratic and institutional setup of a state. To understand why the UK or the EU take the positions they do over Brexit we need to focus on the politics, debates, bargaining and compromises within the bureaucracy of each that led them to take these positions. As such, Brexit will be shaped by what the institutions of either side know what to do and can do with the procedures at their disposal. The complexity of Brexit has meant that most debate about Brexit has so far focused on processes rather than policy. Questions in the UK about who can trigger Article 50 reached the UK's Supreme Court. Then there are a range if issues relating to the role of individual ministers, the capabilities of the UK's negotiating team and wider civil service, the role of bodies such as the Scottish Government or Mayor of London. On the EU side, there have been rows about the role of the European Parliament and the ways in which Brexit will be handed by a bureaucratic arrangement that is both EU and national and which is also grappling with a range of other challenges such as the future of the Eurozone. There is a chance that certain EU institutions will approach Brexit by trying to apply in reverse their standard operating procedures for dealing with EU enlargement.

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Cognitivism and Brexit

While constructivism looks at widely held beliefs and ideas, cognitivist approaches look more at the mindsets – the psychology – of the individual decision makers. The beliefs and personalities of each mean they will react differently

to the same situation. This means that if we want to understand how Britain or the remaining EU approach Brexit then we need to look into the minds of the key individuals involved to understand how their perceptions shaped the approach of their side. What does Theresa May think about Brexit? What might Angela Merkel do? Looking at the world through the eyes of such decision makers also allows us to understand what mental shortcuts they take in terms of analogies. It also allows us to take into account the bigger political calculations weighing on their minds such as forthcoming elections or political legacy.

Other Theories

International relations and political science (to say nothing of sociology, history, philosophy, economics and so forth) offer a wealth of theories, many of which cannot be given justice here. We could look at Brexit through the lens of Robert Putnam's 'Two Level Game' theory by looking for the win-sets in the domestic (UK and 27 other EU member states) and international (or at least European) levels where Brexit will unfold. The 'English School' can point us towards a more nuanced view of the role of ideas in Brexit than constructivism can offer. Where Brexit is taking the EU and European geopolitics can be explored through the theories on European disintegration. Douglas Webber, Hans Vollard and Ben Rosamond have each explored theories about how the EU may disintegrate and what disintegration might mean in practice. If disintegration is not for you, then there are theories of 'Differentiated integration' that can help analyse how a changing, multi-speed EU and Brexit fit together. Andrew Moravcsik, the leading author of liberal intergovernmentalism points to the Hotel California that Britain – and the rest of the EU – may now find they live in. We could look to theories of structure and agency, although they might be too broad to shed sufficient light on Brexit to allow a detailed examination and explanation of it.

A Theory of Brexit?

The aim here has not been to create a theory of Brexit, or to argue that only one of the above theoretical approaches is appropriate to understanding it or, if you wish to try to use theory to give pointers, where Brexit might go. The study of Britain's international relations, as with so many states, has often drawn heavily on realist approaches. In the case of Brexit such theories will serve as a way of highlighting how important economic and security interests can be in explaining the behaviour of a state such as the UK, the member states of the EU, and the remaining EU as a single actor. But this should not lead us to overlook the importance of bureaucratic politics for a process that is already complex and looks set to become more so. More importantly, the place of ideas on either side – and the likely clash over them – mean constructivist approaches will need to be used if we ever hope to explain how the UK and the EU handled Brexit.

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