

The shock is visceral, the future uncertain. Deep-seated grievances lie behind this vote

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*The reaction to last week's vote has been visceral, writes **Tony Travers**. Enormous uncertainty lies ahead. Both of the main parties are in turmoil as they confront the biggest upheaval in British politics since 1945. He explores the different reasons why people voted to leave, and asks whether the systemic problems they reveal can be solved by leaving the EU. If not, how will politicians stem the anger and frustration of Leave voters?*



More books will be written analysing the UK's exit from the European Union than about anything that has happened in British politics since 1945. People on both sides of the leave-remain argument are viscerally affected by their responses to the referendum. They have felt it physically, which is unusual for conventional politics. The decision can be seen as yet another long-term consequence of the Second World War but also, amongst other things, as a response to globalisation, the fall-out from the end of the Cold War and the 2008 banking crisis.



Metal badge from the Black Country Museum. Photo: [Black Country Museum](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Feelings are intensified because the result was so hard to imagine. 'Hard to imagine' in the sense that although it was rationally possible to believe the country might vote to leave, most of those on the 'remain' side simply did not allow their minds to dwell on the kinds of impacts that have actually occurred since Friday morning. Thus the shock is so great.

Feelings are further intensified because there is no predictable way forward. We will not know the full effects of leaving the EU for 20 years or more. No one knows how long it will take to negotiate a new relationship between the UK and the EU: some say two years, others five or more. Will the EU cave in to our demands or play hardball?

Promises made by the Leave side are already being softened or dropped. Just to add spice, both the Conservative and Labour parties are simultaneously locked in destructive civil wars.

"We've got our country back" was the heartfelt response of many who had voted 'leave'. This statement bears much consideration if national politics is to respond effectively to what has happened. Political scientists will measure the proportions of different segments of the population who voted each way. They will produce helpful analyses showing how particular characteristics correlate with the Leave and Remain votes. But the 'got our country back' idea is far more complex. For the moment we can only speculate about why 52 per cent of the population voted to leave the

EU.

The most likely reasons include:

A desire to leave the EU

The loss of sovereignty inherent in EU membership had long irked a proportion of the population, as had regulation affecting the environment, working hours, workers' rights, financial services and even domestic appliances. 40 years of drip-drip media coverage about the 'out of touch' bureaucrats in Brussels convinced a number of people to vote Leave.

To reduce immigration

A far bigger concern, particularly in areas with significant number of migrants from Eastern Europe, was the need to control/reduce EU immigration from lower-income countries. Many places with few migrants also voted Leave, suggesting that fear of immigration was also important.

A response to change in job quality and security

Globalisation may be good for flexible and/or young employees in thriving businesses within big cities, but it has had the opposite impact on those who worked in traditional industries, often in smaller places. Some of the biggest Leave votes were in authorities such as Stoke-on-Trent, Mansfield, Blackpool, Barking & Dagenham and Redcar. The loss of traditional manufacturing, mining, docking and seaside jobs has left many areas with weak private sectors and a mismatch between skills available and skills needed for the modern economy. This issue has been evolving for 50 years or more as new economies in the Far East have industrialised. Successive governments have attempted to re-skill and 'rebalance' the economy, but without much success. This issue, surely above all others, is the one that has embedded a belief that those who run government have allowed many parts of the country to get left behind.

A dislike of austerity and stress on public services

Since 2010, public expenditure on services such as the NHS and schools has grown more slowly than for decades. Only international aid has, controversially, been much increased. Local government, Home Office provision, further education and housing have been cut by 25 to 35 per cent. In fairness to George Osborne, the need to reduce the deficit would have required broadly similar restraint from any government. But the impact on public services shows up in longer waiting lists, reduced entitlement to social care and closed libraries. Residents often believe the arrival of new immigrants is a contributor to the pressure on services.

An anti-government vote

The Conservatives have been in power since 2010, albeit as the leaders of the coalition from 2010-15. Facing an opposition which even its own (largely ex-) frontbenchers believe to be unelectable, it is small wonder some voters sought refuge in a referendum protest vote.

2008 and the banking crisis

The economic havoc caused by the 2008 banking crisis has never led to any obvious downside for many of those who caused it. Inflated boardroom pay has been sustained, with a massive gap in earnings between senior executives and shop-floor workers. Many on the centre-right of politics share with those on the left a view that something is wrong with this outcome. The public almost certainly believes it.

Centralisation

England is the most centralised large democracy in the world. Decisions are made in SW1 about every aspect of government in the North East, North West, South West and other regions which are hundreds of miles from the seat of power. Ministers and officials who spend most of their lives in a small part of central London have to make local decisions about, say Middlesbrough or Cornwall. It is hardly surprising people feel cut off from government, because they are. Within devolved Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, similar centralisation exists.

Decayed political parties

The Conservative and Labour parties have been slowly declining since the mid-1950s. In the 1955 general election, the two big parties won over 97 per cent of the vote. Today they can barely muster 65 per cent. Membership levels have fallen precipitously. Party funding is an embarrassment. The Liberal Democrats' role as a protest party has been destroyed by its period in the Coalition. Only the SNP and UKIP look healthy, and the odd way their votes translated into seats won in 2015 [SNP 4.7% of the vote/56 seats; UKIP 12.6% of the vote/1 seat] was itself problematic.

If these are some of the causes of the disaffection which led the UK electorate to reject the European Union, the key challenge for the 'Brexit government' which eventually emerges is: how many of these problems will be solved by leaving it? Will leaving the EU rebuild the economies of localities where decades of industrial change has occurred and consequently make their residents significantly more prosperous? Will it substantially reduce immigration? Will it allow people in each local area to control more of their taxation and public spending? Will it pump extra billions into the NHS? Will it allow people to feel they have a genuine say in the way decisions are made?

If the answer to many of these questions is 'no', there must be a risk of further, serious, disillusionment with the 'political elite'. The UK can eventually leave the EU, but can its politicians rapidly put right the perceived wrongs of decades of British government and politics?

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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