

# An undiscover'd country: the Brexit debate on Twitter reveals widespread democratic discontent

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*The topic of democracy is emerging as a core value that cuts across both camps active on Twitter in the referendum debate. **Jennifer Jackson-Preece** writes that the democratic discontent that's represented there is directed at Westminster and Brussels alike. Her findings show that this kind of populist political resentment has been a growing feature of British and European politics for some time now. People have lost faith in the political elites, want greater democratic accountability, and believe the migration crisis requires urgent action.*



At 11:35 AM on 2 February 2016, Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, announced the proposed new settlement for the United Kingdom with a tweet: 'To be or not to be together, that is the question...' In less than a week, the British electorate will go to the polls to voice their answer. My earlier [blog post](#) suggested that Twitter would be a crucial platform for the Brexit campaign. The final days of the campaign are an important moment to take another look at the dynamics and significance of Brexit politics on Twitter.

On June 8, 2016, the social media monitoring firm *Brandwatch* released their [latest analysis](#) of Brexit on Twitter. In the last four months, *Brandwatch* has followed over 5 million tweets. Their data shows that *Leave* hashtags are mentioned more frequently than *Remain* hashtags, and that the hottest topics within Brexit tweets are the economy, immigration, the United States, national security, trade and tourism (in that order).

Like *Brandwatch*, I have also been tracking the Brexit campaign on Twitter, in my case using third-party provider *DiscoverText*. My data set is significantly smaller than *Brandwatch* (currently just over 20,000 tweets collected using a random 100 tweet weekly sample from each of a dozen of the most prominent Brexit hashtags). But the general trends that I am seeing are consistent with the *Brandwatch* meta data. For example, both *Brandwatch* and my findings show the ratio of *Leave* to *Remain* hashtags at 2:1. Therefore, I am confident that my smaller sample is an accurate reflection of what has been happening on Twitter.

Unlike *Brandwatch*, I want to find out more than just the big picture. I am interested in the particularities of identity contestation involved in the Twitter Brexit debate. I want to know what Brexit tweets tell us about the beliefs and values that drive British and European politics today. And my preliminary findings are showing some interesting trends.



Firstly, democracy is emerging as a core value that cuts across both camps. Both *Leave* and *Remain* tweets share a perception of growing democratic deficit and a desire for greater democratic accountability. There is a widespread belief that political elites are not representative, political parties are out of touch with voters, and the media cannot be trusted. Crucially, this democratic discontent is directed at Westminster as much as at Brussels.

Populist political resentment of this sort has been a growing feature of British and European politics for some time. We see evidence of it in the rise of populist parties like UKIP here in the UK, as well as the National Front in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party, and the Austrian Freedom Party, to name only a few. No surprise then that the British EU Referendum was intended to reassure British voters that their opinion matters and would be acted upon. The Danish People's Party thinks Denmark should follow Britain's lead in this regard. What is surprising is that the EU Referendum looks to have made public perceptions of democratic deficit worse, not better.

Secondly, worries about migration are not confined to those voting to leave. Instead, the perception that migration is an urgent problem that must be addressed is widespread. Those voting *Leave* share a belief that migration controls would be stronger outside the EU. Those voting *Remain* believe a Brexit will have little or no impact upon migration. But almost everybody thinks migration is a problem, and that the current political response to it has been ineffective.

Finally, Brexit tweets disclose a European debate. British views may dominate, but they are not alone. Many Brexit tweets come from Europe. And while a good number of Europeans are urging British voters to remain, other Europeans are cheering for a Brexit. Why? Because pro-Brexit Europeans share the view that Brussels is elitist, out of touch, and undemocratic. This tendency is a powerful reminder that euroscepticism is not confined to the British.

But what is even more remarkable is the extent to which British tweets reference European countries. At this point, my findings diverge from those of *Brandwatch*.<sup>[1]</sup> *Brandwatch* flagged Britain's relationship with the United States as a prominent topic. However, my data set shows references to other European Union states are more prevalent than those to the United States, by a ratio of almost 8:1. References to other European Union states also appear far more frequently in my sample than do those to European states outside the EU, (e.g., Norway and Switzerland); in this case, by a ratio of more than 10:1.

Irrespective of whether or not the British answer to Donald Tusk on 23 June is 'to be or not to be together', what follows will no doubt 'puzzle the will' of British officials in Whitehall and their counterparts in the European Commission. The Brexit campaign on Twitter clearly shows that the British electorate has lost faith in the political

elites, wants greater democratic accountability, and believes the migration crisis requires urgent action...and they are not the only EU citizens who feel this way. I can only conclude, like Hamlet in the famous soliloquy paraphrased by Donald Tusk back in February, that we stand on the brink of an 'undiscover'd country'.

[1] It may be that because my sample is so much smaller than the big data set compiled by *Brandwatch*, it is unreliable on this issue. But the scale of this discrepancy is surprising given that the rest of my findings show a strong correlation with the *Brandwatch* metrics. It could be that my method of data collection accounts for the difference. Unlike *Brandwatch*, my data collection is set at a constant 100 Tweets per week per hashtag. As a result, my sample will be less affected by significant short lived spikes in Twitter commentary (as in the reaction which followed President Obama's statement on Brexit).

*This blog represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE. Image ©Alan O'Rourke via Flickr, CCBY.*

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