

# The remaking of a Euro Brit? Unless many more UK voters express positive support for things European, a ‘spiral of silence’ could yet undermine the campaign to stay in

**LSE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2015/11/03/the-remaking-of-a-euro-brit-unless-many-more-uk-voters-express-positive-support-for-things-european-a-spiral-of-silence-could-yet-undermine-the-campaign-to-stay-in/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2015/11/03/the-remaking-of-a-euro-brit-unless-many-more-uk-voters-express-positive-support-for-things-european-a-spiral-of-silence-could-yet-undermine-the-campaign-to-stay-in/)

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*In the last two decades positive views of the European Union have stagnated or eroded amongst British voters, argues **Patrick Dunleavy**, and with them pro-European identities. As the Brexit referendum develops, if the ‘Remain’ campaign is to prosper (or even survive) hundreds of thousands of UK voters will have to show a positive enthusiasm for the EU’s achievements and prospects.*



Forecasting is a mug’s game, especially for social scientists. Our track record of expertise in prediction is no better than anyone else’s across many fields, as the [2015 election showed](#). But long-run forecasting is especially perilous. Back in June 1991, (with Helen Margetts and Stuart Weir) I wrote an optimistic piece in the *Guardian* on ‘The Making of a Euro Brit’. Our strapline then was that ‘Disillusion with the Thatcher years is slowly pushing the British voter into the arms of the [European] Community’.

We showed that traditional British oppositions to formal rights protection and adherence to the UK’s unfixed constitution were ebbing away; and that support for making the UK a much more ‘normal’ European democracy was building, albeit at a slow pace. With British voters also working, visiting, holidaying and connecting with other EU countries far more than ever before, the consolidation of our European involvement was a strategy that offered Labour hope of exploiting the Tories divisions. There were enough Euro Brits to justify a positive appeal.

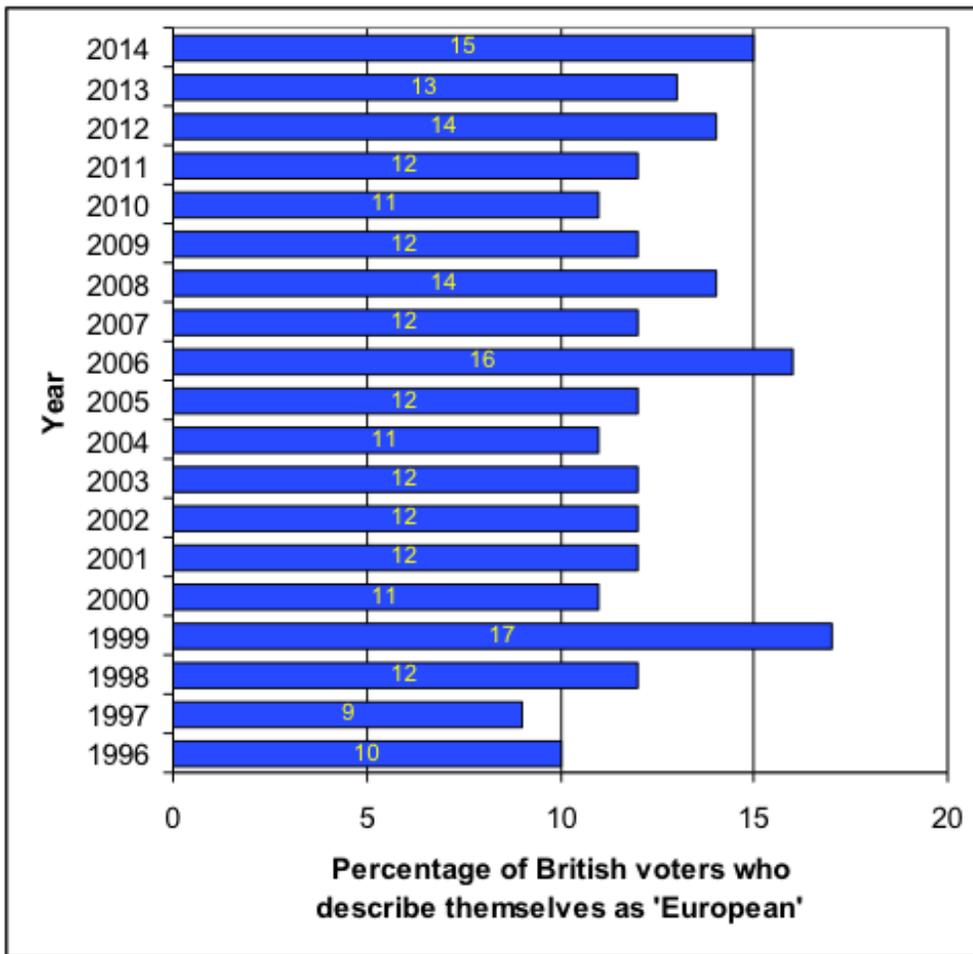
Parts of this argument stood up well over the next fifteen years. Under Tony Blair new Labour implemented a sweeping programme of successful constitutional change (although his astonishingly short-sighted [autobiography](#) expresses mainly his personal disillusionment with every stage of this process). Being positive about Europe also served Labour well in ejecting the Tories in 1997, and in subsequent defeats of Euro-sceptic Tory leaders, William Hague in 2001 and Michael Howard in 2005.

But the further accretion of support for things European that we anticipated in 1991, the emergence and growth of a substantial and influential Euro-positive group of voters, did not continue as we anticipated. The fracturing of new Labour elites in Blairite-Brownite fights subverted further pro-European development in the party’s ranks before the 2008 recession, when things seemed buoyant. And ever since the Euro’s life-threatening financial and economic travails, together with the apparently slow-moving collective response by EU leaders, have greatly slimmed down the ranks of public enthusiasts for the EU (and especially the Euro). The Liberal Democrats’ foreseeably semi-suicidal decisions around joining the first Cameron government in 2010 also spelt disaster for the one UK party that had most consistently advocated for more active European involvement.

The consequences of this non-progress have not just been measured in the frequent predominance of Euro-sceptic options in opinion polls, for such majority attitudes have been the lightly held ‘resting state’ of British public opinion for a much longer period. At two previous decision points, this scepticism was successfully swayed by a strong elite consensus towards temporarily positive pro European responses –in the 1975 referendum, and during the 1983 general election (when Labour pledged to withdraw from the EU went down to a historic defeat). Recreating the same feat in 2016 seems to be the unspoken lodestar of the current, lacklustre “Remain” campaign.

Yet the pro-Europeans core problem now may be a completely different one. [Recent evidence](#) from NatCen suggests that far fewer UK voters identify as ‘European’ than in other major EU countries, as my chart shows.

Chart: The non-flourishing of the Euro-Brits



Source: [British Social Attitudes surveys](#)

So far too few British voters may now be willing to publicly voice support for staying in Europe in a myriad of everyday settings from office cooler conversations, to family gatherings and friends chatting in the Costa or the pub. Compare that with the likely easy confidence of UKIPers and Tory 'Leavers', buttressed in their views by a daily deluge of *Daily Mail*, *Express* and *Telegraph* Euro scepticism. The stage seems set for the opposite of 'bandwagon' phenomenon – what political scientists call a 'spiral of silence'.

From a pro-European viewpoint, this can be summed up in W.B. Yeats' words as a situation where 'the best lack all conviction, and the worst are filled with passionate intensity'. Feeling that their views are too unpopular or esoteric to risk explaining for others, pro-European voters are likely to fall silent, creating an unchallenged Eurosceptic atmosphere. But then the absence of any other 'ordinary people' making the 'Remain' case in hundreds of thousands of everyday settings will further discourage less aligned people from supporting such views.

### The coerciveness of referenda

Add to this that the whole exercise of holding a referendum about Brexit is a fantastically coercive one, just as the Scottish independence referendum proved in 2014. The decision voters had to make then was about statehood, in a way that made their whole future depend upon the views of others around them. In referenda like this how others around you vote can shape issues about your whole nationality and governance, your rights and the rights of your family, children and grand children. It was this characteristic that explained why Scottish independence became so fiercely disputed. Extraordinary passions were mobilized on the losing pro-independence side, that none the less have subsequently persisted, perhaps converting Scotland now into a 'dominant party system' (but not the 'soft autocracy' alleged by [the Economist](#)). At the very end of the 2014 campaign, the pro-Union side in Scotland also

found a stronger voice, finally managing to articulate an emotional as well as a rationalist basis for retaining the status quo.

Without a strong minority of Euro-Brits advocating positively and enthusiastically for things European, the coercive character of Cameron's referendum may well not be recognized until too late, when a 'spiral of silence' phenomenon is already operating. The stakes are not dissimilar in some key ways. If the UK votes 'Leave', then every British citizen (not just the Leavers) will lose their European citizenship, the rights to free movement and free working across the continent, to choose representatives in the European Parliament, and to influence decision-making across a myriad of decision forums. And, as in Scotland, so too will their children and grandchildren, for rejoining later will not be on the cards. Yet on current trends that realization may come too late and be too diffuse to make much of a difference.



It follows that the 'Remain' campaign has a far bigger job on its hands than just retaining its current 56% to 44% poll lead until October 2016, when the referendum debate now looks set to reach its climax. Long before then, they will need to re-energize and increase a substantial group of Euro-Brits – a vanguard of well-informed voters with the motivation needed to sustain the pro-European end of hundreds of thousands of ordinary conversations and interactions across the campaign period, against a foreseeably adverse press tide.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of BrexitVote blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image: CC0 Public Domain*

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