

# The UK's 'Brexit' referendum represents a victory for the forces of populist Euroscepticism

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The UK is currently engaged in a renegotiation of the terms of its membership of the European Union, in advance of an 'in/out' referendum which will be held at a to-be-determined date at some point in the next two years. Here, **Dr. Chris Gifford** argues that the very holding of that referendum represents a victory for the forces of populist Euroscepticism in the UK.*



The referendum on British membership of the EU represents a triumph for populist politics in the UK. The campaign will bring together strange bed-fellows with Labour exiters lining up with UKIP, and Corbyn and Cameron on the same side. This is precisely what the Eurosceptic faithful have always wanted: to see the European issue positioned over and above party politics. The splits on Europe in the main parties are indicative of the extent to which Europe cannot be contained by the party system. The first major expression of Euroscepticism was seen in the Labour party following its 1970 election defeat. Post-election, the uneasy pro-membership consensus erupted into a major rebellion within the party against the Common Market.

The key factor here was the disillusionment with the party following its six years in office and the fragmentation of the British working class. The appeals to the British people against the Common Market and the pro-European British establishment, was not only to mobilise heartlands, but to reconstitute Labourism as a national political force. Similarly, Conservative Euroscepticism began to form in the late 1980s in the context of the exhaustion of Thatcherism, and the threat of electoral defeat. It became an explicitly populist tenet of modern Conservatism under the leadership of William Hague, yet failed to resonate with the British electorate.

As the two mainstream parties have seen their electoral bases shrink, as the interests and identities that underpinned party support have become eroded, populist Euroscepticism enters the political scene, promising to re-

assert an homogenous and unified political subject. Labour divisions resulted in a referendum in 1975 and Conservative divisions are the cause of this referendum. A section of the political class has persisted in turning Europe into an issue in which the nation is at stake, and for which normal politics has to be suspended. It has broken out of the constraints of mainstream party politics, and has become a fragmented extra-parliamentary political movement made up of campaign groups, think tanks, UKIP and the right wing press. The decision to hold a referendum is not therefore a neutral issue to resolve an issue of national importance but a concession to populist nationalists. It is an intensely ideological decision favouring particular political interests.

Cameron's support for a referendum can be seen as a response to a long campaign that began with the Maastricht rebels in the Major government. While initially focused on specific treaties and issues such as the Euro, the ultimate goal has always been an 'in/out' referendum. Every concession to hardline Eurosceptics such as the 2011 Act guaranteeing referendums on any future transfer of power to the EU, simply added to the momentum to the campaign for an 'exit' referendum. For populist Eurosceptics, the referendum is the only way of breaking the governing elite consensus on British membership of the EU, which it is argued has consistently betrayed the British people by misleading them on the extent of integration.

Populist Euroscepticism is [characterised by the politics of resentment](#), whether to Brussels or to Westminster. It appeals to those who have a strong sense of themselves as at the heart of the nation, whose belonging to the national community [is unquestionable](#). These groups feel their identities are threatened, believing that their country is in decline and that it must be reclaimed for them. Elite betrayal is key here as they have taken away what is rightfully theirs and given it away, whether to Europe or to immigrants. On this view, resources are allocated unjustly and unequally and should be reallocated in terms of those whose claims to belonging are strongest. The question arises of the extent to which such sentiments constitute a nationalist movement on the rise. The paradox is that the views they express are those of the defeated and the underdog, a sense that 'their' time has passed, consistent with an older demographic profile. This is a reactionary Anglo-British nationalism without historical agency. In another sense, the impact of Europeanisation in the UK is not dissimilar from what is happening across a number of countries in that it increasingly fragments and bifurcates within and between national societies. Levels of support for the EU decline amongst older age groups, those of lower occupational status and those with fewer educational qualifications.

In a bid to capture these voters from the mainstream parties, the populist right has had some success having adopted Euroscepticism as a central plank of their political agendas whilst toning down their more overt racism. Conversely, younger, more educated urbanites are more likely to express a banal Europeanism, and weaker and more inclusive national attachments. In the case of the UK, [recent research](#) points to a 'tale of two publics', one of the largest and most Europeanised in Europe and one of the most fiercely Eurosceptic. Again, it is older groups who are likely to be Eurosceptic indicative of the extent to which the social bases of contemporary Euroscepticism may be rooted in a specific generational experience. Meanwhile, the Europeanisation of British life continues apace. The UK economy has been characterised by high levels of penetration by 'foreign' capital, which in the context of the Single Market means German buses and trains, French energy companies and Swedish flat pack furniture. The rise of the budget airlines has gone far beyond the package holiday in the extent to which other European countries have become accessible to British people for business and pleasure. UK citizens are increasingly diverse, urban and educated and the EU is a matter of everyday economic and cultural life in a [cosmopolitan society](#).

The referendum on UK membership seems like a concession to an older Britain that has not caught up with reality and is still coming to terms with post-imperial decline, which membership of Europe has always so acutely symbolized. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the capacity of populist Euroscepticism to exploit what remains a fundamental failure of the European Union, its inability to democratically recognise and represent those citizens who increasingly feel themselves left behind by European integration. While cultural and economic life-worlds Europeanise, political life seems resolutely stuck in out-dated conceptions of the people and the nation, reproducing fantasies of imagined communities, and providing no realistic challenge to supranational elitism.

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This piece is based on the article '[Nationalism, populism and Anglo-British Euroscepticism](#)' in *British Politics* (2015) 10, 362-366.

*Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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