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## Brexit is a fascinating case study for the next generation of students and teachers of British and European politics

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*Brexit is both a boon and a bane to the teaching and study of British and European politics. For Dr Tim Oliver of LSE and Alex Boyle, a politics student at the University of Liverpool, there are five ways in which Brexit is central to the study and teaching of both.*

As a student learning the politics of Europe and the UK and as a teacher trying to keep his lecture notes up to date while writing and editing two books on Brexit, Brexit poses for both of us a mix of difficulties and

opportunities in our work. With it set to be the defining issue for Britain and one of the most unique challenges to ever face the EU, understanding Brexit is not something any student or teacher of politics can easily hide from.

Granted, by its very nature the study and teaching of politics is about crises and a topic in a perpetual state of flux. As we all know, politics textbooks have a short shelf life. The often slow process of publishing journal articles means many articles reflect the world and knowledge from a few years before publication. Lecture notes can be adapted, sometimes in response to events on the day. Changing reading lists and course structures, however, require time and sometimes higher approval.

Successfully combining Brexit into the study or teaching of British and European politics depends on keeping five things in mind.

### **Brexit Means Britain**

Whether you're studying or teaching British politics in the UK or on the other side of the world, understanding Brexit means understanding the contemporary UK. As both Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans agree, the issue of Europe is a defining issue for Britain because it reaches into almost every corner of the country's political life. As Andrew Gamble argued back in **2003**:

*The reason why the issue of Europe has been so persistent and so divisive is that there is a lot at stake. For the future of British politics, there is no more important issue, involving as it does a reassessment of British identity, security and political economy, and a judgement about the relative priority to be given to Europe as opposed to other relationships, particularly those with America. Such choices occur rather rarely but when they do they often trigger political realignments which can constitute major turning points in the life of parties and states.*

Learning and teaching the origins of a referendum whose result will have such profound implications and the longer history of the UK's relationship with Europe is, therefore, a solid foundation for understanding not only Brexit but also the development of the modern British political system. As we discuss further below, Brexit opens up an extensive range of topics in UK politics.

The breadth of Brexit as a topic, therefore, offers students of British and European politics a chance to find that elusive ingredient to scoring a high mark: teaching their teacher something new. Synthesising the many different topics and approaches to Brexit allows both students and teachers a chance to escape the silos that too often structure academia. For the teacher, this is a topic where students can do some of the legwork of drawing in new ideas. Many might think of PhD students as the key here. The inevitable flood of PhD students working on Brexit will indeed fill in many of the gaps. But undergraduates, and not least those from elsewhere in the EU and the wider world, can offer much-needed ideas and reports on what Brexit means elsewhere and in other fields.

### **The Case Study of Brexit Britain**

Brexit adds to Britain's place as one of the best and most fascinating national case studies for social sciences. Britain's politics have often made it a go-to place for many teachers and students on a wealth of topics. For pollsters and psephologists the UK's multiple electoral systems have turned it into an electoral laboratory. Britain's ongoing constitutional reforms and the resilience of its Westminster majoritarian model fuel endless debates amongst constitutional and legal scholars and those engaged in comparative politics. For those studying political economy the UK's pursuit of Thatcherism, neoliberalism more broadly and austerity have left it a key case study. Historians and scholars of war and international relations find a country that has gone from being the world's superpower to one that still delivers (or at least tries to) a

military kick and leads the world in soft-power. How Britain has confronted (or not) its religious, racial and security tensions and histories fascinates those in countries around the world who face similar challenges. The very unity and identity of the United Kingdom makes it a must for any student of nationalism. The list is a long one.

Granted, other states have faced many of the same challenges as the UK, and it always pays to be wary of the biases that can arise from the study of the UK. Students and teachers should always ask how comparable the UK's experiences are to those in the rest of Europe or the world. For example, was Trump's election 'Brexit plus, plus, plus' as he predicted it would be? Was it a reflection of wider trends in European, Western and international politics? Or was it a reflection of a combination factors peculiar to the UK? Nevertheless, the UK still offers a wealth of easily accessible literature, data and examples backed up by a long history of studies that can be drawn on as a starting point. Brexit itself is fast turning into one of the most researched and data rich topics available.

### **Europe's Brexit**

It would now be unwise to teach or study Brexit or the EU without also trying to understand the other. Brexit already tells us something important about the nature of the EU. It has changed the politics of the continent to which Britain is forever bound and which shapes Britain more than any other part of the world.

That might all sound trite. Yet too often debates in Britain about Brexit are myopic ones based on an assumption that Brexit is about Britain. Some elsewhere in the remaining EU might like to try and ignore the unsettling fact that one of the largest and leading European states voted democratically to quit Europe's predominant organisation for politics, economics, society and non-traditional security.

What Brexit means for Europe and what a changed EU means for the UK are fast becoming central issues to studying Brexit, the UK and European politics. For those in the UK studying and teaching British and European politics, studying the EU remains a central plank to understanding not just how the rest of the EU works and is responding to and debating Brexit, but how Britain will continue to live with a continent and political union that it is forever closely connected to. For students from elsewhere in Europe Brexit allows them the chance to examine their national debates about Britain as part of debates about a changing EU.

### Theorising Brexit

Brexit is testing many of the **theories** and models we teach and learn in British politics, European studies and many other courses. We can use Brexit to apply such theories as those of structure versus agency or more nuanced theories of international relations such as constructivism versus neoclassical realism. Economists are wrestling with what Brexit means for their theories of how trade works. It has certainly tested models used by pollsters and psephologists to understand how the British people – and voters further afield – vote.

Too often 'theory' is a word that bores or scares many students and even some teachers. It can seem abstract, distant or an irrelevant addition thrown in at the start of an essay or journal article in the hope of ticking a box required for a decent mark or publication. This ignores how theoretical approaches can help make sense of the uncertainty and information overload that surrounds Brexit.

It's very easy as teachers or students to be drawn into the daily and hourly developments of Brexit. Reading and following so many fast-changing developments can leave us feeling weary and without a sense of the bigger picture into which to fit developments. One thing theory can do is help narrow down the focus for our studies. For example, we

could use theories of bureaucratic politics to understand how institutions will shape Brexit or constructivism to analyse the ideas that underpin it. We then have the opportunity to assess these theories, models and other new ideas in real-time as Brexit unfolds.



## Generation Brexit

Another example of a theoretically grounded attempt to analyse Brexit is to see this political and social split within British society as a **generational phenomenon**, as argued by Jackson-Preece and Dunin-Wąsowicz. This generational divide manifested itself again in the 2017 General Election, which proved that young people are an important political constituency and that older generations, including most politicians, have ignored them since the Brexit vote.

The LSE's recently launched **Generation Brexit** social media and research project, which explores Brexit from a sociological perspective, can aid the study or teaching of British and European politics in the shadow of Brexit. This trailblazing project is currently crowdsourcing a millennial cohort vision for the future of UK – EU relations. It invites **those aged under 35 from across the UK and Europe** to debate, decide and draft a policy proposal that will be sent both the United Kingdom and the European Union Parliaments, and the respective negotiating teams.

**Generation Brexit** translates research findings into impactful and policy-relevant arguments that can be utilised to the study and teaching of Brexit. Unlike other Brexit-related engagement campaigns, this initiative targets millennials in the UK and in Europe alike. The pan-European dimension captures the reality of the Brexit negotiations, their contingency on both UK and EU27 politics. It also underscores the necessity of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship for the future, built on shared ideas from the millennial cohort of current voters, many of whom are teachers students of UK and EU politics.

### **Crystal Ball Gazing**

All teachers and students of British and European politics will have faced questions from friends, family and strangers as to why Brexit happened and what might happen next. Speculation on a topic such as this is to be expected, not least when Brexit could turn out to be what historians term a critical juncture for the UK and the rest of Europe.

Academics are often told to be wary of crystal ball gazing. That can be left to think tanks and the media. It does mean, however, that unexpected developments or ones we wish to avoid can catch us out. Until the Brexit vote happened, contemplating Brexit or the withdrawal of any member state from the EU was something of a taboo topic for many in the field of European politics. It means there has been a scramble to understand and analyse such topics as European disintegration.

That leaves us with a lack of relevant and rigorously research literature. A lot of literature, including some of the journal articles, rushed out in response, will be conjecture. Due to the polarising nature of Brexit, for both students and teachers the task of being able to critically think and analyse this literature will be an important challenge for avoiding the inherent bias in many people's work.

And what of the future? Is Brexit a here today and gone tomorrow topic? If it turns out to be a critical juncture then generations of students and teachers of British and European politics will examine the topic, to say nothing of living with its consequences. But even if Brexit is reversed, the experience will have been a significant one in the politics of the UK and the EU, and one that will have cast a light on so much of British and European politics.

*This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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