

EU membership was a cultural symbol which Remainers approved and Leavers disliked



*Provision of more facts and objective information would have been of marginal significance in the Brexit vote. **Michael Cunningham** (University of Wolverhampton) offers his reflections on the EU referendum that point to the existence of substantial political limitations of evidence. He argues that one observes a widespread tendency among many voters to be resistant to facts challenging positions they hold. He concludes that what mattered in the vote was the fact that EU membership was a symbol of the cultural direction of the UK of which Remainers broadly approved and Leavers disliked.*

A couple of days before the EU referendum in June 2016 two lorry drivers were waiting to deliver materials to a company which makes ornamental brick facings and related products near Crawley, in Sussex. The owner of the company (my brother) and the drivers started to discuss the forthcoming referendum and the drivers said they were going to vote to leave. My brother asked why and they said it was because of the 'red tape' surrounding the driving and operation of their lorries. My brother pointed out that virtually all the legislation and directives relating to this issue were domestic and had nothing to do Europe. They did not dispute his claim, which I think was correct, but said they would still vote leave because Europe did lots of things they did not like.

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This anecdote is not to be read as a slur on lorry drivers; rather as an example of what I believe is a more widespread tendency of many voters to be resistant to facts challenging positions they hold since alternative facts can be marshalled or they can dismiss facts which challenge theirs as coming from partisan or unreliable sources. As will be indicated below, I argue that better or more 'facts', for which some groups called, would have had a marginal impact on the EU referendum. It is a banal but important point that all facts have to be interpreted and contextualised which makes an over-emphasis on their importance in political discourse and in the adoption of positions rather naïve. One example will be cited before I concentrate on the specific context of the referendum. The current and recent Conservative and Conservative-led coalition governments have defended their employment policy by using the fact that more people are employed in the UK than ever before. This may be true and, therefore, a 'fact' (and I do not think the opposition parties have disproved this claim). Quite clearly, though, this is not conclusive evidence of the success of the policy because the *quality* of jobs created and concerns over insecurity, 'zero hours' contracts and the rise of the 'gig economy' have been raised by critics of the government. Therefore, facts cannot in some simple manner determine the success or otherwise of this policy.



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With respect to the EU referendum, there were three factors which made the political efficacy of facts and evidence even more marginal. One was the fairly extensive mistrust, and belief in the bad faith, of political opponents, the second was the issue of contingency and uncertainty and the third was the role of identity, culture and disposition in positions adopted, and sides taken, in the referendum and these will be considered in turn. One example of the first factor is the dismissal of the calculations and projections of the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) by some Brexit supporters on the grounds that the IFS was part of the 'establishment' or that it was biased because of its funding sources. This is despite the fact that many commentators consider the IFS to be an agency that strives for objectivity and adopts non-partisan positions. The disdain of some leading Brexit figures for 'experts' and the 'establishment' arguably created or promoted a reciprocal lack of respect for some Brexit figures by Remain supporters, particularly when the former invoked comparisons with Nazi Germany or were scaremongering about Turkish immigration. In politics more generally there may be a temptation to dismiss the claims of political opponents; however, the tone and temper of the debate were perhaps more acrimonious than is usual in British politics.

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The second factor is that, arguably, one of the main themes of the referendum made the limitations of looking for facts and information to improve democratic debate particularly stark. Both sides were predicting how the UK would evolve and fare outside the EU and the pictures drawn were inevitably coloured by speculation, the amount of variables involved and contingencies. While some scenarios might seem more plausible than others, facts and information became even less relevant as the protagonists tried to give a vision of the UK (or possibly the UK without Scotland) ten years hence which had to factor in the responses of the USA, China, and the EU among other international actors to the UK's departure. A moment's reflection on the variables involved and the predictive inadequacies of economists and other social scientists reveals how little impact a recourse to facts or data will have in such an exercise. Neither of these two points is intended to support some extreme relativism or post-modern dismissal of facts; the contention is that the availability of more or better information would have been marginal to the EU campaign in either its prosecution or outcome.

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The third aspect of the EU referendum which raises doubts about the efficacy of increased information, data and perhaps dialogue is that some support for the two camps has been interpreted as representing two different political cultures or identities. Those who supported Remain, disproportionately the young, the formally well-educated and residents of big cities, were more supportive of a cluster of ideas around shared sovereignty, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and an identity that went beyond and superseded a British one. (This is pure speculation but I suspect there is a very strong correlation between voting Remain and speaking, for example, two other European languages). Leave supporters were a more heterogeneous group and encompassed both affluent, rural Conservative areas and post-industrial, working-class areas. For some Leave supporters, a more 'traditional' Britain (or more frequently, England) which embodied an arguably outmoded conception of national sovereignty and a more homogenous cultural and racial composition was the appeal. The European project was also often associated with a political elite which, for the working-class constituency, had failed to provide stable employment, affordable housing and adequate public services. Working-class support for Brexit was often interpreted by Remain supporters as a manifestation of the frustrations of those who had suffered economically in a period of de-industrialisation and globalisation. The argument is not that the material had no impact on the campaign but that a broad cultural identity and political disposition was significant. The importance of this is that the details of the workings of the EU, the possibility of institutional reform and the cost of its functioning (and debates therein) were of secondary importance. For many of the Remain and Leave supporters the details of the functioning of the EU were of marginal significance. For many Remainers the EU was a symbol of, and had a symbolic value as, a positive, inclusive, post-national, unchauvinistic form of politics whereas for many Leavers it symbolised a loss of national autonomy and British pride and caused, or coincided with, economic decline and marginalisation.

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Conclusion: the positivist illusion

The principal argument of this piece is that the provision of more facts and objective information would have been of marginal significance in the EU referendum. As it was not a contest between the parties in the manner of a general election there was no 'track record' of competence in government to be considered and debated by the electorate and, as indicated above, the debate was largely about the likely trajectory of the UK and the UK economy outside the EU. Therefore, hard data and uncontentious facts were even more sparse and marginal than in conventional political and electoral competition and discourse. Additionally, within the binary context of a referendum, EU membership was a symbol of the cultural direction of the UK of which Remainers broadly approved and Leavers disliked. Inasmuch as the contest was about disposition, culture and identity, 'facts' about the operation of the EU as an institution or its 'real' impact on the UK economy since 1973 were largely irrelevant. This is not to claim the electorate are irrational or atavistic. It is to argue, rather, that the positivist emphasis on facts, objectivity and evidence underestimates the role of emotion, ideology and identity in political affiliation and choice and overestimates the efficacy of improved and increased information.

The article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics.

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