

The Brexit vote was driven by the losers of globalisation, but that's hardly the whole story



*On the second anniversary of the Brexit vote, there is hardly any further clarity on how a whole host of issues will be resolved. Some say we are in what Gramsci called “interregnum” – a period of uncertainty during which the old system or order is dying and the new has yet to emerge. Below, **Armine Ishkanian** (LSE) discusses the social context of Brexit, the reasons why people voted for it, and asks what's the role of social policy going forward.*

The context, and who voted for Brexit?

In 2011, three years after the 2008 financial crisis, we saw an explosion of protest movements throughout the globe. Many people [writing](#) about these recent movements argue that the protests and occupation of squares beginning in 2011 were an expression of anger and reflected the growing concerns around the lack of democracy, social justice and dignity. Seven years on, it has now become clear that the prospects for activists' demands bleeding into the transformation of society and of political decision-making are very bleak. Instead, in the intervening years, nativist and right-wing populist movements have been on a rising trajectory, based at least in part on very similar sentiments of discontent with electoral politics and neoliberal policies.

Brexit, similarly to Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential elections, is frequently interpreted as a manifestation or a result of the growing anger with the political and economic status quo and a victory for populism. Regardless of whether we consider Brexit a form of populist politics or simply a specific political issue or demand, Brexit, similarly to many recent protest movements, had a heterogeneous base of supporters and it became a touchstone for a diverse set of grievances and special interests. And yet most analyses of Brexit tend to overlook this heterogeneous base of supporters, and it is common to read interpretations claiming that Brexit was largely a victory for those left-behind by globalisation, who lashed out in anger against the current political elites and wider system and believe has impoverished them.



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In addition to those so-called losers of globalisation, Brexit supporters included many so-called economic winners, including those with high educational qualifications and incomes. Nick Clegg, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, [writes of elite Brexiteers](#) as "...the hedge-fund managers for whom EU-wide regulations are an overburdensome [sic] hindrance to their financial aspirations". Investigative reporting by [openDemocracy](#) has shed light on the "dark money" funding Vote Leave and one of the biggest donors, Arron Banks, who gave more than [£8m](#) to the campaign. There are many unanswered questions about the source of Banks' funds and possible foreign interference. Since the 2016 referendum, there has been a bevy of *post-mortem* reports which have attempted to answer who voted for Brexit and why. These reports seem to generally agree that the Brexit vote was largely driven by the so-called losers of globalisation, who are living on the [margins of society](#), on low incomes, with few educational qualifications, and without the skills required to prosper in the modern economy. They argue that certain cultural attitudes, including [social conservatism](#) and [right-wing views](#) and a very strong sense of English identity, also predisposed people towards Leave. But that's hardly the whole story.

Alongside the so-called left-behind and the financial elites that supported Brexit, there is also a group of Brexit supporters on the political left, the Lexiteers. Lexiteers by and large reject the xenophobic anti-immigration arguments which they ascribe to the right-wing "big business" and "little-Englander" Leave campaigns arguing instead that their opposition to the EU is based on socialist principles and on advancing workers' rights and anti-racist policies. Lexiteers maintain that the referendum has [broken the neoliberal consensus](#) and [alerted the establishment to the polling power of the "left behind"](#). However, it is highly questionable as to whether the neoliberal consensus has been broken and whether post-Brexit Britain will veer away from the neoliberal policies which have been embraced by successive governments since Thatcher.

Moreover, what is often ignored in the discussions about the so-called winners and losers of globalisation is that many of the people who are now protesting in the streets, not necessarily for Brexit, and often against it, are people who in recent years would have been described themselves as the winners of globalisation. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the category "left-behind" is a fluid and not a static category and even those who may have in the past been described as "winners" of globalisation (i.e., young, middle-class, university graduates) are now are facing increased precarity in the job market, the prospect of [bullshit jobs](#), growing personal debt, and poverty.

What role for social policy?

In 1997, European social scientists signed the Amsterdam declaration on social quality of Europe and arguing for the importance of creating [a social policy that has its own independent rationale and legitimacy](#) so as to counterbalance the dominance of economic and monetary policy within the EU. Yet little has been done since then to enhance social quality and after the 2008 financial crisis; existing social protections and programmes in the UK and across Europe have been further dismantled in the name of cutting the deficit.

While [anti-austerity groups](#) in the UK have raised concerns about the impact of austerity policies on different groups, highlighted alternatives to austerity (e.g., cracking down on tax evasion), and demanded the reversals of the cuts and the raising of fees (e.g., in higher education), the government has yet to substantively change course. Despite the claims of Leave campaigners, more money has not been going into the [NHS](#), or other vital social services and programmes (e.g., adult [social care](#), social housing, and the [Sure Start](#) early childhood centres) and there is little evidence that this will change once Britain finally exits the EU.

In the absence of the state in the context of social welfare, some argue that communities and voluntary organisations can and should step into the gap, whether or not this happens depends on the community and its access to resources. More importantly, we need to move away from a rosy view of community as it is not always progressive actors who move in to fill the gaps and needs of populations who feel left behind. Emerging evidence from Britain, Greece, and Italy demonstrates how right-wing movements and fascist political parties (e.g., the British National Party, CasaPound in Italy and Golden Dawn in Greece) are using social welfare delivery, including food banks and free medical services, to win the hearts, minds, and votes of those who are suffering from growing poverty and precarity.

Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour party leader and his explicit anti-neoliberal stance has revitalized many on the left, yet he faces challenges from the Conservatives as well as those in his own party. Moreover, like Bernie Sanders in the US, Corbyn is often accused of promoting a type of left or socialist populism, which critics argue lacks fiscal constraint and is anti-business. It remains difficult to challenge the neoliberal status quo, what some call the TINA [there is no alternative] position.

Today, the grievances that initially brought people into the streets in protest and led to the victory of Brexit, have not been resolved and in some instances, they have been exacerbated and the neoliberal model remains vibrant. Rather than writing off those with grievances as the losers and the left-behind as angry victims, a more robust and empirically grounded analysis is required to understand the complex political reconfigurations and shifting alliances which have contributed to Brexit. This, in turn, can inform our thinking of how social policy can mitigate social conflicts and advance greater social justice and cohesion. If nothing is done to recognize and address the social and economic drivers which contribute to rising discontent, populist politicians from Trump to Farage will continue to tap into the anger by creating a divisive politics of us versus them. And those who are suffering from poverty, un(under)employment, precarity, lack of affordable housing, and debt will not be any better off.

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

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