Sigma: Journal of Political and International Studies

Volume 41 Article 5

4-2024

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Introduction

Political polarization has become an increasingly hot topic in recent years as countries around the world have seen a greater divide in their national politics. In general, polarization refers to the process whereby people become increasingly sorted into separate camps that hold distinct and opposing identities and interests (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). However, this divide is not limited to ideology: countries have also seen an increase in affective polarization. Affective polarization occurs when individuals move beyond simple policy disagreements into seeing themselves as belonging to an "in-group" while those who oppose them belong to the "out-group" (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). This group mentality leads to increasingly positive feelings toward one's own group, and increasingly negative feelings toward the opposing group (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). In simple terms, affective polarization can be measured as the difference between how much an individual prefers their own group and how much they dislike the other group (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020).

Researchers have previously done substantial analysis on affective polarization in the United States as it has often been seen as a hotbed for strong political divides. While polarization is evident in the United States, affective polarization is not exclusively American (Pew Research Center 2014). In fact, the United States is not excessively polarized compared to other Western states (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020). Polarization levels in the United States among the electorate are less than levels found in Greece, Portugal, and Spain and are similar to the levels found in Australia, Britain, France, and New Zealand (2020). Therefore, analyzing polarization in any of these

countries can provide a valuable contribution to existing scholarly literature on the causes of affective polarization.

Analyzing the circumstances surrounding "Brexit" in the United Kingdom can provide a compelling perspective on the causes of affective polarization. In June 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum to decide whether the country would leave or remain in the European Union. The issue became so polarized that two years after the referendum, 42% of British citizens still agreed that "when people criticize the Remain/Leave side, it feels like a personal insult" (Evans and Schaffner 2019, 19).

This paper will examine three theories to determine which best explains the increase in affective polarization during the Brexit debate: social identity theory, ideological polarization, and elite behavior. This analysis will show that ideological polarization, not partisan social identity, was the driving force behind the United Kingdom's affective response to leaving the European Union because the Labour and Conservative parties failed to consolidate their positions to one side of the debate. Process tracing will also reveal how the level of ideological polarization was enhanced by elite behavior in negative media campaigning. Uncovering the causal mechanisms behind Brexit's polarization can assist policymakers as they work to implement possible preventative measures to minimize polarization.

Process tracing is an appropriate method to use in a case study testing polarization theories. Process tracing is a qualitative approach that answers research questions and hypotheses by focusing on examining evidence from the unfolding of a situation over time (Collier 2011). In the case found in the United Kingdom, process tracing is useful because Brexit had a clear timeline, there is an abundance of research and survey evidence to draw from, and there was an evident rise in affective polarization. This paper will proceed through process tracing by first outlining some of the key facts in the Brexit debate. It will then systematically explore each theory of polarization and the corresponding evidence from Brexit that supports or contradicts the theory. The paper will end by looking at the aftermath of the Brexit vote and drawing implications for the broader scholarly debate on the causes of affective polarization.

Background

Examining the circumstances surrounding the Brexit debate helps illustrate how affective polarization rose during the campaign. As early as 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron promised to hold a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union as part of the Conservative Party's campaign manifesto (Higgins 2013). This promise was primarily made to cater to right-wing voters who might otherwise side with the United Kingdom Independent Party in the upcoming 2015 general election (Higgins 2013). When David Cameron proposed holding a referendum, he and other Conservative Leaders thought that a vote to remain would easily win (Erlanger 2016). However, a volatile campaign ensued that defied expectations and resulted in a 52% majority vote to leave the European Union and a 48% vote to stay (Erlanger 2016).

Interestingly, the United Kingdom's support for membership in the European Union had been consistently low prior to the 2016 referendum. Just two years after joining the then-called European Economic Community in 1975, the United Kingdom held a referendum over whether they should leave the organization but ultimately decided to stay (Walsh 2016). In 2009 and 2012, the United Kingdom had the lowest support for membership in the European Union: only respectively 31% and 30% of UK citizens stated that they thought membership was a good idea (Global Attitudes Project 2012). Comparatively, 65% percent of Germans and 48% of French citizens agreed with the statement. Even in terms of simply having a favorable impression of the European Union, Britain had a consistent downward trend from 2007–2012, bottoming out at a 45% favorability rating.

This general dislike of the European Union sharpened into an emotion-driven political divide in 2016. An examination of the discourse surrounding Brexit found that people on both sides of the Leave-Remain debate would frequently define their "in-group" by highlighting the differences between them and the "out-group" (Meislova 2021). This process included debasing and even demonizing the other side. James Bartholomew, a British journalist who favored the Leave campaign, wrote the following about his experience in 2016:

> One Remain poster suggested that to be for Remain was to be "kind," "open," "inclusive" and "tolerant" which, of course, implies the opposite about Leave. Yet some of the Remainers I met while out campaigning were anything but tolerant. After feeling their contempt a number of times, I got to the point of thinking: "Oh God! I hope we don't have to knock on any more doors of the bloody haute bourgeoisie!"

This type of out-group characterization resulted in a very real consequence: hate crimes against minorities and Eastern Europeans in Britain increased by 42% during the two weeks surrounding the vote (Dodd 2016). Regardless of whether this surge was caused by more people reporting or an actual increase in crime, both responses show a high level of affective polarization in the immediate vicinity of the Brexit vote.

Partisan Polarization

The first potential cause of the rise in affective polarization during the Brexit campaign is partisan identity. When examining the United States, researchers found that the perception of an increase in ideological polarization was actually not due to the public gaining more extreme beliefs (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011). This polarization was instead caused by Democrats and Republicans following their respective party's policy positions more consistently. Polarization, therefore, is not caused by policies but by parties (Reiljan 2020).

The causal mechanism underlying a partisan-based approach to affective polarization is social identity theory. Social identity theory analyzes individuals' instinctive tendency to promote group interest at the expense of their opponents (Mason

2018). Foundational studies of this theory found that even without an individual reward-based incentive, research participants consistently discriminated against a perceived outgroup in order to achieve the maximum positive net difference for their group (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Political parties can provide the type of group-based identity needed for affective polarization. For example, Hernandez, Anduiza, and Rico found that an upcoming election increased the level of polarization because it activated strong partisan identities (2021). Although political parties simplify the voting process for citizens and encourage participation, they can also transform politics into a competition of "us vs. them" (Mason 2018). This process is especially dangerous when other identities like race, religion, and cultural identifications become sorted clearly along party lines (Mason 2018). Under social identity theory, individuals do not identify with their political party solely based on ideological preferences (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Instead, individuals have an innate desire to belong to a group and see that group succeed. Once an individual adopts a party identification, they are implicitly pitted against the opposing group.

In the case of Brexit, a lack of party unity indicates that partisan identity was not the cause of affective polarization. It is true that party affiliation can be used as a predictor for an individual's vote in the referendum. Six in ten Conservatives voted to leave the European Union while seven in ten Liberal Democrats and about half of the Labour supporters voted to remain (Schumacher 2019). However, internal divisions within the parties show that party loyalty could not have substantially impacted the Brexit debate. In 2016, none of the major political parties (except for UKIP, which was founded on the policy of leaving the European Union) declared a unified party consensus on whether the United Kingdom should leave or remain (Edwards 2016; Mason 2016).

Both Conservative Party elites and general party members were split over the issue of Brexit. Party leaders were almost evenly divided, with 56% of Conservative MPs favoring Remain and 44% favoring Leave (Edwards 2016). The Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, campaigned to stay in the European Union and frequently butted heads with primary Leave campaigners like Conservative Boris Johnson and UKIP's leader Nigel Farage (Asthana and Mason 2016). A poll conducted by NBC News the week before the referendum vote found that the majority of Conservatives were likely to side with Leave, with a margin of 59% for Leave and 38% for Remain, despite their own party leader's efforts to campaign for Remain (Cohen and Lapinski 2016).

Although the Labour Party was less divided ideologically than the Conservative Party, they were still unable to present a united front. In September 2015, Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, declared that his party would campaign for the country to stay in the European Union (Wintour 2015). However, this declaration was followed by a rather lackluster effort. In May of 2016, just one month before the vote, a leaked memo from the official Remain campaign showed that "only about half of Labour voters have realized their party is in favor of staying in the European Union,

with the rest thinking it is split or believing it is a party of Brexit" (Mason 2016). The perception that Corbyn had not tried hard enough during the campaign and frustration over the result led the Labour Party MPs to hold a vote of no confidence in the aftermath of the referendum where over three-quarters of the MPs voted to remove Corbyn as the head of the Labour Party (Asthana, Syal, and Elgot 2016).

In contrast to the two major parties' disjointed approach to the referendum, Brexit-based identities quickly became a polarizing force. An analysis of survey data conducted from 2016–2019 found that people were more likely to identify with either Leave or Remain than with a political party and that positive or negative perceptions about Leavers and Remainers were not driven by party identity but by Brexit identity (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 2021). Furthermore, having cross-cutting cleavages, or attitudes and identities that are not typically found within one's political party, can mitigate the effects of partisanship (Mason 2018). In Brexit, dislike towards the Leave or Remain side cut across traditional partisan boundaries (Meislova 2021). Whether it was because of internal division among party leadership or mediocre campaign messaging, the referendum was not heavily influenced by political parties (British Social Attitudes 2017). Partisanship was not the cause of affective polarization in Brexit.

Ideological Division over Cultural Issues

Instead of partisan polarization, the Brexit debate was defined by ideological differences. Ideological polarization occurs when groups' policy preferences move consistently farther to the left and right (Webster and Abramowitz 2017). Researchers have found that citizens feel more strongly toward candidates who support less centrist policies (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016). These enhanced emotions are caused by the perception of increased stakes in an ideologically diverged campaign (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). Elite politicians' positions are not the only thing that affects polarization; individuals who hold more extreme policy positions themselves are more affectively polarized (Reiljan 2020).

In the case of Brexit, the ideological divide was tied to specific cultural issues. Cultural issues are more likely to generate intense polarization than economic issues because they often intertwine with deeply held identities (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2022). A survey conducted on the day of the referendum found that 82% of Leave voters attributed the most influential motivator for their vote as either "the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK" or that leaving "offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders" (Ashcroft 2016). This survey illustrates how cultural issues concerning state identity and immigration were the primary driving force behind Leave voters. This analysis is supported by a pre-election report that found that individuals who felt strongly about British identity being eroded by the UK's membership in the European Union were more likely to want to withdraw from the union (Curtice 2016).

Concerns about immigration that had been building in the United Kingdom for many years were exposed during the referendum campaign. In the town of Boston,

the number of foreign-born residents increased by six times from 2001–2011 and continued to grow from 2011–2016 (Freytas-Tamura 2016). The rapid increase in immigration strained the availability of housing, schools, hospitals, and jobs (Freytas-Tamura 2016). The official Leave campaign adopted these cultural issues as their primary concern with their slogan "take control" (Erlanger 2016). The slogan signaled to voters that the migration of people from Europe could only be subdued by leaving the European Union (Erlanger 2016). Just three weeks before the referendum, a controversial House of Commons committee report blamed the UK's membership in the European Union for the government's failure to deport 13,000 foreign criminals (Travis 2016). In a study conducted after Brexit, participants were asked to rank a list of a dozen social and political concerns (Curtice 2017). The only issues significantly correlated with an individual's vote in the referendum were related to cultural outlook and national identity (Curtice 2017).

The polarization of these issues was likely compounded by the presence of alt-right campaigners in the weeks leading up to the vote. Right-wing ideology has been found to be especially potent in creating affective polarization. Past studies have found that radical right parties are more intensely disliked by mainstream society than would be predicted based on their policy positions (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2022). Alt-right rhetoric can inflame people on both sides of the political aisle because it often singles out scapegoats to blame for "the people's" troubles (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2022). This affective response to alt-right ideology has continued despite the normalization in recent years of radical parties' presence in mainstream politics and coalition governments (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2022). In early June 2016, the Daily Mail found that Brexit's official Leave campaign had been infiltrated by dozens of alt-right extremists who had attached themselves to the movement (Walters, Owen, and Cahalan 2016). In response to the report, the Leave campaign stated that there was little they could do to stop extremists from buying and distributing Leave merchandise (Walters, Owen, and Cahalan 2016). Several MPs from both the Conservative and the Labour parties spoke out against the Leave campaign's indifferent response to the presence of alt-right activists (Walters, Owen, and Cahalan 2016).

Only a week before the referendum vote, tensions between the alt-right movement and Remain supporters peaked with the brutal murder of Labour MP Jo Cox. Cox was a passionate supporter of immigration and had been campaigning for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union (Cobain, Parveen, and Taylor 2016). On June 16th, Cox was walking to a meeting with her constituents when she was attacked by Thomas Mair. She was shot twice in the head, once in the chest, and stabbed 15 times. According to eyewitnesses, while Mair was attacking Cox he yelled, "Britain first, keep Britain independent, Britain will always come first" (Cobain, Parveen, and Taylor 2016). In the immediate aftermath of her death, both Remain and Leave campaigns suspended campaigning efforts, and most political organizations abstained from conducting surveys (Castle and Bock 2016). Politicians from both sides of the aisle spoke out about uniting against hatred and called for kinder politics (Erlanger 2016). Jo Cox's death may have changed the political tone of the debate in

the final week before the referendum vote. However, her death also symbolizes the horrifying consequences that can come from affective polarization and illustrates the extreme divide between Leave and Remain voters.

Elite Behavior and Negative Political Campaigns

The ideological polarization found in the Brexit referendum was likely compounded by elite politicians' behavior and the presence of negative media campaigning. Some of the first research on affective polarization found that exposure to political campaigns and negative advertising strengthens partisan affect (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). A cross-country study found that elite polarization is significantly correlated with trends in affective polarization (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2021). More specifically, in recent years elite disagreement on cultural issues such as immigration or national identity has started to drive affective polarization more than disagreement over economic issues (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2022).

The media coverage in the United Kingdom is highly polarized over ideological issues. A study conducted about the portrayal of the refugee and migrant crisis from 2014–2015 found that of the five European Union countries studied, the United Kingdom's media coverage was the most negative, the most polarized, and was "uniquely aggressively in its campaigns against refugees and migrants" (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2015). During the referendum campaign, two of the UK's primary newspapers, the Guardian and Daily Mail, had an ideologically polarized approach to the debate. The Guardian was primarily pro-Remain and the Daily Mail was strongly pro-Leave (Spiers 2019).

Elite rhetoric from both the Remain and Leave campaigns further inflamed the debate. Politicians from the Remain side were often accused of "scaremongering" when they cited reports from economists and the IMF about the negative economic consequences that would come from leaving the European Union (BBC 2016). Michael Gove, a Conservative MP who campaigned for Leave, stated that Prime Minister David Cameron and other Remain campaigners were guilty of "a depressing litany of projections about world war three and global Brexit recession" (Asthana and Mason 2016). Leave campaigners like Nigel Farage also spread negative messaging and misinformation. One of the most controversial choices in advertising associated with the Leave campaign was a poster of a crowd of Syrian refugees with the words "Breaking point: the EU has failed us all" (Stewart and Mason 2016). By portraying mostly non-white people in the poster, the Leave campaign played on fears that Turkey would enter the European Union and force the United Kingdom to accept a flood of Middle Eastern refugees (Stewart and Mason 2016). At another point in the campaign, Nigel Farage claimed that staying in the European Union would put British women more at risk for sexual assault because of the influx of immigrants. Farage supported this claim by referencing an instance in Germany where attackers, some of whom were asylum seekers, sexually assaulted hundreds of women at a city central station on New Year's Eve (Elgot and Mason 2016). Ultimately, elite rhetoric

and media misinformation created a situation where the United Kingdom saw "both sides accuse the other of bare-faced lies, with institutions and authorities dismissed as corrupt, [and] experts and public servants as biased" (Easton 2016).

Conclusion

Identification as a Leave or Remain supporter continues to play an important role in UK politics. Typically, affective polarization decreases as the visibility of political conflict and the urgency of political identities decline (Henandez, Anduiza, and Rico 2021). Most voters lose interest in political competition soon after election day (Hernandez, Anduiza, and Rico 2021). However, in 2019, three years after the Brexit vote, only 8% of Britains said they were a "very strong" supporter of a political party and as many as 40% said they were either a "very strong Remainer" or a "very strong Leaver" (Curtice et al. 2019). The enduring legacy of Brexit identities is probably due in part to continued media coverage on the lengthy process of leaving the European Union, a status that the United Kingdom finally achieved in January 2020 (Hayton 2022).

However, the conflict between Brexit identities and partisan identity has declined since the referendum. Following the Brexit vote and David Cameron's subsequent resignation, the Conservative Party was able to effectively consolidate its position into a solidly pro-Brexit stance (Hayton 2022). The Conservative elites' willingness to move with the result of the referendum allowed them to reorient the Leave side into their party as well as maintain a hold on Conservatives who had voted for Remain (Hayton 2022). If Conservative leadership had taken this adjustment sooner during the referendum campaign, it is likely the debate would have become less polarized as Brexit identities would have no longer cut across traditional party lines (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021).

Using process tracing, this paper confirms that affective polarization can exist outside of previously strong social identities. The Conservative and Labour parties' failures to present a united front during the referendum campaign created a unique circumstance where partisan identity was not the preeminent force in dividing UK constituents. Instead, the affective polarization in the United Kingdom was caused primarily by an ideological divide on cultural issues. This ideological divide was deepened due to emotionally charged rhetoric from elite figures and intense media coverage. Using the polarization that occurred during the Brexit referendum as a case study advances scholarly literature as it demonstrates that ideological polarization can be a driving cause of affective polarization, especially in the absence of strong party identities.

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