LSE and Europe
Explaining the Brexit Vote

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#LSEBrexit
Why Did Voters Choose Brexit?

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..Is Brexit just the beginning?
THE EU REFERENDUM EXPERIENCE

- 50+ referendums on European integration
- Since 2000, there have been 25 EU referendums, of which 10 were No-votes
  - Denmark (x2), Sweden, Ireland (x2), Greece, France, the Netherlands (x2), and UK
- Political establishment + business normally overwhelmingly pro-EU
LESSONS FROM PAST EU REFERENDUMS

1. The campaign matters
   - Attitudes are highly malleable

2. Messages from political parties are important
   - But parties often divided

3. The “reversion point” is crucial
   - The consequences of a No-vote are as important as the proposal (Status Quo bias?)

4. EU referendums are not just about the EU
   - Dissatisfaction with the government and anti-establishment protest votes
Why the Remain-side felt confident....

Do you think Britain would be better off or worse off economically if we left the EU?

Source: YouGov June 2016
THE CAMPAIGN

- Close race
- Governing Conservative Party split, leading both camps
- Main issues:
  - REMAIN: Economic dangers of Brexit (*A Leap in the Dark*)
  - LEAVE: Immigration & Sovereignty (*Take Back Control*)
- No discussion about: democratic deficit, EU institutions
BREAKING POINT
The EU has failed us all

We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.

Leave the European Union
ON 23rd JUNE

tovoteleave.co.uk

3 MILLION UK JOBS
ARE LINKED TO
OUR TRADE WITH THE EU

More jobs and more security – Britain is stronger IN Europe
THE CAMPAIGN ISSUES

Note: Pre-referendum survey of 5,000 respondents asking for “main arguments” (structural topic model) (Hobolt & Wratil)
IMMIGRATION VS. ECONOMIC BENEFITS
‘PROJECT FEAR’ did not work

- Fear-mongering ‘worked’ in Scottish referendum
- Survey experiment (May 2016):

  ‘Experts point out that the consequences of leaving / remaining in the European Union are very uncertain and difficult to predict…’

  - Telling respondents about uncertainty of Brexit: No effect
  - Telling respondents about uncertainty of Remain: Less turnout

- Had people had enough of scare-mongering?
THE LEAVE VOTER: CHARACTERISTICS

Source: Hobolt, 2016. BES. Marginal effect based on regression model of leave vote
Education Gap

% Leave vote

No qualification | GCSE | A-level | Undergraduate | Postgraduate
---|---|---|---|---
80% | 70% | 50% | 30% | 20%
THE LEAVE VOTER: ARGUMENTS

- EU has not made UK more prosperous
- Brexit will not reduce trade
- UK Parliament to override EU law
- EU has not helped prevent war
- EU has undermined British identity
- Brexit will lower immigration
- Anti-EU migrants

Source: Hobolt, 2016. BES. Marginal effect based on regression model of leave vote
**But is Britain an Outlier?**

ITALY AND FRANCE?

Imagine there is a referendum and you could decide whether your country stays as a member of the European Union. How would you vote?

Source: Bertelsmann Foundation
EXPLAINING SUPPORT FOR EU MEMBERSHIP

Source: Bertelsmann Foundation, study of 8 EU countries. Marginal effects on support for remaining in the EU.
CONCLUSION

- Referendum provided a mandate for Brexit, but not what *kind of* Brexit
  - Government appears focused on limiting Freedom of Movement
- It is unlikely, but not impossible, that the Brexit vote will trigger other EU exits
- Yet, populist right-wing forces are on the rise across Europe
  - Fuelled by anti-immigration, Eurosceptic and anti-elite sentiments
  - Similar socio-economic divides as in Brexit vote
‘Let’s never ask the public for their views ever again’