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# *What Brexit has Revealed: Pride and Prejudice as Political Identity Traits*

## *Lo que el Brexit develó: orgullo y prejuicio como rasgos de identidad política*

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**ABSTRACT**

The Brexit victory in the referendum on June 23rd, 2016, in the United Kingdom surprised half of the British population and the world's public opinion, and it was described as an atypical and irrational political behavior. A thorough analysis of the historical context and how the teams for and against leaving the European Union presented their arguments to the voters shows the reasons for the result. This article reflects on them in two facets: *1)* the background to the consultation: the way in which the relationship between the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe was constructed and how the British perceived their integration, in addition to the campaign strategies in favor of permanence and exit, and *2)* how citizens saw in the consultation an opportunity to change political rules contrary to their interests. I also present their first impressions of the Brexit results.

**Keywords:** Brexit; European Union; political perceptions; campaigns; national identity.

**RESUMEN**

El triunfo del Brexit en el referéndum del 23 de junio de 2016 en Reino Unido sorprendió a la mitad de los británicos y a la opinión pública del mundo, y se le calificó como un comportamiento político atípico e irracional. Un análisis a fondo del contexto histórico y de la manera en que los equipos a favor y en contra de la salida de la Unión Europea ofrecieron sus argumentos a los votantes muestra las razones del resultado. En este artículo se hace una reflexión sobre ellas en dos aspectos: *1)* los antecedentes de la consulta: la forma en que se construyó la relación entre Reino Unido y el resto de Europa y cómo es que los británicos percibieron su integración, además de las estrategias de campaña en pro de la permanencia y la salida, y *2)* cómo los ciudadanos vieron en la consulta una oportunidad para cambiar reglas de la política contrarias a sus intereses. Expongo además sus primeras impresiones sobre los resultados del Brexit.

**Palabras clave:** Brexit; Unión Europea; percepciones políticas; campañas; identidad nacional.

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## Introduction

The triumph of the option to exit the European Union (EU) in the June 23rd, 2016, referendum in the United Kingdom took half of the British public and the global opinion by surprise. It was labeled as an atypical political behavior, reflecting a decision-making process perceived as lacking rationality. However, a deeper analysis of the historical context and how pro —and anti— EU exit options presented their arguments reveals a substantial number of reasons that explain this outcome. This article outlines these reasons based on two main aspects: *1)* the historical background of the referendum, which reviews the development of the United Kingdom's relationship with the rest of Europe post-World War II, British perceptions of EU integration, and the campaign strategies adopted by organizations promoting both the leave and remain options; and *2)* the way in which citizens viewed the referendum as an opportunity to reshape political rules that they perceived as contrary to their interests, including their initial reactions to the Brexit result.

The concept of *path dependence*, proposed by theorists in the new institutionalism (Pierson, 2004; Sewell, 1996), will be employed to examine the variables that influenced the calculated return for citizens choosing the exit option. Additionally, the critical juncture represented by the Brexit referendum —marking a transformation of the basic frameworks that had previously defined the social codes of life in the UK— will be evaluated.

Goffman's (2006) framing theory will also be incorporated to establish the reference frameworks used by pro-exit campaigners and their alignment with the political reference points of voters opting for Brexit.

## *The United Kingdom and the European Union*

Since the early 1950s, British governments have justified the European integration project through two narratives: *1)* promoting peace and prosperity in the wake of World War II within the context of a smaller and less open global economy than that of the 21st century; and *2)* the unification of Europe following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Copsey, 2015). Although these narratives were compelling, in practice, they encountered persistent reluctance rooted in certain features of British political culture and historical prejudices, complicating relations with the continent.

In describing their relationship with Europe, the British often quote Winston Churchill (1953): "We have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not combined. We are interested and associated but not absorbed. If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, it will always choose the open sea". These words, spoken by the then-Prime Minister, illustrate the historical British reluctance to-

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wards the European integration project, dating back to the earliest negotiations to form the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. Years later, the UK initially opted out of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 but applied for membership without success in 1963 and 1967. The UK was eventually accepted in 1973, and in 1975, under Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, a first referendum on staying in or leaving the EEC was held (Copsey & Haughton, 2014).

At the time, the peace narrative proved convincing for most Britons (67 %), who cast a vote of confidence in continuing community ties with Europe. Regarding the promise of prosperity, this aim was framed around trade liberalization, focusing on creating a common market among member countries and removing trade barriers. A shared external trade policy was also established to strengthen economic exchanges within the bloc and enhance competitiveness on the international stage (BBC News, 1975).

Forty-one years later, the situation was different. The open economy and European unification narratives had failed to deliver on their promises and were even viewed as detrimental by a significant portion of the public, who felt excluded from their benefits. In 2016, the advantages of remaining in the EU persuaded 48 % of voters, ultimately outnumbered by the 52 % in favor of leaving. Pre- and post-referendum surveys indicate that the socio-demographic groups most associated with Brexit voters were those aged 60 and older, supporters of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), working-class individuals, and those without higher education. Regarding voter location, data show that of the 144 rural areas in the UK, 44 recorded 60 % support for leaving (Kirk, 2016; Uberoi, 2016).

Several reasons behind this outcome relate to each institutional shift that has progressively altered the original spirit of the EU and the multitude of responsibilities, tasks, and decision-making areas that have accrued over time. The signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 marked a turning point in the EU's transformation and Britain's detachment from certain agreements endorsed by the other member states. This treaty inaugurated a new phase of continental integration, encompassing political and common security responsibilities, establishing EU citizenship, and strengthening the powers of the European Parliament.[1] The end of the Cold War and European unification imposed new responsibilities on EU member states. Consequently, perspectives and domestic security concerns shifted, responding to new international challenges such as large-scale migration and organized crime. To address these threats at the borders, more precise mechanisms for police and judicial cooperation were introduced (Geddes, 2013).

[1] The Treaty links Parliament to the procedure for appointing the Commission. The role of European political parties in European integration is recognized. They contribute to the formation of a European conscience and to the expression of the political will of European citizens. As regards the Commission, its term of office was extended from four to five years, thus making it equal to that of the European Parliament.

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One of the major changes stemming from Maastricht was the adoption of common legislation for economic policy convergence and the use of a single currency: the euro. However, the UK, while signing the treaty, opted to retain the pound sterling (European Union, 1992).[2] The second key moment in shaping the EU as we know it today occurred in 2004, when Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Cyprus joined. These countries represented a 19 % increase in population —an additional 74 million people— and a 23 % increase in geographic area, totaling 700 000 km$^2$. However, despite the enlargement scale, this expansion contributed modestly to economic terms, accounting for only a 5 % increase in the EU's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Melguizo and Taguas, n.d.). The third defining date in EU history was the signing of the Lisbon Treaty on December 13, 2007, which expanded the EU's competencies in foreign policy, defense cooperation, and border controls (Geddes, 2013). The UK opted for exceptions on matters of justice, internal affairs,[3] immigration, and asylum.[4]

*An ambiguous partner*

The UK has always maintained an ambiguous relationship with Europe. The general perception is that its connection with Brussels has created an institutional structure that is conceived as being foreign to British political traditions. This stems from the significant differences between the British and the EU regarding power distribution and the balance between national and supranational institutional dynamics. Steinberg (2018) argues that the UK has always had a transactional view of its membership in the Union, being highly reluctant to

[2] It is worth mentioning that not all Member States have accepted the Euro. It was initially introduced in 11 countries in 1999, but entered circulation in 2002 in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal, while Denmark, the United Kingdom and Sweden remain outside the Eurozone. Currently, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Sweden remain outside the Eurozone.

[3] The Treaty specifies that the "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union" will not be fully applied by the European Court of Justice in the United Kingdom and Poland.

Article 1 states:

*1)* The Charter does not extend the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union or of any court of Poland or the United Kingdom to determine whether any law or regulation or administrative provision, practice or action of Poland or the United Kingdom is incompatible with the fundamental rights, freedoms and principles which it reaffirms.

*2)* In particular, and for the avoidance of doubt, nothing in Title IV of the Charter creates rights that may be asserted before the courts of Poland or the United Kingdom, except insofar as Poland or the United Kingdom have provided for such rights in their national law.

Article 2. To the extent that a provision of the Charter relates to national laws and practices, it shall apply in Poland or the United Kingdom only to the extent that the rights and principles it contains are recognized in the laws or practices of Poland or the United Kingdom. Reform Treaty-Protocol (No. 7) On the application of the character of fundamental rights to Poland and the United Kingdom.

[4] In this respect, Great Britain has maintained the position it took in 1995 when it refused to sign the Schengen Agreement abolishing internal border controls between EU member countries.

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surrender too much sovereignty and never truly embracing the political integration project shared by most EU member states.

It has been rightly observed that integration has led to social, economic, and political interaction patterns that have impacted the UK's internal political structures. Indeed, Europeanization altered the operational practices of the British political system and many significant areas of public policy. The regulatory framework set by the EU also affected the role of institutions, public policy compensation patterns, and citizen representation (Geddes, 2013). Thus, the public has often viewed the adoption of new laws, the establishment of new institutions over the years, and the implementation of new policies as an unwelcome intrusion (Rosamond, 2000). The discourse for or against EU membership has varied depending on the political alignment of the government in power: the Conservative Party has shown a tendency toward Euroscepticism, while the Labour Party has been more inclined to recognize the benefits of the EU.

The sense of alarm over the limitations that subjection to EU principles could impose began with Margaret Thatcher's government, as her neoliberal model envisioned economic prosperity through free trade and saw the EU as an obstacle preventing the UK from fully leveraging the benefits of globalization (Bevir, Daddow & Schnapper, 2015: 9). The Labour Party's return to power in 1997 marked a temporary reprieve from Eurosceptic rhetoric. Labour governments understood the importance of incorporating Europe into their discourse and political projects. However, their efforts did not resonate as expected, and during their thirteen years in office, they failed to persuade the British public of the advantages of promoting the country's leadership within the EU or increasing support for pro-European policies. Prime Minister Anthony Blair also fell short in his goal of positioning the UK as a bridge between Europe and the United States (Allen, 2013; Bevir, Daddow & Schnapper, 2015).

The Conservatives returned to 10 Downing Street at a time when the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis was still being felt, with the public largely attributing the blame to the UK's ties with Europe and the misguided decisions being made in Brussels. As mentioned, Prime Minister David Cameron exercised his veto power in 2011 to block reforms to the Lisbon Treaty, which aimed to support agreements among Eurozone countries to stabilize the currency. His decision was met with disapproval by the other EU members, who announced they would pursue an alternative path through an intergovernmental treaty to achieve their goals (Allen, 2013).

The path towards European integration brought about consequences that could not have been foreseen when the British approved their entry in 1975. Coupled with a lack of public conviction about their EU membership, these factors help explain why the UK struggled to align with its partners on all major transformations in objectives, institutions, and legislation. This situation led them to shift from a stance of managed independence to a more isolationist position, culminating in the outcome of the 2016 referendum (Allen, 2013; Geddes,

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2013; Freedland, 2011). This also explains why the British chose to leave instead of opting for a more moderate form of participation in the EU. Another determining factor in this decision was their conception of national identity, a topic to be addressed next.

## *British character and the pro-Brexit campaign*

The propositions of *path dependence* theory help explain how, in the case of the 2016 referendum, the pro-Leave campaign presented a return to a self-sufficient past as the most advantageous option for the British people, tipping the balance toward change rather than continuity (Sewell, 1996; Pierson, 2004). Sewell argues that events occurring early in a sequence can influence the potential future outcomes of history. This implies that prior assessments of the costs and benefits of a significant event will affect how similar events are judged in the future. Pierson further explores this by arguing that positive feedback processes in citizens' interpretations of social developments reinforce their convictions and influence the stability or change of a given situation. He also contends that the initial set of conditions defining a political context can have significant and lasting effects on the outcomes of collective actions.

Much like the shift in governmental views on the UK's role in Europe, the public also experienced a transformation, moving from what Schmidt (2006) terms as a *permissive consensus* to openly expressing public dissent on the matter. In line with Churchill's ideas, a substantial portion of the British populace continues to view their country through the lens of its imperial glory and national sovereignty (Saraiva-Szucko, 2022). Regarding the former, unlike Germany or France, which have led the integration process since its inception, Britain's late entry could be seen as a sign of its declining power and regional status and the diminishing role it plays in global geopolitics (Geddes, 2013). On the matter of national sovereignty, Gamble (1985) explains that the British notion of political rights is tied to the sovereignty of Parliament, with references to national history and traditional freedoms derived from Enlightenment ideas. This perspective has led to viewing European integration not as an opportunity to enhance universal rights but as an artificial imposition and a threat to historically acquired rights (Wincott, Peterson & Convery, 2017; Dykes & Donnelly, 2012; Wallace, 1986).

Compared to other EU countries, the British have developed a strong national identity, leaving little room to accept their European affiliation based on a sense of political efficacy. Two examples illustrate this: *1)* the key elements they associate with their identity —history (33 %), culture (32 %), and geography (27 %)— all of which have higher percentages than the EU average (European Union, 2005); *2)* their stance on dual identity, with 32 % embracing both national and European identities, while 56 % adhere solely to a national identity (European Union, 1995).

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The signing of the Maastricht Treaty intensified British social opposition to the EU, fueled by two additional factors contributing to the growth of Euroscepticism: the strength of national identity and the erosion of public trust in the political system and politicians (Franklin, Marsh, and McLaren, 1994). The Spring 1994 Eurobarometer, conducted after the treaty came into effect, already indicated some signs of British reluctance towards EU membership. The nationalist lens through which they viewed Europe is evident in their opinions on key issues related to integration. In that year, 61 % believed the EU should only handle matters that could not be effectively managed by national, local, or regional governments (European Union, 1995). Furthermore, 44 % did not feel benefited by membership, and 53 % disagreed with the concept of a "two-speed Europe", supporting the integration of less economically advantaged countries. Additionally, 45 % were against increasing joint action, with the same percentage showing disinterest in the European project (European Union, 1995).

Thus, the 2004 enlargement resulted in a rift between society and political elites, potentially contributing to the rise of Euroscepticism, as only 31 % of the population supported the decision to incorporate more countries into the EU, despite the government's decision to endorse the initiative (Dursun-Osaka, 2014). The strategy of Brexit proponents relied on a more accurate reading of the signs of decline, culminating in three major achievements. The first was blaming Europe for all the issues afflicting the UK, which led to the other two: appealing to deeply rooted prejudices among a significant portion of the population by offering solutions to their fears and, ultimately, adopting a tone that defended national character. The campaign focused on domestic arguments more aligned with the electorate's immediate concerns, such as insecurity and the strain on the social fabric due to increased migration, both of which were associated with the deterioration of public services. In the political-cultural sphere, they appealed to recurring themes in the British mindset, which have contributed to the growing Eurosceptic trend in recent years: sovereignty, protection of individual rights, and national identity.

*"Let's blame Europe"*

Molina (2018) points out that political debate in the United Kingdom has largely focused on the demands placed by supranational Europe on its member states without adequately recognizing the benefits it offers them. The author questions the position of self-proclaimed Europhiles, arguing that even they do not base their stance on emotional commitment or a belief in superior democratic quality but rather on transactional calculations.

The strength of British national identity and the ambivalence of successive governments prevented the formation of a consensus around the UK as a truly committed actor within the EU framework or as a leader capable of decisively influencing the decision-making processes in Brussels (Bevir, Daddow & Schnapper, 2015). A year after the EU's expansion, 35 % of

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the UK population held a negative view of the EU, and 44 % expressed distrust. This skepticism extended to its major institutions: 52 % disapproved of the European Parliament, 46 % of the European Commission, and 55 % of the European Court of Justice (Dursun-Osaka, 2014). A decade later, these perceptions had significantly worsened. According to Eurobarometer data collected a year before the Brexit referendum, 72 % held a negative view of the EU, with 73 % distrusting it and 65 % distrusting the European Parliament (European Union, 2015). Moreover, 69 % felt their voice was not heard in Brussels' decision-making processes (European Union, 2014). These sentiments remain prevalent today: the 2022-2023 Winter Eurobarometer reveals that 50 % of respondents still distrust the EU, and 59 % feel disconnected from it, although 36 % maintain a positive view of the institution and 42 % are neutral. Despite their distrust and perceived detachment from the EU, British citizens align with the union on several key values: 43 % prioritize peace both individually and at the EU level, followed by human rights (39 % and 35 %, respectively), equality (32 % and 22 %), and respect for other cultures (21 % and 19 %).

In the UK, there has been a longstanding habit of blaming Europe for numerous domestic policy failures. Much has been written about the role of the media in shaping this image and the significant part they played in the success of the "Leave" campaign during the 2016 referendum. This was achieved through what political communication theory terms *framing bias*, where the media induces pro- or anti-European sentiments by consistently presenting them in a positive or negative light (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014: 1-3).

The anti-European campaign was spearheaded by three major news conglomerates, which have consistently shown a critical —and at times hostile— stance towards decisions made in Brussels. The press also provided a skewed perspective on the financial burden of EU membership for the UK. Daddow (2012: 1225) describes how three media groups drove the anti-European agenda: *1)* the Murdoch group with The Times, Sunday Times, Sun, and Sun on Sunday; *2)* the Telegraph group with the Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph; and *3)* the Harmsworth group, which publishes the Mail, Mail on Sunday, Evening Standard, Daily Express, and Sunday Express.

One of the key arguments promoted by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage —the most prominent faces of Brexit— was that leaving the EU would save the UK £350 million a week, money supposedly being sent to Brussels that could be redirected to domestic needs. This marketing strategy resonated well with the public perception of the financial costs associated with EU membership, whether in terms of overall contributions or the UK's role as one of the EU's major budgetary contributors (Allen, 2013). However, Brexit proponents conveniently overlooked the "UK rebate", a reduction in the UK's contributions negotiated in 1984 (Saraiva-Szucko, 2022). Beyond the financial costs, proponents argued that leaving the EU would allow the UK to regain control over its international relations and free itself from the political constraints of reaching a consensus among 28 member states (LSE CFBE, 2016).

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The referendum became a vehicle for channeling British discontent towards a wide range of political issues associated with Europe. The vote to leave was not only about the binary choice of staying in or leaving the EU; it also served as an outlet for widespread dissatisfaction with domestic and foreign policy excesses and a rejection of the exclusionary nature of the dominant liberal model. It was also a clear indication of public frustration with the costs of globalization, which had led to recurring economic crises and austerity policies impacting national welfare (McGowan, 2018; Oliver, 2016; Vibert, 2016).

*The threat of the enemy*

At the time of the referendum, the primary concern for many Britons was insecurity, which they linked to immigration and the influx of people with different customs, often perceived as alien or even threatening. Public opposition to immigration became evident following the 2004 EU enlargement and the inclusion of several Central and Eastern European countries, which resulted in increased migration to the UK. This sentiment intensified in 2015 during the refugee crisis originating from Asia and Africa. Experts argue that these two events led many Britons to conflate immigration issues with broader EU concerns (Wincot, Peterson, and Convery, 2017; Goodwin and Heath, 2016).

The Brexit campaign exploited what Blinder (2015) describes as "imagined immigration", a perception shaped more by fears of uncertainty and potential social and political threats than by actual realities. This phenomenon was particularly evident among EU member states following the border liberalizations of EU legislation (Geddes, 2013). Just before the referendum, a significant portion of Britons —37 % in 2014 and 36 % in 2015— considered immigration to be the most pressing challenge facing the EU (European Union, 2014, 2015). There was also a strong opposition towards immigrants from culturally and racially different backgrounds (Dustman and Preston, 2007; Ford, 2011). Macdougall, Feddes, and Doosje (2020: 891) delve into this issue by distinguishing between symbolic and real threats: the former refers to the perception that immigration endangers British cultural norms and values, while the latter is viewed as a concrete threat to aspects of daily life, such as jobs, education, healthcare, and housing.

The "Remain" campaign failed to counter the narrative that one of the major costs of EU membership was the obligation for the UK to accept people from economically disadvantaged EU countries, who were perceived as exploiting the welfare system. In contrast, the "Leave" campaign successfully tapped into this prejudice, using adverts depicting a more efficient National Health Service (NHS) post-Brexit, now serving only native Britons.

Before the referendum, overtly racist and exclusionary rhetoric was generally seen as politically incorrect, yet the association between cultural diversity and a threat to "true British identity" had long been part of public discourse. By validating exclusion as the "correct attitude", the Brexit campaign legitimized discriminatory expressions that intensified during

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and after the referendum, continuing to shape political and social behaviors in the UK to this day. Media participation was also pivotal in this context, fostering a space where strong anti-immigrant attitudes found resonance within the wider informational landscape (Azrout, Van Spanje & De Vreese, 2012). The "Leave" campaign's greatest success was redefining the referendum's focus, shifting it from a question of EU membership to a referendum on immigration levels. They blamed migrants for social deterioration and economic hardship in various regions (Moore & Ramsey, 2017; The Economist Special Report, 2015). In this context, it is worth noting how the migration narrative overshadowed other positive aspects of EU membership that might have swayed voters towards remaining, such as professional migration, which was widely seen as beneficial by 44 % of respondents in 2015, along with peace among EU members (51 %) and social welfare (24 %) (European Union, 2015).

*The identity unleashed by Brexit*

*Frames* are selection, emphasis, and presentation principles concerning what exists and what matters. They stem from the actor's need to explain what occurs around them. Additionally, they assign meaning to emerging situations, determine what is relevant, and indicate which behaviors are appropriate (Goffman, 2006; Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011).

These frames also reflect a selection influenced by a group of people's shared ideas and beliefs, along with the hierarchy they assign to them; this selection involves criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Robert Entman (1993: 54) defines it as follows:

> The character, causes, and consequences of any phenomenon become radically different as changes are made to what is prominently displayed […] The social world is […] a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized.

Choosing what to include or exclude in a frame entails applying a deliberate value bias. Frames shape how various aspects of life are understood and evaluated, individually and collectively. They allow specific elements of a broader controversy to be highlighted, focusing on one or two central aspects of complex issues that one wishes to emphasize (Aaroe, 2011; Nelson & Kinder, 1999).

In the context of identity and political integration, particularly during the Brexit campaign, the dichotomy of "us" *vs.* "them" was presented from various angles. One previously referenced approach was the perceived disadvantage of the British compared to other EU countries due to the significant budget allocated to the EU. Another effective perspective in this dichotomy was the creation of a sense of belonging to the "us", referring to all Britons who felt excluded in contrast to "them", those privileged by policies designed in Brussels (Vibert, 2016; Bevir, Daddow & Schnapper, 2015).

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The EU also carries another connotation within the "them" *vs.* "us" distinction, grounded in the idea of Europe versus the British Empire as two distinct and antagonistic power entities. The enforced membership in an alliance of sovereign countries disrupts the traditional British vision of political power, historically conceived as the expansion of its territories and total control over economic activities in its colonies, as well as the imposition of the Crown's institutions and cultural codes in each of them (Elsayed, 2018). Elsayed describes it as follows:

> As the British gained economic, political, and cultural prominence, the Empire became a vehicle for nationalism since its success abroad translated into pride and glory at home. This legacy does not dissipate overnight. Although the British Empire dissolved into autonomous sovereign states, patriotism and the love for a united kingdom never waned. (Elsayed, 2018: 95)

The Brexit campaign capitalized on this nostalgia for a "glorious past" and articulated it through straightforward messages accessible to all audiences. The idea of "Take back control" appealed to the need to free the country from the disadvantageous and even humiliating position of being subject to Brussels' regulations and the obligation to maintain an alliance with countries whose economic and historical statuses were deemed inferior to those of the United Kingdom.

The third and most significant construction of the "us" *vs.* "them" dynamic is that of the nation's members and the people versus the "others" belonging to different nations and peoples. Currently, most countries have two types of narratives regarding their history: the traditional one with ancestral origins and the one continuously reworked to reflect the present. A "strong" nationality is constructed through habits and traditions that, due to their recurrence, become the narrative of a national community, of an "us", with similar identity traits that share something profound beyond the legal and administrative considerations of the state. This idea of "us" is generally juxtaposed against the existence of "others" with different identity traits who are foreign to this original community (Byrne, 2014).

Suvarierol (2012: 212) refers to a form of nationalism that responds to the tension of this dual narrative by distinguishing between "native" national identity and that of citizens of migrant origin. This type of nationalism is based on a logic of freezing the nation, ignoring diversity and social change, and positioning "the nation" and "national identity" as homogeneous, stable entities discursively closed to any form of addition or transformation.

The referendum showcased a snapshot of a stagnant nationalism and a historical identity that required immediate collective action to protect the island from international threats brought about by the policies imposed by the EU, the influx of foreign migrants and refugees, and the gradual imposition of habits and traditions foreign to the national spirit (Elsayed, 2018; Wincott, Peterson & Convery, 2017). Regarding the "people", Brexit symbolized the triumph of populist rhetoric, driven by factors framing the context of the referendum. In

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this sense, Brubaker (2020) argues that a state of exception can pave the way for populist discourse, as seen in the call for a referendum that can radically alter political and economic codes and established institutions. For the public to embrace such messages, two additional elements are necessary: a formula for salvation and a trusted leader to carry out the transformative feat (Tucker, 1976).

Skillfully, the proponents of the campaign linked leaving the EU to the salvific formula of returning the UK to an idyllic era of splendor, where the people were a cohesive unit centered around a single language, culture, tradition, and shared principles and future projects. The people's potential lies in defending sovereignty and cultural, political, and moral unity (Mény & Surel, 2002). The message was simple: leaving the EU would redirect the country in the "right direction", enabling Britons to cease being "victims of Brussels' abuses" and reclaim control of their borders, preventing further migration.

Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2021: 1476-1477) offer an explanation that synthesizes these three versions of the "us" *vs.* "them" dichotomy through the concept of affective polarization, which is linked to groups sharing similar opinions and perception biases. *Affective polarization* occurs when individuals define themselves based on their membership in a particular group, attaching emotional significance to that membership and adjusting their behavior to the group's norms and ideas (Bartle & Bellucci, 2009: 5).

Applying this concept to the Brexit case, one can conclude that identification with a group centered on defending a common cause was focused on rescuing the essence of the British national character. The second group identification bias emerged through a differentiation process based on animosity and prejudice towards those outside the shared identity codes, in this case, migrants. The third bias revolved around evaluating global events and decision-making processes, linked to the responsibilities attributed to the political class, globalization, and subjection to the EU's dictates.

## Final reflection. Seven years after the referendum

The UK's exit from the EU has been anything but straightforward. It only materialized five years after the referendum, and the actual outcomes diverge significantly from the promises made by Leave campaigners, aligning more closely with the warnings issued by Remain advocates. This article concludes with two key questions: *1)* Why was the Brexit's "saving formula" more persuasive than the arguments for remaining? *2)* What are the electorate's views on their departure from the EU today?

One explanation lies in the public's distrust of the official messenger: the government and Prime Minister David Cameron. A second factor is the government's inability to effectively communicate the benefits of remaining and the consequences of leaving. On January

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23rd, 2013, Cameron delivered a speech at Bloomberg News in London, where he outlined his vision for the EU, centered around five principles that, in his view, needed to be discussed to modernize relations among member states. These principles were: *1)* enhancing competitiveness to make member states more market-profitable, *2)* increasing flexibility in members' capacity to make internal economic decisions, *3)* promoting greater democratic accountability from Brussels to EU members, and *4)* creating mechanisms to ensure greater fairness and justice.

In November 2015, Cameron wrote a letter to European Commission President Donald Tusk, proposing substantial reforms in EU regulation and administration, with the keyword being "flexibility". According to Cameron, this flexibility must be applied in four sensitive areas of inter-country relations: economic governance, competitiveness, sovereignty, and migration. In February 2016, an agreement was signed granting the UK preferential treatment in these areas. However, neither the Prime Minister nor the Remain campaign strategists could translate what was agreed upon in Brussels into meaningful assets for citizens to consider in their decision-making. The Remain campaign opted for a conventional message, like those used in general elections or for the renewal of the European Parliament, which proved irrelevant in the face of the enthusiasm stirred by the promise of a national renaissance that Brexit offered. The symbolic act of bringing back documents from Europe affirming the UK's uniqueness within the EU failed to convince voters, especially when contrasted with the allure of reclaiming imperial glory and national honor. Enumerating the costs associated with leaving the EU for the country and its citizens had less impact than the anticipated benefits of regaining autonomy.

Pierson (2004) asserts that in a process characterized by increasing returns, the likelihood of staying the course increases as one progresses, given that the relative benefits of remaining, compared to other options, grow over time. However, the Brexit case revealed an opposite trend. Most Britons voted for the general promise of "taking back control" in June 2016. However, once this became a reality, the gap between expectations and outcomes was striking: economically, the initial results of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement indicated that the UK was no longer a member of the single market and had ceased to be the EU's main trading partner, while new trade barriers hindered transactions. The over 10 % depreciation of the pound, far from boosting exports and fostering competitiveness, led to increased import costs and higher business expenses (Gilles, 2022).

Brexit has also had a negative impact on household incomes: alongside inflation at 10.5 %, a real wage decrease of 2.9 %, and rising service costs, there has been a loss of purchasing power, increased debt, and a decline in quality of life (Gilles, 2022). Another sign of instability and social discontent has been the significant number of strikes by various labor sectors seeking better working conditions. In 2022, unions had their most prominent moment in forty years, mobilizing a wide range of professionals: doctors, nurses, ambulance personnel,

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land, air, and sea transport workers, lawyers, postal service employees, educators at all levels, and firefighters. On February 1st, 2023, coordinated strikes by teachers, border control officers, and civil servants from various ministries such as health, transport, business, culture, elections, and administrative staff, as well as train drivers, led to a walkout of around half a million people (Elgot, Weale & Topham, 2023).

Politically, after Cameron's resignation, the country has seen four Prime Ministers, with three serving in 2022 alone. Theresa May led the initial Brexit negotiations but stepped down in May 2019 after failing to secure Parliamentary support for her agreements with Brussels. Boris Johnson succeeded her, winning the Conservative Party leadership in July and securing over 43 % of the vote in the December general election that year. However, Johnson resigned in September 2022 due to political scandals, economic mismanagement, and his inability to rally party support for his policies. Elizabeth Truss took over but resigned just forty-five days later after her "Mini Budget" economic plan triggered a financial crisis and historic depreciation of the pound against the dollar. Rishi Sunak inherited a host of unresolved issues upon assuming office.[5]

As mentioned, migration was a backdrop to the referendum; however, following the Brexit victory and amid the nation's economic crisis, concern over migration decreased from 56 % in 2016 to 23 % in 2021 (English & Mann, 2021), despite ongoing net migration flows seven years post-referendum. A study by the UK in a Changing Europe (Wittke, Frayne, Wride & Stowers, 2023) indicated that by June 2022, net migration levels had reached record highs, around half a million people. This shift reflects a reorientation of migration patterns, with workers from South Asia and Africa replacing those from the EU.

The most significant shift in public opinion has been related to the economy. Evaluations of the pressure on Britain due to its EU departure were markedly less favorable by late 2022, with a rising number of respondents believing the economy was weaker because of Brexit (49 % at the start of the year to 56 % in October) (Redfield & Wilton Strategies, 2022). Regarding Brexit's impact, the consensus is that it has been detrimental: around 50 % of both Leavers and Remainers see it this way (Wittke, Frayne, Wride & Stowers, 2023: 16).

An increasing number of Britons believe that leaving the EU has negatively affected their daily economic circumstances. By late 2022, 60 % felt that the cost of living had risen because the UK was no longer an EU member, and 38 % believed Brexit had negatively impacted their personal finances. This contributed to growing disillusionment with life outside the EU among the public, regardless of their 2016 vote (Wittke, Frayne, Wride & Stowers, 2023: 23).

[5] As leader of the largest party in the House of Commons, Starmer was appointed Prime Minister by Charles III on July 5th, 2024, becoming the first Labour Prime Minister since Gordon Brown and the first to win a general election since Tony Blair in 2005. Any analysis of the political transition after the date of acceptance of this article exceeds its temporality.

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The reasons for dissatisfaction with the current relationship with Brussels vary: Remain supporters regret that the government has maintained a more distant relationship than they would have liked, while Leave supporters continue to blame Europe for Britain's plight, attributing the outcomes to the EU authorities' lack of commitment to the new relationship (Wittke, Frayne, Wride & Stowers, 2023: 21). More than eight years after the referendum, 55 % of citizens believe leaving the EU was a mistake (Statista, 2024); 51 % say the negative effects have outweighed the positives, and 47 % feel that Brexit remains unfulfilled (YouGov, 2024).

Three years after formally exiting the EU, the task of consolidating political and trade agreements satisfactory to both parties remains unfinished. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that the UK will have any advantage over Europe, in fact, quite the opposite. During the referendum, the EU was portrayed as a distant and overbearing bureaucracy to be rid of. However, after the exit, Brussels became a crucial factor in shaping the UK's future relations with the continent. The economic and health crises from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the internal uncertainty following Brexit have led to a renewed appreciation for closer cooperation with the 27 partners the UK once left behind.

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