

Fact-checking Britain's EU referendum

The information campaigns surrounding Brexit/Bremain are about more than accurate data or an unknowable future.

On 23 June 2016, a referendum will determine if British voters wish to leave or remain in the European Union. This is the UK's first referendum on Europe since it opted to remain in the European Economic Community in 1975. In that instance, the leftist Labour government was split but carried the day with opposition Conservative support. In 2016, it is the Conservative government's turn to be riven by internal factionalism. Widely seen as a test of pro-EU Prime Minister David Cameron's mandate, opportunists from the Conservative Eurosceptic wing are manoeuvring for a possible coup should Cameron be undermined by a public decision to leave. As in 2016, the government needs opposition support, albeit from a Labour party whose resurgent socialist left can barely conceal its contempt for European neoliberalism.

The challenge for both camps is to convince the electorate to care about Europe. The Brexit campaign has consistently held the public relations initiative, finding it easier to mobilise public opinion and media support by focusing on negative shibboleths about immigration and the 'loss' of national sovereignty. Rhetorical opposition to this narrative has been weak, struggling to match the appeal of traditional populist politics. At the same time, the quality of public debate has degenerated. In a progressively febrile environment, nuanced analysis and commentary on the benefits and disadvantages of EU membership can be hard to find.

Sovereign Data examines the information campaigns and contributions of important voices in the debate, and explores the tensions that arise between framers, fact-checkers and forecasters.

Government information

The forthcoming referendum is subject to the terms of the European Union Referendum Act (2015), which sets out specific regulations for the vote on Europe. This legislation amends the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA, 2000), which regulates elections in general. The Electoral Commission ensures that campaigns and elections are conducted fairly within often strict guidelines on finance and information provision. Under PERA, government is not allowed to publish 'promotional material' on referendum issues or outcomes during a 28-day 'purdah' period before the public vote. The government had planned to ditch purdah, arguing it would prevent them from discharging their existing responsibilities to the EU, but were forced by Conservative Eurosceptics to retain it. This was seen as a victory by Brexiteers but the government has also benefited from maintaining the purdah principle, as it potentially short-circuits future Eurosceptic accusations of unfairness in the late stages of campaigning, should they lose the vote.¹ In a similar move to placate Eurosceptics, Prime Minister Cameron has allowed backbenchers and dissenting ministers the right to campaign against the government's remain policy. The leading members of the Brexit campaign – since April 2016, the designated campaigner is 'Vote Leave' – are therefore two Conservative heavy-hitters and erstwhile Cameron allies, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, the latter the obvious popular choice to succeed Cameron should he lose the referendum.²

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In mid-April 2016, the Government sent every household in the UK a policy leaflet, 'Why the government believes that voting to remain in the European Union is the best decision for the UK'.³ The publication laid out the political, economic and social consequences of leaving the EU and the benefits of remaining in Europe. This prompted howls from the Brexit camp of unfair use of public funds (GBP 9.3 million) for 'propaganda' purposes, Johnson deriding it as the 'scare tactics of Project Fear'.⁴ The characterisation rather over-estimated the tone of the leaflet, which was more managerial than unnerving. A more accurate criticism might have been that – by comparison – the leaflet was less balanced than Harold Wilson's pro-EEC promotional pamphlet in 1975, which had the virtue of setting out both sides of the argument.⁵ Accusations of the misappropriation of public funds also rang slightly hollow, given concerns over Brexit groups' campaign finances, raised recently with the Electoral Commission.⁶

Media and academia

The government's inattention to nuance is understandable, if regrettable, as it refused an opportunity to inject some even-handedness into a highly polarised situation. It has become exceptionally difficult to comment publicly on the issue without being accused of fear-mongering or abject bias. The public-funded broadcaster, the BBC, nominally a neutral institution, has, as ever, been accused of bias by both sides. This ill-tempered slanging match is playing out against the background of a government review of the media organisation's charter.⁷ Much of the vitriol levelled against the BBC emerges from newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch, who is well-known for his anti-EU views. There is no attempt at neutrality from this quarter, which claims it is 'entitled to have a view' on membership of the EU, even if that is decided by Murdoch himself.⁸ Despite accusing the Remain camp of peddling fear and uncertainty, leading Brexit voices are equally culpable of 'dog-whistle politics', the *mot du jour* in current British politics. Johnson's recent allusions to the Hitlerian ambitions of the EU have done nothing to assuage frustration at the crudity of public debate.⁹

Several organisations have tried to chart a middle ground between the two poles of Leave and Remain, recognising publicly that the issues at stake are more nuanced than the chief protagonists present. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the UK in a Changing Europe project at King's College London aims to be 'an authoritative, non-partisan and impartial reference point ... that stands aside from the politics surrounding the [EU referendum] debate'.¹⁰ Importantly, its analyses are explicitly intended to inform the public of key issues, as much as they are other stakeholders. Given the current concern about youth disengagement from electoral politics in the UK, its attention to educating young people via its 'Me & EU' portal is especially significant.¹¹ Complementary initiatives include the Full Fact website – 'Whichever side you end up on, get the facts' – which fact-checks literature and statements from both sides of the campaign.¹² The independent think-tank, Civitas, provides extensive breakdowns and explanations of both camps in the referendum debate.¹³ Unsurprisingly, there are many other resources purporting to be neutral and objective but which are perhaps less so than they immediately appear. As Roy Greenslade, a former newspaper editor and noted media analyst, opined in *The Guardian*, 'information' from these sources can also be 'ammunition'.¹⁴ That observation applies across the board.

Narratives, not numbers

Boris Johnson, despite his apparent historical illiteracy, knows perfectly well this debate is not about numbers, despite the range and variety of intervening entities. For every International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UK Treasury, or Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report on the deleterious impact of Brexit, another extols the virtues of the UK leaving the EU. Innovative data analytics by US firm Predata have derived meaning from social atmospherics and market signals to demonstrate fluctuations in

support for Brexit and its impact on economic indicators.¹⁵ But, as one columnist noted astutely, 'there are almost no undisputed or undisputable facts to support either side.' This is 'actually a battle of ideas – it is about what people want to believe, not about what is provable.'¹⁶ In this context, numbers serve facts less than narratives. This leads to a situation in which, for instance, the chair of the UK Statistics Authority is forced to defend his autonomy before the Public Administration Select Committee, in the face of pro-Brexit pressure to release migration figures before, rather than after, the referendum, as planned.¹⁷

Under such conditions, what value do facts and figures have? Intelligence analysts and data scientists understand that data does not start that way. It only exists as 'data' once basic information is filtered for veracity, value and a host of other criteria - ultimately leading to the production of further insights or knowledge.¹⁸ For lay observers, such distinctions might seem a little pedantic. What matters is that data production can serve different and often contradictory ends. It is true, and important, that open access to validated data enables an empowered electorate to fact-check political claims and thus – in theory – make better decisions. But voters have to be motivated to engage in this way. Political scientists and communications theorists have also long understood that in the game of politics, rhetoric is first and foremost about selling an agenda. Presenting objective truths is a secondary issue. The factual basis of framing efforts, in other words, is only relevant insofar as it resonates with target audiences, and the resonance of any given argument – or political agenda – is made up of much more than the facts. In the current debate, this is pure politics, in the sense that numbers only adhere to visions of the future if they serve those who articulate them. This is hardly a novel observation but is writ large in the Brexit/Bremain debate.

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Conclusion

The 2015 British general election showed politicians, pundits and voters how inaccurate opinion polls predicting electoral outcomes could be.¹⁹ It is therefore unwise to speculate as to the result of the June referendum, particularly as polls run by the same organisation can render contradictory results depending on survey methods used.²⁰ Whatever the result of the June vote, two things can be said with certainty. First, Britain will choose to either remain in the EU, or leave it. Second, there will be an almighty internal struggle for the soul of the Conservative party. The referendum will also have been notable for another reason. Every major intervention claiming to 'present the facts' has been dismissed out-of-hand by those whose narratives are challenged by that information. This flies in the face of evidence from other EU referendums that diverse narratives fare better than narrow ones.²¹ Neither side is willing to engage in reflective debate and the absence of a middle ground has left both looking morally bereft and unfit to govern. It has been a campaign in which desperate domestic politicking has drowned out nuance and impaired the British electorate's ability to evaluate for itself the opportunities and pitfalls of EU membership. If, as many suspect, Brexit triggers a 'domino effect' of EU member-states clamouring to leave, let the British example stand for how not to campaign during a referendum, if citizens' interests are truly held to be of worth.

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