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Nationalism in the Age of Brexit: The Attitudes and Identities of Young Voters

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Nationalism in the Age of Brexit:
The Attitudes and Identities of Young Voters

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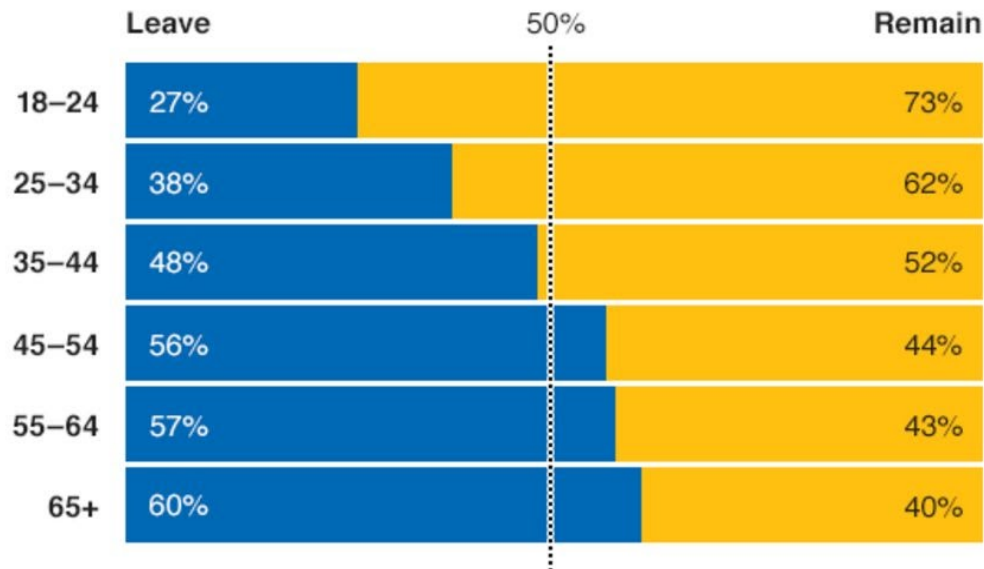
INTRODUCTION

The Brexit referendum marked the first time in the United Kingdom when political lines were drawn along distinct generational lines. In 2016, 73% of young people, aged 18-24, and less than 40% of older voters, aged 65 and over, voted to Remain. In comparison, over 60% of older voters and only 27% of young voters voted to Leave (Fig. 1). Voters aged 25 to 64 remained fairly split between two options, but the difference between older and younger generations is incredibly significant (Kelly 2016). Voter differences have historically been between socioeconomic classes; the urban and the rural, the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the uneducated; however, the Brexit vote reveals a strong difference in values and beliefs between young voters and older voters, with older voters holding most of the power.

In the few years since 2016, Brexit and these divisions have remained relevant in the political sphere. On January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom left the European Union and entered a transition period to determine the terms of their future relationship. Important aspects such as trade deals, border security, and fishing access will ultimately be decided by December 31st, 2020 or they will leave with no deal (Edgington 2020). In addition to Brexit, two general elections have taken place since Brexit, once in 2017 and again in 2019. In both elections, the Conservative party not only maintained their majority but gained seats in the last year. Similarly to the Brexit gap, over 60% of young voters support the Labour party while 69% of older voters support the Conservative party (Fitzpatrick 2019). Consequently, both Brexit and the Conservative wins have highlighted to young voters that regardless of their political efforts, the British majority is tending towards right-wing ideology.

In this thesis, which draws upon qualitative research and interviews, I investigate how Brexit and conservative politics have affected young people's understanding of their place within

How different age groups voted



Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls

BBC

Fig. 1. A breakdown of Leave and Remain vote percentages by age group. (Source: BBC News 2016.)

the nation. Theories of the nation and belonging by the likes of Anderson, Calhoun, and Skey create a groundwork for analyzing the United Kingdom as an example of an imagined community and the implications this has on the identities of those within it. I argue that identities are hierarchical and fluid, both within a person and within a community, and people hold multiple identifications that contest with others'. Consequently, not everyone feels that they have an innate right to the nation, a sentiment that is evident in how young voters feel that they are not represented by the Brexit and Conservative parties in the United Kingdom. Taken together, these insights challenge Benedict Anderson's characteristic of community within a nation.

This project draws on an analysis of the language my interlocutors use to answer questions regarding voting, government, and identity and how their frames of reference construct their identities. From this analysis, I find that media coverage of recent events in politics, such as

Brexit and the 2017 and 2019 general elections, have created a binary perception of identity. Young voters seek to discursively separate themselves from groups that they do not associate with, such as Leave voters and Conservatives, by describing them with aggressive, negative traits. By doing so, they affirm to themselves and their like-minded community that they are not a part of those groups, the “Other”.¹ Yet because these groups are in power, young voters feel a sense of powerlessness from lack of representation and a responsibility to always be able to defend their position with statistics and facts. This process of Othering reveals a hierarchy of identities within the United Kingdom where the Other, who holds power, prioritizes national identity, unlike young voters.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

In this research project, qualitative data were collected over three months, from August 2020 through October 2020. During this time, I conducted six virtual interviews with young British citizens. Research participants were adults, aged 22-28, who grew up in the United Kingdom, hold British citizenship, and were eligible to vote during the 2016 Brexit referendum. These participants would have been aged 18-24 and categorized as a young voter when the Brexit referendum took place. Participants are from various regions within England and while five still live there, one participant moved to the Netherlands to attend university. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Participant selection was conducted through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a method that uses personal contacts and current participants to connect the researcher with other potential participants. Through direct messaging, I explained to potential participants what the

¹ This research uses the framework of the Other to analyze participant’s relationship to oppositional groups, such as Leave voters, Conservatives, and older voters. The intent is not to homogenize these oppositional groups, but to reflect the process of Othering and how young voters intensify already present divisions.

purpose of my study is and what an interview would entail. If the potential participant agreed, I scheduled a time for us to virtually meet. Prior to the interview, participants signed the consent form that allowed me to audio record and use their responses in my thesis. Participants were interviewed through an online video conferencing app, such as Skype or Zoom. I interviewed participants with video, even though I only recorded audio because it is important to see how participants react to certain questions and maintain rapport.

The interview style was semi-structured interviewing, in which I asked open-ended questions and directed the conversation to themes that are of particular interest to them. I had a list of points and questions that I wanted to ask and use to guide the interview. Semi-structured interviewing is useful for learning about how the participant understands topics in their own words and having them expand on their answers. With this style, I can ask more about their experiences and gain a more personal understanding of their beliefs. The questions I asked are divided into four sections and I mostly stuck to the same order, but sometimes topics were switched to maintain a conversational flow.

The four sections were background, voting, government, and identity. The background questions were simple and straightforward questions that the participants easily answered to get comfortable in an interview setting. Questions such as, “Are you working or are you in school?” and “How often do you read the news?” primed the participants to start talking about themselves. The next category concerned voting experiences and beliefs. I asked participants about how they voted during the Brexit referendum and what memories they have from that time. Other questions involved their opinions of the two parties and what they believe was the cause of the divide both within the country and between generational lines. The third category concerned their opinions on the state of the Conservative majority government and their representation

within government. I asked questions such as, “Are you represented in the national/local government? Has Brexit changed how you feel about the government regarding confidence or respect?” The fourth category concerned their national identity and what assumptions they hold about other identities. I asked the participants if they identify more as English, British, or European, and what differences there are between the people who identify as each. I also asked for any memories of times they felt pride in being British and if they thought about applying for citizenship in an EU country after the referendum. The last question I asked participants was if they think Brexit will affect their future and if so, how.

Interviews were concluded by giving participants the opportunity to ask me questions about the research project and my interview questions. I asked them to consider who else would be interested and told them how to contact me if they have potential participants or any further questions. The interviews were transcribed using GoTranscript, an online transcription service, and then stored and coded to protect the participant’s identity and information. Using notes from the interviews and transcripts, I conducted textual and content analysis using the nationalism theories described in the literature review. Discourse analysis is used to interpret their language and how participants framed their opinions both overtly and covertly. The project’s methods and procedures have been approved by the IRB and have been granted exempt review.

This research project went through multiple variations in the course of its conception and approval considering the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in the past year. As countries and institutions began to understand how severe and transmissible the disease is, they implemented rules and policies in an effort to reduce in-person social activity, and as such, many facets of what was considered normal life were forced to change. As a result, research on human subjects has adjusted its methods to protect the health and safety of both its participants and

investigators. Many methods of data collection in anthropology are now limited or impossible to apply. Ethnographic research involving participant observation and in-person interviews must be creatively reimaged in a virtual manner. The obstacles I have faced in pursuing this research project have changed my methodologies greatly, but regardless, the findings will still be valuable in understanding young voters' sense of belonging and opinions of Brexit.

LITERATURE

The concepts of nations and nationalism in the modern era have been studied and theorized by many from a variety of disciplines. The study of the nation provides insight into not only what a nation is, but also who makes up a nation and who belongs to a nation. The theoretical framework for this research will center around Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation in *Imagined Communities*. Works by other researchers such as Billig and Wallace emphasize more empirical qualities of nationalism and more specifically, how they exist within the United Kingdom. Skey and Calhoun's research builds upon Anderson's community characteristic of a nation by critiquing that feelings of equality among members are unrealistic due to the innate power and identity hierarchies that exist within a nation.

Imagined Communities and Nationalism

To properly define nationalism, it is useful to begin with what nationalism is not. Nationalism is not racism, xenophobia, or general right-wing politics. It is incorrectly used to define violent others, such as Neo-nationalists, who are associated with fear. Michael Billig (1995) explains that the definition of nationalism has been misrepresented by popular media and academic writing by "always [seeming] to locate nationalism on the periphery" (5). Nationalism does not occur on the outskirts of society. It is not grown "in fear and hatred of the Other", as it

is typically used to describe xenophobic, racist hate groups (Anderson 1983, 141). In reality, nationalism is a crucial part of identity and reinforces the existence of the nation.

Understanding nationalism requires an understanding of the nation. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1983) defines the nation as “an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). The four major characteristics that determine the existence of a nation are that it is imagined, limited, sovereign, and a community. A nation is imagined because the members will never know or meet all their fellow members, and yet they feel a connection purely because they reside in the same nation. This first characteristic of a nation, that it is imagined, is emphasized through a common history that reinforces memories and stories that members can connect through (De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 154). A nation is limited because it has distinct borders that separate it from other nations. No nation aims to include the entire world: it has finite boundaries that create a distinct national territory. As such, there is a finite number of members that are involved. Thirdly, a nation is sovereign because it does not operate under a God, or at least members are free under a God (Anderson 1983). Billig (1995) writes that religion may play a part in the nation’s identity, however “the order of nations is not designed to serve God, but God is to serve the order” (4). Lastly, a nation requires a sense of community among its members. Anderson (1983) uses community to infer that members feel equal to one another and have equal rights to the nation. Billig (1995) highlights that this sense of community is what combines the nation’s physical space and members. It creates the sense that members have an equal right to live within the borders of the nation.

The existence of the nation is then reinforced by its members through nationalism. Nationalism is a manufactured sense of community based on the idea of shared geography,

language, and culture. Anderson (1983) explains that this definition of nationalism is recent and modern, universal and all-encompassing, and influential to the creation of identity (5). It involves the process of members internalizing the values of a nation and then reproducing those same values, hence legitimizing the nation's existence. This identity, however, is not set in stone. National identities are constructed and then "produced, reproduced, transformed, and destroyed ... through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals and media people" (De Cillia et al., 1999, 153). A member's sense of nationalism and national identity can be altered depending on their relationship to the nation.

Nationalism is not inherently positive or negative. It is instead a consequence of a nation's defining binary of membership. The internalization of the nation's values and culture through nationalism creates a fundamental distinction between members and non-members. Non-members reside outside the boundaries of the nation and hence have internalized the values of a different nation. As the world is currently filled with nations, the binary of membership has evolved into citizenship and national identity (Anderson 1983, 156). De Cillia et al. (1999) analyze how national discourse can be used to foster feelings of both sameness and difference regarding national identity. They premise that the "construction of nations and national identities always [run] hand in hand with the construction of difference/distinctiveness and uniqueness" (150). This binary can create problems when identities become unstable in response to changing communities and threats to the nation.

Nationalism in the United Kingdom

Anderson's theories of the nation can be applied to a study of the United Kingdom by analyzing its various national characteristics. Firstly, the United Kingdom is an imagined community with millions of members from various regions connected through stories and

histories, which were “forged significantly overseas, in war and empire” (Calhoun 2017, 57).

The British identity relates closely to an introverted understanding and pride of the British Empire and the United Kingdom’s back-to-back world war victories. Secondly, the United Kingdom is limited by boundaries, namely the British Isles. The only nation they share a direct border with is Ireland. Thirdly, the United Kingdom operates sovereignly. After a long history of religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, they now practice religious freedom (Colley 1992). Lastly, despite large inequalities between London and the rest of the country, the United Kingdom has a strong sense of regional community and identity. William Wallace (2017) explains that “Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham had their own industrial elites and local pride” (198). High taxation and redistribution limited the difference between the wealthiest and poorest, maintaining a feeling of equality within these regional communities.

There are various ways nationalism is recognized in the United Kingdom, largely because some members may not feel like they are not a part of the same nation. Wallace (2017) explains that a person is capable of holding many identities because communities are imagined and, therefore, can be imagined in infinite ways. In the United Kingdom, identity is dependent on physical location and personal preference (Colley 1992). A person can identify as a British citizen, an English citizen, and a Londoner all at the same time. The United Kingdom is a “multi-national community” with four sub-nations of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (Wallace 2017, 198). In the last few decades, there has been an increase in identification and nationalism within the sub-nations. The British identity became equivalent to an English identity, even though Great Britain also includes two of the three subnations. As a response, people are now more likely to associate with their subnation, as Welsh, Irish, or Scottish, over the nation, and this heavily influences both their scholarly work and their politics (Colley 1992).

However, since the 2016 referendum, divisions between the four nations have deepened due to increased English power in politics. This new English nationalism does represent the values of the entire United Kingdom and tensions between the four subnations have increased.

Fluidity and Hierarchy of Belonging

Anderson's abstract characteristics of the nation have been criticized in recent years for their applicability to modern nations, specifically his emphasis on community. Anderson argues that all members of the nation feel an equal right to the nation, whether that equality exists or not. Calhoun (2003) responds that this perspective is cosmopolitan in nature and therefore denies the social reality that many groups experience (536). Within the nation, a member belongs to many social groups and cultures that also contribute to their identity. Calhoun argues that it is the individuals, not the national community, that should be studied and analyzed, as Jeremy Bentham ([1789]1982) explains that "the interest of the community is ... the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it" (as quoted in Calhoun 2003, 536). Anderson's idea that all members feel equal within the nation does not consider their other identities and sub-communities. National belonging and identity do not hold the same level of meaning or importance for all social groups (Skey 2013, 82). Anderson assumes that national identity is stable and not affected by identity to these other communities. He does not acknowledge the fluidity of these identities and how groups interact and intersect with one another within the nation.

Members feel connected to a variety of groups and identities that all play an important role in their identification. Calhoun (2003) emphasizes that all people belong to multiple different communities, whether social, cultural, or ethnic (536). Michael Skey (2013) explains that people feel membership to a nation through a variety of ways, but I contend these

characteristics can also be applied to smaller communities. One characteristic is a sense of predictability through shared rituals, linguistic frameworks, and spatial continuity. These create a sense of regularity and order within a community and result in more meaningful relations with other members (85). Another way to create feelings of belonging is through smaller boundaries, with familiar patterns of regions and cities with networks and relationships in which people can locate themselves. Skey writes that “these everyday features contribute to a relatively settled sense of identity, place, and community” that are crucial to belonging within a nation, but they are also applicable to belonging to smaller communities and identities (86). Regional identities, political identities, and social identities are also created through shared language, rituals, and place.

There are ways to diminish member’s feelings of belonging to a nation by denying their claims of identity and reinforcing a sense of unequal power relations. Those who hold their national identity of the highest importance and hold the most power within the nation are the ones who “define the *conditions of belonging*” (Skey 2013, 89). In an effort to protect what they believe to be “their nation”, they argue that people who do not have similar characteristics or competencies, what Ghassan Hage describes as national cultural capital, have less of a right to the nation. Upon being marked by these groups, those with less cultural capital tend to feel discomfort and uncertainty about their national identity (91). These power dynamics can be felt throughout ordinary life and activities, affecting their “everyday nationhood” (Smith 2008, 564). Marked groups will sense these attacks on their national identity even in the seemingly mundane aspects of life, which can lead to their preference to identify with other communities or systems.

Perceived inequality of belonging can alter how a person ranks their identities, effectively lowering the salience of a person’s national identity while increasing the salience of other

identities. This shift is possible because identity is fluid and not fixed. Changes in the social or political world can affect which identities are most prominent or referenced. Calhoun (2003) explains that “identities and solidarities... are neither simply fixed or simply fluid, but may be more fixed or more fluid under different circumstances... They provide networks of mutual support, capacities for communication, frameworks of meaning” (537). This further emphasizes the limitations of Anderson’s frameworks by highlighting that community is not only relevant on a national level. Identifying with various communities means that belonging is contextual, individual, and hierarchal.

CONTEXT OF BREXIT

The Brexit Vote

The results of the Brexit referendum shocked the Western world, revealing deep divisions between all demographics within the United Kingdom. There were vast differences in voting depending on income, education, age, location, and party alliance (Wallace 2017). Those who voted to remain were typically well-educated, higher income, lived in an urban setting, younger than 45, and voted for the Labour party. Those who voted to leave were typically low-skilled, lower-income, rural, older than 65, and voted Conservative. Of the four nations, England and Wales had a majority vote for Leave while Scotland and Ireland had a majority for Remain. Since Leave won, England has held the most control with Brexit negotiations and other subnations are unhappy with this shift in power. As a result, Scottish nationalist parties have gained attention, hinting towards “another referendum on its separation from the UK” (Calhoun 2017, 70). These results highlight the demographic differences between voters, but it is more important to understand how the Leave campaign used notions of nationalism to encourage voters to leave the European Union.

Nationalism and national identity played an important role as a conservative response to globalization and the movement of people. In an increasingly interconnected world, the government and big business embraced changes that drastically altered the structure of the United Kingdom as a nation. Older generations find that the nation no longer represents what they considered to be their core values. They witnessed changes through decreased sovereignty, increased immigration, and a forgotten mutual history with Europe. One of the Leave campaign's focuses was that the United Kingdom was being taken advantage of by the European Union (Calhoun 2017). They promoted the idea that their money in the European Union was being unfairly distributed, primarily to still recovering Eastern European countries. Voting for Leave "[suggested] autonomy, the ability for the country to make its own decisions about its future, its relations with others, and who can cross its borders" (58).

Borders and immigrants were another major focus of the Leave campaign, resulting in largely racist and xenophobic discourse. One example of this is an advertisement depicting a line of non-white immigrants and arguing that leaving the European Union would protect their borders from these group (Fig. 2). In another instance, cards reading "'Leave the EU, no more Polish vermin'" were found outside schools in a Cambridgeshire town (Channel 4 News 2016). Solidarity within the community was threatened by the increasing presence of immigrants, who had a separate history to those who could trace their history back to the Roman empire (Gardner 2017). Lastly, the Leave campaign reinforced a version of history that largely focused on the United Kingdom as the European savior. This version negated any common history between the United Kingdom and mainland Europe (Wallace 2017). All these changes created a culture of mistrust and anger towards anything that did not represent the United Kingdom prior to globalization.



Fig. 2. Nigel Farage standing in front of the Leave campaign advertisement “Breaking Point”. (Image credit: Philip Toscano/PA, Source: Elgot 2016.)

Young Voters in the United Kingdom

Both older voters and younger voters were fueled to vote out of fear for the future and discontent with the current government, but ultimately it was easier for the Leave campaign to mobilize older voters. For older generations, they feared losing their national values to European intervention and decreasing solidarity (Calhoun 2017). Younger generations were upset by “high levels of distrust of political systems, institutions, and social elites, leading to claims of a contemporary ‘crisis of democracy’” (Harrison 2017, 256). They were angered that their futures were being put at stake by older generations and politicians who did not share the same values. Younger voters and students “did not view Europe as one of the most pressing political issues” as older generations did during the Brexit campaign (Sloam 2018, 4026). The difference of whether or not membership to the European Union is an issue is one of the key reasons the Remain campaign had a difficult time mobilizing voters. People are generally less likely to vote if they support the current state of the nation, and as a result, the Remain campaign could not create the

same level of urgency as the Leave campaign (Sloam 2018). Despite losing the vote, the Remain campaign was able to mobilize enough young voters to make a considerable difference compared to previous elections.

Young voters in the have been historically difficult to mobilize for elections, yet large turnouts in recent years indicates that many feel that they are being directly affected by the results. For the last 30 years until 2016, there was a continuous drop in young voter turnout for general elections in the United Kingdom. From 2001 to 2015, the number of young people, aged 18 to 24, who voted averaged at 40% (Sloam 2018). In recent years, however, young voters have played an increasingly important role in British politics. For the 2016 Brexit vote, 64% of the young population voted, and then the following year 71% voted in the 2017 general election (Harrison 2017). The turnout could have been higher if there had been a larger sense of urgency as the drastic increase in young voter participation has shown that “some people can be motivated to participate when the stakes are perceived to be high” (258). After years of little to no representation, young people felt isolated from politics and began to mobilize because they understood that their future was at stake.

Young voters also differ from older generations in how they identify themselves in relation to the United Kingdom and Europe. Unlike older generations, young people are less likely to explicitly identify as British or English.² They consider the explicit identification of English or British to infer “ethnic nationalist” and populist political views (Fenton 2018, 336). By rejecting a national identity, they consider themselves members of a larger community and believe themselves to be more inclusive than their older counterparts. According to Harrison (2017), young people are more likely to associate with a European identity and membership to

² At other times, young people will identify as English or British to signal their birthplace while overseas or in a conversational context (Fenton 2018).

the European Union. They embrace the multi-ethnicity of their communities and find solidarity with mainland Europe as well as on the British Isles. Fenton (2018) adds that national identity is met with indifference or hostility and a European identity is preferred. According to my participants, however, this connection to the European Union is not as prevalent as Fenton and Harrison claim. Participant responses challenge them in that they prefer to identify as British over European, but align with them in that most participants disavow their English identity.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In my interviews, participants were open and willing to talk about their experiences with Brexit and the current government. Several themes appeared relating to strong opposition against those who held different beliefs and identified with different political parties or Brexit campaigns. This binary frame of reference enforces an us vs them, right vs wrong, mentality that results in strong negative feelings about these oppositional groups, referred to as the Other. As I explained in the introduction, the term Other is used to highlight the divisions already present and how participants intensify them through the process of Othering. Participants attempt to separate themselves from the Other by describing them with harsh, derogatory language, such as that they are racist, liars, or elitist. They simultaneously construct and legitimize the Other's existence by separating themselves from oppositional groups.

A Divisive Culture

In the United Kingdom, the past years since the referendum have been marked by intense political conflict. From the moment the referendum became legitimate, people had to start choosing sides. With essentially only two options, in both the referendum and the government, feelings of divisiveness grew, and the mentality that one side was right/good while the other was wrong/bad developed. Switching sides was rare and people formed a strong identity with the

group they supported. The dynamic of us vs them is seen throughout interviews and is particularly evident in participants' responses to questions about the Leave campaign, the current government, and the media.

During the referendum, voters had only two options: Remain a member of the European Union or Leave the European Union. A binary referendum question, with little information about the effects or possible paths to leave, allowed for the spread of both misleading information and misinformation (Dunin-Wasowicz 2017). Across all interviews, participants were quick to call the Leave campaign liars. Elle, a recent graduate who works in film, said that she would have voted Leave yet noted that there were lies about where funding would go. Several participants explicitly mentioned a large red bus with "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead" on its sides as an example of false or misleading information spread by the Leave campaign (BBC News 2018). Adam, a school teacher, said "it was just an outright lie" and Felix, an economics graduate student, called it "an absolute scandal... just fucking bullshit".

Participants who voted Remain were deterred not only by what Leave would mean for their futures but also the lies and inconsistencies produced by the campaign. As such, a divide between Remain and Leave voters developed around both what effects leaving the European Union would have on the United Kingdom and whether or not you believed the information, or "lies" according to participants, spread by the Leave campaign.

Similar to the Brexit vote, a binary between political parties in England has grown with the majority of voters choosing either the Conservative party or the Labour party. While the United Kingdom technically has a multi-party government, the power and support of Conservative and Labour have fundamentally created a two-party system within England. Bianca, a neuroscience undergraduate student, would like to vote for a more leftist party such as



Fig. 3. A Leave campaign bus advertisement featuring the disputed slogan. (Image Credit: Getty Images, Source: BBC News 2018.)

the LibDem party, but it feels like “you vote Labour or you might as well just give a vote to the Conservatives.” In 2017 and 2019, the Conservative party won a majority of Parliament seats, taking seats that Labour had held for years. As the Conservative party gains more seats, participants tend to feel less represented and agree with less of what the government does. A combination of the government’s continued efforts towards Brexit and their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in all participants feeling dissatisfied. With two parties holding the most power, participants feel that they must choose one or the other. Their dissatisfaction with the Conservative party emphasizes their felt responsibility to vote Labour because it is their only other choice.

With the government and referendum conceived in popular consciousness as binary, the media aggressively reinforced the right vs wrong, us vs them narrative. Media, in recent years, has taken sides in these debates and produced news and articles that support business interests

over a truthfully informed public. Elle brought up how Rupert Murdoch, owner of The Sun and The Times, supported Brexit and his newspapers reflected that. Targeted ads and misinformation to support the Leave campaign left participants trying to determine what was real and what was fake. As a result, people in the UK are less likely to get their news from websites or television channels that don't support their view. This is a criticism they had of both older and Leave voters, but also of themselves. Participants are self-aware that they are a part of the problem with biased media consumption. Adam points out that people "don't necessarily use the internet to find all the different bits of information ... because it's a lot of hassle". Carmen, a recent graduate working in medical communications, admits that "the media that [she consumes] is all very of one opinion so it was quite demonizing of the opposing side, which did filter into [her] perception of it". Both the one-sidedness of the news and the participant's focus on one or two sources created a narrative of strong binaries in society. The information they take in confirms that they are right and that other voters and beliefs are wrong which strongly affects how they identify within the nation.

Identity: Construction of The Other

The binary frame that is produced by politics and media has been internalized by young voters and is now a part of how they identify. Crucial to participants' identities are the intense separation and chastising of people that do not agree with them. Across all political beliefs, participants described their opposed groups as strongly independent from them by describing their negative qualities. For participants who were more liberal and pro-Remain, they strongly differentiated themselves from the Conservative party and Leave voters. Elle, who was pro-Leave, strongly differentiated herself from Remain supporters, and Felix, who supports the Conservative party, strongly differentiated himself from the Labour party and other liberal

groups by describing the left as “old-school, almost borderline Communist”. The Other is different for each participant yet the process of Othering is evident for all. The Other is useful to analyze the divisions that are already present in the nation as well as how they are intensified by young voters.

One common characteristic attributed to the Other was racism. Hatred of immigrants, English pride, xenophobia, and blatant racism were phrases thrown at various different groups. English identifying people are “big, old, football [hooligans] who [drink] all the time and stuff like that, or just being racist” according to Adam. Pride in the English flag, St. George’s Cross, has “quite right-wing, a bit racist ‘loving England as a country’” connotations for Diane, an IT employee. However, for Carmen, anyone voting Leave was “low-key racist” and held strong beliefs that immigrants were bad and hurting British values. Felix would agree, arguing that Leave voters hold xenophobic views and want England to return to its former segregated self. He also believes that xenophobia and racism are not just qualities of Leave voters, but additionally older people whose English pride has betrayed younger voters.

Other criticisms given to the Other include that they are money-driven, posh/elitist, and out of touch with what the United Kingdom is like today. The stereotype of the political parties is that Conservatives are higher on the socioeconomic scale and Labour voters are lower. Bianca says that given a few outliers, this is “completely true”. As such, the Conservative government “only cares about the rich” and is out of touch with the people of the country according to both Adam and Carmen. Additionally, Carmen and Elle feel that both older voters and people who identify as English give the impression of being more posh and having a stiff upper lip. Their personalities and attitudes have an essence of performativity related to an older English generation. They are less likely to show or explain their feelings, tend towards patriarchal

beliefs, and are quick to blame Eastern European immigrants for any issues related to the economy. Given the caustic language surrounding the Other, participants do not find that acknowledgment is enough to differentiate themselves.

Construction of the Other is a way for participants to distinguish themselves from oppositional groups. By calling the Other racist or elitist, they are both separating themselves from these groups as well as affirming that they are not members of these groups. This is a way for participants to prove their membership to other communities or identities. Contrasting themselves with the Other allows them to display their other identities, such as regional or social identities. Geographical identity within England was of importance to every participant. Whether they were a Northerner or Southerner, their region, or simply being from London was mentioned in relation to their national identity or community. Participants from London, where 60% voted Remain, felt that their location significantly influences their understanding of politics because most of the people around them think just like them (BBC News 2016). Other identities, such as their political party, sexuality, or career choice were also strongly displayed by participants. These identities strongly contrast with the Other and participants sought to differentiate themselves through this critical language. They wanted to prove to their community that they disapprove of and denounce what the Other stands for. By criticizing them for being racist and elitist, they were distancing themselves from the Other and reaffirming that they themselves do not have these traits.

The Cycle of Powerlessness

It is these same groups who have been Othered that hold positions of power in the government and hold the most sway when voting. Parliament currently holds a Conservative majority and Brexit is still underway, much to the satisfaction of older voters as most participants

see it. With the Other in positions of power, participants feel a similar separation towards the government and a lack of representation. Every participant was unhappy with the government, whether it was a recent disenchantment or a continual disagreement. Even Elle, who would have voted Leave, has been disappointed with the Brexit efforts thus far and believes that “Boris Johnson is also awful, but he has a stupid haircut to go with it”. Similarly, Felix, a Conservative voter who voted Remain, believes that the current Conservative government “just comes across as incompetent”. Both participants whose identities align with some form of power are discontent with how things are proceeding. The combination of separating themselves from the Other and disagreeing with the direction they are taking the government results in a feeling of powerlessness.

The feelings of powerlessness and intense separation from the Other are mutually reinforcing, creating a cycle of reaffirming distance between participants and the Other/those in power. By separating themselves from the Other, they are separating themselves from those who are both in power and represented by those in power. Their separation from power in the government means that their values and efforts are being blocked by the Other, increasing their perceived separation. Participants ultimately feel that the government is not meant for them and struggle to find hope that this will change. Carmen describes her feelings of powerlessness in relation to the fact that her vote “has become less powerful because the majority of the opposing side has just grown”. Adam lives in a Conservative area and knows that Conservative will continue to win elections, and as such his vote doesn’t really matter. Voting and efforts to be heard and represented feel pointless when young voters know that the Other will always win.

This separation from those in power is crucial for participant’s understanding of their place within the nation and their desire to remain a part of it. Constant news and affirmation that

their values and selves are not represented in the government will have result in participants feeling that they do not belong. Young voters have tried to find a way to hold onto their rights through the application of EU and foreign passports. Every participant answered yes to thinking about how they could apply for citizenship in another country. Whether it was through their parents and family members or through romantic partners, all participants looked into the process to figure out how they qualified. While dual citizenship does not inherently mean that people don't feel like they belong, the context of applying or researching directly after Brexit highlights that young voters are not content with losing their rights by leaving the European Union.

Arsenal of Evidence

Participants have an abundance of facts and information ready to prove their stance and defend their use of caustic language in regards to the Other. Participants had many points on the economy, immigration, and cyber threats that were not personal in nature but information that they have remembered and used to explain their language. In addition to Bianca's claim that Leave voters are motivated by xenophobia, she brought up how many of the jobs that immigrants hold are within the NHS. The jobs that they claim are being taken away by immigrants are not being filled by British people, with only 200 people showing up to interview for a position that received 10,000 applications. While Felix was studying abroad, a professor asked him to explain Brexit and the Leave campaign. After ten minutes, he says his professor was overwhelmed by the information he had provided and that, "it was like a hair dryer blowing in his face". Participants have all this information on the Other stored and ready to use even in times when they are not being targeted for having these views.

One reason for young voters to have all this information ready is because they feel responsible for being able to defend their positions with facts. As discussed, one criticism of the Leave campaign that all participants shared was that it consistently lied and shared misinformation. By separating themselves from the Other in this sense, young voters attempt to prove that they themselves do not make emotionally based or ill-informed decisions. By having statistical or impersonal information, they are reaffirming themselves and the listener that they have taken the time to research and find truths to back their statements. This sense of responsibility, however, can have negative effects on their sense of belonging. Elle describes that she feels a constant pressure “to go above and beyond giving factual evidence” to defend her support of Leave, ultimately making her exhausted to the point where she will stop talking about her views. If young voters are constantly on the defensive, constantly trying to prove that they are right and the Other is wrong, they will be constantly framing themselves in a way that makes them feel that society thinks they are wrong.

DISCUSSION

Looking at young voters’ need to separate themselves from groups such as Leave Voters and the Conservative Party through these various lenses highlights a hierarchy of identities both within the United Kingdom and within its citizens. Within the United Kingdom, those who prioritize their national identity hold positions of power and are more represented. The rhetoric surrounding the Leave Campaign strongly portrayed strong pro-Britain/England sentiment through attacks on Europe and anti-immigrant sentiments. The Conservative Party has continued in this manner in their continued support of Brexit, adding to what Golec de Zavala, Guerra, and Simão (2017) describe as social dominance orientation, or the desire to compete and prove the superiority of their own nation (3). Leave voters and Conservatives have a higher need to protect

their perception of the nation and its values from outsiders, such as the European Union, but also those within its borders. Participants explain the importance of national identity to the Other by British values and anti-immigrant comments they have heard. Thile these attributes are not true for every member of the Other, it emphasizes that they personally prioritize their national identity and want to prove the superiority of the United Kingdom.

The Other believes political identity is the most important and those who feel differently do not have as much of a right to “their” nation as they do. Michael Skey explains that those who hold the most power in a nation are the ones who set the conditions for belonging. Those who do not meet the conditions for belonging will feel uncertain or question their right to the nation. Within the United Kingdom, those who do not meet the conditions for belonging are largely young voters, who identify more with identities other than national identity. Within the political sphere, young voters tend to associate with Remain and leftist parties such as Labour. Young voters do not see their interests represented in the national government and struggle to see how this can change in the future.

Other identities that young voters rank higher than their national identity are their social or local communities. Participants spoke highly about their identities within a regional frame, such as being from a specific city or region, as well as being members of social communities, such as being LGBTQ+. Examples include how Bianca believes that she is “definitely a Southerner” and Carmen has been educating herself by researching members of Parliament who “voted against gay marriage” and “adoption by gay couples”. Young voters feel that these social identities, like being liberal or a Londoner, define them more than their national identity. In their personal hierarchy of identities, these identifications are ranked higher than their national identity, unlike the Other. These identities also connect them to members that reside outside of

the nation and result in a higher sense of belonging to an international community. Because some of these identities do not align with the more conservative, English-based conditions of belonging, they feel that they must defend themselves. To protect and enforce these identities, young voters have developed the patterns of abrasive language and othering. Speaking negatively about those who value their national identity is a way to affirm to their communities that their social identities are prioritized.

These findings challenge Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community because not all members feel that they have an equal right to the nation. His emphasis on community as a sense of equality between members, whether real or not, does not consider the fact that identities are both hierarchical and fluid. Identities within the United Kingdom are hierarchical in that those who prioritize their national identity hold positions of power and can make those who prioritize other identities feel that they do not belong. In this sense, young voters do not have a perceived equality to the nation as Anderson describes. Identities are additionally fluid and have fluctuating levels of importance. Identities become more prevalent when they are threatened, as seen by Brexit voters' response to perceived threats to the nation. The salience of identity varies between people and situation which reveals that people's perceived right to the nation can change depending on time and place. Community is not possible when a nation, such as the United Kingdom, is marked by an intense binary of belonging.

CONCLUSION

With the resurgence of right-wing politics through Brexit and a Conservative government, older, Leave, and Conservative voters have gained significant control within the United Kingdom. In response to this resurgence, young voters have developed strategies to both

separate themselves from these groups and reinforce their social identities. This binary frame of reference is a result of increased divisions within both politics and society. The Leave campaign, Conservative party, and media bias have heavily influenced young voters' perception of binary belonging. Consequently, young voters seek to explicitly separate themselves from groups that they perceive as opposite to them, the Other. Young voters construct the Other by attributing harsh and derogatory traits to them in an effort to both affirm their own identity and to reassure people in their community that they are not a part of the Other.

However, because the Other holds positions of power within the United Kingdom, young voters feel a sense of disconnection from the government. They lack representation and feel their votes are powerless because of the size of the Other's majority. These feelings of powerlessness and separation between themselves and the Other are mutually reinforcing: because the Other has all the power, they cannot be represented, which emphasizes and increases their perceived divisions. Additionally, young voters feel required to have an arsenal of facts ready to defend their construction of the Other. This arsenal also frames their understanding of the world which can negatively affect their perception of belonging.

The conditions for belonging within the United Kingdom is determined by the Other as they are the group in power. Their conservative beliefs and pro-Britain rhetoric highlight that a condition for belonging is the prioritization of national identity and pride. Young voters do not meet this condition as they identify more with social and local communities which results in them feeling that they do not belong and are not represented in government. They seek to protect and defend their identities by emphasizing them through this process of Othering those in power. This process highlights a hierarchy of identities in which young voters feel that they have less of a right to the nation than the Other and challenges Anderson's characteristic of community

within a nation. This hierarchy can have long lasting implications for the United Kingdom as a nation considering that these younger generations will make up the voting majority in coming decades. Continued preference to identify with social and local communities over national identity could effectively alter the United Kingdom's status as a nation and the attitudes of those who belong within it.

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