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Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union, by Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley

Book of the Week: Danny Dorling on an illuminating analysis of the many factors that swayed the referendum

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Source: Alamy

The British public does not have a settled view on Europe. The authors of this detailed study, underpinned by new data and new analyses of existing surveys, reveal that in 2005 50 per cent of UK voters approved of Britain being in the European Union, and only 36 per cent disapproved. Everything changed after the 2010 election, and by 2012 those numbers were reversed. But they had flipped again by the 2015 general election, with almost 50 per cent pro-EU and only 37 per cent disapproving.

But by the eve of the 2016 referendum, a majority chose negative words when asked to describe how they felt about EU membership. The two most highly significant predictors of how any individual voted were their attitudes to immigration and whether they had come to believe that “Britain no longer controls its own economy”.

Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union reveals that there was a “Boris effect” because Boris Johnson was likeable in 2016, and when he came out for Leave, it mattered. On likeability, he scored 4.5 out of 10 against Jeremy Corbyn’s 4.2, David Cameron’s 3.5 and Nigel Farage’s 3.2. Of those who gave him 9 out of 10 for likeability, 90 per cent voted Leave. It was not Boris

wot won it, but his support for Leave clearly mattered more than Nigel's.

Other conclusions that Harold Clarke, Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley draw are less plausible. In analysing the European Social Survey, they suggest that "Britain is not that much different from other countries in the EU when it comes to explaining the sources of Euroscepticism". But this fails to explain the lack of a significant Eurosceptic vote in the Netherlands on 15 March 2017. Clearly the Dutch are different, but why? The authors conclude that the British are not unusually racist among Europeans, although this is hardly surprising, given that the UK has been a multicultural society for longer than most of Europe. Their analysis also reveals that the Swedes and Germans are now, on average, the least racist people in Europe, as expressed in surveys about ethnicity and immigration.

The British appear easily swayed. When the referendum was called, the polls suggested Remain would win. The final vote was incredibly close: 51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent. In one of the authors' more interesting new analyses, they simulate 1 million referendums with a higher turnout

than 72.2 per cent, and claim that Remain would have won in 660,300 of those contests.

Leavers are described as “an army of activists who, ever since their defeat at an earlier referendum in 1975 and in subsequent controversy surrounding the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, had been plotting to mobilize a new revolt to extricate Britain from the EU”. Ukip are identified as the army’s core, but the party’s membership was small and, according to yet another analysis of new data revealed here, “not very active”. They are 99 per cent white, 10 times more likely to have voted Conservative than Labour in the past, and typically are old men harbouring a significantly greater dislike of Muslims than the majority of the population.

The Leave campaign had many factions, and was hardly a disciplined army. This book identifies its plotter in chief as Matthew Elliott, former chief executive of the TaxPayers’ Alliance, a group funded by anonymous affluent people trying to pay less tax. Elliott was a 12-year-old schoolboy when the Maastricht Treaty was signed. Ukip’s main donor, Arron Banks, made his fortune having “set up 37 different companies using slight variations of his name”,

The Guardian reported. This book does not go into his past, or into Elliott's motivations, or those of Farage or any of the other key figures in the scramble to Leave.

Leave campaigners' tactics, however, are described in detail. Dog-whistle politics was used to stir up a fear of immigrants: "Dominic Cummings, the lead strategist for Vote Leave, had taken to social media to suggest publicly that voting to remain in the EU could increase the chance of Cologne-style mass sex attacks on Britain's streets." Farage talked of a coming "flood of jihadists".

The Sun and *Daily Mail* are identified as the country's key Eurosceptic newspapers, denouncing those concerned about Brexit's impact as "Project Fear" scaremongers. Cameron warned that a holiday in Europe would rise by £230 (which it did, when the pound plummeted following the vote); the Trades Union Congress predicted that average weekly workers' wages would be £38 lower by 2030 (we'll have to wait and see); Tesco bosses said food prices would rise (as they have).

As polling day approached, voters began to doubt both campaigns. In three polls held in June 2016, twice as many voters saw both sides as "mostly dishonest" than

thought they were “mostly honest”. On the eve of the poll a majority thought both campaigns were negative. This is how the prime minister, trade unions and supermarket bosses lost and a small group of men from the far Right fringe won.

The authors blame globalisation for the vote for Brexit, but globalism affects all countries. They cite the argument that immigration depresses wages at the bottom and inflates them at the top. So perhaps the general public had been convinced that rising income inequality was due to rising immigration that was due to Britain’s membership in the EU. But why is income inequality lower in all other EU countries, including those with a much higher rate of immigration than the UK?

Referendums in Britain tend to be won by the side that can spend the most, and thus by the donors with the deepest pockets. Brexit’s authors explain that Ukip was of no importance until Sir James Goldsmith, who until then had hogged the anti-EU limelight with his Referendum Party, died in 1997. But the reader is left asking, what was in it for Ukip donors to try so hard to secure Brexit? What motivated them?

It's money that matters. The most important set of data that the authors fail to consider is that relating to campaign donors, the amounts raised by both campaigns, and what it was spent on, including donations in kind, target email marketing, and placement of advertisements. Most analysis of Donald Trump's presidential victory has focused on campaign tactics, wealthy donors and spending. Why would tactics and spending have been so much less important in the outcome of the Brexit vote? The word "donor" appears just three times in this book's main text and once in an endnote; the phrase "campaign spending" does not appear at all. It is as if the authors believe that the two sides nicely presented their arguments and then the voters decided – rather than acknowledging that the campaign spending changed opinions. According to the BBC, the ratio of Leave to Remain campaign spending was £16.4 million pounds to £15.1 million. That is a ratio of 52:48, almost identical to the ratio of the votes cast, but if the authors of this book are aware of this, they do not say.

This is a good book, but it does not follow the money. A better book would try to work out how people were

influenced to swing so wildly towards Leave in the run-up to the vote. But thanks to this book we know how the vote did swing over time to Remain and which groups of voters were easiest to influence, if you had the money, could put up enough posters of immigrants flooding in, and have enough newspapers report them.

In their concluding line, the authors claim that “the 44-year experiment of European integration has come to an end”. But so far only Greenland has left the EU, in 1985, and even its citizens remain EU citizens. The UK is still in the process of trying to leave; meanwhile many other countries have recently joined or are in the process of joining.

Mainland Europe now has a common currency and no longer has to humour Britain’s Conservative Party, whose only significant ally in the European Parliament was Poland’s Law and Justice Party. The UK is very different from most other EU countries, even if its voters are not. Perhaps the UK’s trying to leave is just the end of the first phase of the integration experiment. Integration may well be easier with the British on the sidelines.

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