

# Journeys of a PhD Student in the Centre for Brexit Studies

***By Jay Rowe, PhD Student at the Centre for Brexit Studies***

The 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union delivered one of the most surprising political results in living memory.

Decades of Euroscepticism and in-fighting within the dominant British Conservative Party led then-Prime Minister David Cameron to call the vote as a means of eliminating the most divisive issue in his party, once and for all. He failed.

My research is being carried out against the backdrop of an implosion within the Tory Party, division across the country about the merits and demerits of Brexit, and great uncertainty about what the future holds for the union of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The 51.9% vote share for the anti-EU campaign, Vote Leave, surprised pollsters, academics and swathes of the general public. In the final UK-wide public vote which preceded the referendum, the combined vote share for the partially Eurosceptic Conservatives, and the wholly Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), totalled 49.4%; still short of a majority if every one of their voters opted for Brexit.

In the months and years following the vote, explanations for the surprising result have ranged from national and imperial nostalgia, to the regional inequalities across England and Wales, and the longstanding social divisions within society. I, however, have been tasked with exploring developing patterns of voter behaviour which might have lasting implications for the future of the United Kingdom outside (or inside) of the European Union.

In May 2018, I began a three-year PhD in the discipline of Social Sciences. My topic was entitled 'Understanding the Changing Voter Perceptions and Attitudes toward Brexit: A Longitudinal Study'. My work has, thus far, been undertaken alongside a variety of other scholars across the Centre for Brexit Studies in Birmingham; these

include social psychologists, economists, as well as security studies, legal studies, criminology and business studies experts.

The interdisciplinary nature of the research institute inspires my own project by keeping me, as a researcher, informed of the wide-ranging social, political and economic effects of Brexit upon the minds of the voters.

I began my doctoral research just one month before the two-year anniversary of the referendum, and things have changed considerably since then. The original B-Day of 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019 has been twice extended to the new provisional date of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2019; although this date may not have the finality that some Brexiteers are hoping for.

Furthermore, current Prime Minister Theresa May is in the process of passing power to her successor; barring any (more) major mishaps, this successor is likely to be former HIGNFY host Boris Johnson. Of the two new parties which were formed to fight the 2019 European Parliament Elections, according to last week's Yougov/The Times 'Next General Election' poll, the Brexit Party shared the lead with the Conservatives on 22%, while Change UK was tracking at 0% in the same poll.

These changes are just the tip of the iceberg relative to the social, political and economic changes that voters are experiencing daily. This is why it is important to conduct the research I am presently engaged in.

The first piece of primary research, in my study, is an online questionnaire which measures, firstly, how voters' choices of 'Leave' and 'Remain' would change given the opportunity to vote in a fresh referendum.

The final results delivered twelve distinct, voting-pattern groups; cross-tabulating Leavers, Remainers and non-voters with those whom would vote Leave or Remain again, those whom would not vote in another referendum, and those who were still unsure of how they would vote if given another opportunity.

Associations were then sought related to votes in the 2017 General Election, and demographic variables including age group, gender, mobility of residency across the UK and self-defined social class.

Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to take three, well-verified social psychology scales on social identification, collective narcissism and collective self-esteem, to determine if high or low scores in any of these regards could predict a particular change pattern, or group of change patterns.

The results of this survey are currently being analysed using ANOVA and Chi Square testing, and I hope to publish these results soon if the findings are of significance.

However, I can share some general, indicative observations gleaned from the cleaning and preliminary study of the data. The findings give some credence to theories that national collective narcissism and national social identification can help us to understand support for those wishing to Leave the European Union.

National collective narcissism can be simply defined as an unrealistic belief in one's nation's greatness, whereas national social identification reimagines the nation as a relevant social group in which membership can be gained or lost. While it will take some empirical analysis before we can claim any significance in the findings, these first results show that the inclusion of social identification and collective narcissism in the survey were both worthwhile undertakings.

My research is scheduled to conclude in April or May of 2021, and what seems most likely, given the timeline of Brexit thus far, is that it is impossible to predict the state of the United Kingdom and its relationship with Europe and the rest of the world.

My research, however, will aim to give a snapshot of life and attitude changes toward Brexit across three turbulent years. It remains to be seen whether the findings of this study mirror the reality of attitude changes if another referendum was to take place, but hopefully it will illuminate the demographic characteristics and the psychological makeup of swing (and steadfast) voters ahead of any such vote.

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