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# UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF BREXIT

January 2019



**Britain is three months away from leaving the EU; we need to know why and whether this could happen elsewhere?**

To understand Brexit we need to understand the political psychology of British politics and its relationship to the European Union (EU). Using data on public knowledge, groups, concerns, amnesia, and trust, this summary demonstrates the political consequences of the increasing distance between the electorate and the government in the United Kingdom over the question of Brexit; the British exit from the European Union.

Since 1990 the increasing distances between electorates and governments have left ordinary people vulnerable to the emotional appeal of the far-right across Europe. This summary demonstrates five areas of data showing these distances and helps provides solutions for closing these gaps.

## **Possible solutions for closing the citizen-politician gap include:**

1. Improving public knowledge of the EU
2. Encouraging many-sided informed public debate
3. Raise awareness of public concerns
4. Address the amnesia of empire and national greatness
5. Understand the neoliberal causes of collapse of trust in government

## **Summary of facts:**

- On the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 the United Kingdom held an advisory referendum on its membership of the EU. 16.1 million people (25% of the UK population) voted to Remain in the EU; 17.4% people (27% of the UK population) voted to Leave the EU ([Manners 2016](#)).
- 17 years of Eurobarometer Public Opinion surveys demonstrate that UK citizens are the least knowledgeable about the EU amongst older, larger member states ([Manners 2017](#)). How does such lack of objective knowledge of the EU shape the referendum and Brexit debate?
- The recent article on 'Political Psychology of European Integration: The (Re)Production of Identity and Difference in the Brexit Debate' in the international journal *Political Psychology* shows how five factors influenced the way in which emotions and reason are inseparably linked in the Brexit debate ([Manners 2018](#)).

**Political Psychology of European Integration: The (Re)production of Identity and Difference in the Brexit Debate**Ian Manners   
University of Copenhagen

*This article uses political psychology to understand emotions such as anger, hate, and passion in the Brexit debate in order to demonstrate the wider value of the political psychology of European integration. It uses five strands of political psychology to understand European integration, drawing on evidence from the Brexit debate. These strands are individual cognitive psychology, social psychology, social construction, psychoanalysis, and critical political psychology. The article argues that the political psychology of European integration demands an understanding of the interwoven nature of feelings and illusions, the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes, and the multiplicity of strands of political psychology in the mutual accommodation and inclusion by European states and peoples. Only in this way is it possible to even begin to comprehend the many ways in which identity and difference are (re)produced by all partners in the Brexit debate and what these processes mean for the wider study of the political psychology of European integration.*

**KEY WORDS:** Brexit, European Integration, European Union, political psychology, United Kingdom

**The (Re)Production of Identity and Difference in the Brexit Debate on European Integration**

In an era of European crises over political legitimacy, economic austerity, loss of confidence in the EU, and the rise of far-right populists, the topic of European integration has become a very emotional subject. The anger which protestors demonstrate against economic austerity, the hate which nationalist far-right parties express for the EU and fellow Europeans, and the passion with which supporters of the EU argue for greater integration and enlargement are today central to understanding European integration. This article uses political psychology to understand emotions such as anger, hate, fear, anxiety, and passion in the Brexit debate in order to demonstrate the wider value of the political psychology of European integration. What this article, and the special issue it is part of, shows is that psychology and politics are deeply implicated in understanding contemporary European integration.

The article uses five strands of political psychology to understand European integration, drawing on evidence from the Brexit debate.<sup>1</sup> These are individual cognitive psychology, social psychol-

<sup>1</sup>In terms of method, the analysis began with a meeting with U.K. Minister for Europe, David Lidington in March 2013 and finished in September 2018, including the publication of the analytical framework (Manners, 2016), a working note (Manners, 2017), research report to the Danish Parliament (Manners, 2016), and data on objective knowledge of the EU (Manners, 2017). The method included microanalysis of qualitative discursive data, meso-analysis of quantitative survey data, and meta-analysis of secondary publications on the political psychology of Brexit.

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# Why Brexit occurred and how to avoid it in other countries

## Emotion and reason

The discussion of emotion and reason are not separable in the Brexit debate. Both Leave and Remain voters live in a country and debate driven by emotions and passions such as fear and hate, trust and love. The findings and data presented here are the result of a five year research project into the UK's changing relationship with the EU from 2013-2018. The project found five mutually-dependent explanations for why Brexit occurred and how to avoid it in other countries.

## Five explanations

The five explanations for why Brexit occurred each depend on a different strand of political psychology: individual cognitive psychology recognises the lack of objective knowledge as important; social psychology shows how social group identity conflicts are determining; ontological security sets out how real and imagined fears play a role; psychoanalysis focuses on Britain's collective *postcolonial melancholia*; and critical political psychology demonstrate how neoliberal alienation is a crucial factor.

## Data and actions

These five explanations are demonstrated by data showing how political and psychological processes are linked to each other in the Brexit debates. This combination of explanations and data shows how all EU member states are potentially vulnerable to the emotional appeal of far-right ideas, parties, and governments across Europe. This knowledge then shows how to avoid similar Brexit-like problems in other EU countries.

## Explanation 1: Lack of Objective Knowledge

### What explains Brexit?

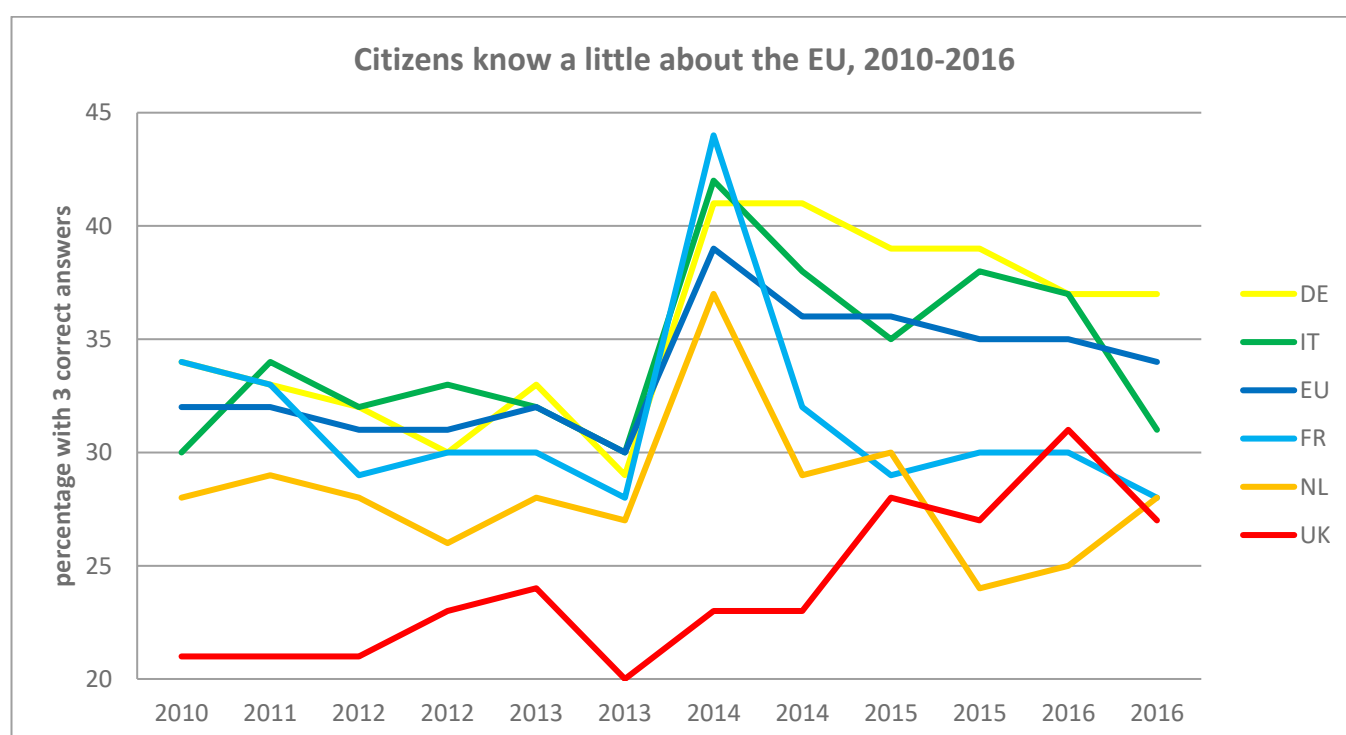
Eurobarometer public opinion data demonstrates that among older, larger member states, UK citizens surveyed over the past 13 years are the least knowledgeable, most incorrect, and least able to answer simple questions on the EU. Approximately 76–87% of U.K citizens lack the knowledge to answer even basic questions on the EU, placing reasoned knowledge far behind emotional appeal in the Brexit debate ([Manners 2017](#)).

### What does the data say?

When asked three very simple questions about the EU during 2010-2016, 24% of UK respondents could answer three questions correctly, 17% could not answer any question correctly, and 45% answered at least one question ‘don’t know’. When asked simple questions about the EU during 2005-2010, 13% of UK respondents could answer three questions correctly, 30% could not answer any question correctly, and 60% answered at least one question ‘don’t know’.

### How to avoid this problem?

Democracy, elections, and referenda cannot function in the EU with such low levels of objective knowledge in member states. To avoid this problem each country must engage in life-long public education, knowledge, and awareness strategies to improve democratic participation, civic engagement, and public debate. This involves schools, public service broadcasting, and civil society more generally. Countries with particularly low levels of knowledge, such as France, the UK, Italy, and Hungary, remain vulnerable to far-right claims about the EU.



Source: Eurobarometer Public Opinion Polls, 2010-2016.

## Explanation 2: Social Group Beliefs

### What explains Brexit?

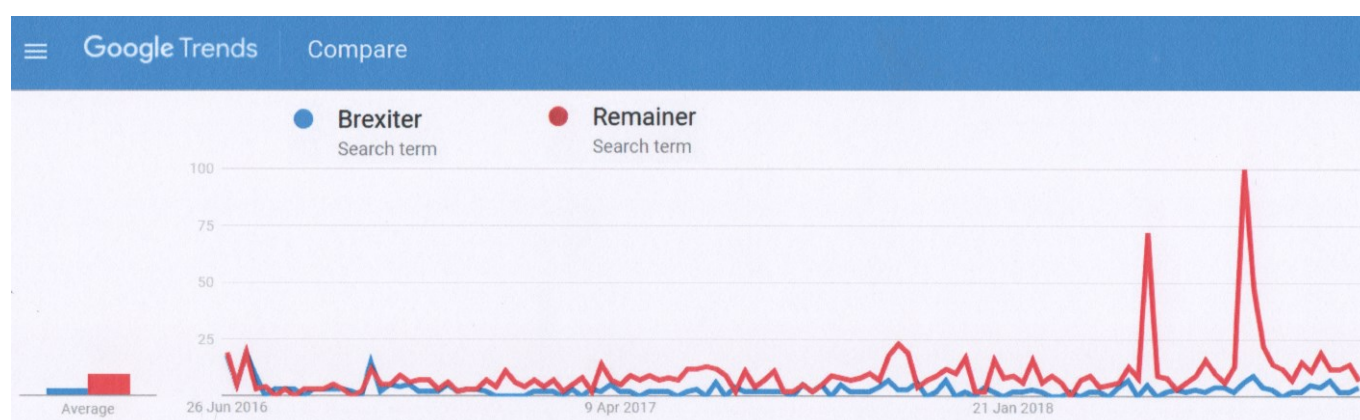
In the absence of public knowledge of the EU, social group identity, conflict, and beliefs determine politics more than reason and facts. The Brexit debate consists of two diametrically-opposed groups, 'Remainers' and 'Brexiters' (Leavers) who share so little common ground that there is currently no foreseeable political outcome that doesn't result in national catastrophe.

### What does the data say?

The social group public and political debates over the past 30 months demonstrate that Leavers/Brexiters believe in national uniqueness, traditional status quo, and international status, all of which they see as threatened by the EU. The widespread use of the language of patriot/traitor, hero/coward demonstrates the sense of in-group victimhood and national chauvinism associated with collective narcissism and right-wing authoritarianism. Google trends comparing searches for 'Remainer' with 'Brexiter' since the referendum, expressed as a proportion of the peak search week in July 2018, illustrates the increasing pervasiveness of these social groups (below)

### How to avoid this problem?

Representative democracies require multi-party political contestation and pluralistic political debates, not deeply-divided dichotomised differences. To avoid this problem, each country must encourage many-sided public debate where a spectrum of informed opinions are discussed and shared widely. The formulation of excessively dichotomised debates as being 'fair and balanced' simply because they have just two sides must be avoided. In this respect, the UK, with its first-past-the-post electoral system and two-dominant party-political system is particularly vulnerable to artificial dichotomisation.



Source: Google Trends, searches on 'Brexiters' and 'Remainer', June 2016-September 2018

## Explanation 3: Public Fears

### What explains Brexit?

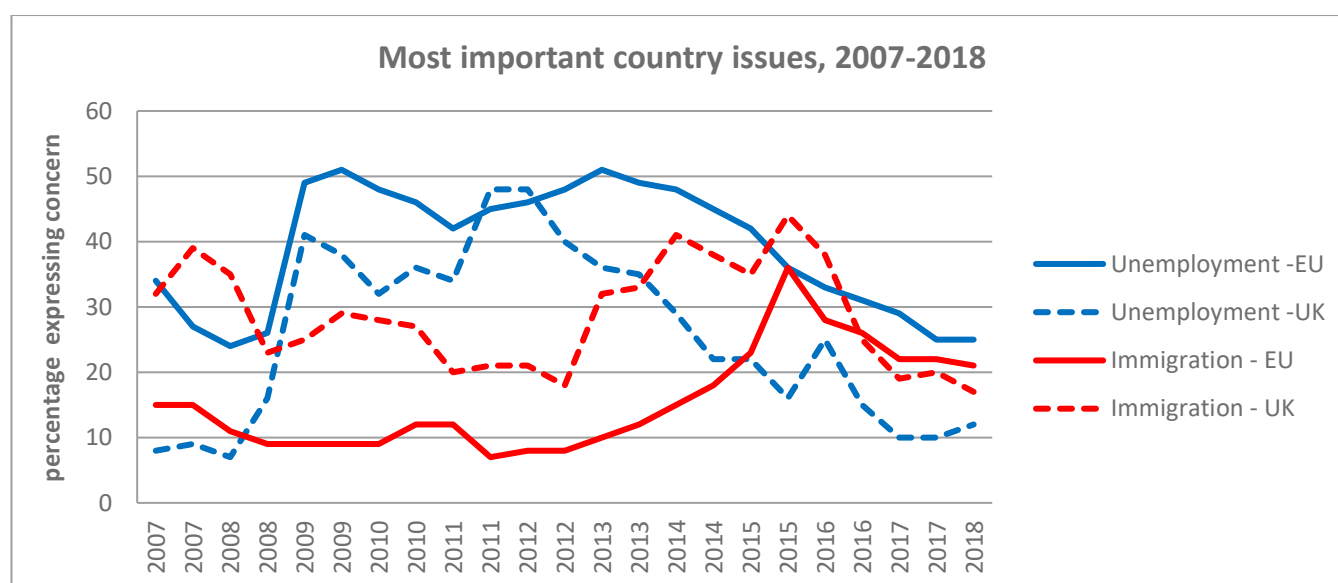
Public concerns, insecurities, and fears can fuel social group beliefs and politics in the absence of public knowledge. Whether true or not, public fears about unemployment and the economic situation, or immigration and terrorism can drive public debate and opinion, as they do in the Brexit debate.

### What does the data say?

Eurobarometer surveys from spring 2007 (EB 67) to 2018 (EB 89) illustrate how EU and UK responses to the question of the most important issues facing respondents' country at the time differ. Since the outbreak of the global financial crisis EU concerns have been focused on fears of economic insecurity, such as unemployment. In contrast, UK concerns have been more focused on immigration, driven by government austerity and migration policies. These concerns peaked in autumn 2015 with 44% of UK respondents identifying immigration as their major worry, although by spring 2018 these were rapidly replaced by fears about health and social security, and rising costs of living.

### How to avoid this problem?

EU states need to be far more aware of public concerns and take positive steps to address them when genuine, or correct them when false. EU policies directly addressing genuine socio-economic concerns are crucial during periods of extreme economic crises as indicated by data from 2008-2017. In contrast, citizens need to be more honestly informed about socio-economic concerns such as immigration in the UK, primarily driven by Britain's imperial history, government migration policy, and fuelled by Conservative party ideological austerity.



Source: *Eurobarometer Public Opinion Polls, 2007-2018.*



## Explanation 4: Postcolonial Melancholia

### What explains Brexit?

Brexit debates take place within a historical context of unconscious 'postcolonial melancholia' and 'pathology of greatness' (Gilroy 2004). Denial of historical guilt and repression of awareness of British colonial consequences lead to a melancholia and mourning of something having been lost. Brexit debates about the 'Anglosphere', the Commonwealth, and the possibilities of even greater trade agreements with former colonies around the world are left uninformed by historical truths.

### What does the data say?

Analysis of the past eight years of national political and cultural debate in the UK and its relations with the four 'home countries' (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) reveals patterns of amnesia and nostalgia in equal parts. The Conservative government's campaign to trade on 'GREAT Britain', launched in 2012 (below, left), and film industry releases from 2015-2018: *Home Fires*, *Dad's Army*, *Their Finest*, *Dunkirk*, *Churchill*, and *Darkest Hour* (below, right), illustrate this imperial amnesia, pathology of greatness, and nostalgia for the past embedded within the Brexit debate.

### How to avoid this problem?

As the perpetrators or victims of European empires, EU states need to vastly improve public knowledge about the colonial and postcolonial consequences of empire in Europe and the world. Former imperial powers such as Britain must address the amnesia of empire, particularly with regard to the colonised 'Anglosphere' (e.g. USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and the postcolonial consequences for the world's poorest countries. At the same time, educational and public information programmes must address the pathology of national greatness and how this is detrimental to other nationalities and international relations, as well as driving racism and misogyny.



## Explanation 5: Neoliberal Alienation

### What explains Brexit?

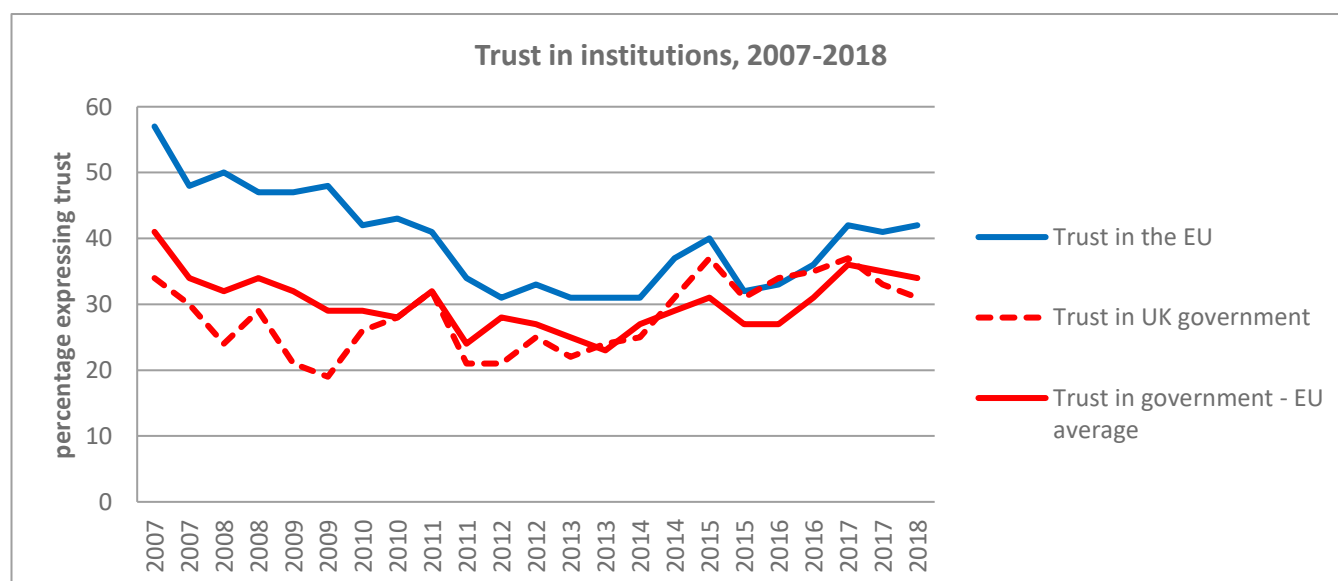
Neo-liberal alienation within the United Kingdom has arisen from the long-term effects of four decades of 'Thatcherism'; that is the privatisation of public life, including the deregulation and privatisation of nationalised industries, financial services, welfare state, and government. In June 2016, after six years of ideological austerity, many U.K. voters felt isolated and alienated, impoverished and vulnerable to the appeal of extreme claims of simple solutions such as 'taking back control' and making Britain Great again, let alone removing foreigners from Britain and Britain from the EU.

### What does the data say?

The Eurobarometer public opinion surveys illustrate the way in which public trust in national and EU political institutions had collapsed during the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis during 2011–14 and the refugee crisis during 2015–16. The absence of public trust in political institutions in the UK is even more pronounced, with an average level below 30%. Further data shows how increasing child mortality, stalling improvements in life expectancy, increasing poverty, and some of the EU's highest levels of inequality drive this neoliberal alienation and decline in public trust in the UK (Taylor and Loopstra 2016; Unicef 2017; Cheung 2018; ONS 2018).

### How to avoid this problem?

There is widespread recognition that neoliberal economics, including austerity, deregulation, and privatisation has systematically failed citizens across Europe (Blythe 2012; Mason 2016; [Manners and Rosamond 2018](#)). In order to regain public trust, mend the EU's fractured societies, and avoid the collapse of the EU at the hands of far-right parties and governments, a rethink of socio-economic policies is crucial. In particular, EU and member state institutions must focus on the wellbeing of ordinary people by addressing poverty, inequality, and injustice across Europe.



Source: Eurobarometer Public Opinion Polls, 2007-2018.



# Conclusion and Solutions

## Conclusion

Understanding the political psychology of Brexit by focusing on evidence about knowledge, debate, fears, amnesia, and trust provides a convincing explanation for why Brexit occurred and could occur anywhere in the EU. Since the 1990s the public space of European countries has declined, in many cases privatised. Decreasing the distance between electorates and governments demands rebuilding the public realm in order to strengthen European democracy, societies, and resist the emotional appeal and simple solutions of the far-right.

## Solutions

1. **Public knowledge** about the EU must be improved through civic education, public engagement, and factual information.
2. **Public debate** about the EU must encourage many-sided informed opinions from across society.
3. **Public fears** must be addressed when genuine, and corrected when false, through closer cooperation between independent public information and action.
4. **Public awareness** of imperial amnesia, historical guilt, and the consequences of the pathology of national greatness must be improved.
5. **Public trust** in an inclusive society for all, a rich and equal public life, and genuinely democratic government must be restored through addressing the failures of neoliberal alienation.

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