

# **British Euroscepticism as British Exceptionalism: The Forty-Year “Neverendum” on the Relationship with Europe**

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## **Introduction**

In 1975 Britons were asked to vote on whether to stay in the then European Economic Community (EEC). Since that time, there have been repeated demands from British politicians to withdraw from the European Union (EU), alongside almost instinctive calls to hold referendums on key EU issues (namely, on specific treaties and on the euro) as well as on membership itself (Gifford, 2010; Oppermann, 2008). The idea, proposed by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 that an In/Out vote offers a neat and democratically compelling solution to a long-standing debate is popular amongst the electorate (Chatham House/YouGov, 2015). Having won a parliamentary majority in the May 2015 general election, Cameron’s top priority for his new term of office is to hold this vote. Hence this article sets out to analyse why the demand for a membership referendum has arisen anew, forty years after the UK’s relationship with European integration was seemingly settled for good (Smith 1999).

It does so by explaining British Euroscepticism towards European integration as a manifestation of British exceptionalism. That is, the UK approaches European integration as a pragmatic and utilitarian foreign policy stripped of a normative commitment to a European ideal of ever closer union. Tellingly, James Callaghan, who as Foreign Secretary oversaw the renegotiation of Britain’s terms of membership in 1974-75, understood the EEC as a “business arrangement” (Wall, 2012: 516). The call for a referendum to determine Britain’s EU status is an extension of this exceptionalist mindset, which also evokes a certain “British superiority” (Gifford, 2010: 329) that suggests the UK could walk away from a federalizing EU with no deleterious consequences. From this utilitarian perspective, criticism of the balance between the costs and benefits of integration relates not just to recent developments such as the politicization of intra-EU migration in the past decade (Gifford, 2014). Rather, there is a significant continuity in the Euroscepticism found in contemporary British politics in that complaints about the detrimental impact of the EU often relate to core first principles of European integration and not just recent moves towards greater political union (Glencross, 2015). In this context, the argument pursued in this article is that it is necessary to examine the demand for a referendum on EU membership as part of an – in EU terms – exceptional, four-decades-long debate or “neverendum”.

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The most obvious parallel forty years on is that the strategy for settling the issue of EU membership is, for David Cameron at least, identical: renegotiate the terms of membership prior to allowing the people to decide. This proposed move is doubly unilateral by virtue of asking first for British-focused concessions followed by an *ex post* form of democratic authorization by the British public. The neverendum is thus a clear manifestation of a British exceptionalism towards European integration, one that even transcends Euroscepticism as demands for a referendum can also be found in the pro-EU camp of British politics with federal leanings. Nevertheless, as this article demonstrates, the success of Euroscepticism in contemporary Britain means the never-ending debate over the EU is fundamentally trapped in enduring calls for a membership referendum where the outcome will be much less certain than in 1975.

### **Euroscepticism and the Demand for an EU Membership Referendum**

An In/Out referendum will involve asking Britain's voters to grapple with the most momentous peacetime political decision since the convulsions of Irish Home Rule – another debate over federalism/secession – in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Similar to “the Irish Question”, the referendum question has become the Banquo's ghost of party politics in Britain, haunting generations of politicians of all stripes since entry into the EEC in 1973. Whereas it was the Labour Party that campaigned in February 1974 to allow the people to give their consent to continuing EEC membership, in 1992 it was Prime Minister John Major who faced a revolt amongst his Conservative Party MPs as they sought to engineer a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty. A decade later, Tony Blair sought to defuse the Constitutional Treaty by offering a popular vote, a decision echoed by David Cameron's subsequent promise in the run-up to the 2010 General Election to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Neither of these proposed votes went ahead. Yet by unexpectedly winning a majority of seats in the House of Commons, the Conservative Party is now uniquely in a position to move ahead with a popular consultation.

However, resorting to direct democracy to deal with European integration does not make the UK unique. Across Europe many countries have resorted to holding referendums on specific EU-related matters. There are indeed a multiplicity of reasons why politicians call referendums on EU issues (Hug and Schulz, 2007; Finke and König, 2009). The novelty of the British position is rather that mainstream political elites – not just nationalist populists as with the Front National in France – openly discuss the possibility of withdrawal from the EU, and are prepared to actually devolve this decision to the public. In fact, policy convergence around the idea of holding a membership referendum spans the political spectrum to cover not just the Eurosceptic elements of the Conservative Party, but also, albeit in an attenuated form, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. In response to David Cameron's move, the then Labour leader Ed Miliband pledged in 2014 that if elected his party would change the European Union Act so that there could be “no transfer of powers

without an in/out referendum” – a repeat of a promise actually made in the 2010 Liberal Democrat manifesto.

The common feature behind these repeated calls for a referendum is nonetheless a twofold Eurosceptic worry. Firstly, there is the concern that the nature of EU membership is somehow unfair or too restrictive for the more free-trade and globally-oriented UK. Such a concern is peculiar as the UK has an opt-out from the most constraining aspect of integration, European Monetary Union and its tight fiscal coordination. The second fear is that popular consent for membership is singularly lacking amongst the British public. This narrative – as evidenced by Cameron’s comment that “democratic consent for Britain’s membership has worn wafer thin” (Cameron, 2014) – is associated with the claim that the 1975 referendum was about voting for a common market and not a political union. Referring to this earlier referendum, the United Kingdom Independence Party has argued that “the British people were not getting - and have never got - what we were led to believe we were voting for” ( Farage, 2012).

In this context, the spectre of a federal super-state looms large. Even pro-EU voices in Britain who want membership to be confirmed by the democratic participation of the people, are implicitly responding to this Eurosceptic complaint that the EU’s institutional structure and its policy effects have evolved beyond the control of Britain since the last time its citizens had their say. Conscious of the knowledge deficit surrounding public understanding of the under-reported EU (McCormick, 2014), Europhiles across the major political parties believe that the only way to win this argument is by resorting to the voice of the people. However, from a pro-integration perspective there are many perils associated with letting the people decide Britain’s EU future, as suggested by the evidence from voting behaviour in comparable referendums.

### **Euroscepticism and Voting Behaviour in EU Referendums**

There are a host of reasons that determine how voters behave when asked to vote on EU-related issues. Most pertinent for any potential British membership referendum are votes on particular treaties. These referendums replicate what can be expected in the UK debate: an unwieldy mix of national preoccupations alongside existential questions surrounding European integration. In such moments Euroscepticism can thus play a determining role in the eventual electoral outcome. Similar to deciphering results for European parliamentary elections, the key explanatory dilemma for political scientists studying EU-related referendums is how far domestic factors (government/opposition dynamics, the state of the economy etc.) count as opposed to EU-related political attitudes such as Euroscepticism. This dichotomy is framed as a tension between second-order voting preferences that reflect domestic or tangential issues and first-order reasons related directly to the referendum question at hand (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Glencross and Trechsel, 2011). An axiom attributed to François Mitterrand, that if you ask a specific question

in a referendum you will always get an answer to a completely different question, captures this logic exactly.

There are of course ways to reduce the probability that voters will answer a question of their own choosing. Here party stances can be crucial given that levels of approval for incumbent governments matter for electors' readiness to use a referendum as an opportunity to punish the government of the day (Franklin et al., 1995). In principle, therefore, this risk is minimized when opposition parties rally to the cause. During the ratification process for the 2005 Constitutional Treaty 7 of the 10 countries officially scheduled to hold referendums saw the main opposition parties join forces with the government to recommend a yes (Crum, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in two of the member states that actually held a referendum on this treaty – France and the Netherlands – voters rejected the treaty despite an inter-party consensus in favour of a yes. Parties officially supporting the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands held 93% and 85% of the seats respectively in the lower house of parliament, while in the referendum the yes camp mustered only 45% and 38% (Crum, 2007: 75). In both cases, voters refused to follow the official pro-EU cues of the main parties and were instead sceptical about the proposed benefits of the Constitutional Treaty (Glencross and Trechsel, 2011).

Parties are neither unitary actors nor are they capable of controlling how voters evaluate the merits and demerits of the EU. Hence many established parties in Western Europe are vulnerable to factionalization when forced to take a specific stand on European integration, precisely because Euroscepticism is an issue that largely cuts across the left/right dividing line. Factionalization was a distinct problem in France in 2005, as leading figures from the Socialist Party rejected the official party stance (agreed upon through a party ballot in which 59% of members chose to accept the treaty) and campaigned against the Constitutional Treaty. Significantly, surveys showed that a majority of voters identifying themselves as Socialist or Green (another party officially supporting the treaty) did not toe the line (Crum, 2007: 76).

The difficulty confronting major parties in convincing their electors to follow their cues during a referendum points to the anti-establishment dynamic often present in such campaigns. It is in these circumstances that Euroscepticism can thrive. In Ireland in 2008, a heterogeneous assortment of minor parties and interests succeeded in persuading 53% of voters to reject the Lisbon Treaty. Once again, this reverse came in the face of elite consensus as four main parties (Fianna Fáil, Progressive Democrats, Fine Gael, Labour Party) backed the treaty. Tellingly, the most popular slogan of the no camp was “Don't Be Bullied”, a motto indicating the desire to send a message of defiance that connected otherwise disparate groups.

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<sup>2</sup> The three cases in which the opposition refused to sing from the same hymn sheet (Czech Republic, Poland, United Kingdom) all involved right-conservative parties.

Indeed, the Irish example also highlights what a hodge-podge of issues may get entangled in an EU referendum campaign. Nationalists, anti-abortion campaigners, and those worried about retaining control over corporation tax all sought rejection of the treaty. Strange Eurosceptic bedfellows are able to unite – for different reasons – to oppose an EU treaty precisely because these complex documents provoke a range of concerns and even misapprehensions. In Ireland, for instance, Sinn Féin argued that the Lisbon Treaty would traduce Irish neutrality. Even though the Irish government would retain a veto in this policy area, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy was portrayed as forcing Ireland into a militarized approach to international problems (Hodson and Maher, 2014). In France, a host of tangential issues infiltrated the campaign, including immigration, Turkish accession, and even the ham-fisted abolition of the Whitsun bank holiday (Glencross, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, referendums on EU issues can prove rather unpredictable affairs. The Norwegian people's rejection of EEC membership in 1972 came as a surprise because opinion polls had suggested the opposite result. In the 1975 UK vote there was concern about regional divergences, with polls at the beginning of the campaign showing a 16 point lead for withdrawal amongst Scots. Yet the final result in Scotland was 58% in favour of remaining in the EEC (Saunders, 2014). The potential for a large swing vote is also suggested by the evidence from referendums held to, in effect, overturn an earlier electoral verdict. Irish voters rejected the Nice treaty by 54% but adopted it a year later with a 63% majority; the Lisbon Treaty similarly failed the first time after 53% of voters rejected it before subsequently receiving the backing of 67% of the population (Hodson and Maher, 2014). In the Irish case successful re-run referendums are associated with higher turnout via party mobilization and especially intensive government campaigning. Naturally, this kind of get-out-the-vote initiative is much easier when governing parties and the opposition put on a united front in support of the EU. Thus in a British context of a deeply divided governing Conservative Party an In/Out referendum is a highly risky strategy if the intention truly is to fight for remaining inside the EU. These risks become clearer by contrasting the current political climate with the manner in which the 1975 referendum was conducted.

### **Echoes of 1975**

Complaints from forty years ago about the EEC sound strikingly familiar: the UK pays too much for too few benefits, Europe is too inward-looking, accompanied by an overall feeling that it is fine to participate in an economic arrangement but that Britain must stay aloof from federal blueprints for monetary integration (Wall, 2010). More precisely, two aspects of the earlier vote are particularly salient today: the renegotiation tactics and their outcome; the campaign element, involving a potentially divided government alongside cross-party collaboration both for and against EU membership. These two dimensions need to be analysed in turn to assess what the dynamics of a new referendum campaign could look like.

### *Treaty Renegotiation?*

After the Labour Party victory in the General Election of February 1974, negotiation by the Wilson government hinged on the same two factors applicable today: the scale of the reformist ambition and the ability to forge partnerships with foreign capitals (Butler and Kitzinger, 1976). Back then, Foreign Secretary James Callaghan outmanoeuvred EEC-sceptics such as Tony Benn by settling for policy reform (notably regarding the budget and the Common Agricultural Policy) rather than treaty change. This move reassured other leaders by showing that British unilateralist rhetoric was nevertheless compatible with the existing rules of the game. Indeed, the attenuated renegotiation goals were in large part dictated by the attitudes Callaghan encountered amongst EEC partners. The French and German governments in particular were united in their unwillingness to see any backsliding that would undermine the existing institutional structure and the “own resources” system of financing (Haeussler, *forthcoming*). Ultimately, after nearly a year of talks, the Labour government claimed that the majority of renegotiation objectives from the February 1974 manifesto had been achieved.

Although the UK was unable to amend the EEC treaty, the Labour government was able to present a narrative about a successful renegotiation based on the creation of a regional fund, a budget correction mechanism, and improved access to New Zealand foodstuffs. These policy changes allowed the Yes campaign to make the case that Britain’s demands had been met, a claim that proved highly persuasive. The final result of 67% in favour of remaining in the EEC represented a marked swing as Gallup polling had shown a 55% majority for leaving in January 1975. However, today the neverendum surrounding European integration is a problem primarily for the Conservative Party and not Labour. This shift has occurred as a result of an issue absent from the 1975 campaign and which greatly impacts the nature of proposed renegotiation after 2015: immigration.

It is no coincidence that at the top of David Cameron’s agenda of demands for changing the terms of UK membership is the idea of restraining the fundamental EU principle of free movement of people. The populist United Kingdom Independence Party made tremendous inroads in European elections (coming first with 28% in 2014) on a platform combining dislike of the EU with calls to curb immigration. In this case the UK is far from unique as a number of Eurosceptic parties across Western Europe are gaining traction with a similar message, thereby contributing to the fragmentation of party systems (Hanley, 2015). Populists’ success is also founded on the electoral fragility of centre-left parties that traditionally relied on working class votes. As demonstrated by the result of the 2015 General Election, which saw a marked swing to UKIP in traditional left-leaning constituencies in England and Wales, Labour in Britain is particularly vulnerable to the immigration-EU connection that UKIP vehicles. After all, it was Tony Blair’s government that underestimated the scale of potential labour migration and chose not to impose transitional controls after the 2004 EU enlargement.

Yet the free movement of individual citizens offers enormous gains as recognized by the Europhile wing of the Conservative Party. As with capital mobility, free labour movement provides UK businesses with a vast pool of resources with which to innovate and grow, but only on the basis of accepting constraints on immigration policy that are unpalatable to dyed-in-the-wool eurosceptic Conservatives. Cameron's tactic is to attempt a reconciliation between these camps, first through renegotiation of the terms of EU membership. The problem with this strategy is that there is both little common ground between the two factions and not much scope for change within the EU system. Hard-line Eurosceptics seek unilateral concessions to the UK (e.g. a parliamentary veto over the ordinary legislative procedure) or else the overhaul of fundamental EU principles such as free movement. In a context in which there is no appetite for treaty reform per se across the EU – not least because of the absence of a common Franco-German project on which such change normally depends – British Eurosceptic demands cannot be met (Glencross, 2015). Consequently, the method for overcoming internecine Conservative strife is likely to be the same as in 1975 for Labour: an “agreement to disagree” within the government and the party at large during the referendum campaign.

#### *Campaign Dynamics: Elite Strategies and Party Divisions*

It is not just British political elites that have struggled to adapt to the Europeanization of politics provoked by European integration. Parties across Western Europe have tended to downplay contestation over the depth and scope of integration because these issues are orthogonal to the traditional left/right cleavage (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004). In this context, the politicization of EU-related questions raises the spectre of internal splits and the possibility of a structural reconfiguration of party cleavages along a nationalist/cosmopolitan divide (Kriesi et al. 2006), hence the attractiveness of de-politicizing integration in national politics (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Indeed, based on the 1975 referendum on EEC membership, the UK was one of the first political systems to experience the consequences of the politicization of integration. At the time though it was the very novelty of the constitutional device that captured the imagination, and which was considered the cause of the unusual campaign dynamics that followed (Butler and Kitzinger, 1976). Most notably, the contentiousness of the topic meant that collective cabinet responsibility was waived for only the second time in modern political history. The cabinet vote to support what was termed “Britain's New Deal in Europe” was won 16-7, demonstrating the extent of internal opposition, especially from those espousing more hardline leftist views. This dissent was even more prevalent amongst the Labour Party faithful, as reflected in the vote at a specially convened party conference to support a motion opposing EEC membership, which was carried by the block votes of influential trade unions (Butler and Kitzinger, 1976: 113).

As a result of the Cabinet's agreement to disagree, the campaign was essentially a cross-party one, thereby prefiguring the trend, discussed in the previous section, evident in more recent referendum campaigns across the EU. Government figures, as well as influential opposition leaders, could be found on both sides of the 1975 debate. However, the anti-EEC movement was primarily associated with charismatic, if maverick, politicians such as Tony Benn and Enoch Powell. The latter had switched allegiance from the Conservatives to the Ulster Unionist party, which, like the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, formed part of the official campaign against the EEC. By contrast, the pro-EEC camp was inherently associated with the political and business establishment – the Britain in Europe campaign raised fifteen times more in private donations than its rival.

Four decades later, the pro-EU constituency in Britain cannot count on the unwavering support of established elites. In line with what political scientists define as a growing pan-EU “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe and Marks, 2008), the British media and political establishment is divided over the merits of integration. Whereas in 1975 the print media was overwhelming in its support (with the exception of *The Morning Star*, a communist paper) for the EEC, Euroscepticism is deeply engrained in the fabric of tabloid and even broadsheet reporting (McCormick, 2014). Perhaps the most significant consequence of this ideological hostility, and the tendentious EU-related coverage it brings, is a persistent information deficit amongst British voters. This facet of the EU debate in the UK is vividly illustrated by the fact that citizens' median estimate for British contributions to the EU budget is €40 billion per annum, when the reality is €11 billion (Chatham House/YouGov, 2015).

Unlike other strands of Euroscepticism, in the UK an elite version co-exists alongside the bottom-up populism vehicled by opportunistic parties found across Western Europe (Leonard, 2015). Nowhere is this aspect of British Euroscepticism more evident than in the parliamentary Conservative Party, where constituency selection processes favour Eurosceptic parliamentary candidates and hence similarly-inclined party leaders (Fontana and Parsons, 2015). Rhetorical devices and policy proposals by Conservative politicians further reinforce this point about the elite nature of British Euroscepticism. In 2013, 95 backbench Conservative MPs wrote to the Prime Minister asking for the introduction of a unilateral parliamentary veto (completely at odds with European law) over EU legislation. Similarly, London mayor Boris Johnson has argued that ‘the option [of leaving the EU] is also attractive’, because ‘a generous exit’ can be arranged (Johnson, 2014).

It is no coincidence then that it is former Conservative Prime Minister John Major, for whom European integration was a particularly heavy cross to bear, who now presents an EU membership referendum as potentially cathartic (Major, 2013). The intended catharsis relates less to a mass/elite rupture than to healing the split within a divided elite (especially amongst Conservatives). Yet such a referendum would inevitably be a matter of UK constitutional debate and not just of international affairs. Whereas in 1975 the worry was that Scottish voters would reject the EEC (polls



initially showed a 16 point lead for withdrawal in Scotland), the roles today are reversed. Political elites in Scotland, where UKIP and the Conservatives are electorally much weaker, are attached to EU membership to the extent that the Scottish Nationalist Party has called for a Scottish veto on Brexit if a vote to withdraw from the EU did not also gain a majority in Scotland. Today's Scottish nationalists thus link independence to remaining in the EU, although they are ambivalent on the euro and associated fiscal rules. In this way, Euroscepticism in the UK can fuel divisions between mutually exclusive claims of Scottish and British exceptionalism, which indicates how much has changed since 1975.

### **Back to the Future?**

Ultimately, therefore, any pro-EU campaign after the 2015 General Election is likely to face three significant obstacles that did not lie in the path of those who supported EEC membership at the time of the last referendum. Firstly, voters' preference to stay in the EU on renegotiated terms looks impossible to satisfy. The absence of headline-grabbing renegotiation objectives relating to free movement (or other core EU principles) will make it very difficult for the government to spin a story about obtaining a better deal for Britain. Since polls consistently show that voters would prefer Britain to remain in a reformed EU, the lack of reforms plays into the hands of Eurosceptics who claim the EU is "unreformable" and heading towards federal union.

Secondly, supporters of the EU will have to contend with a querulous media environment. Entrenched Euroscepticism across a number of outlets can not only drown out the Europhile message, it can also – in keeping with referendum dynamics discussed earlier – inflect anti-EU sentiment by dredging up issues tangential to the membership question per se. Such an environment is the perfect breeding ground for the third feature that was not present in 1975: populist opposition to the EU mobilized in the form of an organized and well-funded Eurosceptic political party, namely UKIP. The latter's nationalist Euroscepticism is populist in so far as it is blended with an anti-elite critique of established parties. The anti-elite-anti-EU combination is more electorally potent today than when mavericks such as Benn or Powell sought to mobilize similar forces on a shoe-string budget.

Speaking the day after the decisive yes verdict, Harold Wilson proclaimed that the result brought to a conclusion "fourteen years of national argument" (quoted in Bogdanor, 2014). Four decades on, the neverendum continues, confounding expectations that direct democracy has a simple answer for an enduring conundrum. However, when the question of EU membership is posed again to the British public, the campaign is likely to be markedly different, meaning the answer could go either way.

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