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Brexit and EU Legitimation: Unwitting Martyr for the Cause?

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Abstract: Drawing upon emerging trends across Europe, this essay argues that the painful learning Britain undergoes via Brexit, looks set to become a useful lesson for the rest of the EU. Not unlike how Europe's bloody past once served as shorthand for justifying the EU's existence, should Brexit continue to humiliate Britain and result in recession, it will provide a new and powerful symbolic resource capable of legitimating membership and making up for the EU's democratic deficit. As such, Britain looks set to become an unwitting martyr for the EU cause. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom then, a no-deal Brexit may be the optimum outcome for the EU because it would best illuminate the folly of leaving and therefore publicly crystalize the benefits of membership.

Keyword: Brexit, European Union, democratic deficit, narratives, European

INTRODUCTION

In the week following the Brexit vote a popular meme circulated social media claiming that the most popular Google question in the days following the referendum was *What is the EU?*¹ This conversation piece frequently pops up at a certain kind of dinner party; the butt of the joke, of course, is that Brexiteers did not know what they voted for – like turkeys for Christmas – while wise, rational Remainers knew exactly what they were doing.² It is instructive, but not for the reasons that my interlocutors think. The trouble is that even those who have studied the EU for decades cannot agree on what the EU is; in fact, *What is the EU?* is a legitimate academic puzzle that has vexed scholars for several generations now (Diez, 1998: 599; Røren, forthcoming: 2). Researchers have dedicated their lives to trying to figure out how the EU works, why the EU works, and, indeed, if the EU works. The slow-motion car-crash that the Brexit vote initiated is telling in this regard. Explaining the potential consequences of leaving the EU to the British public has required the cumulative efforts of lawyers, political scientists, businesses, economists and many others. It is not clear they have succeeded. If the question “What is the EU?” really was the most popular search term amongst Brexiteers, it is not quite as dim as it first appears.

However, the meme is instructive for the practical problem it illuminates for legitimating complex international institutions. Liberal institutionalists posit an elegant formula for when institutions emerge and when they wither: Institutions will persist

for as long as they provide marginal utility to their members (Martins and Simmons, 1998: 751). Actors will join and remain for as long as they consider it to be in their self-interest. This is an intuitively sensible baseline for analyses (see also: Keohane and Martin, 1995; Wallander, 2000). Yet, it is also suggestive of a significant problem that the EU faces and the Brexit meme above illuminates. Given the sheer complexity of the EU, its diffuse effects, and perhaps most pertinently, given that domestic politicians have strong incentives to take credit for EU benefits while scapegoating it for their failures, the rational calculation ideal, at least among EU members' citizens, seems like a fantasy. Moreover, in an era of 'post-truth' politics (Michelson and Tallis, 2018), and the resurgence of nationalism, European citizens seem structurally inclined to possess a skewed understanding of the EU that makes rational calculation difficult, and Euroscepticism endemic (see also Marshall and Drieschova, 2018).³ Assuming that in the long term, each EU member requires a majority of its citizens to support membership, how can citizens make reasonable calculations about the relative merits?⁴

In the stead of rational deliberation, I posit that *periodic martyrdom* can serve as an unfortunate alternative mechanism for EU legitimation. The costs and benefits of EU membership might be diffuse while the given state is a member, but they become crystallized and concrete upon its leaving. In short, budding Eurosceptics may require a public demonstration of the folly of exiting to appreciate the gains from membership.⁵ The learning forced upon Britain via Brexit, would therefore become a public lesson for all. The function of this martyrdom lies not in the utility of the sacrifice itself (it will make the remaining EU members economically worse off), but in its narrative potential to become a "usable past" that "can be harnessed for some purpose in the present" (Wertsch, 2002: 31).⁶ As I argue below, Brexit has the potential to become a morality tale that embodies the dangers of nationalist hubris and putting faith in Eurosceptic fantasies.⁷ Yet, given that memories in politics are short, I suggest that the UK is unlikely to be the last martyr for the EU cause, at least until the systemic causes of Euroscepticism are mitigated. Thus, the long-term cohesion of the EU may well require some states to leave – and unwittingly martyr themselves⁸ – in order to provide a periodic lesson to the rest.

In making this case, I build upon but also depart from prior research on the EU's 'democratic deficit'. These works document the extent that EU democracy falls short of democratic ideals (e.g. Bickerton, 2016; Follesdal and Hix, 2006), whereas my analysis is of a more pragmatist ilk: it asks, if democratic legitimation is unlikely to function, what sort of legitimation can keep the EU in business?⁹ In this regard, I present a novel extension to works that have emphasized the role that discursive narratives play in (de)legitimizing the EU.¹⁰ Not unlike how Europe's bloody past once served as shorthand for justifying the EU's existence (Wæver, 1998; Diez, 2004), I argue that should Brexit continue to humiliate the

UK, decimate its international standing and result in a recession, it will provide a new and powerful symbolic resource that can bypass the need for complicated cost-benefit analyses.¹¹

The rest of this essay first elaborates the underlying reasons why member states' evaluations of the EU seem likely to systematically diverge from liberal institutionalists' rational ideal. Then, analysing trends in Eurobarometer polling and the responses among eurosceptic parties, part two suggests that the public debacle of the Brexit negotiations has already set in motion the martyr mechanism. However, to conclude, I suggest that whether the UK's martyrdom solidifies into an enduring narrative helpful to EU legitimation may depend upon whether the UK sacrifices its economy with a no-deal Brexit, or steps back from the brink. Ultimately, contra conventional wisdom, this line of argument suggests that a no-deal Brexit offers the best outcome for the future of the EU: it would make visible the value of membership (by showing the social and economic costs of leaving); and thus weaken euroscepticism across the continent and strengthen the EU in the process.¹²

AN IMPLAUSIBLE MODEL: LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND LEGITIMATION BY DELIBERATION

Functioning institutions are supposed to be win-win in the sense of solving collective action problems with additional information and rule-enforcement mechanisms. The EU was long held up as the liberal institution par excellence (e.g. Moravcsik, 2002): a bureaucratic fix to all manner of trivial and non-trivial collective action dilemmas. By organizing minimum common environmental, safety, and labour standards, the EU is said to offer a means of harnessing the dynamism of capitalism, while curbing the incentives to race to the bottom. Over the long term, the free movement of people and capital would enable the benefits of scale to diffuse among the members, while in the medium-term, the EU Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund could attempt to offset distributional inequalities. If the theory sounds utopian, the practice had been sufficiently gainful to keep eurosceptic grumbling to a minority position among its members. No amount of technocratic brilliance, or compromise, can prevent common rules from producing winners and losers, but majorities across the member states have consistently perceived the EU to be a win on balance.¹³

At least that had been the case until recently. Rocked by the financial crisis, the EU enforced painful to the point of cruel, structural adjustment packages on four of its members.¹⁴ As Scott Greer noted at the time, the measures enforced seemed likely to undermine "the European Union's legitimacy and the four states['] economies, "without resolving underlying problems" (Greer, 2016: 52). The Syrian refugee crisis soon followed, suggesting an unevenness to the EU's commitment to human rights and putting into stark relief the limits of its collective problem solving capac-

ities. As Gerda Falkner (2016: 13) lamented, “one core EU country after the other” chose to build fences and leave “the ‘refugee problem’ to countries at the periphery [...] instead of contributing to a joint solution.” Meanwhile the democratic backsliding of several members in the last decade has revealed the EU institutions to be far more willing and able to punish deviance from its economic dogma than to take action to uphold democratic norms.¹⁵ Predictably, trust in the EU institutions took a hit across Europe (Nancy, 2016). The Eurobarometer poll reported that between 2007 and 2016 distrust in the European Union rose from 36% to 55%, overtaking trust, which fell from 48% to 33% in the same period (Nancy, 2016: 15, 21–24).¹⁶ Amidst the crises, a growing number of eurosceptic parties emerged, capitalizing on the EU’s many visible shortcomings (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008; Brack and Startin, 2015).

However, many of these parties use the EU as a convenient scapegoat for a laundry list of grievances that often have only a tangential relationship to the EU. Britain and Brexit is a case in point. Both official and unofficial leave campaigns played short and fast with evidence. For instance, the official ‘Vote Leave’ campaign infamously sent buses around the UK claiming EU membership cost 350m per week. However, when the UK’s rebate and EU spending in the UK are taken into account the figure is more than halved.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the UKIP-led ‘Leave EU’ campaign systematically conflated freedom of movement within the EU with the refugee crisis. For instance, they erected posters around the country with the words “Breaking Point: we must break free of the EU and take back control” written across a picture showing Syrian refugees queuing at the Slovenian-Croatian border (Stewart and Mason, 2016). Meanwhile ‘lexiteers’ claim the EU’s competition laws prevent UK governments from undertaking state-led investment to support its post-industrial cities. Yet regional industrial strategies are quite legal under EU law; it has been the cross-party consensus behind marketization and laissez faire government that held back state-backed investment, not EU membership (Hopkins, 2017). These examples only scratch the surface of the myths and misunderstandings about the EU that pervaded the debate preceding the Brexit vote.¹⁸

BULLSHIT AS A STRUCTURAL FEATURE OF EU DISCOURSE

The impressive resilience and salience of ‘bullshit’ in the Brexit debate – and I use this term in the technical, Frankfurtian sense¹⁹ – casts doubt upon liberal institutionalism’s model explaining the EU’s institutional persistence. As Lisa Martin and Beth Simmons’ (1998: 749) paradigmatic statement of liberal-institutionalism asserts, the theory requires that domestic actors are “able to gauge with some degree of accuracy the ways in which working within international institutions would affect their ability to pursue their material or ideational goals.” Reviewing the Brexit debate suggests that even in a *relatively* well-educated country, with a pluralistic press,²⁰ and a

hitherto ostensibly robust democracy, citizens seemed incapable of gauging with the accuracy required for the rationalist theory to obtain.

The theory remains useful, however, precisely because it can operate as a heuristic for identifying systematic divergences from the ideal. In the classic formulation, neo-liberal institutionalism abstracts away the domestic audience and presumes relatively rational national 'actors' undertake the cost-benefit analysis of the utility of international institutions (Keohane and Martins, 1995). However, following the aforementioned series of crises, European citizenry increasingly participated in the debates over EU membership itself (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008). This politicization is the background condition that produces the possibility of member-martyrdom. By putting EU membership into the domain of domestic politicking, the liberal institutionalist ideal of rational calculation becomes even more distant than it would otherwise be.²¹ It leaves deliberations over the EU membership hostage to a myriad of vested interests and vicissitudes.²² Indeed, the following section argues that Britain's Brexit discourse is symptomatic of a deeper legitimation problem for the EU: there are several systemic conditions for why *bullshit* is likely to pervade member states' EU discourse, and thus render EU legitimation via rational deliberation implausible.²³

Asymmetrical Communication

Given the EU's sheer complexity, the marginal utility of the EU is not easily knowable or accessible for scholars, let alone its members' citizenry.²⁴ However, this trouble is compounded by the systematic incentives – matched with the capacity – for domestic political actors to understate the benefits and exaggerate the costs of the EU. The advantages of being in the single market are a case in point. Being a member of the largest single market should facilitate cheaper trade with other members and lead to gains from economies of scale and specialization accruing to members, while encouraging foreign direct investment from non-EU companies seeking to avoid tariffs. Yet, these benefits seldom get attributed to membership of the EU. Instead, domestic politicians have strong incentives to take the credit, while the EU has little effective means of speaking to national audiences. Thus, when Nissan decided to build a new car-plant in North East England in 1986, the then British PM Margaret Thatcher was free to argue that the decision “was confirmation from Nissan after a long and thorough appraisal, that within the whole of Europe, the United Kingdom was the most attractive country – politically and economically – for large scale investment and offered the greatest potential” (Thatcher, 1986). Thatcher did not mention the EU nor how being in the single market was a necessary condition for the investment, even though she was well-aware that this was the case.²⁵ The inverse is also true. EU policies that are considered likely to be popular can be claimed by the national government as their own. For instance, even after the Brexit referendum,

Theresa May's government attempted to take the plaudits for the European Commission's decision to ban credit card charges.²⁶

These examples capture in a microcosm a systemic problem facing the EU that might be called *asymmetrical communication*. In a book recollecting how the referendum was lost, the government's Director of Communications at the time summed up the problem concisely: "No one has done the EU's public relations very well in the last forty years" (Oliver, 2016: 48). This PR problem appears built into the institutional structure. All member states' governments have the capability and the incentive to frame the costs and benefits of the EU in ways that favour their immediate interests even if it means giving the EU short shrift and undermining its legitimacy in the long term. In short, the EU has no trumpet to blow within national politics and few willing to do so on its behalf.

In a Knowledge Vacuum Bullshit Flourishes

Not only does the EU lack effective PR and is mind-bogglingly complex (not to mention boring), but its members tend to provide only limited education about how it functions to their citizens. The *Learning Europe at School* report, commissioned by the EU Directorate-General for Education and Culture, found that 49% of Europeans believed they did not understand how the European Union works and 71% felt they were poorly informed about the EU (Dunne, Ulicna and Oberheidt, 2013: 4). These perceptions are borne out by the polls testing knowledge of the EU: only 56% of Europeans even realize they elect the European Parliament.²⁷ If knowledge about basic facts about the EU is absent across member states, it is reasonable to presume that more substantive knowledge of it is lacking too. This may partly explain why the Brexit debate prior to the referendum could have become saturated with *bullshit*: "deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, which is indifferent to facts" (Hopkin and Rosamond, 2018: 642). Indeed, bullshit flourishes in a knowledge vacuum. While the UK may exist at the extreme end of a spectrum regarding basic knowledge of EU institutions, as the report suggests, a general ignorance about the EU pervades member states. To be clear (again), it is quite possible to study the EU carefully and reach the conclusion that a country should leave the EU for logical and empirically sound reasons (e.g. Bickerton, 2016). Rather, the point is that gauging the effectiveness of an international institution in the manner liberal institutionalists envision becomes implausible without adequate knowledge.

While ignorance about the EU is widespread and easy to identify, remedying matters is far harder. Besides the complexity, one root cause of this knowledge vacuum surely stems from the paucity of education about the EU within many member states. The report found that eleven member states lack any reference to the EU in their education legislation. Moreover, it notes that when the EU is taught, the con-

tent is “very fragmented in most countries” and tends to focus on simple facts of geography and neglect “the functioning of EU institutions and the decision making process” (Dunn et al., 2013: 24–26). While the EU is clearly aware of the problem, a recent attempt to address the knowledge deficit met with fierce criticism in the British press. Indeed, the biggest selling newspaper in the UK, *The Sun*, reported on EU education efforts with an article headlined: “EU MUST BE JOKING Pro-EU propaganda to be taught in UK schools – and it’ll cost taxpayers £350k” (Cole, 2016). Michael Gove, the former education minister, told *The Sun*: “It’s outrageous that the £350million British taxpayers send to the EU every week is being spent on propaganda designed to indoctrinate children.” If this is the response to an education outreach costing 350k, one can only imagine the backlash that would be incurred should the EU attempt something substantive.

Yet the blame does not only sit with the states. The EU’s technocratic form of government also impairs citizen deliberation, whereby knowledge about the policies and procedures would otherwise be expected to emerge from a competitive democratic process. The relative lack of authority of the European Parliament *vis à vis* the Commission, and the subsequent second-tier status of the European elections are usually attributed blame for this (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However, as the two decades indicate, effective reform of the EU’s democracy is much easier to talk about than to do. Ultimately then,²⁸ widespread ignorance of the EU is embedded among member states and difficult to fix.²⁹

Post-Truth Politics and the Erosion of Trust in Expertise

The final global trend that makes legitimation by deliberation implausible is the erosion of faith in expertise. One might object to this argument that it is unreasonable to expect ordinary citizens to remain *au fait* with international politics, let alone the minutiae of a complex intergovernmental institution. After all, this is why representative democracy exists. Yet, in order for representative democracy to operate, citizens must trust professional politicians to make decisions on their behalf. Moreover, because the governments rely upon and cite expert advice, this model also requires trust in experts. Finally, the citizenry should trust the mode of communication. It is not difficult to see how these conditions were not operating effectively during the Brexit referendum (Marshall and Drieschova, 2018). Indeed, around 75% of parliament campaigned for remain, leaving a 28 point gap between how MPs and the electorate voted: the biggest in any UK referendum (Goodwin, 2019). Meanwhile, a multitude of experts weighed in on the side of remain. For instance, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, warned of dire economic consequences should the nation vote leave; while the Chancellor at the time spoke of an imminent recession should Britain Brexit (quoted in Robertson, 2016). All to no avail. The leading Leaver Michael Gove captured the mood in a TV debate when he responded to

a list of expert forecasts about the negative effects of Brexit with the (in)famous retort “The British People have had enough of experts” (Mance, 2016).

The decline of trust in political discourse has led to the frequent lament that we have entered the ‘post-truth’ era of politics. As clichéd as this refrain has become, it is hard to deny that trust in experts, politicians, and news media has eroded – not only in the UK but across Europe – and this undermines the capacity of the citizenry to make informed decisions about the EU.³⁰ Indeed, lacking trust in the information they are given, a citizen cannot reasonably “gauge with some degree of accuracy the ways in which working within international institutions would affect their ability to pursue their material or ideational goals” (Martin and Simmons, 1998: 749). Instead, as Hanna Marshall and Alena Drieschova (2018: 100) suggested in these pages, such conditions result in voters making decisions “based on information which has been designed to generate emotional arousal” yet “is inaccurate.” In such circumstances, entering a debate about EU membership armed with expert predictions of GDP growth is akin to getting into a knife fight with a water pistol. While assessing the causes of post-truth politics is beyond the scope of this essay,³¹ these trends seem unlikely to be reversed soon, and it is especially hard to imagine trust in politicians significantly improving in the medium term.³² Again, this implies another systematic factor undermining the liberal institutionalist account of EU legitimacy.

How Brexit Became a Cautionary Tale

Asymmetric communication, pervasive ignorance, and declining faith in expertise taken together imply that reasoned deliberation over whether to remain in the EU would be difficult for a large number of the members’ citizens. To the extent that these features are embedded within the EU, it would indicate that the EU will need to depend upon other modes of legitimation. One alternative candidate is that persistence happens by habit: routinized membership practices systematically exclude from view the very idea of leaving. As Vincent Pouliot (2017: 132) argues, “born into an already existing social world, actors cannot change established ways of doing things out of whim.” Here, actors embedded in social arrangements *do* conduct rational deliberation, but they think *from* their position within an institution rather than about it. For Pouliot, this explains why representatives seldom appear to conduct cost-benefit analyses of membership in multilateral fora in the manner required by liberal contract-based accounts. In the context of the EU, this explanation of persistence as unreflective-habit appears to have been historically important, as captured by Hooghe and Marks’ (2009: 5) notion of a *permissive consensus*: “deals cut by insulated elites”. To be sure, eurosceptic groups have long existed within the EU, but to the extent that they could be excluded from mainstream politics, states could keep on keeping on with EU membership without explicit debate or deliberation.

Yet having suffered perpetual crises during the last decade, the EU members' habits have been shaken by the rise of euroscepticism across the continent. In this respect, Brexit was symptomatic of a long-term trend whereby EU integration and, increasingly, membership have become politicized (Hooghe-Marx, 2009). Thus, even if leaving the EU still remained a minority position, governments increasingly had to defend and thus legitimate staying in the Union. In the context of what appeared like a perpetual crisis, it was not clear that pro-EU voices would eventually prevail. Moreover, if I am correct about the systematic conditions undermining reasoned deliberation, relying on cost-benefit analysis and GDP forecasting would not cut it. Indeed, at the time of the Brexit vote, the trends looked ominous: in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Brexit looked like it could prove to be the catalyst for EU disintegration. From Marine Le Pen calling for "Frexit" to Geert Wilders demanding "Nexit", Eurosceptics across the continent rejoiced at the referendum result (Chrisafis, 2016). Indeed, several commentators began pondering whether Brexit could become a model for other members to follow (Rosamond, 2016; Oliver, 2017). In short, Brexit seemed like it could precipitate an existential crisis for the EU and even 'the West' (e.g. Jones, 2016: 218).

Yet, as the Brexit negotiations have rumbled on, a remarkable turnaround in eurosceptic trends has emerged. Even though the economic impact of Brexit remains unclear, the repeated humiliation of the British government during the process of negotiation has turned the UK into a laughing stock³³ and served as a welcome boon to europhiles. Even those observing from a distance could see that eurosceptic promises of "sunlit uplands" would not be realized.³⁴ For instance, the UK's attempts to leverage its economic heft in order to Brexit with all the benefits of the EU without the costs or rules, have been rendered fantasy (*cakism* in British parlance³⁵). Indeed, the very process of trying and failing to get such a deal has already turned Brexit into a "cautionary tale".³⁶ For instance, the former Czech State Secretary of EU Affairs Tomáš Prouza reported to the *Guardian* that "[w]e always looked up to Britain as an example of how a country could be ideally run. All that has gone up in flames" (Henley, 2019). Meanwhile, in an open letter to his country's citizens, Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister, warned, "If anyone in the Netherlands thinks Nexit is a good idea just look at England and see the enormous damage it does" (Henley, 2019). It has not taken long for media commentators to join the dots on what the Brexit omnishambles implies for the EU. As Peter Baker (2019) of the *New York Times* put it, "Britain's lurch for the door has grown so messy that it has paradoxically discouraged others from contemplating a withdrawal from the EU". Michael Hirsh (2019), writing in *Foreign Policy*, spells out the implications most clearly: "Britain's humiliation has been a powerful lesson for even the most virulent populists and nationalists within the EU, rendering the idea of full exit all but unthinkable."

If these snapshots appear anecdotal and perhaps elitist, polling data and the changing policy positions of eurosceptic parties also support the argument that Brexit has provided a boost to EU support across member states. Once 'hard eurosceptic' parties now preach remain and reform.³⁷ For instance, Italy's Five Star Movement no longer campaigns to leave the Eurozone, while Marine Le Pen's 'National Rally' has gone silent on Frexit (Hirsh, 2019).³⁸ Meanwhile the Eurobarometer polls suggest the decline in support for the EU has reversed. The 2018 poll shows that the support for the EU is at its highest since 1983. On average 60% of citizens believe that EU membership is a good thing while over two-thirds are convinced that their country has benefited from being a member of the EU (EU Parliament News, 2018). While the headline of the EU Parliament News article reporting on the poll read, "Public Opinion survey finds record support for EU, *despite* Brexit backdrop" (ibid.), it seems more plausible that this is the *result* of Brexit.³⁹ In short, it seems that Brexit has provided euromphiles with a symbolic resource more powerful than any amount of economic analysis of the benefits of EU membership.

MEMBER MARTYRDOM: A NEW MODEL OF LEGITIMATION?

The late leader of the Liberal Democrat party, Paddy Ashdown (2017), wrote in 2017 that Brexit "will bewilder future historians as the most remarkable example in modern history of a country committing an act of monumental self-harm while still in full possession of its faculties." Ashdown may well be right, but as is customary for Brits, he overlooked the meaning of that self-harm for Europe. The UK's act of self-harm is not happening in a vacuum but producing a very public spectacle about which lessons from history will be drawn. We might ask, who else self-harms while still sentient? In Brexiting, Britain may turn itself into an unwitting martyr for the EU cause: illuminating the dangers of leaving, while crystalizing the diffuse benefits of membership. From a euromphile perspective, this may have happened just in the nick of time. The old pro-EU narrative – whereby memories of Europe's members' bloody past legitimated the imperfect compromises of EU membership (Wæver, 1998: 90) – has begun to fade of late, and the EU arguably needs a new legitimation narrative.⁴⁰ It need not be detailed; it just need be simple, powerful and accurate enough to be plausible: *Do you really want your country to 'do a Brexit'?*

To be successful, such a narrative would not require that all Europeans become paid up euromphiles dedicated to the European project, but merely convince sufficient numbers that exiting the EU would be foolish.⁴¹ Indeed, if the pro-EU forces can get their Brexit story straight, it could serve as an alternative to legitimation by deliberation for a generation. Write it into history books and it could serve even longer.⁴²

However, the Brexit narrative is not yet settled and the type of exit may well prove crucial. Indeed, Taggart and Szczerbiak are probably right that unless the outcome

is unambiguous, its meaning may well become muddled as it is “filtered and interpreted through the different narratives of Euroenthusiasts and eurosceptics” (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018: 18). So far, the process leading up to this point seems suitably unambiguous, but this is only half the story. The UK has not yet left the EU and it is still unclear how or even whether it will.

The possibility for martyrdom depends partly upon the type of exit the UK undertakes and partly upon the future relationship the EU grants the UK. If the EU offers the UK a deal that is better than membership, then the UK would become a model and other members would be sure to follow.⁴³ Despite Brexiteer claims that the EU’s economic interests would impel them to offer the UK privileged access to the single market, nothing the EU has said so far suggests this is likely. However, another possibility is that the EU could deny the UK any cake at all: if the EU is seen to actively *punish* the UK then Brexit would not illuminate the benefits of membership as much as their willingness to punish members that try to escape. As such, the EU would be easily painted as a prison.⁴⁴ The best option for the purposes of EU legitimation – and the one that the EU has followed thus far – is to stick stolidly to its own rules: offer the UK no special privileges nor any special punishments. Although negotiations of the future relationship will not be formally discussed until the withdrawal agreement has been finalized,⁴⁵ it seems clear from the comments from EU leaders that the UK will face a relatively fixed menu of options: a pay-off between high access to the single market and little regulatory and trade autonomy (e.g. Norway), or less access and more autonomy (e.g. Canada). In short, the UK will be able to have its cake, but not to eat it too.

However, whether Brexit becomes a ‘usable past’ for EU legitimation will also depend on UK behaviour. The chaos that has ensued in British politics post-Brexit has hitherto been almost ideal for EU legitimation because it has shown the UK’s eurosceptics to be far better at criticizing the EU than at finding a workable strategy for leaving the EU. Crucially, the Brexit process laid bare to other EU members how even the UK’s long-term eurosceptics lacked a realistic plan of how to leave the EU and what sort of relationship they would prefer afterwards. Instead, the UK spent the years following the referendum result arguing with itself about what sort of Brexit it should pursue. Indeed, Theresa May spent three years discovering the hard way that Brexiteer demands would not be accepted by the EU, and ultimately ended up arriving at a compromise withdrawal agreement that she could not get through Parliament. Instead, Parliament has only been able to agree on what it *does not* want: no majority exists for any shade of Brexit (or remain). As a result of failing to get her Brexit-deal across the line, Prime Minister May was forced to resign. At the same time the process has polarized the country along leave/remain lines that cut across party loyalties and pushed the constitution to its breaking point.⁴⁶ It is an open question whether just the difficulties involved in the Brexit process so

far would prove sufficient to put off soft eurosceptics from hardening in the future.⁴⁷

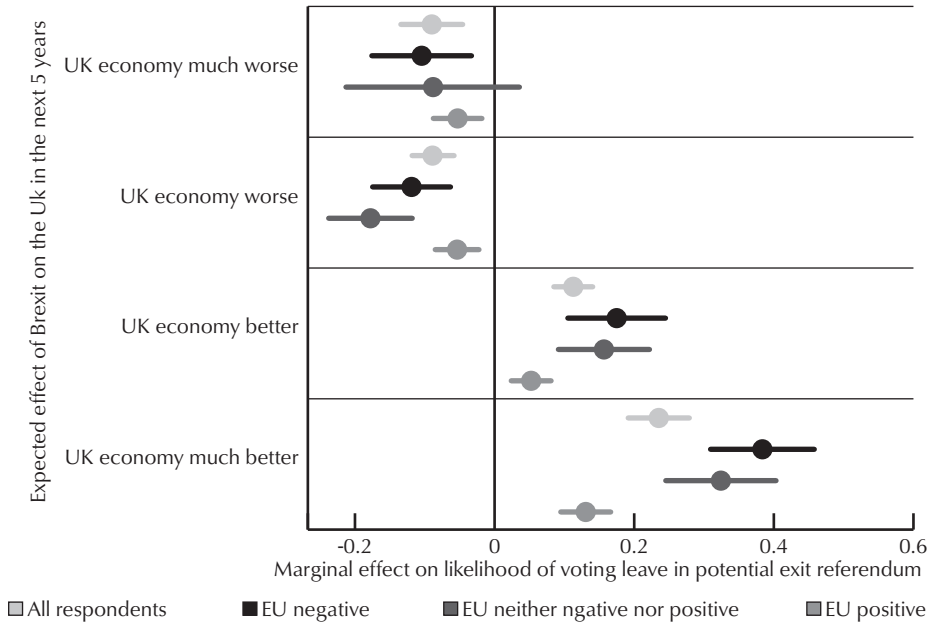
However, the new Prime Minister Boris Johnson's strategy looks like it may produce an unambiguous Brexit and perhaps an unambiguous lesson too. In an attempt to break the impasse, Johnson has packed his cabinet with 'hard' Brexiteers willing to countenance a "No-Deal Brexit" (Lilico, 2019). A no-deal Brexit would entail leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and thus there would be no transition period to smooth the exit. Although the government's own no-deal planning – 'Operation Yellowhammer' – forecasts major damage to the UK's economy and mass disruption to supply chains (Mason, 2019), upon entering office Johnson stressed that the UK must be willing to walk away without a deal, ostensibly to generate leverage to negotiate a better withdrawal agreement (Mathews, 2019). While Parliament rejected the plan and instead mandated Johnson to seek another extension should his government fail to reach a deal,⁴⁸ polls indicate his strategy of trying Brexit "come what may" has succeeded in uniting significant numbers of leave-voters behind the Conservative party.⁴⁹ Recent polling suggests 73% of leave-voters support a no-deal Brexit (Curtis, 2019) while many within his own party have publicly doubted Johnson's commitment to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement.⁵⁰

While it is far from certain – at the time of writing⁵¹ – whether Johnson will prove able or intends to follow through on his no-deal threat, the chances are sufficiently high that it is worth considering its consequences for the EU. Conventional economic analyses suggest that although no deal would hit the UK hardest, it would also hurt all EU member states too (Jones, 2016: 218). As a result, despite the leaders in the EU growing increasingly frustrated with the UK's dithering, they have so far been willing to extend the deadline each time the UK has asked. However, from the perspective of clarifying the benefits of EU membership and producing an unambiguous and simple lesson for budding eurosceptics, a no-deal Brexit could be ideal.

While the Brexit debate demonstrates that *warnings of future* economic harm may not resonate with eurosceptics, a real-time technicolour recession might prove far harder to dismiss. A poll of 9371 working-age respondents (ages 18–65) across the EU27, carried out by researchers from the University of Zurich (Walter, 2017), suggests that the economic consequences of Brexit may have considerable influence on whether eurosceptics from other countries will seek to follow in the UK's footsteps (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Expectations about the effects of Brexit for the UK and a potential leave-vote in the EU27

The expected effect of Brexit on the likelihood of a leave-vote in a potential exit referendum in the respondent's own country (EU-27)



Note: Controls for each respondent's age, education, gender, rural/urban environment, country, and opinion of the EU.

Source: Walter, 2017.

In particular, existing eurosceptics reported they would be significantly more likely to vote to leave the EU (should they be given the chance) if the UK's economy is "much better" after Brexit. Meanwhile, they reported they would be less likely to vote to leave if the UK's economy worsened after Brexit.

The UK would make a particularly salient 'lesson' from a narrative perspective because its economic size should make it well-placed among existing members to leave the EU with the least economic blow-back. Thus, if the UK does suffer a major recession and witness a capital flight in the manner many predict, it will surely make smaller countries' populations think twice before pursuing the same path (or at least make it more difficult for eurosceptics to argue for it). Moreover, the manner in which Brexit has been justified – it was characterized by a nationalist brew of post-colonial nostalgia and opposition to migration (Beaumont, 2017) – suggests that were the UK to struggle post-Brexit, it would not elicit much sympathy. Finally, if Boris Johnson – a bona fide Brexiteer – is the one to lead the UK to a no-deal Brexit,

then it would appear difficult for eurosceptics on the continent to claim that Brexit was sabotaged.

However, memories are notoriously short in politics. Even if Brexit does turn into an international by-word for the dangers of eurosceptic hubris, if the EU does not fix its democratic deficit it may still require a periodic martyr every generation or so to sacrifice themselves for the cause.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 'Brexit' refers to the referendum held on 23 June 2016, when 51.9% of the United Kingdom electorate voted to leave the European Union (EU).

² Recent research also casts considerable doubt on the popular view that the leave vote can largely be explained by ignorance. In a survey of 3000 adults, broadly representative of the UK population, people were asked 15 questions about the EU. The results revealed *both* leavers and remainers scored only marginally better than if they had answered the questions randomly. For instance, 50% of the remainers agreed with the statement that "[m]ore than ten per cent of British government spending goes to the EU." The correct figure is 0.36% (Carl, Richards and Heath, 2018). This would suggest that remainers did not necessarily know what they were voting for, and if they do happen to be right about the consequences of Brexit, it may not be because of a deep understanding of the EU.

³ I do not mean to imply that remaining in the EU is necessarily 'rational', nor that there is one agreed upon rational means of conducting a cost benefit analysis – only that whatever calculation is done, the information citizens have available is likely to be both incomplete and skewed against the EU. There are lots of good reasons to oppose the EU (see Bickerton, 2016), but there are also some advantages to membership that are often poorly communicated to domestic populations.

⁴ I focus on the Liberal Institutional account of legitimation rather than constructivist accounts of socialization into an EU identity, because I assume that while this latter mechanism probably accounts for a large number of the pro-EU citizenry, my argument is more geared towards the reasons why "soft eurosceptics" (those who are critical of EU policy but wish to remain) may or may not turn into "hard eurosceptics" (those wishing to leave the EU altogether). On the hard/soft distinction see Taggart and Szczesbiak (2001).

- ⁵ From this perspective, the first country to thrive upon leaving would sound the death knell for the EU. In which case, the UK would merely become a model for other countries' eurosceptics to follow rather than a martyr for the EU.
- ⁶ The Wertsh quote here refers to the function of collective memories in general rather than martyr narratives in particular; however, a martyr narrative can be seen as one particular type of 'usable past'. On narrative power and the politicization of collective memory see Subotic (2013); for a discussion of how martyr narratives function see Peterson (1996).
- ⁷ For critical analyses of Brexiteers' visions of the UK's future outside the EU see Beaumont (2017), Bell and Vucetic (2018) and Daddow (2019).
- ⁸ Although martyrs usually consciously sacrifice themselves for their (often religious) cause, as Peterson (1996: 34) shows, a person dying or undergoing suffering for a cause need not be a believer to become a martyr for it. Hence the UK can be an *unwitting* martyr.
- ⁹ To be clear, by legitimation I mean justifications that succeed in achieving sufficient acquiescence in a target audience rather than holding the EU up to an abstract standard of legitimacy and assessing the extent to which it meets it. On this Weberian conception of legitimation see: Jackson (2006: 13–46). However, as will become clear, democratic deficit research is formative to my argument.
- ¹⁰ Some europhiles have explicitly recognized the need to develop a new narrative for the EU-self. Indeed, the European Commission has funded activities in order to generate and promote one. However, perhaps predictably, recent efforts – particularly the “A New Narrative for Europe” project – were elite-driven, and beset with infighting, and almost entirely whitewashed WWII from the final text (Kaiser, 2017). Meanwhile public engagement with the process took place only once the text had been finalized (Kaiser, 2017). In short, the EU's efforts to develop and promote a positive narrative resemble a parody produced by its critics.
- ¹¹ Although I suspect that suffering public humiliation and an economic pain would prove sufficient to put off a good number of soft eurosceptics from turning hard, there is good reason to believe Brexit may catalyze the break-up of the United Kingdom as Scotland and perhaps even Ireland could desert it. If Brexit did ferment the Union's disintegration, then the UK really will have sacrificed itself for the EU cause.
- ¹² As I document below, after initially crowing, few eurosceptic parties in Europe now seem keen to follow the 'Brexit model'. This suggests these groups are taking into account the effects of Brexit when formulating their position towards EU membership. If it these groups maintained a purely principled opposition to the EU membership, then Brexit would not make any difference to their policy towards EU membership (and the argument presented here would be wrong).
- ¹³ The Eurobarometer polls suggest that while active opposition to EU membership has waxed and waned, it has historically enjoyed the approval of solid majorities in most member countries (Beaumont, 2017: 381).
- ¹⁴ Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus.
- ¹⁵ On EU members' democratic backsliding, see: Daniel Kelemen and Michael Blauburger (2017: 317–320).
- ¹⁶ The pattern was similar when the question referred to specific institutions – the EU Commission, the Central Bank, and the Parliament. However, the exception was the European Court of Justice, which seemed to remain largely unaffected by the trend.

- ¹⁷ Needless to say, the Brexiteers' figure of 350m took no account of any benefits of the single market for business (making it easier to export), consumers (reducing prices on imports) or employment (benefits stemming from foreign direct investment).
- ¹⁸ And that is to say nothing of the steady flow of false and exaggerated claims about EU directives – bans on prawn cocktail crisps, bendy bananas, etc. – that have been a staple of the British right-wing press for decades. For a comprehensive list of such claims, see the Euromyths A-Z index (European Commission, n.d.).
- ¹⁹ Here bullshit should be understood as “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, which is indifferent to facts” (Hopkins and Rosamond, 2018: 642).
- ²⁰ According to a Reuters report reviewing the Brexit coverage in the run up to the referendum, although overall the mainstream newspapers displayed a bias towards leave – 48% to 22% when factoring in the reach of the newspapers – plurality need not require perfect balance. Moreover, even strongly remain and leave outlets did print some articles from the other side (Levy, Aslan and Bironzo, 2016).
- ²¹ The rational calculation ideal is impossible to realize – no actor can have perfect information, for instance – but can still function imperfectly and thus retain some explanatory purchase. However, as I will argue, if bullshit pervades domestic debates about an institution, even an approximation of rational deliberation becomes implausible.
- ²² Indeed, it is worth noting that a large majority in parliament (75%) campaigned for remain in the referendum.
- ²³ For at least as long as EU membership is politicized among large numbers of EU citizens.
- ²⁴ The EU's ‘democratic deficit’ has been widely documented, though my take departs slightly from the usual argument that (quite reasonably) blames the EU institutional make-up, to also emphasize the national culpability. For a review of the debate, see: Follesdal and Hix (2006).
- ²⁵ This is shown by a 1980 memo to Thatcher from her industry minister, Keith Joseph (cited in Conn, 2018).
- ²⁶ Theresa May tweeted an image reading “We’ve banned credit card charges” without any mention of the fact that it was an EU Commission decision (Elgot, 2018).
- ²⁷ Following the Brexit vote in 2019, UK turnout in the EU election reached its highest level in 20 years. However, the turnout was still only 36.2%. The average across the EU has hovered between 40 and 50% (EU Election Results, 2019).
- ²⁸ In the year preceding the Brexit referendum, the UK scored lowest across all the Eurobarometer poll questions pertaining to knowledge of the EU (Hix, 2015).
- ²⁹ Quite reasonable complaints about the EU's ‘democratic deficit’ have persisted for decades and despite several efforts to reform it, they enjoy at least as much salience now as earlier.
- ³⁰ According to the Reuters Digital News Report, between 2015 and 2019 trust in news media declined in the UK from 51% to 40%. Similar downward trends were also observed across Europe (Newman et al., 2019).
- ³¹ For a critical discussion on ‘post-truth politics’ and its implications see: Wight (2018), Marshall and Drieschova (2018) and Rone (2019).
- ³² For instance, in the UK, the long-term trend points downwards. Between 1986 and 2013, the percentage of those who trusted government “to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their

- own party" fell from 38 to 18 per cent (the National Centre for Social Research cited in Goodwin, 2019).
- ³³ One French official gleefully reported that she had named her cat Brexit because "it wakes me up miaowing because it wants to go out. When I open the door, it sits there, undecided. Then it looks daggers at me when I put it out" (Henley, 2019).
- ³⁴ The Tory MP Andrea Leadsom used this expression to refer to her plans for leaving the EU during her bid for the Conservative Party leadership in 2016.
- ³⁵ The term 'cakism' has become shorthand for describing the position that the UK can have all the benefits of EU membership without the costs; it was coined after Boris Johnson told the *Sun*, "Our [Brexit] policy is having our cake and eating it".
- ³⁶ For instance, a British Conservative MEP used the expression in a recent speech to the European Parliament (Murphy and Evans, 2019).
- ³⁷ 'Hard eurosceptics' are those who oppose EU membership, while 'soft eurosceptics' refers to those who are discontent with particular policies or the direction of change (Taggart and Szczepiński, 2001).
- ³⁸ The National Rally is the French political party that was formerly known as the National Front.
- ³⁹ At the time of writing, the most recent poll average reports that 61% of respondents believe the EU is a "good thing" (EU Parliament News, 2019).
- ⁴⁰ The remain-side in the referendum debate certainly tried to mobilize this narrative (Martill and Rogstad, forthcoming: 7–8) but it did not appear to resonate.
- ⁴¹ Such an approach would arguably constitute a new rendition of what Benjamin Tallis (2018) has called "Defensive Liberalism", whereby instead of offering a positive vision the status quo legitimates itself by reference to the poverty of alternatives. However, as theoretically appealing as a positive vision of the EU might be, a strong self is easiest to achieve negatively, by reference to an unfortunate other. While othering is usually considered a 'bad' thing it need not be: the EU's othering of its past has arguably provided the basis for cooperation for more than half a century. If Brexit leads to the UK being 'othered' for succumbing to its nationalist and xenophobic urges (which many within the EU share), this may also prove productive for clarifying EU membership norms. Indeed, it is through processes of stigmatization that the norms of a society are produced and maintained (see: Adler Nissen, 2014; Zarokol 2014).
- ⁴² See Subotic (2013) on the importance of history textbooks and national narratives.
- ⁴³ Not to mention that non-EU members with inferior trading arrangements would immediately seek to improve their terms.
- ⁴⁴ This is already a trope among British eurosceptics (Daddow, 2019: 10–11).
- ⁴⁵ The EU made the Withdrawal Agreement a pre-requisite to beginning negotiations over the future relationship. It spells out the legally binding terms upon which the UK will leave the EU, including financial obligations, citizen rights, and ensuring that the Irish border remains frictionless. It also sets out the terms of the transition period after the UK leaves the EU.
- ⁴⁶ Theresa May's successor as Prime Minister Boris Johnson's decision to "prorogue" Parliament was deemed unlawful by the Supreme Court because it would have undermined Parliament's ability to scrutinize the government's Brexit strategy (BBC, 2019). Johnson has also indicated he would or might be willing to defy the law mandating him to request an extension to Brexit (Rayner, 2019).

⁴⁷ For instance, if the UK eventually undertakes a 'soft' Brexit, whereby following a transition period it would establish a relationship with the EU akin to Norway's, then it will be unlikely to suffer much obvious economic shock. Eurosceptics may also argue that it was not a 'real' Brexit and therefore it was a poor model for what leaving the EU could mean. However, it would be intriguing to see how the UK would react to being put in the Norwegian position of loitering outside the corridors of power trying to curry favour with EU members (see: Haugvik, 2017).

⁴⁸ By the 18th of October 2019.

⁴⁹ Or at least attracting back a number of the voters that had switched allegiance to the Brexit Party. Indeed, the event that catalyzed Theresa May's downfall was the European Elections, where the Brexit Party triumphed largely at the Conservatives' expense.

⁵⁰ Arguably the most high-profile is Amber Rudd, who resigned from the cabinet because she felt that reaching a deal was not the government's primary objective (BBC, 2019)

⁵¹ The final draft was written on the 27th of September 2019.

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Notes on Contributors

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