

Book Review: Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/05/12/book-review-brexit-why-britain-voted-to-leave-the-european-union/

12/05/2017

*Why the British people voted for Brexit remains the most contested issue in UK politics, and one also weighing on the minds of many elsewhere in the EU. For **Tim Oliver**, the new book by **Harold Clarke, Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley** offers the best analysis yet, albeit one that can't answer all the questions Brexit throws up and which should be read as part of the wider literature on Britain's relations with the rest of Europe.*



Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union. Cambridge University Press. 2017.

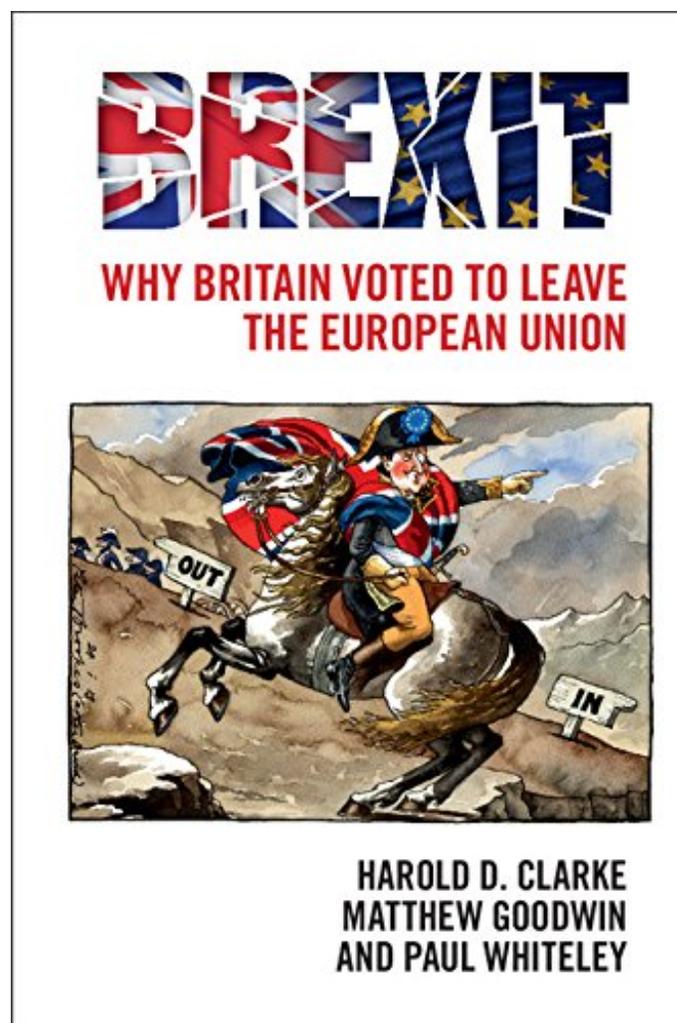
Ever since the early hours of the morning of 24 June 2016 politicians, journalists, officials, academics and large swathes of the British public have been trying to work out why the British people voted 52-48 to leave the European Union. Not even the victorious Leave campaigns and supporters can offer a clear answer. Defeated Remain campaigners and voters offer an equally diverse range of explanations.

Yet an answer there needs to be, not least by those taking Brexit forward. Answer why the British people voted for Brexit and you're closer to assessing whether the Brexit policy now pursued by HM Government aligns with why the British people voted as they did. Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley's book is the best and most rigorous attempt yet to look at how the British people voted and, more importantly, explain why they voted as they did.

Matt Goodwin has outlined their thesis [on this blog](#) and presented it at [Chatham House](#) followed by questions and answers. To avoid repetition I offer here only a brief reprise. Drawing on twelve years' worth of data covering 150,000 voters, the book opens up – through a valence theory focusing on a mix of calculations, emotions and cues – the complex and various reasons behind the vote for Leave.

While they reject the idea that one reason, person or factor explains the result, they do credit the key role of concerns about immigration and the appeal of two individuals – Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. Nor, as they show, was Brexit the result of a sudden upsurge in support for Leave. By looking back at twelve years of data they show how certain attitudes that would shape the vote were 'baked in' long ago, not least thanks to a lack of confidence in how the traditional parties had coped with the economy and immigration.

The outcome was one where many voters believed there was an economic risk (even if the case was at times being



hysterically overblown) from voting Leave, but emotions – not least long-running unease over immigration and security – overcame the risk while also making it more likely such voters would turnout. Remain voters might have sided more with mitigating the economic risk, but they did so grudgingly without much by way of a positive emotional case to support their choice or to make them turn out to vote.

The book itself can be roughly divided into four groups of chapters. Chapters 1-4 provide some of the background to Brexit, including a narrative history of the campaign and the inadequacies of the renegotiation. In telling the history they show how certain attitudes were ‘baked in’. This plays an important part in the theory the authors set out in these chapters, their approach based on previous theories and studies of how people vote in such referendums.

Chapters 5-6 offer an excellent overview of UKIP by looking at the party’s efforts and the attitudes of its members. UKIP’s role is credited as one the most important background factors to why Brexit happened, and one many in UK politics are loathe to give much credit to. Nor would many be comfortable acknowledging the book’s finding that UKIP voters’ attitudes are not that dissimilar to the average British voter.

It is to chapter 7 that those seeking the answer to the question of why Britain voted for Brexit will turn; although by doing so they will miss the interconnected analysis that precedes it. Chapters 8-9 form a look at what Brexit could mean for the UK and the remaining EU.

| *The book’s single biggest strength is without a doubt its empirical analysis.*

The book’s single biggest strength is without a doubt its empirical analysis. By drawing on such a wealth of data it offers an objective, evidence-based analysis for the most contentious topic in contemporary UK politics. Those seeking to rebut it – not least in politics itself – face the unenviable task of supplying a similar wealth of data.

Those uncomfortable with a numerical approach need not be put off. The writing is clear and the sections dealing with methodology can be skipped over. For psephologists, pollsters and those more comfortable with the science side of political science these sections will, of course, repay closer reading.

The approach of drawing on such data also limits the book. With data going back only twelve years, this is not a book that dwells on the history of UK-EU/European relations. Event such as the 1975 referendum are discussed, but the history of Britain as ‘an awkward partner’ is kept brief. As the book points out, some of the attitudes that would underpin the vote for Brexit were ‘baked in’, but there is little attempt to go back and look at how some of the baking might have begun in the earliest days of Britain’s membership and, possibly, long before it even started.

British political debate has rarely had much to say that is positive about the EU and Britain’s membership of it. Cameron and large numbers of other Remain campaigners who had previously said little positive about the EU were reaping, what they and generations of their predecessors had sown, when they tried at short notice to overcome decades of negative debate about UK-EU relations. Such has been the vitriol shown towards the EU that some historians might look back and wonder why only 52% voted for Leave.

There are some absences and frustrating moments in the book, although these are on topics which had they been opened up for discussion would have added little to the central thesis. One example lies in the coverage of the different results in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Remain) and England and Wales (Leave). As so often in British politics and political science, Northern Ireland’s unique political setup means it quickly disappears from the discussion.

| *London’s vote to Remain tends to be included as something of an afterthought despite the UK and England’s capital city and global metropolis*

Differences within England – 85% of the UK’s population – are not explored in much detail. Scotland’s vote to Remain is given attention, but London’s vote to Remain tends to be included as something of an afterthought despite the UK and England’s capital city and global metropolis (and the city the UK elite call home) now being at odds with a UK and England it so often dominates. These are curious oversights given the status of Northern Ireland and the City of London will be central to the Brexit negotiations.

It is chapters 8 and 9 that are vulnerable to most criticism. It is here that the authors move away from explanation towards prediction of what Brexit might mean for the UK’s economy, immigration and quality of democracy. It is, of course, difficult to write a book about Brexit without dwelling on the future. But if the issue of why Britain voted for Leave remains deeply contested then so too are the possible economic and political implications.

This does not deter the authors who waded into the debate about the economics of Brexit, arguing that EU membership has not mattered to UK economic growth and so Brexit will not have a big impact on the UK economy. Their conclusions that the effect of Brexit on the UK’s economy, society and democracy will be limited beg the question of whether Brexit is the most overrated development in contemporary UK politics.

conclusions that the effect of Brexit on the UK’s economy, society and democracy will be limited beg the question of whether Brexit is the most overrated development in contemporary UK politics

They are also sanguine about the possibility for a UK-EU deal, noting that it is possible if ‘sanity prevails’. That sounds similar to what some Remain campaigners and EU decision-makers were hoping for last June. Frustrations elsewhere in the EU towards an awkward Britain might be, to use the authors’ own phrase, ‘baked in’.

How important Brexit might be to the rest of the EU, however, is something touched on towards the end of the book when political opinions in the UK are compared with those across the rest of the EU. This section points out something often overlooked elsewhere in the EU: that the UK is not always the most awkward. Europe as a whole has seen a move from a permissive consensus towards European integration to one of constraining dissensus, meaning there remains a strong potential for a backlash within the remaining EU. Macron and Merkel have a big job ahead of them, with Brexit being one of the several challenges facing the Union, and not its most important.

British politicians should not fall into the trap of thinking they are now free from backlashes. In the last few sections of the book, the authors outline how another referendum appears unlikely and levels of ‘Bremorse’ remain low. But there remains plenty of issue space for populist parties and well-funded individuals to feed off and take advantage of unaddressed frustrations with the UK’s democracy, economics and society.

It is unlikely any book can fully explain as complex a topic as Brexit. Anybody picking up this book with a view to finding an answer to why the British people voted to leave the EU will find the most rigorous attempt so far at an answer.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

Tim Oliver is a teaching fellow in British politics at UCL. From 2015-17 he was a Dahrendorf Fellow for Europe-North American Relations at LSE IDEAS. He remains an Associate of LSE IDEAS.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics