



UK referendum: The national vote that is determining European history

Dr Ania Skrzypek

FEPS Senior Research Fellow

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In the comprehensive report [“Argument or organisation? The battle over the membership of the European Union”](#) Olivia Bailey presents the summary of data gathered through a poll, which was executed by GQRR for FEPS, Fabian Society and TUC. She argues that it may be too close to call just yet and that the gap continues to narrow. Since the “Leave” camp scores higher in being more persuasive, the answer to that would be to focus on mobilising the undecided, withstanding part of the electorate. Here especially the Labour Party would seem to have a chance to change the current trend, as the percentage of the voters who had supported them in the European elections in 2014 and now who do not intend to vote is higher than the ones noted for the Conservative or the LibDem.

The question remains how to accomplish that. Especially that the studies prove that the European vote is a specific one, whereby the voters’ behavioral patterns change and lead to the greatest volatility among the groups of the electorates. Although it is hard and may even be on the edge of unwelcome to express the opinions on what is argued to be a domestic campaign, convinced Europeans can hardly refrain from being part of the debate. That is especially that the referendum or rather the negative term of “Brexit” has become a part of political and social discourse around the television and kitchen tables across the EU. In that sense the European progressive family has a responsibility to offer their story to the citizens of the other Member States. It should address the concerns that they have about the unprecedented aggressive behavior of the British Prime Minister Cameron, who may have won his “emergency breaks” battle over the Council at an enormous cost. The fact that he had kept the EU hostage for the months it should have had a full capacity to react to the different challenges prompted much of the anti-British sentiments. These clashing with the arguments about “British pride” translate to the fact that many, also on the centre-left see a potential divorce as a relief for both sides.

Additionally, the renegotiation of the membership conditions for the UK became a reference point for many across the Union, who raise the question if also their respective countries could step up their game vis-à-vis the EU. These were recently echoed in the discourse that preceded the referendum, which took place on 6th April in the Netherlands and concerned the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. Within one third that participated, nearly two thirds of voters said “no”. Even though the question was different, still following the numerous opinion polls the evident explanation of such a result was the sentiment that the vote offered a chance to say that the Netherlands should not favor further integration and that the conditions of the membership should be re-discussed so that the state will no longer be just the net-payer. The sentiment to decrease the contribution echoes the feeling that whilst the Netherlands move from welfare state to a participation society, their internal austerity must translate onto the scale of their contribution – that is especially that the EU has proven incapable to recover from the 2008 crash.

What is interesting is that there is a common element between the Dutch and British pre-referendum campaigns, which in fact was also eminent in the recent Danish debate ahead of their vote on 3rd December 2015 on the question of their opt-out from the EU policy provision in the dimensions of justice and home affairs. If one browses the posters, there is a great similarity among “no” materials. That lies in fact that no is simple, while yes seems to be very complex. Especially that “no” translated to “Leave” has a double power of rejecting both the EU in the current shape and the membership within it, whilst “yes” may seem too narrow to express both the support for remaining and for the reforms that the EU most obviously needs to put in place.

The above quoted Bailey’s report points out this is one of the reasons for which “Leave” campaign as more radical, and hence appearing more passionate resonates better in the core fields that the voters are preoccupied with. These, following the collected data, are domains of: integration; economy; control of laws; security and terrorism (see page 13). One can interpret these in many different ways, but for European operates the striking conclusion is that these are precisely the emanation of 4 cornerstones that the European Communities were founded on in the 1950s. The question of immigration was back then an issue of solving distributional conflicts while ensuring freedom of movement and equality of rights; the worries about the economy echo searching for the old promise that European cooperation will be a source of prosperity and progress; the control of laws reflects the pleas that the Community will safeguard and promote the rule of law and democracy; and finally the concerns on security remind of the ideal of peace for which the EEC was established to begin with. This observation leads to a straightforward conclusion – the debate at hand is the one about the vision for the future. Most obviously the populations still long for the same values and the same guarantees to be at the heart of the project, but the solutions in place are no longer adequate. And that is what should motivate all – Labour and its sister parties from the EU – not to see 23rd of June as the end of the race, but as a beginning of a longer political marathon.

Hence although the debate on the future of Europe is perhaps as old as the integration process itself, it seems reopening it is a long-term overdue process. This can explain why, following Bailey’s report, but also the findings of the FEPS Millennial Dialogue, there is an obvious a generational divide among the “Remain” and “Leave” voters. Over 50% of the population aged 65+ favours leaving – giving into pessimism about the EU and the nostalgic sentiments about “restoring British imperial glitz”. While at the same time over 50% of the voters between 18 and 34 years of age declare themselves for “Remain”. This hope that is entrusted in the EU must not be taken for granted – especially in the times that democracy is being challenged and populists and nationalists seem rather on the rise in other states, such as Hungary, Poland, but also Austria and Germany. They need to be answered to and providing a proposal that looks at the future of Europe in 5, 10, 20 years may be the key for Progressives to reconnect with this group of voters.

The idea that there is a project that the centre left wants to pursue jointly is also what should be the bridge between now and the 23rd June. The probability of the “Leave” to be victorious in the end seems surrealistic. Hence the cautious optimism the sentiment with which the polls are being read, however much can happen still ahead and after the ballots are casted. What should be the warning is that history has witnessed cases where a close call prompted social unrest, following which the general elections led to a total reshuffling of the partisan systems. That is why the political

imagination of the Progressives has to stretch beyond the referendum date, already now looking at how to manage its' results on both the national and the European level.