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Euroscepticism revisited: the 2016 Leave vote

Beyond the identity approach

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Introduction

On the 23 June 2016, the British people voted to leave the EU in a referendum, against all expectations, thereby causing a massive political rupture within the UK. The people of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and London voted decisively for Remain while the people of England and Wales had voted Leave, highlighting a huge divide in the Union. Prime Minister David Cameron, who initiated the vote, resigned immediately. The financial markets were in turmoil and the British pound reached record lows. The two major political parties, the Conservative and Labour, were deeply split, and trying to come to terms with the vote (de Vries, 2018; Leruth et.al., 2017)

The immediate political effect of the Leave vote was felt across the continent as well. For Europe, Britain's decision to leave the European Union was a historical and painful moment. It marked a new chapter in the history of the EU wherein 'exiting' the EU had become possible. The timing was also critical, since Europe was dealing with the rise of public Euroscepticism, and the increasing success for Eurosceptic parties. One question remained: why did Britain vote Leave?

Many explanations were offered. Some people were convinced that the Leave vote was engineered by "people without skin in the game: homeowners without mortgages, and school-leavers without degrees, who felt that the warnings of potential economic woes applied only to other people" (Bush, 2016). Others were certain that "immigration was key" to understanding the Leave vote (Goodwin, 2017).

These explanations were in line with the two most prominent explanations for public Euroscepticism: the utilitarian approach and the identity approach. The former argues that Euroscepticism is the result of the economic challenges that the process of European integration forms for certain voters, while the latter explains Euroscepticism in terms of group identity and the challenges to that identity by others (de Vries, 2018: 35-36). However, both of these approaches are limited. They ignore contextual factors, such as culture, discourse and emotion, which could influence a vote to Leave, and they neglect the deeper meanings that such a vote might hold for voters. They also fail to explain the (dynamic) mechanisms which led to the Leave vote.

Given the dominance of the identity approach in political and public discourse, and within the field of public Euroscepticism, my research addresses the limitations of this approach in explaining the 2016 Leave vote. I address these limitations using the following research question:

To what extent can the identity approach explain the mechanisms behind the meanings and beliefs which led to the 2016 Leave vote?

These limitations stem in part from a reliance on quantitative methods in political science, which utilise survey data and questionnaires, and consequently are less able to give insight into personal meanings. To address this bias, my research adopts a qualitative approach wherein I have conducted semi-structured interviews with Leave voters, and use content analysis in order to uncover the mechanisms behind the meanings and beliefs which led to the Leave vote.

Furthermore, these limitations stem from theoretical misconceptions within our understanding of public Euroscepticism and specifically the identity approach which is the focus of my research. The identity approach provides us with a one-sided and limited understanding of public Euroscepticism by not including the broader context and dynamic behind public Euroscepticism. My research addresses this by introducing three theoretical conceptual tools which help us to construct a ‘full picture’ from what informs Eurosceptic attitudes to the decision-making process which led to a Leave vote.

Final, my research offers a few recommendations for how to research public Euroscepticism in the future, but also how to address and deal with public Euroscepticism as policy maker and/or politician.

Theoretical framework

In the following section, I will discuss the identity approach with regard to our research question, and argue that there are four theoretical misconceptions within this approach which need to be addressed. Firstly, the identity approach relies on a notion of in-group favouritism and out-group hostility, but it is unclear why this notion should apply in the context of the EU and the process of European integration. Secondly, there is a static understanding of ‘culture’ within this approach, which limits understanding of how, for example, history influences culture. Thirdly, while it explains ‘identity’ as a potential driver for Eurosceptic attitudes, it fails to explain how these attitudes are formed. Finally, it assumes a causal relationship between identity and political action. I argue that, due to these theoretical misconceptions, the identity approach offers a one-dimensional, and, at times, simplistic explanation of public Euroscepticism. This will be discussed in detail in relation to the theories underlying the approach. To conclude, I will suggest three conceptual tools, which could help us to go beyond these theoretical misconceptions by explaining the broader context and dynamic behind public Euroscepticism.

1.1 The critique of the identity approach

The first wave of studies exploring people’s attitudes to the EU and the process of European integration focused on public support, and were dominated by rational cost-benefit and economic explanations. This later became known as the utilitarian approach. The utilitarian approach argues that there are two primary drivers of people’s attitudes to the EU and the process of European integration: firstly, the economic performance of their country due to the membership of the EU; and secondly, the personal benefits that people gain from their country’s membership of the EU. This could be, for example, the freedom of movement. This approach was based upon David Easton’s (1975) model of public support, in which he distinguishes between two different models of public support: specific (utilitarian) and diffuse (affective). In the context of the EU and the process of European integration, utilitarian support can be seen as a form of cost-benefit analysis, while affective support is a form of attachment or loyalty to the EU and EU policies as a result of positive economic evaluations of EU-membership (Gabel, 1998: 16-18). More recent research within the utilitarian approach includes research on Brexit which points towards a utilitarian explanation for public Euroscepticism. For example, Hobolt (2016) argues that the divide between winners and

losers of globalization was a key driver of the Brexit vote. This suggests that people's support for the EU and the process of European integration depends on how much they felt to have gained from EU membership versus how much they felt left behind.

However, the focus of this thesis is on the second wave of studies on attitudes to the EU and the process of European integration which shifted its focus from support to scepticism. This shift happened in the aftermath of the Danish rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and the failure of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 due to its rejection by French and Dutch voters. This second wave, subsequently referred to as 'the identity approach', argued that attitudes weren't based only upon 'rational' or economic calculations (as proposed in the utilitarian approach), but were more 'emotive' and connected to 'identity considerations', such as national identity and attitudes towards other cultures (Carey 2002; McLaren, 2002, 2005; Hooghe and Marks, 2005). The identity approach suggests that there are two primary drivers for people's attitudes towards the EU and the process of European integration: firstly, the level of attachment of individuals to their country; and secondly, their attitudes towards other cultures, and immigration.

McLaren (2002) was one of the first scholars to argue that identity plays an important role in attitudes towards the EU. She argues that national identity considerations are an important influence on people's attitudes because people have fundamental 'attachments' to their nation (2002:553-554). As the process of European integration has consequences for 'national integrity', people can view the EU as a threat, and therefore become sceptical or even hostile towards the EU and European integration (2002: 554). A similar argument is made by Carey (2002), who suggests that a strong national identity, feelings of attachment to one's country or region, and a view of the EU as a 'threat' to one's identity and culture, are important influences in Eurosceptic attitudes (2002:401-403).

Both Carey and McLaren argue that this relationship between identity considerations and (increasing levels of) Euroscepticism among the public isn't strange, because the nature of the European project fundamentally changed. As it became more political and less economic, the EU and the process of European integration became more salient. Carey suggests that, "following the increased visibility of the political aspects of the EU after the ratification of the Treaty on European Union, the criteria for evaluating the European Community along economic dimensions are combined with symbolic political considerations" (2002:390).

Citizens therefore use a set of criteria to evaluate whether or not they support the EU and (further) European integration. Whereas Carey emphasises the 'identity' aspect of these considerations, and links this explicitly to one's territorial identity (national, regional or European), McLaren sees immigration and the perceived threat that immigration poses to one's country as key to understanding Eurosceptic attitudes.

Hooghe and Marks (2005) go one step further than Carey and McLaren. They argue that people's perceptions of their national identity are crucial for understanding Eurosceptic attitudes. Citizens who view their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are more likely to be Eurosceptic, compared to those who perceive their national identity in inclusive terms (2005:424). However, divides within political elites also play a crucial role. Hooghe and Marks argue that when the political elite is united on the issues of the EU, national identity can co-exist with a positive attitude towards European integration. But when the elite are divided, exclusive national identities produce Eurosceptic attitudes (2005:437).

So how successfully does the identity approach explain public Euroscepticism? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the theories which lie at its heart. Most scholars within this approach rely heavily on three theories: realistic group conflict theory, which became prominent in the 1950s; the social identity approach (SIT), as developed by Tajfel (1974); and a theory of symbolic politics, as developed by Sears (1993). Consequently, I argue that they have adopted both the theoretical problems and empirical difficulties of these theories. I will use McLaren's (2006) book as the basis for my critique as she was the 'instigator' of the identity approach, and many scholars build upon her findings to explain public Euroscepticism.

One of the most prominent realistic group conflict theories is Herbert Blumer's group position theory. Blumer (1958) argues that "racial prejudice exists basically in a sense of group position rather than in a set of feelings which members of one racial group have towards members of another racial group" (1958: 3). This means that to define one's own group is always to characterize another racial group. This can lead to, for example, a fear that "the subordinate racial group" is threatening the position of the dominant group (1958: 3-4). This racial prejudice is a form of 'self-defence' whereby members try to protect the integrity and position of their own group (1958:5). This notion of group conflict, with racial collective identity at its core, suggests that perceived threats against the dominant group can explain

hostility to other racial groups. McLaren (2006) argues that this notion of group conflict is important for our understanding of people's attitudes to the EU because it is likely that many individuals will view policy decisions in terms of threats to their group. In other words, freedom of movement will be viewed in terms of how it affects the group, and those that don't belong to the group (2006:55). Other academics within the identity approach also make this argument. Van Klingeren et al. (2013) suggest, for example, that European identity can be viewed as a group conflict in which European citizenship (the out-group) forms a threat to nationalism (the in-group). As a result, you could argue that people who feel strongly attached to their own nation (i.e. 'nationalists') can feel threatened by the notion of European identity (2013: 693).

This idea of group protectiveness and hostility to other subordinate (racial) groups is closely related to the second dimension of identity approach: SIT. The earliest version of SIT centred around research into the role of social categorization in intergroup behaviour. Henri Tajfel conducted an experiment in which he assigned people into groups at random, in a laboratory setting. He found that people formed an in-group bias and discriminated against other out-groups. This led to the conclusion that social groups play an influential role in how people identify themselves, and how they categorize others around them (Tajfel, 1974:67-68). Tajfel, et al. (1979) believed that in-group bias was driven by a need for positive self-image, and that this could be achieved by the positive self-esteem of one's own group. Members of the in-group are, to put it simply, very eager to establish differences between their own in-group and another out-group in order to create for themselves "a positive social identity" (1979:190).

This notion of in-favouritism and hostility to out-groups is at the heart of the identity approach. McLaren (2006) argued, for example, that "as long as national identity could be providing people with a basis for self-esteem and self-value", it is likely that people will oppose threats to that identity: in this case, the EU and the process of European integration (2006:18). Others apply this notion of in-group favouritism and out-group hostility to EU policies and argue that this helps to explain public Euroscepticism. Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) claim that immigration could have created "identity-based hostility" towards the EU and the process of European integration because of public opposition (2017:455).

Immigration became more prominent after several Central- and Eastern European states joined the EU in 2004, which was followed by higher rates of migration into the UK under the guise of the freedom of movement rules within the EU. This notion of "identity-based

hostility” could also have been sharpened from 2015 onward due to the European refugee crisis (2017:455). De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005) are more explicit, and argue that is not people’s in-group favouritism, but their negative out-group bias which helps to explain opposition to further European integration. They hypothesize, for example, that European integration brings together people from different countries with different religions and cultures, and that people who hold negative attitudes of immigrants will be more likely to reject further European integration (2005:64-65).

The third dimension of the identity approach is subtler but prominent, and that is how scholars within this approach conceptualise culture, and link this to national identity. Many political science scholars understand culture as a system of symbols that is fixed and bounded within a social group. The social-psychological theory of symbol politics as developed by Sears is central to this outlook. Sears (1993) argued that people acquire fixed, emotional responses to particular symbols from a young age through “a process of classical conditioning” (1993:120). The most important of these “symbolic predispositions”, such as party identification and racial prejudice, are more likely to persist throughout a person’s adult life (1993:120). This is because certain political objects, such as particular policies, are meaningful for people, due to their ability to produce this emotional response. This response remains consistent over time despite the object becoming less or more salient (1993:120). In this understanding of culture, as a fixed system of symbolic meaning, the group isn’t defined by what they possess, but by how they perceive themselves. This view has led political scientists within the identity approach to assess people’s identity by analysing, for example, how attached they are to their nation, their level of pride in their nation’s heritage versus the EU, or their fear of their language (as a symbol of their identity) being threatened by European integration. For instance, Van Klingeren et al. (2013) ask respondents, as a soft variable measure: “Would you say you are very proud (3), quite proud (2), not very proud (1), not at all proud (1) to be (nationality)?” With this variable, they try to prove a hypothesis that the level of a person’s national pride is connected to their level of Euroscepticism (2013:693-695).

To summarize: the identity approach argues that there are two primary drivers of people's attitudes towards the EU and the process of European integration: firstly, the level of attachment of individuals to their country; secondly, their (negative) attitudes towards other cultures and immigration. This understanding of what drives public Euroscepticism is derived from a notion whereby Eurosceptic attitudes can be understood as a 'group conflict', meaning that public Euroscepticism is a response to the threat posed by the EU and the process of European integration to the in-group culture. This is explained by a drive among people to establish differences between themselves and others based upon nationality, ethnicity or race, in order to create a positive self-identity. At times, the identity approach could be seen to imply a Huntingtonian 'clash of cultures' in which people feel threatened by European integration because it will negatively alter their culture, represented by elements such as their language.

1.2 The alternatives

What does its reliance on these three theories mean for the identity approach? I argue that they lead to four theoretical misconceptions within the identity approach that need to be addressed. Firstly, the notion of in-group favouritism assumes that people form political attitudes because they belong to a certain group, and are therefore hostile to another group. But it doesn't become clear why would this apply to the EU, beyond the suggestion that the EU has become more 'political'. Secondly, culture is understood as a fixed set of symbols whose meaning can be traced and known. But culture isn't a knowable universal that exists in a neutral vacuum: its meaning shifts, under the influence of history and events. Thirdly, the identity approach doesn't explain how political attitudes are formed and ascribes a lot of importance to identity. But identity is a contested and complex concept, which is embedded in a social context. Its meaning is not static but dynamic. Consequently, it is too simplistic to assume that people share an identity because they live in the same country or share the same race. Finally, the identity approach assumes a causal relationship between identity and political action. But it doesn't explain how attitudes turn into action. What are the mechanisms behind this transformation? Other external factors, such as the role of political discourse, are left out of the scope of research within this approach.

So what are the alternatives? I argue that we have to look at the broader context and dynamics behind public Euroscepticism in order to find out how these attitudes are formed, and what the meanings and beliefs are that underlie them. We often assume that Euroscepticism is the result of certain political attitudes, and try to find out which factors drive Euroscepticism. But what if Euroscepticism is a vehicle through which wider political battles are fought? Instead of treating people as having homogenous views because they belong to a certain ethnic group or share a nationality, we need to look at the heterogeneity within a society, and how wider competing beliefs about who we are, and where we should go in the future, are part of a broader political struggle. The EU and the process of European integration is, in this sense, not only a part of that struggle, but is also used as a way of voicing those beliefs. In my view, there are three conceptual tools that can help us to interpret this broader context and dynamic, to inform a multidimensional understanding of it. This doesn't mean that the identity approach isn't useful, only that it should form part of a wider theoretical framework.

Cultural schema

As discussed earlier, one of the theoretical misconceptions within the identity approach lies in its reliance on the notion of in-group favouritism, and its static understanding of culture. This leads to groups and their attitudes being defined by their ethnicity and/or nationality, with certain values and symbols attached to this. This could be true to a certain extent, as individuals do use their 'nationality' and/or 'ethnicity' as a reference in how they identify themselves, and some individuals may feel 'emotionally attached' to the national flag. However, this assumes a homogeneity within people's attitudes when there are multiple, competing beliefs within any society, which can vary over time in their content and resonance. But more importantly, the struggle between these beliefs is an important driver of political change (Bonikowski, 2016).

So how can we research the relationship between people's attitudes and public Euroscepticism in our case study, and go beyond these theoretical misconceptions? I argue that a useful starting point for this research lies in Brubaker's (2004) critique of the notion of 'groupism'. According to Brubaker 'groupism' is a prevalent tendency within the social sciences whereby we research the social world in 'blocks' based on criteria such as ethnicity. However, in order to go beyond this 'groupism' we have to rethink our analytical concepts and the manner in which we research them. So rather than using coherent ethnicities or

nationalities to interpret and analyse the social world, we should see ethnicity and nationalities as ways of seeing the social world. In other words, we should ask how ethnicity or nationality are constructed, and how they are perceived and used by people in their everyday lives as they navigate their social world. In our case, instead of using nationality to perceive, interpret and research public Euroscepticism, we have to look at how nationality is seen and used as a perspective on the EU.

A useful conceptual tool to bypass this ‘groupism’ is the cultural schema, as formulated by Bonikowski (2016) in his research on nationalism. According to Bonikowski, a cultural schema is “a way through which people give meaning to their membership in imagined communities defined and governed by formal institutions” (2016:9). It builds upon the notion of the cognitive schema, as articulated in cognitive psychology. Our experience of the world is often messy and formless, and a cognitive schema gives this flow of sensory inputs a shape, by offering a frame of reference through which it can be interpreted and made meaningful, in order to guide our future actions (Bonikowski 2016: 9).

The danger here is that we perceive the cognitive schema as operating relatively coherently and consistently at the group level, for instance by suggesting that there is such a thing as a British or a Dutch cognitive schema. Bonikowski’s innovation is to emphasise that there is no single cognitive schema. Instead, within any given group, there will be several different cultural schemas operating, which are formed and changed through social interactions (Bonikowski 2016). ‘Crucially, group members often disagree, whether actively or not, about the meaning of the group’ (Bonikowski 2016:10), meaning that cultural schemas are constantly in competition, and being reworked and renegotiated. Bonikowski’s approach therefore represents a dynamic, relational understanding of group identity, in which shared meanings are not fixed at the group level, but constantly reworked from within the group.

Understanding that individuals make sense of the world through such local schemas can also help us to prevent a common mistake within political science: assuming that a researcher’s understanding of a particular issues aligns with the perspective on the ground. For example, within the identity approach, when survey researchers examine attitudes about immigration, the assumption is often made that the that the concept of ‘immigrants’ is a coherent, universal attitude object towards which people can express their opinions (Blinder 2015). But, how do we know that people see ‘immigration’ or ‘immigrants’ in the same way that, for example, the

state does? According to Blinder (2015), who researched the understanding of immigrant attitudes in Britain, people's perceptions of immigrants differs drastically from the way the state 'sees' immigrants (2015:81). Rather than thinking of 'an immigrant' as any foreign person who entered the UK for any reason, Blinder found that people think predominantly of asylum seekers when they think of 'immigrants' who want to settle permanently in the UK (2015:87-88). A local enquiry into the shared cultural schemas through which individuals make sense of the world is the only way to avoid assumptions about the meanings that particular conceptual categories hold for individuals.

Public Mood

The concept of a cultural schema can help us to make sense of how people view the social world, and what informs their political attitudes. However, there is still the puzzle of how particular attitudes form around certain social groups, and result in political action only in some cases. A second conceptual tool to add to our theoretical framework to address this is the concept of 'public mood'. According to Forkert (2017), a public mood is the 'affective' climate in which discourses, events and cultural habits come together. She uses the public mood in two manners: firstly, the public mood is a rhetorical, normative tool used by politicians and other political actors to show that their policies and/or views are relevant and popular. In this manner, the public mood is connected to the framing of the public through for example political polling. Secondly, a public mood is a mobilizing factor in which certain moral values, policies and political discourses resonate with the public, and are used to judge others and themselves (2017:7-9). I am mainly interested in how the 'public mood' is used within a salient political context such as a general election.

What is the mechanism behind the public mood being a mobilizing factor? The answer lies in its affective elements. As Hall and Ross (2015) argue, affective experiences play an important role within politics. Shared emotional experiences across groups can generate new, unexpected groupings that emerge outside of collective identity groups. When individuals respond to a particular stimulus (such as a political event) with the same emotional reaction, they can be temporarily bound into a new social collective, a grouping that exists not on the basis of shared interests or values, but based on a shared emotional response to the given stimulus (Hall and Ross 2015: 859). In this sense, affective refers to the notion that certain emotions can motivate people to certain actions. The consequences of these dynamics can

lead to new strategic, political opportunities. For example, Hall and Ross (2015) describe how individual responses to 9/11, which was a highly salient emotional event, transformed themselves into quickly assumed collective groupings as they found expression in and were amplified through social interactions, public displays (e.g. of the American flag), and the media. As consequence, the public mood shifted due to concerns over ‘security’, and this created new opportunities for politicians who wanted to spend more money on anti-terrorism, and shift normative orientations among the public on human and civil rights. Consequently, several polls in the aftermath of 9/11 indicated that an increased number of Americans were willing to “give up some freedoms or civil liberties in order to combat terrorism” (2015: 867).

Opportunity for change

I have suggested that, in contrast to the identity approach, particular groups should be understood as containing multiple competing cultural schemas, rather than a single, unified one. I have also argued that, in addition to these ways of ‘making sense’ of the world, the role of affects and emotions within politics is crucial. In particular, these affective elements of politics are able to work to produce unexpected alliances that cut across classic identity lines. In contrast to the identity approach, then, I am suggesting that political groupings are conflicted and divided, and prone to forming suddenly as the result of affective responses. But how does this lead to a Eurosceptic action, such as the 2016 Leave vote? I would suggest that political opportunity theory can help us to understand this.

Political opportunity theory aims to explain how social movements come to take particular forms. It argues that “activists’ prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent” (Meyer 2004: 126). This means that the specific political opportunities that are afforded to the social movements, such as the channels through which they can express their grievances, can have a decisive effect on the outcome of their actions (Meyer 2004: 128).

Given the model of struggle or conflict that I have proposed, I would suggest that a referendum should be understood as a key political opportunity, in that it provides a legitimate channel for the expression of conflicts that are already taking place within a society. Rather than suggesting that a campaign is needed to persuade a population to become Eurosceptic, and that this will happen through a process that pits a national ‘us’ against the

‘them’ of the EU, I suggest instead that the opportunity simply acts as a valve, releasing ‘pressure’ (in the form of political conflict) that has already built up within the society as a whole.

To summarize: I argue that the understanding of public Euroscepticism within the identity approach fails to take into account the broader context and dynamics which form people’s attitudes. In turn, I am proposing three conceptual tools that can help us to go beyond the theoretical misconceptions within the identity approach. I suggest that particular groups should be understood as including multiple competing cultural schemas, rather than unified one based upon a singular group identity. Furthermore, I argue that the role of affects and emotions within politics is important for our understanding of public Euroscepticism. Finally, I propose that when we try to understand how Eurosceptic attitudes turn into political action, we have to view a referendum as a key political opportunity which can serve as a ‘valve’ to release ‘pressure’ (in the form of political conflict) that has already built up within society.

Methodological Framework

In the following section, I will set out my methodological framework. Firstly, I will discuss my methodological critique of existing research on public Euroscepticism and the disadvantages of using predominantly quantitative methods. Secondly, I will explain why I chose to use a qualitative method. Finally, I will discuss my case study, and how it contributes to answering my research question.

2.1 The dominance of quantitative methods

The majority of research on public Euroscepticism is conducted using quantitative methods, whereby statistical or numerical analysis is used on data that has been collected through surveys, polls or questionnaires. When scholars choose a quantitative method, they choose a research strategy in which they try to establish “a relationship between a certain theory and research, in which the accent is placed on the testing of theories” (Bryman, 2008:22). I argue that by choosing a quantitative method to research public Euroscepticism, scholars are agreeing to a trade-off in which finding a relationship between (national) identity and public Euroscepticism becomes more important than understanding the context and meanings attached to this relationship.

This leads to methodological issues regarding our understanding of public Euroscepticism. While studies conducted using these methods are able to produce representative findings by analysing the responses of large numbers of people, the amount of data available for each individual is somewhat limited. Consequently, studies using these methods tend to base their findings on the interpretation of relatively small differences in data (See, for example, Christin and Trechsel, 2002; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005; Hakverdian et. al., 2013). However, without being able to ask about the actual meanings and beliefs that underpin participants’ survey responses, there is inevitably some speculation involved in such findings. In general, there is a lack of rich, deep qualitative research that can be combined with data in order to provide more nuance and detail on underlying meanings and beliefs.

There are two other methodological issues that affect our understanding of public Euroscepticism. Firstly, due to the dominance of quantitative methods, existing research on public Euroscepticism have a tendency towards ‘methodological nationalism’. In other words, public Euroscepticism has been analysed and researched from an assumption that nations and states share the same boundaries (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002:308). Researchers assume that the nation-state is the only analytical unit, and consequently overlook divisions and conflicts within the beliefs of national populations (See, for example, Christin and Trechsel, 2002). This simplifies the diversity within people’s views towards the EU and the process of European integration.

Secondly, a complex concept such as identity is measured by using individual-level models where there is only room to express these matters in ‘analytical terms’ (e.g. as a self-rating on a scale of one to ten). According to Bruter (2013), the problem with trying to measure identity in this way is that “identity is not naturally thought of in analytical terms but is lived and, at best, expressed” (2013:35). Consequently, quantitative scholars need to develop variables and questions that can capture dynamic contextual factors. These should be supplemented by rich, qualitative insights.

To summarize: the study of public Euroscepticism is dominated by quantitative methods leading to methodological issues with our understanding of public Euroscepticism. Insufficient attention is given to the meanings that identity categories hold for people, and the difficulty of measuring an intangible concept like identity is sometimes overlooked. Qualitative research methods have the potential to address these issues.

2.2 Qualitative research: our case study

As a result, my research is to be qualitative. I carried out face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten Leave voters in England, before conducting a qualitative content analysis of my data using content analysis and coding.

Research method

According to Valentine (2005), ‘Interviews, in contrast to questionnaires... take a conversational, fluid form, each interview varying according to the interests, experiences and views of the interviewees. They are a dialogue rather than an interrogation.’ (2005:111) A semi-structured format allowed me to closely address the topic of my research question consistently, while being free to ask follow-up questions to explore any new themes suggested by my interviewees. This also gave them the space to speak as freely as possible about their decision-making process, without me interfering unnecessarily.

In a face-to-face interview, I was able to watch the manner in which they were expressing themselves, for instance by observing body language. This also allowed me to make sure that I wasn’t putting unnecessary pressure on them to answer: an important ethical consideration given the potential sensitivity of the topic of voting Leave. My approach was mainly informed by Klave (1996)’s ten criteria of a successful interviewer (Klave as quoted in Bryman, 2008:445) which included to sensitively listen to interviewees.

My interview flow began with an introduction, followed by a set of questions where I would try to find out their political attitudes on three different levels (local, national and European). I concluded with a set of direct questions in which I asked them about their thoughts on the referendum, and motivations for voting Leave. (See *Appendix 1* for an overview of my questions.)

Data analysis

For the analysis of my data, I used content analysis and coding. This research strategy is independent of a theoretical framework. It is an interpretive and descriptive approach “involving close reading of text”, and is therefore “open to subjective interpretation, reflects

multiple meanings, and is context dependent” (Julien, 2008:120). This strategy was important because I was interested in *how* Leave voters came to their decision to vote Leave, and *which* mechanisms were behind their meanings and beliefs. It allowed me to investigate context, and explore how interviewees spoke as well as the content of what they were saying.

I completed two rounds of coding. The first was to produce codes or clusters of codes from the first analysis of my interviews. This involved a very close reading of the transcripts in an attempt to find the repetitive patterns of action and meaning within the data (Julien, 2008:121; Saldana, 2016:6). My second round of coding put these codes into categories and concepts, which were also informed by my theoretical framework. In this stage, I was trying to attach multiple different meanings to my analysis (Saldana, 2016: 10). While this approach was complicated because its flexibility meant that unexpected themes could surface, ultimately it also gave me much richer data than a quantitative approach.

Case study

I interviewed ten people who voted Leave during the 2016 EU referendum. The majority of my interviewees lived and worked in the East Anglian region of England, while one of my interviewees lived and worked in London. I conducted these interviews in the summer of 2017, between 26 July and 2 August. I received help in finding the interviewees from my in-laws who live in East Anglia. I didn't know my interviewees and when I interviewed them it was the first time that I have met them. I didn't encounter any difficulties in arranging my interviews, and interviewed people either in their homes or at their work. After consulting my supervisor, I used only six interviews to conduct my analysis, to have a manageable amount of data.

My only selection criteria was that the interviewee had voted Leave. As my sample size was so small it was unnecessary to seek a representative sample. There was some diversity in the sample, as I interviewed both men and women, employed and unemployed, with different levels of education and across different age groups. (Although I was unable to find any Leave voters under the age of 30.) I was initially concerned that Leave voters might not feel comfortable expressing anti-immigrant sentiments in interviews with me because of the colour of my skin. While this may have prevented people from expressing more hostile or

racist views, it didn't seem to be a problem, as many interviewees spoke freely about their views on immigration.

Results

In the following section, I will set out the analysis of my results. Firstly, I will discuss in detail each major concept that I have found, and the separate categories. Secondly, I will set out my discussion, based upon my analysis, and will do a few recommendations for the field of public Euroscepticism but also to policy-makers and politicians regarding how to deal with public Euroscepticism.

3.1 Cultural Schema

In the following section, I will discuss how I used the concept of a cultural schema to reveal the 'frames' through which people view and analyse their social world. Such schemas also give meaning to their membership of the 'imagined community' to which they belong to. This is important for two reasons: firstly, it provides a dynamic but structural understanding of how identities are constructed; and secondly, it helps us to understand how their personal experiences become meaningful for people.

Furthermore, I hypothesise that certain historical representations and narratives play an important role in both forming and giving meaning to cultural schemas. In particular, widely shared and iconic historical representations that have resonated over time will play an important role in how people view themselves, their surroundings, and the world in general. I will refer to these widely shared and iconic historical representations as "cultural memories", following the research of Noakes and Pattison (2013) on the British cultural memory of WWII. They argue that the memory of the WWII is "notable because of its durability and its flexibility" (2013:10). This is confirmed by the manner in which individuals use WWII in their discourse, even when they have no experience of the war: it is used as a *perspective* on events that happened long after the war ended (2013:10).

In addition, I suggest that Euroscepticism, understood as the critique of the EU and the process of European integration, will be part of that cultural schema. I think the Leave vote can't be explained without predispositions of Euroscepticism already being present. I argue

that this is related to the historical and cultural (e.g. media) representation of Britain's membership of the EU. However, this is also connected to the fact that the EU and European integration have been highly salient topics within the major political parties, the Conservatives and the Labour Party, for many years.

A cultural schema approach helps us to understand *how* to interpret and research public Euroscepticism within a society, without making prior assumptions about people's identities and/or political attitudes. It leaves room for heterogeneity, and more importantly, it introduces historical representations and public narratives as essential to this understanding.

Cultural memories of WWII and the British Empire

After two rounds of coding, one of the major categories that I found in my data was 'Cultural Memories of WWII and the British Empire'. I have grouped these two together because they were used often in comparison with the other, although the cultural memory of British Empire was used more frequently by interviewees. This category of cultural memory is closely connected to my next major category, of 'Britishness/Englishness', in the sense that interviewees use it as a *perspective* to explain why they voted Leave, but also to explain their overall outlook.

Overall, the references to cultural memories of WWII and the British Empire were often explicit. Some interviewees use it as a statement of what Britain is:

"I had my reasons, you know, I just think that the British Empire is strong enough to cope with... anything that could be thrown at it and I am sick and tired of everybody else dictating what we do." (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

Interestingly, this need to 'not be dictated to' is used by all interviewees when they talk about the process of deciding to vote Leave, and sometimes in an abstract sense of expressing anger at the perception of their vote by others who disagree with them. It is also used to express frustration at Britain's decline, blaming its membership of the EU for Britain not being what it used to be. In this sense, the vote can be seen as reclaiming an image of 'greatness'. This becomes clear when this interviewee expresses his anger but also confidence in Britain's future after the Leave vote:

“They don't seem to realize this but we ran about two-thirds of the world for about 500 or 600 years. We ran about two-thirds of the whole planet for 500 or or 600 years. We most certainly don't need them to tell us how to do it.” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

The reference to the British Empire is in this instance explicit: it is pointing towards Britain's (past) greatness. Some interviewees go into greater detail about what this cultural memory of the British Empire entails:

“Yeah we did have an Empire. Yeah we did go into and control many, many countries but like most empires do. Did we do some bad things in those countries? Most undoubtedly we did, there is no question about that. Did we do a lot of good in those countries? That cannot be denied. You know the biggest democracy in the world, India, we brought stability, we brought order, we brought moral ways, we brought an enormous amount of things, good things to India. I think the biggest awful thing we did in India was leaving it when it all split up because I think that was criminal. They reckon there were million people died after we left. I think that is a conservative estimate. I think that is absolutely shameful.” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

This is again about size of Britain's empire but also its influence in the world. The reference to India makes this clear. India is a democracy because of Britain. The ironic notion about this cultural memory is, again, its ambivalence. There is this widespread aversion against the EU because it is trying 'to dictate' to Britain, but Britain's own historical role of invading and ruling other countries is seen as largely a force for good. However, this is not purely positive depiction of the British Empire. It is ambivalent:

“There are lots of things that we can't be proud off as a country, how we behaved in other countries and things like that, you know, when we were in India, I think we were very arrogant, we went out into these other countries, and we were like, we are here, and you listen to us. You know... But every country got things to be ashamed off as well as things to be proud off.” (Female, 59, carer)

Frequently, as above, interviewees noted the negatives as well as the positives of the Empire. But despite these failures, this cultural memory of the British Empire is used, over and over again, by interviewees to legitimize and explain their Leave vote. The lack of respect for this

image of Britain is also fuelling the irritation and anger that is felt by some of the interviewees at how their vote has been perceived:

“We ran about two-thirds of the planet for 500 or 600 years. We most certainly don’t need them [the EU] to tell us how to do it... When they started acting like that, [furious] that’s how I feel.” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

Not being told how to run their own country, and not being dictated to, is again a powerful, emotive expression of these cultural memories.

However, as stated, the cultural memory of WWII was mentioned frequently as well. This is for two reasons: firstly, this memory is embedded in the family histories of the majority of interviewees; and, secondly it is linked to Europe and the histories of European countries:

“And I look back over all the years, my grandfather, he served in the war, and he was actually gassed, he died at 63 because it has affected his stomach and things like that. My dad and my uncle served in the army. Dad was about to go to Suez but he got saved from that because it all got stopped at the last minute. He was right ready to go... but we have fought so hard to be nation to be proud of. I don’t think we are proud in the same way as we were.” (Female, 59, carer)

This interviewee uses her family history and their involvement in the WWII to explain her reasons for voting Leave. This connects to her sense of pride at being British, and the country being sovereign and significant. At times, these family’s histories are used to express the (patriotic) emotion that was felt with this vote. It was about ‘fighting’ for Britain:

“Excuse me and I am not totally British but my dad was in the army, and you know, and I think his belief was, you fight for your country, no different than my granddad who was in the German war, and my other granddad was in the English one. They both got stories, they both nearly got killed.” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

But these cultural memories of WWII are not always used in an explicit manner. At times, it is expressed through other emotions that are connected to this memory, such as the perceived loss of community spirit:

“No, I think we have lost the communities, and that feeling of village life, you knew everybody in the village ... life has moved on and you can't go backwards but I think we lost such a lot. You look at other countries, and you know, family is still so important but here we seem to have lost that... There is that drive of got to work, got to do this, got to do that and everybody got to care for everyone else you know. I don't think we have improved things for the better in society.” (Female, 59, carer)

This memory is used to express a sense of loss in the present, and a nostalgia for the past. The cultural memory of WWII is one of unity, and community spirit. And this is informing some of my interviewees when they talk about their process of voting Leave, and what has driven their vote.

To conclude: the first category of cultural memories of WWII and the British Empire demonstrate the importance of history, and certain historical representations, in how people view themselves and their social world. This category contributes to our cultural schema by revealing ‘the pictures’ that people have in their head when they think of Britain, and how feelings of its perceived decline inform their understanding of the world. (I will discuss this societal pessimism in more detail below.) The importance attached to these historical representations, and the discourse of ‘exceptionalism’, also helps us to see how the vote could have been an emotional vote.

Britishness/Englishness

Another major category I found within my data was the notion of Britishness or Englishness. These were used by the majority of interviewees interchangeably, and provided a *perspective* to explain why they chose to vote Leave. Interestingly, it is seen by some as a unifying force that cuts across differences such as class:

“If you had a business man, and you had sort of like a vicar, and then you had a single parent, and then you had a wealthy person you would have... many differences but they all might have one single thing that they agree with, and you know, just say for instance, they all have different versions of politicians and what have you but you

have that one goal that Britain can be great. Or Britain is great.” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

There was only one respondent who talked about Englishness as an explicit identification of her identity, and used it in a manner that was opposed to Britishness as a category:

“Once I said to you I am 59 years old, so I have grown up here, and I have got children and grandchildren, and I am proud to be English. Not British. English. I was born in England, and I am proud to be [from] England.” (Female, 59, carer)

Her Englishness is politicized, in the sense that is used to describe what underlies her political attitudes and outlook. This was her first response when asked about the EU referendum, meaning that her ‘Englishness’ is used as a *perspective* on why she chose to vote Leave. This also demonstrates the salience of her Englishness.

Often, the notion of Britishness/Englishness is connected to an idea of ‘exceptionalism’. This is informed as well by my other major category, ‘the cultural memories of WWII and the British Empire’. However, interviewees aren’t always explicit in explaining why Britain is different, great or even exceptional. For some there is a vague notion of Britain being a pull factor for others:

“I said today you know out of all those countries, what is the second language that they speak, it is English, and look how big we are, really in comparison, Russia is three times the size of what we are, and parts of it, and I said other countries, are huge but they still to choose to come to us. They still choose to visit us.” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

For others there is a distinct idea of what makes Britain great:

“We got our own Queen, we got our own parliament, and we got our own way of doing things, thankfully we never took on the Euro, we kept our own money, and why shouldn't we still be a country that can be proud, and why shouldn't we actually trade with all of these other countries.” (Female, 59, carer)

In this quote it is made clear that this notion of Britishness/Englishness expresses a sense of *being* different. The interviewee sums up the objects which make Britain self-reliant and sovereign, but also implies that Britain is culturally different, in that the country has its own way of doing things.

Overall, these emotive statements help interviewees to frame their votes in terms of improving Britain, the country that they love:

“I love England. And I think we can be a good country. I don't think it [the vote] won't [sic.] have a bad effect on our young people. I think they will have more choices.”

(Female, 59, carer)

“It is broader. The economy, making sure that we have a good economy and we are a strong nation. Health. Making sure the nation is kept healthy and looked after.” (Male, 52, caretaker, ex-soldier)

At times, an emotion of overall decline is expressed with the image of Britain no longer being great or exceptional:

“We just to be a country where people came in, learned their trait and went back to poorer countries to do it, now if you go to places like India or anywhere else, you are likely to get better treatment than you are here. Their hospitals are far cleaner and more up to the mark and everything because we lost our way. There are some many ways.” (Female, 59, carer)

The reference to ‘we lost our way’ is a powerful, emotional expression of the overall decline of the country. It also demonstrates that Britishness/Englishness is a conflicted notion.

To conclude: the second category of Britishness/Englishness isn't solely about being a member of a Britain and England. It is more used by interviewees as an *emotional perspective* on how they view the world and themselves, and which informs their political attitudes. It is about Britain being an exceptional country, but is also used as a unifying force that cuts across demographic and social divides within the country. This is integral to our cultural schema because it helps us to see how people view themselves, and how this is complex and emotional.

Euroscepticism

The last major category that I found in my data was Euroscepticism. As I hypothesized, my data suggests that the Leave vote can't be explained without predispositions towards Euroscepticism already being present. Interestingly, this was often expressed through concerns about the EU being undemocratic:

“We have an organisation, an unelected organisation that wants to bring laws in place to make it the same for everybody, one size fits all. Well it doesn't, and staying part of an organization that wants to basically force that upon us, and make us pay for the privilege made absolutely no sense.” (Male, 52, caretaker, ex-soldier)

This is a good example of how the vote was legitimized by Eurosceptic predispositions. It is a critique of the direction in which the EU is heading:

“I felt that when we joined the Common Market, in 73, people voted on basis of trade but I don't think anyone then voted for what we ended up with “...” I think a lot of people who originally voted to join the Common Market, had they realized that at the time? They would have probably said, no thank you, we like our sovereign identity.” (Male, 47, IT consultant)

At times, however, this critique of the EU being undemocratic and a critique of the process of European integration actually bleeds over in the EU being corrupt:

“It took me about 3 seconds [to decide to vote Leave] ... because of the administration itself. Because of who actually runs the EU. No-one. The five EU presidents are not elected. They are nominated. We have no say in it whatsoever. I think all of them are scumbags. The whole lot of them. I can't find a decent one out of one of them and god, only know what they are being paid. God only knows. And they dictate.” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

“Evil. Absolutely evil. I think it is corrupt. There is so much money ploughed into that, and it never gone where it should have gone and you got, for a better word, fat cats sitting there, having a high old time, being paid a ridiculous amount of money... No, the sooner that comes crumbling down, and if Britain is the one that helps to make that [happen], and makes them all sit up and think.” (Female, 59, carer)

To conclude: this third category confirms my hypothesis that a majority of my interviewees would demonstrate Eurosceptic tendencies that preceded the vote. These were all based on a critique of the EU as an organization, and the (political) direction in which the process of European integration was heading. This is interesting because its democratic nature is often taken for granted, but the EU as an organization is seen as an affront to the idea of democracy.

3.2 Public Mood

In the following section, I will discuss how I used the concept of public mood to research the socio-political context in which political attitudes are formed, and the affective elements of this context. This is important for two reasons: firstly, it provides us with a theoretical tool to research the socio-political context prior to the vote. This is often treated as ‘unchanged’ or less relevant within the identity approach. Secondly, it helps us to construct a dynamic understanding of how political attitudes could have been influenced by a shifting context.

I hypothesize that this concept of a public mood could help us to understand what kind of socio-political climate made it possible for the Leave campaign’s messages and policies to resonate with the public. To understand the increased resonance of certain messages and policies within a campaign, we have to understand the shifting contextual factors. This is partly based upon the research of Bonikowski (2017) on populism and the mobilization of collective resentment. Bonikowski (2017) argues that the supply-and-demand size of ‘radical’ politics have been stable over time, so in order to understand the increasing public support for radical politics, we have to focus on the increased *resonance* between pre-existing attitudes and discursive frames. Resonance is not only a function of the link between a certain frame and the belief of the public; it is also about *the shifting context* within which certain frames come to be seen as solving a relevant problem (2017:193). Therefore, I am particularly interested in the ‘affective’ elements of this public mood. This could be certain emotions that underlie people’s attitudes but also ‘affective’ political events, by which I mean political events that have resonated with a society at large. For example, in the Netherlands, the murder on Pim Fortuyn is an affective political event because it emotionally resonated with the public to such an extent that it affected their political attitudes. Unfortunately, it isn’t within the scope of this thesis to research the political discourse, messages and campaign of the Leave campaign in itself. However, I hope use my concept of the public mood to reconstruct the affective context in which this campaign turned out to be successful.

Finally, I hypothesize that a part of this public mood could be explained by ‘societal pessimism’ within society at large. According to Steenvoorden and Hartevelde (2018) societal pessimism is “a concern that society is in decline” (2018:29). This is different to grievances over personal, economic circumstances (the ‘losers versus winners’ thesis), cultural grievances (for example, opposition against immigration), or political discontent: citizens don’t need to be personally disadvantaged to be worried about the future direction of society. It is a diffuse attitude which can’t be explained by objective conditions. It is an attitude “that is constituted by perceptions of unmanaged changes within Western societies and the erosion of old certainties” (2018: 29). According to Steenvoorden and Hartevelde (2018), the appeal of PRR parties lies in offering to citizens, who are societally pessimistic, a clear vision of how society should change. The aim is to radically alter the status-quo, and to ‘restore’ a time in which there were old (and preferred) social, ethno-cultural and political certainties (2018, 30). This understanding of societal pessimism is relevant to our concept of public mood due to its emphasis on the convergence of political discourse and policy agendas (such as the Leave campaign) with the sentiment at large within a society. I hypothesize that societal pessimism will be an overarching factor within our concept of public mood.

Distrust of politics

The first major category I found within my data was the distrust of politics. This was often expressed towards the domestic political class, depicting them as being dishonest to the public and not following through on their word:

“I was voting Labour but I wasn’t actually happy with any of them because I just think, my gut feeling is, none of them tell the truth. Yeah, and even if they do slightly tell the truth they won’t keep to it because they will end up slightly corrupt because of the way things are. You always got somebody doing something, and you know, changing things and then getting out of it, and just saying we will do this, and it doesn’t come to fruition, you know.” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

This distrust of the political class also demonstrates an aversion to the current status quo, which doesn't work for people like her. This becomes clear when this interviewee voices it as "the way things are", and references the lack of change in the country. At other times, distrust is informed by an affective political event:

"The first one, corruption but then I can remember the expenses scandal, and all that, and I think that is still very much present. Recently I see that they have given themselves a nice, big pay award and then tell me that I am still going to get 1%."

(Male, 52, care-taker, ex-soldier)

"No matter what the money was but the money and the power is a massive carrot for somebody in politics... First of all, the expenses things. The expenses scandal, yeah. You had MP's of every ilk. Some of them who were incredibly wealthy, claiming for, you know, really, really small, insignificant stuff... It is just greedy." (Male, 65, shop-owner)

Again, embedded within this is a sense of unfairness, wherein the domestic political class is seen as corrupt and not working for people like him. It is interesting that the expenses scandal, which came to light in 2009, still resonates for these interviewees, and informs their sense of how politics works. In this instance, it is also more salient due to the sense of resentment that is felt by the first interviewee when his own wages fall behind, while politicians have theirs increased. Meanwhile, the second interviewee's reference to 'greed' shows how he sees this as morally wrong, and therefore holds a sceptical view of politics.

Overall, the majority of interviewees express a distrust of politicians in general. This leads to a polarized view of the political parties within Britain, which is made more salient due to the electoral system where two parties dominate the political landscape. A politics of personalities and values seem to become more important:

"Yeah she [May] is the first leader that has come up for a long time that you felt actually, or I felt, confident in her as a person." (Female, 59, carer)

"That I think they are all fibbers [liars], to be quite honest with you, I think all politicians fib, and I can't tell you which one is telling the truth and which one isn't but

I have to go with what I believe is my strongest view at the time. I did at one time I wouldn't vote because I thought they are just a pack of liars, all of 'em, they all say what they want to do [but] if Labour got in, they change things, and they make it so that the poorest people can get all the help.” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

This distrust of the political class results in a polarized view of politics in general. However, it is also strongly linked to this emotive notion of ‘a lack of change’. This lack of change is at times a concrete critique of the political system:

“How would I describe it [politics]? Blimey... Same old, same old. It hasn't altered for years has it? It is two cards for years. It is... like a boring game of tennis. You know who the two finalists are going to be... and it is just... oh... [GASPS] Listen, I know there are people who absolutely adore politics, absolutely adore it. Live and die politics. But to me, a lot of the times, it is like watching paint dry and some of the bullshit they come out with, all of 'em.” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

At times, the lack of change creates a longing for clarity, a situation in which there is no ambiguity and no conflict involved in the making of political decisions:

“I think sometimes when you had the monarchy ruling, sometimes that was a little bit, you know, little bit better, wasn't it, at least you had one person making decisions, alright, Henry the Eighth wasn't the best person but yeah...” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

To conclude: the first category ‘distrust of politics’ shows that people’s political attitudes are informed by a profound suspicion of the political class, which bleeds over in thinking that politicians are actually corrupt. Interestingly, this is still informed by the expenses scandal. At times, these feelings of distrust of politicians is also infused with feelings of unfairness about the political system, and the notion that there is a lack of change. People don’t believe that politics can change their lives or make things better for the country as a whole. This happens in a political context which is polarized, wherein the political leader or certain values they represent seem to matter more than the choice of a political party.

Societal pessimism

The second major category I found within my concept of a public mood was ‘societal pessimism’. This wasn’t always expressed directly as a ‘decline of society’ in general, but was indicated through references to a variety of specific events and indicators which point towards overall decline. For example, a critical political moment such as the 2015 refugee crisis:

“We had hundreds of thousands of people suddenly getting into boats across the Mediterranean and wherever they come from... But the way these people were coming over, and we the West should just literally open the doors and say: ‘Come on, guys. In you come!’ You know. It sounds a bit bloody ridiculous, and when you got an Angela Merkel saying, many as you want should come in and here you go! And there are over a million migrants who have come... You can’t let everybody just come to your house. You can’t have it.” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

This interviewee expresses feelings of anxiety but also anger at how the refugee crisis unfolded, and how it was dealt with on a European level. The intensity of his feelings become clear when he uses the phrase, “You can’t let everybody just come to your house. You can’t have it.” His reference to “your house” shows how this critical political event activated feelings of anxiety, as the home is generally understood as a place of safety. Interestingly, his notion of “we, the West” also refers to a sense of community which transcends England’s borders, and which is also in decline due to this refugee crisis. However, these anxious feelings of decline were mostly felt with reference to communities at home. This could be due to job losses:

“You know, certain parts of like [car factory], round here, is closing. But they are going to be doing something else so there will be different jobs so I think that is the more worrying thing, how many jobs have been lost, and not replaced, if you lose 500 jobs, and that has to be replaced in a small area... you’re never going to get a happy ending because you might have somebody that is 45 years’ old that could do that job but they might want the 22-year-old because they get a longer life out of them... you just think, god, I just want a nice fair world.” (Female, 51, cleaner, was homeless)

The profound effect of a factory closure in the local community is expressed here as a sense of decline, but also feelings of concern about what the future could hold. The intensity of these feelings becomes clear when the interviewee states that she just longs for a ‘nice fair world’.

Another interviewee explains how these feelings of societal pessimism could have driven but also mobilized the Leave vote:

“I feel that none of the political parties are actually giving the people what they want. I feel that there is a substantial amount of people that are seriously poor and it offends me that we got food banks, and there is a substantially part of the country that feels seriously disadvantaged... with Brexit... I felt overall that people were feeling that nobody was listening to them, and as a consequence of what has happened, the politicians had a bit of a wake-up call, ah right we can't carry on doing what we always have done, maybe we should have to start listening to what the people want... I think that the people said, you have done Brexit, but we want you to do something for the NHS, we want you to do something for a whole range of issues.” (Female, 44, administrator)

In other words, the mixture of a lack of change within society and the level of poverty within England may have driven people to vote Leave. There is a focus on changing the country for the good, and stopping this sense of decline within society. Interestingly, this interviewee states clearly that the vote was also partly to ‘shake up’ things, and to redirect politicians’ attention to the public services in the country such as the NHS.

To conclude: the second category of ‘societal pessimism’ was an overarching factor among a majority of interviewees, as I hypothesized. While this wasn’t always expressed directly, there was a clear sense of decline. This could be either within the local community, nationally (as with the state of public services), or internationally (with the refugee crisis). The picture of England that emerges from this is a country that is struggling. There is poverty, there is a lack of jobs, and insufficient funding for public services. This could help us to understand how this, as part of a wider public mood where people don’t trust politicians, could direct people’s focus towards change and changing the status quo.

3.3. Opportunity for Change

In this final section, I will discuss how I used the concept of ‘opportunity for change’ to research the pathway that has led to the Leave vote. In other words, how can we understand when Eurosceptic attitudes turn into political action? This is important for two reasons. Firstly, the identity approach pays little attention to the question of how people come to the decision to vote for a Eurosceptic party or to vote Leave during an EU referendum; instead, this approach only researches what could potentially drive this vote. Secondly, the concept of ‘opportunity for change’ allows us to examine the process through which different groupings within a society, or, as some political science scholars would call them, ‘cultural cleavages’ (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) turn into ‘political cleavages’. The dynamic behind this process is complex but is also often overlooked within the literature on public Euroscepticism.

I would suggest that a referendum in itself brings a certain dynamic with it, because unlike a general election where you vote for a political party, people are asked in an, often polarized manner, to form an opinion on a single salient matter. However, I also suspect that this specific dynamic will make it more likely for people to go with their ‘gut-feeling’ than with messages given to them during a campaign. This is partly informed by research that has been done by Hobolt (2009), who argues that voters with a higher awareness of politics in general will rely more on their pre-existing attitudes towards European politics (2009:80). That means that voters who are already more informed about politics, and have pre-existing Eurosceptic attitudes, will be more likely to ignore or ‘resist’ recommendations given by their governments when they go to the ballot box, compared to those with little political awareness.

Final, I suspect that there is also another dynamic at play when it comes to a referendum. I hypothesize, based upon the political opportunity theory, that a referendum can be understood as a key political opportunity, in that it provides people with a legitimate channel for the expression of conflicts that are already taking place within a society. This means that people aren’t only forming an opinion on the specific matter at stake in the referendum; instead, the referendum is also being used as an act of political action through which their values and beliefs about society at large are voiced.

Negative campaign

The first category that I found within my concept of ‘opportunity for change’ was ‘negative campaign’. Rather than the campaign having little effect on voters, or its messages directly influencing the decision-making of voters, in practice the relationship between the campaign and the decision to vote Leave was far more complex:

“Throughout the whole process I became very disheartened that it seemed that a lot of the press, and a lot of the media, there was a lot of experts who were all focusing on what I felt were the negatives of Leaving rather than the positives, and I felt that there was a lot of bias there from people who even really should have kept their opinions to themselves, things like the Governor of the Bank of England, you know, he was actively saying we shouldn’t leave, we should remain in the EU, and I felt well, that’s really not your place to say that, and the predictions that a lot of the experts were making that you know, well you vote to Leave, and the financial markets will crash, there will be a recession, and in fact the FTSE [Financial Times Stock Exchange], [is] the highest it[’s] ever been.” (Male, 47, IT consultant)

Interestingly, this interviewee felt ‘disheartened’ because he felt the campaign wasn’t fair and balanced, with both sides able to put across their point of view across equally. Instead, he perceived the Remain campaign to be ‘elitist’, and defending a status-quo by working actively against the Leave vote. This was in contrast to the normal conduct of elites during other political campaigns, (e.g. General Elections), where there is an expectation of political neutrality on the part of experts such as the Governor of the Bank of England.

A majority of interviewees expressed how ‘negative’ they have perceived the campaign to be on both sides, but also that there was a lack of ‘objective’ information:

“Umm.... No to be perfectly honest because I found the campaign on both sides seemed to be run, almost along the lines of scare tactics. Ooh, if we don’t get out of this is going to happen and our noses will fall off... Ooh, if we stay this will happen and our legs will fall off, well... no, there didn’t seem to be a lot of solid facts. I mean, yes I remember one saying ooh, we will be paying 350 million pounds, and we can put

that into the NHS, well actually, no that was proven to be wrong anyway.” (Male, 52, care-taker, ex-soldier)

Interestingly, this interviewee reflects back negatively on of the main slogans from the Leave campaign, and sees it as incorrect. This is informative: it shows that people were open to arguments from both sides, and were let down by a lack of neutral facts.

At times, this feeling of disappointment bleeds over in actual feelings of anger over the manner in which the campaign was conducted:

“Do I remember anything from the campaign? Yeah... Yeah but um all the money that we are paying, every week, some were saying that when we come out, it is all going into the NHS which was all a pie in the sky but in fairness it was a lot of... Um... I don't want to call it downright lies or what but the Remain side was saying, oh if we come out, the place is just going to implode well it was a Thursday? Alright, by Friday, we were all going to be gone! It will be as if on Thursday an atom-bomb will go off, and by Friday we will all be gone! Gone!” (Male, 65, shop-owner)

These quotes offer us an insight into the extent to which the campaign was perceived to be unfairly biased. At the same time, what is unexpected is that this distrust of the campaign is extended to both sides, Leave as well as Remain. This suggests that the campaign could have mobilized Leave voters, based on feelings of anger, to disengage, and to go with their pre-existing Eurosceptic attitudes, rather than being influenced by the messages of either campaign:

“I found it really, really frustrating and I got really angry because I watched one of the, or I think I watched more than one, debates and after it, I went on the BBC where they do the fact checker and both sides were lying, both sides were telling blatant exaggerations and it was extremely difficult to get the facts and at the end of it, it did become one of these... I like to get the facts and I like to look at things and in the end it just became a gut instinct thing.” (Female, 44, administrator)

This reference to “a gut instinct” confirms that people felt it was a referendum where they couldn't rely on the campaigns being fair and informative, forcing them to stick with their

pre-existing beliefs. Consequently, this demonstrates the importance of emotions, rather than following a calculating logic where they vote according to their interests:

“I don’t care what slogans are, I am not interested in a slogan and I wouldn’t vote on a slogan.” (Female, 44, administrator)

In other words, the campaign did matter but not as a direct influence on people’s vote. It mattered in the sense that it served as a mobilizing factor because it was so polarized and negative. However, people didn’t vote in an impulsive manner where they made up their mind very quickly on how to vote. Instead, people considered the consequences of their vote:

“I had an inkling that I was going to vote to get out but I did sit and think about it long and hard before... to make sure that I was sure in my mind... I was hoping we were going to get some more... facts and figures and information supplied by the different groups in the build-up to it but like I say, they all both seem to go for a negative policy... [also] I think there were a lot of people who could have been swayed either way if better information would be out there.” (Male, 52, care-taker, ex-soldier)

Again, people were aware that there would be potential consequences to their vote but in the end, due to the campaign, decided to vote according to their ‘gut instinct’. This was the case even if interviewees expressed a preference for voting in a more ‘rational’ and considered manner:

“I don’t like to make decisions on ‘emotion’, ‘belief’, or faith. That is not who I am but with Brexit, I pretty much felt that it went down like that for me.” (Male, 47, IT consultant)

To conclude: the first category ‘negative campaign’ allows us to see the voting process was something more than either a campaign delivering effective messages, or people voting based on challenges against their group identity. The interaction between the campaign during the referendum, and people’s process of decision-making is complex, and driven more by a sense of Leave voters being ‘the underdog’. Overall, the campaign was perceived to be very negative, uninformed and at times biased against their beliefs which led to people feeling

mobilized to follow their ‘gut’ instinct. But people felt disengaged as well from the campaign to such extent, due to its negative nature, that the campaign messages didn’t always matter.

Cultural cleavages become political cleavages

The second category that I found within my concept of ‘opportunity for change’ is the ‘cultural cleavage’. Cultural cleavages “deeply divide members of national communities around fundamental questions of who they are, who they are not, and what their collective future ought to hold” (Bonikowski, 2017:189). These powerful beliefs about collective identification can transform into political cleavages when “the right socio-political circumstances succeed in resonating with these beliefs” (Bonikowski, 2017:189). In the context of the EU referendum, this meant that divides within English society between different groups became politicized around different visions of Britain’s future relationship with the EU. There is evidence of these domestic divisions within my interviews:

“I think there is a big divide. I think the divide was there... And I think that is quite sad, and... there does seem to be this thing that, if you voted for Brexit, you mustn’t say [so openly] ... I think that is really sad. I do think that is really sad.” (Female, 44, administrator)

This interviewee expresses how emotional this divide suggesting that what is at stake here is not simply about a political preference but about something more fundamental, like a way of seeing oneself and seeing the country’s future.

The intensity of this divide becomes clear when Leave voters talk about their interactions with Remain voters in the aftermath of the vote. The level of hostility that they encounter feels like a deeply personal attack:

“After Brexit when I was visiting customers, it might come up in conversation, and you know, if, most people I spoke to at least claimed that they voted to Remain, and they were very venomous about that, and about almost labelling everyone who voted Leave as being racist, and so naturally, I would be very non-committal. I wouldn’t say, well, actually... so [with] many of the customers I felt I could say that I have voted Leave and why, but [with] others I thought, I am just to keep quiet on this, because I

didn't want to be labelled a racist because I am not, and you know, racism wasn't a factor in my decision" (Male, 47, IT consultant)

To conclude: the second category of 'cultural cleavages' shows that there were existing divides within English society between different groups, and that these became politicized around different visions of Britain's future relationship with the EU. It also shows that the vote wasn't simply a political preference, but about something more fundamental. So the pathway in which these voters turned their Eurosceptic attitudes into political action is about more than just Europe. Euroscepticism has become inclusive of a broader, cultural cleavage which the EU referendum turned into a political cleavage.

3.4 Discussion

What do these concepts add to our understanding of public Euroscepticism? Firstly, the concept of the cultural schema demonstrates how Euroscepticism is informed by a sense of history. In this case, a historical narrative of "British greatness" resonated with my interviewees, and their votes were justified in terms of situating themselves on the right side of history.

The usage of this historical narrative seemed to revolve around an imagined version of Britain where sovereignty and being unique as a country mattered. These historical 'pictures' in people's mind were very salient when they considered how to vote, and how they legitimized and narrated the vote in the aftermath of Brexit. The concept of the cultural schema therefore adds to our understanding of public Euroscepticism because it demonstrates the importance of history and historical narratives, and how these inform people's pre-existing attitudes.

Secondly, the concept of the public mood demonstrates the importance of the socio-political context, and that people's attitudes are also informed by certain emotions that are at large within society. A sense of 'decline' and/or that 'the country is not doing well', was informative for people's decision-making process, despite some of them not being directly affected by this decline themselves. This shows how feelings of anger, directed towards the political elite, but also pessimism about the direction in which the country is heading, were key in informing people's political attitudes. It also demonstrates that British society was already polarized before the Leave vote, and that this followed through to the EU referendum

campaign. The concept of the public mood illustrates how these *shifting contexts* inform and influence people's attitudes, and that it is important not to overlook the emotional context in which attitudes are formed, by focussing only on 'rational' decision-making.

Thirdly, the opportunity for change demonstrates how the referendum was a key political opportunity for people to express both their pre-existing attitudes and their feelings of anger and pessimism, by channelling them through their decision to vote Leave. This was aided by the fact that the referendum used a binary question in an already polarized environment. But more importantly, the concept of opportunity for change demonstrates how being exposed to politicians and their messages within the campaigns, which were very negative and polarized, only deepened their feelings of anger and their sense of political disengagement. This led many of them to disengage from campaign messaging, and go with their pre-existing attitudes and 'gut' feelings. The concept of opportunity for change improves our understanding of public Euroscepticism by showing how a vote can provide an opening for a whole set of broader opinions, feelings and attitudes to be expressed. Consequently, the Leave vote forms part of a larger dynamic that is more complex than is generally acknowledged within theories of public Euroscepticism.

Conclusion

The 2016 Leave vote has had an unsettling effect on politics across Europe. Eurosceptic and populist parties have been emboldened by the decision of the third largest economy in the EU to ‘exit’, and an openly Eurosceptic government has taken power in Italy, joining those in Austria, Hungary and Poland. Within the UK, the divisions that emerged through the vote have become ever more entrenched. Two years on, support for leaving stands at 53%, with 21% backing a second referendum and 13% advocating the cancellation of the Brexit process altogether (YouGov, 2018). This polarisation is both geographic and demographic, along class, education and age lines (The Guardian, 2018). And yet, as Dominic Cummings, architect of the Leave campaign, has claimed, “The cold reality of the referendum is no clear story, no ‘one big causal factor’, and no inevitability – it was ‘men going at it blind’” (Cummings, 2017). As the consequences of the referendum prove ever more divisive and destructive for British politics, the question of what drives public Euroscepticism and hostility towards the process of European integration becomes increasingly important for advocates of the European project.

The identity approach is arguably the most dominant explanation within political debate, public discourse and the field of Euroscepticism. However, my research has shown that we need to go beyond the identity approach because it isn’t sufficient to explain the mechanisms behind the meanings and beliefs which led to the 2016 Leave vote. The identity approach helps to indicate a certain ‘direction’ but it can’t provide a comprehensive map of how Eurosceptic attitudes are formed, and what causes these attitudes to lead to political action.

My map of public Euroscepticism shows, firstly, the importance of history and certain historical representations in how people view themselves, others and their country. People use their identities as perspectives on politics in a dynamic manner, whereas the identity approach assumes people’s identities are constant and stable. Identity, as a concept, certainly matters, but in the sense of how ‘identities’ are narrated and constructed by people themselves as they engage actively with their cultural context.

Secondly, my map of public Euroscepticism demonstrates the importance of researching and understanding the socio-political context in which political attitudes are formed, and how they

influence each other. Where the identity approach takes this context for granted, by assuming that political identities come already formed, the concept of public mood demonstrates that the affective elements of the socio-political context can explain why certain meanings and beliefs are formed, and also when these beliefs can lead to political action. Whereas the identity approach doesn't focus on explaining the referendum itself, seeing this as an unpredictable outcome of identity as the primary driver of Euroscepticism, my research demonstrates that the opportunity for change itself is also important. A vote serves as a vehicle for the expression of existing cleavages within society, channelling them into a binary question about Leaving or Remaining in the EU.

This project suggests several new directions for further research in this area. It highlights the importance of a qualitative approach to public Euroscepticism, which can provide deeper, richer data on voter's motivations to support the representative findings of quantitative survey research. It broadens our conceptualisations of what Euroscepticism is, by acknowledging that is a multiple and dynamic process instead of a straightforward relationship, influenced by a range of factors and mechanisms. Finally, it emphasises the importance of paying close attention to the broader contextual factors that influence Euroscepticism, including the role of cultural and emotional dynamics.

My research also leads to a set of recommendations for policymakers and politicians for how to deal with Euroscepticism. Firstly, it highlights that Euroscepticism is about Europe, especially how European integration is evolving, and the (perceived) undemocratic nature of its institutions. Euroscepticism cannot be reduced to a proxy for other domestic or regional issues. Secondly, holding a binary referendum on European issues is risky, given the potential of such a vote to mobilise anti-elite sentiment and the likelihood of any proposing government being seen as the representatives of the status quo. Furthermore, citizens require an informative factual campaign prior to any referendum: inflated, emotive claims are likely to be disregarded, leading voters to make a decision based on their 'gut feelings'. Lastly, Euroscepticism is now inclusive of domestic debates, and also of people's broader political attitudes. It is no longer a force from outside which invades national politics; instead, it can materialise in any context, connecting local problems to broader global issues of elitism, corruption and political power. Consequently, its significance within European politics is unlikely to diminish, making managing Euroscepticism an ever more pressing concern for the European leaders of the future.

Appendix 1

Introduction:

I'm a researcher from Leiden University in the Netherlands trying to understand the EU Referendum and the Leave vote for my Master's thesis. This research will only inform my thesis – I won't pass your data on to anyone else.

As a participant in this research you will remain completely anonymous, so it won't be possible to trace anything you say in this session back to you, and your name or identifying details won't appear anywhere in my final report.

Before we start this interview, do you have questions for me?

Context:

- I'd like to start by getting to know you a bit better. How would you describe yourself?
- And how about work – what was the last job that you did?
- How long have you lived in this area?
- Whereabouts did you grow up? / Where did you go to school?
- And what did you do after you finished school? [To find out education level]

Politics:

- Right, we're going to talk about some political issues – firstly in this area. What are the issues in the local area?
- Do you get the feeling these issues are similar to what you'd see elsewhere in the country or are they particular in some ways to this locality?
- And how about nationally – what are the important issues for you?
- Did you vote at the last election?
- [If yes] Can you remember who you voted for? Which party?
- How did you come to that decision?
- [If no] When was the last time you voted at an election?
- So, if I say the word politics to you, what comes to mind?
- How would you describe politics in the UK?
- Could you name me a few politicians?

EU-referendum:

- Okay, looking a bit further back – how about the EU referendum. Did you vote?
- How did you come to that decision?
- Was it an important vote for you? Why?
- What were the key issues for you in this referendum?
- Can you remember any facts, figures or slogans from during the campaign?
- How does Britain look to you after the vote?
- If I say the phrase European Union to you, what comes to mind?

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