

# Nationalism in the Age of Brexit: The Attitudes and Identities of Young Voters

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## ABSTRACT

The 2016 Brexit referendum revealed a division between younger voters, a majority of whom voted *Remain*, and older voters, a majority of whom voted *Leave*. From virtual interviews with six British young adults, this article analyzes the effects of the Brexit referendum on their perceptions of belonging and national identity. My theoretical framework draws upon Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation and Michael Skey's and Craig Calhoun's critique that feelings of equality among members are unrealistic due to the power and identity hierarchies that exist within a nation. Interviews reveal a strong binary conception of identities created through politics and media that divide voters into distinct, distanced groups. Young voters use harsh, derogatory language to describe oppositional groups, such as Conservatives, Leave voters, and older voters, to separate themselves and reinforce their identities. However, because these oppositional groups hold the most power, continuous separation reinforces feelings of powerlessness in politics and reveals hierarchies of identities. These hierarchies can have long-lasting implications for the United Kingdom as these younger voters will eventually comprise the voting majority and strive to see their values and beliefs represented in positions of power.

**Keywords:** Brexit; identity; nationalism; Otherness; voting

the rural, the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the uneducated; however, the Brexit vote reveals a strong difference in values and beliefs between young voters and older voters, with older voters holding most of the power.

On January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom left the European Union and entered a transitional period to determine the terms of their future relationship. For a year, they debated rules and regulations regarding a new trade deal and Brexit was finalized on January 1, 2021 (BBC News 2020). In the years after the referendum, two general elections took place, one in 2017 and another in 2019. In both elections, the Conservative party not only maintained their majority but gained additional seats. Similarly to the Brexit gap, over 60% of young voters supported the Labour party while 69% of older voters supported the Conservative party (Fitzpatrick 2019). Consequently, both the Brexit and Conservative wins reveal that the British majority tended towards a right-wing ideology

**T**he Brexit referendum marked the first time in the United Kingdom when political lines were drawn along distinct generational lines. In 2016, 73% of young people, aged 18-24, and less than 40% of older voters, aged 65 and over, voted to Remain. In comparison, over 60% of older voters and only 27% of young voters voted to Leave (BBC News 2016; Figure 1). Voters aged 25 to 64 remained fairly split between two options, but the difference between older and younger generations is significant (Kelly 2016). Voter differences have historically been between socioeconomic classes, the urban and

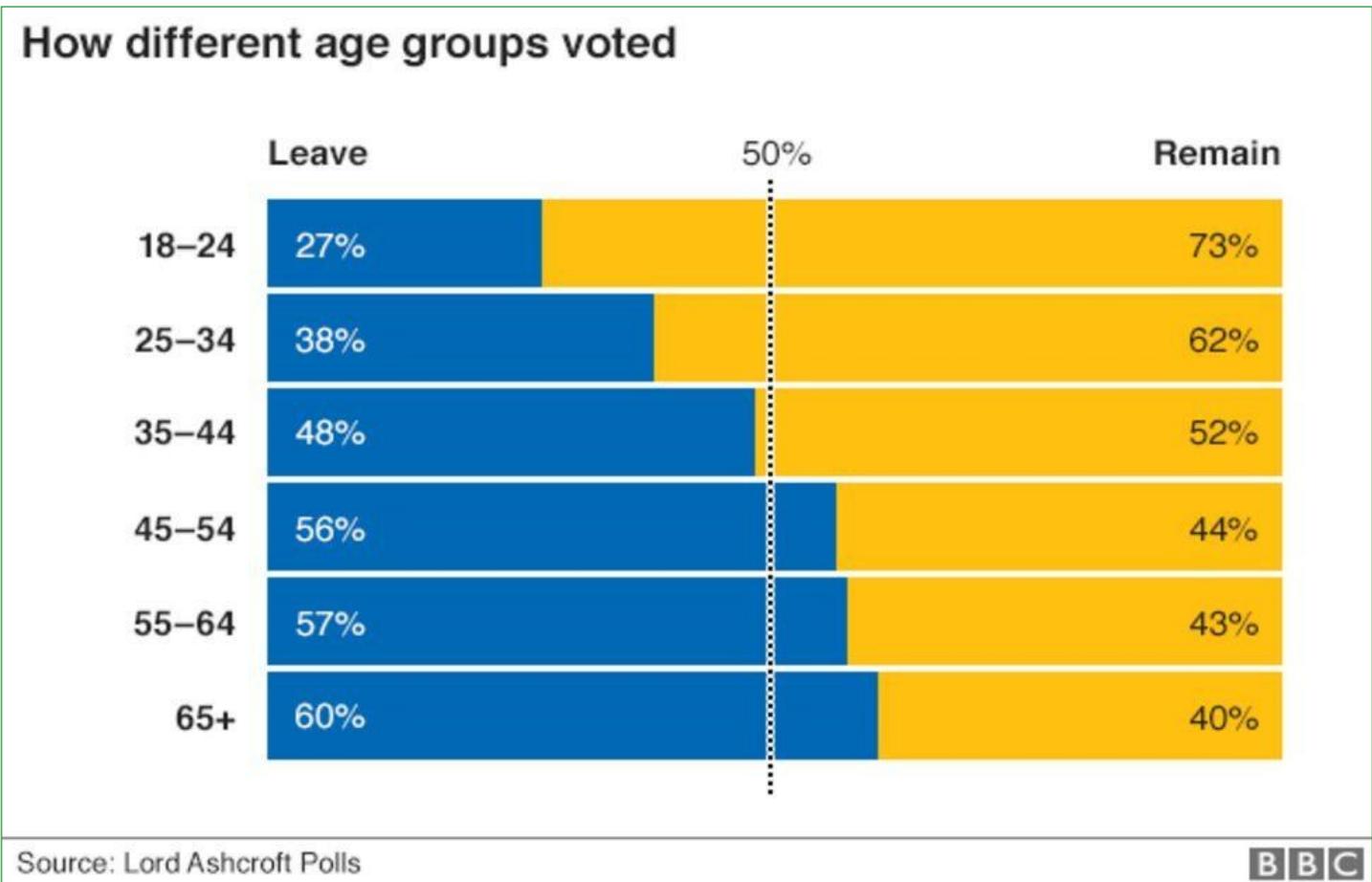


Figure 1: A breakdown of Leave and Remain vote percentages by age group. (Source: BBC News 2016).

regardless of young voters' political participation.

In this article, which draws upon qualitative research and interviews, I investigate how Brexit and conservative politics have affected young people's understanding of their place within the nation. Theories of the nation and belonging by the likes of Benedict Anderson, Craig Calhoun, and Michael Skey create a groundwork for analyzing the United Kingdom as an example of an imagined community and the implications this has on identities within it. I argue that identities are hierarchical and fluid, at the level of the individual and within a community, and people hold multiple identifications that contest with others'. Consequently, many people feel that they do not belong in this increasingly conservative version of the nation, a sentiment that is evident in how young voters feel frustrated and hostile towards the Brexit and Conservative parties in the United Kingdom (Harrison 2020). In response to their perceived feelings of separation from this increasingly conservative nation, young voters have developed strategies to distance themselves from those in positions of power. Taken together, these insights challenge Benedict Anderson's (1983) characteristic of community within a nation, namely that all members have a perceived equal right to the nation.

This project draws on an analysis of the language my interlocutors use to answer questions regarding voting, government, and identity and how their frames of reference construct their identities. From this analysis, I find that major political events, such as Brexit and the 2017 and 2019 general elections, and their media coverage have created a binary perception of identity around political association. Young voters seek to discursively separate themselves from groups they do not support, such as Leave voters and Conservatives, by describing them with antagonistic, negative traits. By doing so, they affirm to themselves and their like-minded community that they are not a part of those groups, the "Other." This research uses the framework of the Other to analyze participant's relationships to oppositional groups such as Leave voters, Conservatives, and older voters.

The intent is not to homogenize these oppositional groups, but to reflect upon the process of Othering and how young voters actively distance themselves from those in power. This stance reveals that there is both the perception of powerlessness and agency in their decision to further separate themselves from the values held by the Other. Young voters additionally feel a responsibility to always defend their position with statistics and facts. This process of Othering reveals a hierarchy of identities within the United Kingdom where the Other (as defined by youth) holds power.

## **Imagined Communities and Nationalism**

The study of the nation provides insight into not only what a nation is, but also who comprises and belongs to a nation and how nationalism is constructed. Anderson (1983, 6) defines the nation as "an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." The four major characteristics that determine the existence of a nation are that it is imagined, limited, sovereign, and a community. A nation is imagined because the members will never know or meet all their fellow members, yet they feel a connection purely because they reside in the same nation. This imagined characteristic of a nation is emphasized through a common history that reinforces memories and stories that members can connect through (De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 154). Next, a nation is limited because it has distinct borders that separate it from other nations. No nation aims to include the entire world; it has finite boundaries that create a distinct territory and those within are considered members. Thirdly, a nation is sovereign because it does not operate under a God, or at least members are free under a God (Anderson 1983). Lastly, a nation requires a sense of community among its members. Anderson (1983) uses community to infer that members feel equal to one another and have equal rights to the nation. Billig (1995) highlights that this sense of community is what unifies the nation's physical space and members. It creates the sense that members have an equal right to live within the nation's borders.

The existence of the nation is reinforced by its members through nationalism. Nationalism is a manufactured sense of community based on the idea of shared geography, language, and culture. Anderson (1983, 5) explains that this definition of nationalism is recent and modern, universal and all-encompassing, and influences identity creation. This identity, however, is not set in stone. National identities are constructed and then “produced, reproduced, transformed, and destroyed ... through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals and media people” (De Cillia et al. 1999, 153). A member’s sense of nationalism and national identity can be altered as their relationship to the nation shifts.

Nationalism is not inherently positive or negative. It is instead a consequence of a nation’s defining binary of membership. The internalization of the nation’s values and culture through nationalism creates a fundamental distinction between members and non-members. Non-members reside outside the boundaries of the nation and hence have internalized the values of a different nation. As the world is currently comprised of many nations, the binary of membership has evolved into citizenship and national identity (Anderson 1983, 156). De Cillia et al. (1999) analyze how national discourse can be used to foster feelings of both sameness and difference regarding national identity. They premise that the “construction of nations and national identities always [run] hand in hand with the construction of difference/distinctiveness and uniqueness” (De Cillia et al. 1999, 150). Part of constructing this difference and sameness in relation to the nation is the creation of the Other.

### The Nation and the Other

Many factors determine who belongs within and who belongs outside a nation. Borders act as a means of physically separating groups of people but there are also cultural and ethnic differences that can be used to create feelings of separation. These differences are inherently binary and represent a means of creating “distinction between us (those who identify themselves as belonging to a given community) and them (those who are other than us)” (Manti 2019, 1). The construction of “us” versus “them”

in linguistic discourse is a means of referencing one’s belonging to in-groups, additionally applicable to national identity. “Them,” or the Other, allows for people to directly compare themselves against something outside of their nation. Delanty (1995, 5 as quoted in Tekin 2010, 161) says that “the defining characteristic of the in-group ‘is not what members have in common but in what separates them from other groups.’” People can create identity by defining the cultural, physical, and ethnic attributes that exist for the Other, hence applying the opposite characteristics to themselves. These differences, however, are always positive upon self-reflection and negative when applied to Others (Neumann & Welsh 1991). Beyza Tekin (2010, 161) explains that “Othering more than often involves the ascription of varying degrees of negativity to the out-groups” and positive, communal characteristics to strengthen identity within groups. Critical, negative language and descriptions are a means to both create the Other and define one’s own positive characteristics.

Those in power can determine Others that exist outside of the nation as well as within the nation: those who threaten their ideal collective identity. Stuart Hall (1997) analyzed how racial Othering is created through media representation and stereotyping, a means to mark the Other in symbolic and cultural terms that maintain systemic power dynamics. Those in positions of power label those who do not belong and create difference as a means of supporting their own identity. In this manner, Othering is a tool that reinforces the current structures that give certain groups power over others. Within this article, however, I am analyzing the process of Othering by those not in positions of power. They utilize the same tactics of value creation and negative attributes but in a way that further distances them from sources of power within the nation.

### Nationalism in the United Kingdom

The experiences of nationalism and Othering within the United Kingdom can be understood by first locating the United Kingdom as an example of a nation through Anderson’s definition. Firstly, the United Kingdom is an imagined community with millions of members

from various regions connected through stories and histories, which were “forged significantly overseas, in war and empire” (Calhoun 2017, 57). The mainstream British identity relates closely to an positive self-reflection and pride in the British Empire and the United Kingdom’s back-to-back world war victories. Secondly, the United Kingdom is limited by boundaries, namely the British Isles. The only nation they share a direct border with is Ireland. Thirdly, the United Kingdom operates sovereignly. After a long history of religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, they now practice religious freedom (Colley 1992). Lastly, despite inequalities between London and the rest of the country, the United Kingdom has a strong sense of regional community and identity. William Wallace (2017, 198) explains that “Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham had their own industrial elites and local pride.” High taxation and redistribution limited the difference between the wealthiest and poorest, maintaining a feeling of equality within these regional communities.

There are various ways nationalism is recognized in the United Kingdom, largely because there are different ways members identify with the nation. Wallace (2017) explains that a person is capable of holding many identities because communities are imagined and, therefore, can be imagined in infinite ways. In the United Kingdom, identity is dependent on physical location and personal preference (Colley 1992). A person can simultaneously identify as a British citizen, an English citizen, and a Londoner. The United Kingdom is a “multi-national community” with four sub-nations of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (Wallace 2017, 198). In the last few decades, there has been an increase in identification and nationalism within the sub-nations. People increasingly identify as Welsh, Irish, or Scottish and this heavily influences both their scholarly work and their politics (Colley 1992). Divisions between the four sub-nations have deepened since the 2016 referendum due to increased English influence in politics.

### Fluidity and Hierarchy of Belonging

Anderson’s abstract characteristics of the nation have been criticized in recent years for their applicability to modern nations,

specifically his emphasis on community. Anderson argues that all members of the nation feel an equal right to the nation, whether that equality exists or not. Calhoun (2003) responds that this perspective denies the social reality that many groups experience (536). Within the nation, a member belongs to many social groups and cultures that also contribute to their identity. It is the individuals and their personal interests, not the national community, that should be studied and analyzed (Calhoun 2003, 536). Anderson’s idea that all members feel equal within the nation does not consider other identities and sub-communities. National belonging and identity do not hold the same level of meaning or importance for all social groups (Skey 2013, 82). Anderson assumes that national identity is stable and not affected by community identities.

There are ways to diminish members’ feelings of belonging to a nation by denying their claims of identity and reinforcing hierarchal power relations. Those who believe national identity is most important also hold the most power and “define the *conditions of belonging*” (Skey 2013, 89). To protect what they believe to be “their nation,” they argue that people who do not have similar characteristics or competencies, what Ghassan Hage (1998, as quoted in Skey 2013, 91) describes as national cultural capital, have less of a right to identification with the nation. Upon being marked by as the Other, those with less cultural capital tend to feel discomfort and uncertainty about their national identity. These power dynamics are reflected in ordinary life, affecting their “everyday nationhood” (Smith 2008, 564). Sensing that they do not belong, marked groups may prefer to identify with other communities or social groups.

Perceived inequality of belonging can alter how a person ranks their identities, effectively lowering the salience of a person’s national identity while increasing the salience of other identities. This shift is possible because identity is fluid and not fixed. Changes in the social or political world can affect which identities are most prominent or referenced. Calhoun (2003, 537) explains that “identities and solidarities... are neither simply fixed or simply fluid, but may be more fixed or more fluid under different

circumstances... They provide networks of mutual support, capacities for communication, frameworks of meaning." This further emphasizes the limitations of Anderson's frameworks by highlighting that community is not only relevant on a national level. Identifying with various communities means that belonging is contextual, individual, and hierarchal.

## Methodology and Limitations

Between August and October 2020 I conducted six virtual interviews with young adults, aged 22-28, who grew up in the United Kingdom, hold British citizenship, and were eligible to vote during the 2016 Brexit referendum. These participants would have been aged 18-24 and categorized as a young voter when the Brexit referendum took place. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Participants were from different regions within England and various socioeconomic and political backgrounds. Adam is from a low-income coastal county in the East. He has some university education and works as a teacher. Bianca lives in a city in the South where she is studying neuroscience for her undergraduate degree. Both Carmen and Diane currently live in London after graduating with their Bachelors. Carmen works in medical communications and plans on eventually continuing with her Masters while Diane works in IT for a computer company. Elle is in the process of moving from university outside London to a rural village and works in film. Felix is originally from a high-income conservative suburb of Manchester but now lives in the Netherlands. He recently completed his Bachelors and is now studying for his Masters in economics. Adam and Felix are both from conservative areas but Felix is the only participant who identifies with and votes for the Conservative party. Adam, Bianca, Carmen, Diane, and Elle all identify as liberal and most vote for the Labour or Lib-Dem parties. Elle, however, is the only participant who supported the Leave campaign. Adam, Bianca, Carmen, Diane, and Felix all voted to Remain while Elle would have voted Leave if she had not been abroad.

Participant selection was conducted through snowball sampling. Through direct messaging, I

explained to potential participants the purpose of my study and what an interview would entail. If the potential participant agreed, I scheduled a time for us to virtually meet. Prior to the interview, participants signed the consent form that allowed me to audio record and use their responses in this article. Participants were interviewed through an online video conferencing app, such as Skype or Zoom. I interviewed participants with video, even though I only recorded audio, because it is important to see how participants react to certain questions and maintain rapport.

The interview style was semi-structured interviewing, in which I asked open-ended questions and directed the conversation to themes that are of particular interest to them. I had a list of points and questions that I asked and used to guide the interview. Semi-structured interviewing is useful for learning about how the participant understands topics in their own words and having them expand on their answers. With this style, I was able to ask more about their experiences and gain a more personal understanding of their beliefs. The questions I asked were divided into four sections, including background, voting, government, and identity. Background questions were simple and straightforward questions that the participants easily answered to get comfortable in an interview setting. The next category concerned voting experiences and beliefs. I asked participants about how they voted during the Brexit referendum, what memories they have from that time, and their opinions of the Leave and Remain parties. The third category concerned their opinions on the state of the Conservative majority government and their representation within government. The fourth category concerned their national identity and what assumptions they hold about other identities. I asked participants if they identify more as English, British, or European, and what differences there are between each. I also asked about times they felt pride in being British and if they considered applying for citizenship in an EU country after the referendum. The last question I asked participants was if they think Brexit will affect their future and if so, how.

Interviews concluded by giving participants the opportunity to ask me questions about the research project and my interview questions. I asked them to consider who else would be interested and told them how to contact me if they had potential participants or any further questions. The interviews were transcribed using GoTranscript, an online transcription service, and then stored and coded to protect the participant's identity and information. Using notes from the interviews and transcripts, I conducted textual and content analysis using the nationalism and Othering theories described in the literature review. Discourse analysis was used to interpret their language and to understand how participants framed their opinions both overtly and covertly. The article's methods and procedures have been approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, ethnographic research involving participant observation and in-person interviews needed to be creatively reimaged in a virtual manner. The obstacles I faced in pursuing this research project changed my methodologies greatly, but regardless, the findings will still be valuable in understanding young voters' sense of belonging and opinions of Brexit.

## Context of Brexit

### The Brexit Vote

The results of the Brexit referendum shocked the Western world, revealing deep divisions between all demographics within the United Kingdom. There were vast differences in voting depending on income, education, age, location, and party alliance (Wallace 2017). Those who voted to remain were typically well-educated, higher income, lived in an urban setting, younger than 45, and voted Labour. Those who voted to leave were typically low-skilled, lower-income, rural, older than 65, and voted Conservative. Of the four nations, England and Wales had a majority vote for Leave while Scotland and Ireland had a majority for Remain. As the Leave campaign won; England lead the Brexit negotiations and other sub-nations were unhappy with this increased power. As a result, Scottish nationalist parties gained attention, hinting towards "another referendum on its separation from the UK" (Calhoun 2017, 70).

These results highlight the demographic differences between voters, but it is important to understand how the Leave campaign used notions of nationalism to mobilize voters to leave the European Union.

Nationalism and national identity were important parts of the conservative response to globalization and the movement of people. In an increasingly interconnected world, the government and big business embraced changes that drastically altered the structure of the United Kingdom as a nation. Older generations found that the nation no longer represented their core values. They witnessed changes through decreased sovereignty, increased immigration, and a forgotten mutual history with Europe. One of the Leave campaign's foci was that the European Union was taking advantage of the United Kingdom (Calhoun 2017). They promoted the idea that the European Union was unfairly distributing their money to still recovering Eastern European countries. Voting for Leave "[suggested] autonomy, the ability for the country to make its own decisions about its future, its relations with others, and who can cross its borders" (Calhoun 2017, 58).

Borders and immigrants were another major focus of the Leave campaign, resulting in largely racist and xenophobic discourse. One example, the "Breaking Point" advertisement, depicted a line of non-white immigrants, arguing that leaving the European Union would protect their borders from these groups (Elgot 2016). In another instance, cards reading "Leave the EU, no more Polish vermin" were found outside schools in a Cambridgeshire town (Channel 4 News 2016). Some believed that solidarity within their community was threatened by the increasing presence of immigrants, who had a different history to theirs of the Roman empire (Gardner 2017). The Leave campaign reinforced a version of history where the United Kingdom stood as the European savior. This version negated any common history between the United Kingdom and mainland Europe (Wallace 2017). All these changes created a culture of mistrust and anger towards anything that represented the United Kingdom post-globalization.

## Young Voters in the United Kingdom

Both older and younger voters were motivated out of fear for the future and discontent with the current government, but ultimately it was easier for the Leave campaign to mobilize older voters. For older generations, they feared losing their national values to European intervention and decreasing solidarity (Calhoun 2017). Younger voters were upset by “high levels of distrust of political systems, institutions, and social elites, ... a contemporary ‘crisis of democracy’ (Harrison 2018, 256). They were angered that their futures were put at risk by older generations and politicians with different values. Unlike older generations, younger voters “did not view Europe as one of the most pressing political issues” during the Brexit campaign (Sloam 2018, 4026). The difference of whether membership to the European Union was an issue is one of the key reasons the Remain campaign had a difficult time mobilizing voters. People are generally less likely to vote if they support the current state of the nation, and as a result, the Remain campaign could not create the same level of urgency as the Leave campaign (Sloam 2018). Despite losing the vote, the Remain campaign was able to mobilize more young voters than previously.

Young voters in the United Kingdom have been historically difficult to mobilize for elections, yet large turnouts in recent years indicate that many feel directly affected by the results. For the last 30 years until 2016, there was a continuous drop in young voter turnout for general elections in the United Kingdom. From 2001 to 2015, the number of young people, aged 18 to 24, voting averaged at 40% (Sloam 2018). In recent years, however, young voters have played an increasingly important role in British politics. For the 2016 Brexit vote, 64% of the young population voted, and then the following year 71% voted in the 2017 general election (Harrison 2018). The turnout could have been higher with a larger sense of urgency but the drastic increase in young voter participation has shown that “some people can be motivated to participate when the stakes are perceived to be high” (Harrison 2018, 258). After years of little to no representation, young people felt isolated from politics and began to mobilize when their futures were at risk.

Young voters also differ from older generations in how they identify in relation to the United Kingdom and Europe. Unlike older generations, young people are less likely to explicitly identify as British or English. They consider the explicit identification of English or British to infer “ethnic nationalist” and populist political views (Fenton 2018, 336). By rejecting a national identity, they consider themselves members of a larger community and believe themselves to be more inclusive than their older counterparts. According to Harrison (2018), young people are more likely to associate with a European identity and membership to the European Union. They embrace the multi-ethnicity of their communities and find solidarity with mainland Europe as well as the British Isles. Fenton (2018) adds that national identity is met with indifference or hostility and a European identity is preferred. According to my participants, however, this connection to the European Union is not as prevalent as Fenton and Harrison claim. Participant responses challenge both in that they prefer to identify as British over European, but align in that most participants disavow their English identity.

## Findings and Analysis

In my interviews, several themes appeared relating to strong opposition against those who held different beliefs and identified with different political parties or Brexit campaigns. This binary frame of reference enforces an us vs them, right vs wrong mentality that results in negative feelings about these oppositional groups, referred to as the Other. The use of Other in this analysis differs from other theorists’, however, in that those engaging with this process are not in positions of power. They are instead Othering the very groups that hold power. Participants attempted to separate themselves from the Other by describing them with harsh, derogatory language, such as that they are racist, liars, or elitist.

## A Divisive Culture

In the United Kingdom, the years since the referendum have been marked by intense political conflict. From the moment the referendum became legitimate, people had to start choosing sides. With essentially only two

options, in both the referendum and the government, feelings of divisiveness grew, and the mentality that one side was right/good while the other was wrong/bad developed. Switching sides was rare and people formed a strong identity with the group they supported. The dynamic of us vs them is seen throughout interviews and is particularly evident in participants' responses to questions about the Leave campaign, the current government, and the media.

Across all interviews, participants were quick to call the Leave campaign liars. Even Elle, who said that she would have voted Leave, noted that there were lies about where funding would go. Several participants explicitly mentioned a large red bus with "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead" on its sides as an example of false or misleading information spread by the Leave campaign (BBC News 2018; Figure 2). Adam said this advertisement "was just an outright lie" and Felix called it "an absolute scandal... just fucking bullshit." Remain voters were deterred not only

by what Leave would mean for their futures but also the lies and inconsistencies produced by the campaign. As such, a divide between Remain and Leave voters developed around both what effects leaving the European Union would have on the United Kingdom and whether or not people believed the information, or "lies" according to participants, spread by the Leave campaign.

Similar to the Brexit vote, a binary between political parties in England grew with the majority of voters choosing to support either the Conservative party or the Labour party in elections. While the United Kingdom technically has a multi-party government, the power and support of Conservative and Labour have fundamentally created a two-party system within England. Bianca would like to vote for a more leftist party such as the LibDem party, but it feels like "you vote Labour or you might as well just give a vote to the Conservatives." In 2017 and 2019, the Conservative party won a majority of Parliament seats, taking seats that Labour had held for years. As the Conservative



Figure 2: A Leave Campaign bus advertisement featuring the disputed slogan presented by Boris Johnson (Parsons 2016).

party gained more seats, participants felt less represented and agreed with less of the government's actions. A combination of the government's continued efforts towards Brexit and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in dissatisfaction for all participants. Participants felt that they had to vote for one of the two parties and dissatisfaction with the Conservative party emphasized their felt responsibility to vote Labour.

With the government and referendum conceived in popular consciousness as binary, the media aggressively reinforced the right vs wrong, us vs them narrative. As Hall (1997) noted, media has the ability to symbolically and culturally infer characteristics to groups that are Othered. Media owners within the United Kingdom advertised and supported their parties throughout the Brexit campaign. Diane believed it was "really important [that] Rupert Murdoch supported Brexit" because as "the head of [the Sun and the Times], he's supporting one thing, his business interests". Targeted ads and misinformation to support the Leave campaign left participants trying to determine what was real and what was fake. As a result, people in the UK were less likely to get their news from websites or television channels that didn't support their views. This is a criticism they had of older and Leave voters, but also of themselves. Participants were self-aware that they were a part of the biased media consumption problem. Adam pointed out that people "don't necessarily use the internet to find all the different bits of information ... because it's a lot of hassle." Carmen admitted that "the media that [she consumed was] all very of one opinion so it was quite demonizing of the opposing side, which did filter into [her] perception of it." Both the one-sidedness of the news and the participant's focus on one or two sources created a strong binary narrative. Their sources confirmed that they were right and other voters were wrong, which strongly affected how they perceive those with differing values or voting behaviors.

### Identity: Construction of The Other

The binary frame produced by politics and media has been internalized by young voters with how they identify. Crucial to participants' identities was the intense separation and

chastising of people that did not agree with them. As Tekin (2010) noted, the process of Othering involves attributing negative characteristics to those who are marked as different and this is evident in participants' descriptions. Across all political beliefs, participants described their opposed groups as strongly independent from them by describing their negative qualities. For participants who were more liberal and pro-Remain, they strongly differentiated themselves from the Conservative party and Leave voters. Elle, who was pro-Leave, strongly differentiated herself from Remain supporters, and Felix, who supports the Conservative party, strongly differentiated himself from the Labour party and other liberal groups. When talking about the left, he described them as "old-school, almost borderline Communist." The Other was defined differently for each participant yet the process of Othering was evident for all.

One common characteristic attributed to the Other was racism. Hatred of immigrants, English pride, xenophobia, and blatant racism were phrases thrown at various different groups. English identifying people were "big, old, football [hooligans] who [drink] all the time and stuff like that, or just being racist" according to Adam. Pride in the English flag, St. George's Cross, had "quite right-wing, a bit racist 'loving England as a country'" connotations for Diane. However, for Carmen, anyone voting Leave was "low-key racist" and held strong beliefs that immigrants were bad and hurting British values. Felix agreed, arguing that Leave voters hold xenophobic views and want England to return to its former segregated self. For Felix, xenophobia and racism were not just qualities of Leave voters, but also older people whose "selfish, bigoted, xenophobic views might have an impact on [his] future".

Other criticisms given to the Other include that they were money-driven, posh/elitist, and out of touch with what the United Kingdom is actually like. A stereotype of the political parties is that Conservatives are higher on the socioeconomic scale and Labour voters are lower. Bianca said that given a few outliers, this is "completely true." As such, the Conservative government "only cares about the rich" and was out of touch with the people of the country,

according to both Adam and Carmen. Additionally, Elle felt that both older voters and people who identify as English gave the impression of being more posh; their personalities and attitudes have an essence of performativity related to an older English generation. Carmen explains they're "of the 'stiff upper lip' generation. They don't like to be open about how they feel." In addition to being less likely to show or explain their feelings, they tend towards patriarchal beliefs and are quick to blame Eastern European immigrants for any issues related to the economy. My participants' caustic language towards the Other illustrates that they did not agree with the general conservative, patriarchal values supported by the government and the nation. The values of those who prioritize national identity are opposite to my participants' who seek to highlight their personal and community values by disavowing the Other.

Construction of the Other was a way for participants to distinguish themselves from oppositional groups and affirm their identity with other communities. By calling the Other racist or elitist, they were both separating themselves from these groups as well as affirming that they did not share these characteristics of the Other. In doing so, participants simultaneously constructed their personal identities while demonstrating their in-group membership to other communities. Contrasting themselves with the Other allowed them to display other identities, such as regional or social identities. Geographical identity within England was important to every participant. Instead of focusing on national boundaries like the Other, participants spoke about smaller boundaries based on their physical location within the United Kingdom. Smaller geographical identities involve "whole debates about where the line is for North and South" England, according to Bianca, or being from "a poor area of Southeast London" like Carmen. Participants from London, where 60% voted Remain, felt that their location significantly influenced their understanding of politics because most of the people around them "were pretty aligned in [their] political direction", as Carmen explained (BBC News 2016).

Tekin (2010) explains that speaking about common characteristics and sameness is another way to strengthen identity within groups. Other identities, such as their political party, sexuality, or career choice were also displayed by participants. These identities contrast with the Other and participants sought to differentiate themselves through this critical language. They wanted to prove to their community that they disapprove of and denounce what the Other stands for. By criticizing them for being racist and elitist, they were distancing themselves from the Other and reaffirming that they themselves do not have these traits.

### The Cycle of Powerlessness

With the Other in positions of power, participants in this study felt a sense of distance towards the government and a lack of representation. Every participant was unhappy with the government, whether it was a recent disenchantment or a continual disagreement. Even Elle, who would have voted Leave, was disappointed with the Brexit efforts and believed that "Boris Johnson [was] awful, but he [had] a stupid haircut to go with it." Similarly, Felix, a Conservative who voted Remain, believed that the current Conservative government "just comes across as incompetent." Both participants whose identities align with some form of power were discontent with their current state. The combination of separating themselves from the Other and disagreeing with the government's actions resulted in a feeling of perceived powerlessness.

The feelings of powerlessness and intense separation from the Other were mutually reinforcing, creating a cycle of reaffirming distance between participants and the Other/those in power. By separating themselves from the Other, they are separating themselves from those who are both in power and represented by those in power. Their perceived separation from power in the government means that their values and efforts are being blocked by the Other, increasing their perceived separation. Participants ultimately felt that the government is not meant for them and struggled to find hope that this will change. Carmen described her vote as "less powerful because the majority

of the opposing side has just grown.” Adam, living in a Conservative area, believed that the Conservative party will continue to win elections and as such his vote doesn’t really matter. As Carmen pointed out, voting and efforts to be heard and represented “evoke moments of feeling powerless and despairing” because she knows that the Other will always win.

Distance from those in power affected participants’ understanding of their place within the nation and their desire to remain a part of it. Constant news and affirmation that their values and selves were not represented in the government will result in participants feeling that they do not belong. They do not meet the conditions for belonging to the nation as set by the Other; they do not hold the same values and cultural capital as those in power. Young voters tried to find ways to hold onto their European rights through the application of EU and foreign passports. Every participant in this study answered that they considered paths to citizenship in other countries. Through their family members or romantic partners, all looked to see how they could qualify. While dual citizenship does not inherently mean that people don’t feel like they belong, the context of applying or researching directly after Brexit highlights that young voters were not content with losing their rights by leaving the European Union and their perceived diminishing status of belonging.

### Arsenal of Evidence

Participants had an abundance of facts and information ready to prove their stance and defend their use of caustic language in regard to the Other. Participants had many points on the economy, immigration, and cyber threats that were not personal in nature but information that they remembered to explain their language. In addition to Bianca’s claim that Leave voters are motivated by xenophobia, she brought up how many of the jobs that immigrants hold are within the National Health Service (NHS). The jobs that they claimed to be taken away by immigrants were not being filled by British people, as she recalled “there were 10,000 applications and 200 people showed up for their interview.” While Felix was studying abroad, a professor asked him to explain Brexit

and the Leave campaign. After ten minutes, he said his professor was overwhelmed by all the information he had provided and that his reaction “was like a hair dryer blowing in his face.” Participants had all this information on the Other stored and ready to use even in times when they were not being targeted for their views.

One reason for young voters to have all this information ready is because they felt a responsibility for being able to defend their positions with facts. As discussed, one criticism of the Leave campaign was that it consistently lied and shared misinformation. Othering “[tends] to be subsumed to fit a preconceived pattern of opposites” by which participants are able to directly compare themselves against the Other, in this case that they do not lie (Neumann & Welsh 1991, 331). By separating themselves from the Other’s characteristic of lying, young voters attempted to prove that they themselves do not make emotionally based or ill-informed decisions. By having statistical or impersonal information, they were reaffirming to themselves and the listener that they have taken the time to research and find truths to back their statements. This sense of responsibility, however, can have negative effects on their sense of belonging. Elle described that she felt a constant pressure “to go above and beyond giving factual evidence” to defend her support of Leave, ultimately making her exhausted to the point where she “just stopped talking about it in general or sharing [her] views.” If young voters are constantly on the defensive, constantly trying to prove that they are right and the Other is wrong, they will be constantly framing themselves in a way where society thinks they are wrong.

### Discussion

Looking at young voters’ need to separate themselves from groups such as Leave Voters and the Conservative Party through these various lenses highlights a hierarchy of identities at both the national and individual level. Within the United Kingdom, those who prioritize their national identity hold positions of power and are more represented. The rhetoric surrounding the Leave Campaign strongly portrayed pro-Britain/England

sentiment through attacks on Europe and anti-immigrant sentiments. The Conservative Party has continued in this manner with their continued support of Brexit, adding to what Golec de Zavala et al. (2017, 3) describe as social dominance orientation, or the desire to compete and prove the superiority of their own nation. Leave voters and Conservatives have a higher need to protect their perception of the nation and its values from outsiders, such as the European Union, but also those within its borders. Participants explained the importance of national identity to the Other through British values and anti-immigrant comments they have heard. While these attributes are not true for every member of the Other, they emphasize that the Other personally prioritize their national identity and want to prove the superiority of the United Kingdom.

The Other believes political identity is the most important and those who feel differently do not have as much of a right to “their” nation as they do. Skey (2013) explains that those who hold the most power in a nation are the ones who set the conditions for belonging. Those who do not meet the conditions for belonging will feel uncertain or question their right to the nation. Within the United Kingdom, those who do not meet the conditions for belonging are largely young voters, who identify more with regional and social identities than national identity. Within the political sphere, young voters tend to associate with Remain and leftist parties such as Labour. Young voters do not see their interests represented in the national government and struggle to see how this can change in the future.

Other identities that young voters rank higher than their national identity are their social or local communities. Participants spoke highly about their identities within a regional frame, such as being from a specific city or region, as well as being members of social communities, such as being LGBTQ+. Examples include how Bianca believes that she is “definitely a Southerner” and Carmen has been educating herself by researching members of Parliament who “voted against gay marriage” and “adoption by gay couples.” Young voters feel that these social identities, like being liberal or a Londoner, define them more than their national identity. In their personal hierarchy of

identities, these identifications are ranked higher than their national identity, unlike the Other. These identities also connect them to members that reside outside of the nation and result in a higher sense of belonging to an international community. Because some of these identities do not align with the more conservative, English-based conditions of belonging, they feel that they must defend themselves. To protect and enforce these identities, young voters have developed the patterns of abrasive language and Othering. Speaking negatively about those who value their national identity is a way to affirm to their communities that their social identities are prioritized.

These findings challenge Anderson’s definition of the nation as an imagined community because not all members feel that they have an equal right to the nation. His emphasis on community as a sense of equality between members, whether real or not, does not consider the fact that identities are both hierarchical and fluid. Identities within the United Kingdom are hierarchical in that those who prioritize their national identity hold positions of power and can make those who prioritize other identities feel that they do not belong. In this sense, young voters do not have a perceived equality to the nation as Anderson describes. Identities are additionally fluid and have fluctuating levels of importance. Identities become more prevalent when they are threatened, as seen by Brexit voters’ response to perceived threats to the nation. The salience of identity varies between people and situation which reveals that people’s perceived right to the nation can change depending on time and place. Community is not possible when a nation, such as the United Kingdom, is marked by an intense binary of belonging based on conservative values.

The process of Othering by participants reveals that there is a perception of powerlessness as well as agency in their stance. They do not hold power within the nation and their values and cultural capital are not supported by those who do hold power. The continual gains made by the Conservative and Leave campaigns make participants feel powerless and disconnected from the nation—

even participants with connections to the Other feel discontent and actively distance themselves. However, there is agency in their continued stance of Othering those with power and fighting for their personal values. Participants do not need to join the Other because they have some hope that future elections could return some power to their communities. Participants have voted in both general elections since the Brexit referendum, highlighting that there is mobilization among young people to vote and play an increasingly important role in politics. As they recognize that their lives are being directly impacted, there is an effort to find collective identity within their communities that also oppose the Other. If they manage to gain power back over the Other in coming years, they may be more willing to associate with the nation, as Dina Roginsky (2006, 241-242) points out that "a well-constructed national identity imposed from 'above' can be accepted, internalized and spread only if its ideas and practices fit people's sentiments and the symbolic meanings generated from 'below.'" A collective national identity within the United Kingdom will have to include the values held by young voters as they gain more political power.

## Conclusion

With the resurgence of right-wing politics through Brexit and a Conservative government, older, Leave, and Conservative voters have gained significant control within the United Kingdom. In response to this resurgence, young voters have developed strategies to both separate themselves from these groups and reinforce their social identities. Their process of Othering differs from most in that they are not in positions of power, but instead distancing themselves from those in power. The binary of Other is a result of increased divisions within both politics and society. The Leave campaign, Conservative party, and media bias have heavily influenced young voters' perception of binary belonging. Consequently, young voters seek to explicitly separate themselves from groups that they perceive as opposite to them, the Other. Young voters construct the Other by attributing harsh and derogatory traits to them in an effort to both affirm their own identity and to

reassure people in their community that they are not a part of the Other.

However, because the Other holds positions of power within the United Kingdom, young voters feel a sense of disconnection from the government. They perceive a lack of representation and feel their votes are powerless because of the size of the Other's majority. These feelings of powerlessness and separation between themselves and the Other are mutually reinforcing: because the Other has all the power, they cannot be represented, which emphasizes and increases their perceived divisions. Additionally, young voters feel required to have an arsenal of facts ready to defend their construction of the Other. This arsenal also frames their understanding of the world which can negatively affect their perception of belonging.

The conditions for belonging within the United Kingdom are determined by the Other as they hold political power. Their conservative beliefs and pro-Britain rhetoric highlight that a condition for belonging is the prioritization of national identity and pride. Young voters do not meet this condition as they identify more with social and local communities which results in them feeling that they do not belong and are not represented in government. They seek to protect and defend their identities by emphasizing them through this process of Othering those in power. This process highlights a hierarchy of identities in which, by not meeting the conditions for belonging, young voters feel that the nation belongs more to the Other. Their sense of powerlessness in regard to government representation and unwillingness to associate with those who hold positions of power challenge Anderson's characteristic of community within a nation. This hierarchy can have long lasting implications for the United Kingdom as a nation considering that these younger generations will make up the voting majority in coming decades. For young voters to feel a sense of belonging within the United Kingdom, they will need to see their values and beliefs represented within positions of power alongside those of the Other.

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