

## **Self-Determination during the Brexit Campaign: Comparing Leave and Remain Messages**

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### **Abstract :**

This article analyses how the issue of self-determination was framed and presented during the Brexit referendum campaign. It focuses on the two official campaign websites of the Leave and Remain sides during the referendum campaign between 15 April and 22 June 2016. The qualitative thematic analysis covers 186 posts from both sides, using an inductive approach. The results indicate that both camps adopted similar approaches towards the issues of self-determination (although from different perspectives), with limited emphasis on the general elements and extensive use of the specific themes. These themes were a combination of issues which were salient in society and on which the other camp had little to say.

**Keywords** : self-determination, themes, website posts, Brexit

### **Introduction**

There is a broad consensus in the literature that the Brexit referendum was called due to the long-lasting internal divisions in the British Conservative Party on the issue of European integration. In government since 2010, the party has a share of its members, led by several prominent figures, who strongly oppose the EU and who promote Eurosceptic messages.<sup>1</sup> Such messages have their origins in the defeat of Eurosceptics in the 1975 referendum and in the controversy surrounding the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.<sup>2</sup> At the 2015 election, David Cameron sought to keep the party united by appeasing the Eurosceptic wing of the party. This decision was driven by a double stake: a united party would convey the message that it is fit for government and would also avoid vote losing votes to the outspoken Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) who had topped the polls in the 2014 European elections. As a result, the party manifesto used in those elections included a promise about a referendum on British membership in the European Union until the end of 2017.<sup>3</sup>

The referendum on self-determination, as explained in the introduction to this special issue, is unique in Europe. It was highly divisive and the two camps (Leave and Remain) promoted different ideas related to self-determination. Regarding the concept of self-determination, this article uses the definition provided in the introduction to this special issue according to which it is “the mobilisation of human communities in favor of altering the territorial unit that is responsible for the political sovereignty that is exercised on them”.<sup>4</sup> Earlier studies about Brexit analysed how traditional media covered the EU referendum campaign<sup>5</sup>, but little attention has been paid to how the two camps conveyed messages online through their official campaign websites. This article fills that gap in the literature and aims to answer the following research question: How was self-determination

framed during the Brexit referendum campaign? We focus on the two official – as designated by the electoral commission – campaign websites of the Leave and Remain sides during the referendum campaign between 15 April and 22 June 2016. Our qualitative thematic analysis covers 186 posts from both sides and unveils several important similarities and differences between them.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on themes and framing in referendums with emphasis on what has been done for Brexit. It presents briefly the methodology and the data used for analysis. The third section provides an overview of the referendum and explains the reasons for which it was called and how self-determination was presented prior to the campaign. The fourth section presents in detail the results of our analysis, being followed by a general discussion and conclusions.

## 1. Theory and Methodology

Research going back half a century shows how the media often act as a primary source of political information for voters, can influence what they learn about particular issues and have an impact on attitude formation.<sup>6</sup> Since then, a large amount of studies illustrate how this influence takes place, one of the most common avenues being through the framing of issues. The framing is created through a primary framework in which the information is put into either natural or social categories. The assignment to social categories takes place if the event has, at its core, the actions of political actors or policy implications.<sup>7</sup> Framing has been defined as the framework used by the media to define problems, identify causes and suggest particular solutions by making some aspects of issues more salient than others in the news reporting.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, framing involves the inclusion of political, moral or social judgement to the news coverage.<sup>9</sup> A frame selects aspects of perceived reality, which leads to particular “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation”.<sup>10</sup>

Framing can be used by various actors - who set the political discourse - in their attempt to make sense of the events around them, in their own terms, with the aim to influence the public.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, frames are heavily utilized in various types of rhetoric with the purpose of organising and structuring the presentation of issues to the public.<sup>12</sup> This means that the content of an event can be presented in different ways, to convey particular messages and to emphasise the evaluations of those who frame it. To achieve its purposes, a frame has to be embedded in the broader features of the target audience. As such, it is likely to have specific semantic and rhetorical nuances, cultural resonances, or linguistic techniques (e.g. metaphors, catchphrases) that are appealing to the public.<sup>13</sup>

Highly divisive events such as the Brexit referendum oppose two major camps that are very likely to use framing throughout the campaign in order to persuade voters to support them. In addition, given the fact that partisan cues were very weak due to the internal division of the two major parties over the issue, persuasion and framing effects may also have been larger than expected.<sup>14</sup> Partisan cues are often crucial in referendums organised on salient issues because voters rely on what parties tell them is an issue; such as Brexit.. A recent comparative analysis of referendums organised in Europe shows that clear partisan cues are one of the two main causes for a referendum to be approved.<sup>15</sup>

Previous studies indicate that framing has been extensively used in the traditional media throughout the Brexit referendum campaign. The press coverage was biased against the European Union,

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favoring the Leave camp.<sup>16</sup> A qualitative content analysis of the articles published by the seven top-selling national newspapers during the referendum campaign in the UK reveals a dominance of the pro-Leave messages. Three major frames, consistently repeated across newspapers: *take my / our country back*, *undemocratic EU*, and *take back control*. These frames were presented either in isolation or juxtaposed with issues that were salient for the British public such as immigration, the economy, or the country's ability to make its own laws.<sup>17</sup> Such an approach has been quite predictable given the fact that the UK press have portrayed the EU negatively for many several decades.<sup>18</sup>

Research into television news provides very similar results to what observed for the printed media. An analysis about how broadcasters routinely presented the claims made by the two camps involved in the Brexit campaign indicates that the media did not have an independent and non-biased presentation, contextualisation and analysis of the facts and figures that were used by the two sides.<sup>19</sup> The British visual media did not differ from the press: they were not impartial and used a biased approach in which issues were framed favorably to the Leave campaign. The literature reviewed here has dealt extensively with the framing of messages in general. The specific issue of self-determination has not been addressed in detail although some findings indicate clear frames that can go under that category, e.g. *take our country back*. The analysis in this article focuses exclusively on how such particular claims were framed in the online environment.

## Methodology

For this study we use a qualitative content analysis of the official campaign websites of the Leave and Remain sides during the referendum campaign. Our goal is to identify the frames and themes used in the posts from the campaign websites related to self-determination. The analysis is text-based, the frames are determined inductively and the coding of frames is done manually.<sup>20</sup> The inductive framing analysis reconstructs a repertoire of frame packages on the basis of the patterns observed in the analysed messages.<sup>21</sup> Each frame package includes a core frame, i.e. an implicit cultural phenomenon like a value or a belief, and framing devices that are the indicators of the frame, e.g. vocabulary, catchphrases. All these contribute to the rhetorical structure of a message.<sup>22</sup>

In this article we use inductive framing analysis to systematically set out the various ways in which the two sides engaged in the referendum campaign present issues of self-determination to the public. The sample of messages include all the posts (excluding video materials) related to self-determination issues published on the official websites of the two sides between 15 April and 22 June 2016. This is the official duration of the campaign for the referendum. Our analysis includes 169 website posts used by the two sides out of which 94 belong to the Leave side and 75 to the Remain campaigners. Some posts included two themes and they were included in multiple categories. For these reasons, the number of units of analysis is slightly higher than the number of posts: 103 for Leave and 83 for Remain.

## 2. An Overview of Brexit

The 2016 referendum on the issue of the UK's exit from the EU was an important watershed moment not just for the UK but for the EU. The Leave side in the referendum, at times, played to the worst impulses and issues of importance to the Eurosceptic movement in the UK. The referendum saw the highest turnout in a nationwide UK election at 72%, but also had a small majority for the

Leave side of just 51.9% yielding a margin of victory of 2%.<sup>23</sup> The analysis of how the public voted highlighted deep social divides in the country with age and education specifically being a major problem for the future stability of the UK's constitutional set up.

Before we can look at how the idea of self-determination was framed in the 2016 referendum on the issue of the UK's exit from the EU, let us briefly discuss how Euroscepticism and the idea of leaving the EU developed in the UK. The UK has always had a certain distance from the concept of Europe and the European identity due to its distinctive history and culture. Three factors contribute to British Euroscepticism, distinctly from wider discontent with the EU across Europe. There is the island mentality, the Commonwealth (in which the UK sits as a major player) and the Special Relationship with the USA.<sup>24</sup> All these factors foster an idea of a Britain that is a global power, not a regional power. British Euroscepticism is rooted in the past and nostalgia for the 'finest hour' Britain.<sup>25</sup> The idea of Britain and Britishness has created a scenario according to which the 'EU holds Britain back' from its potential as a global power which has feed into a growing idea of a need for self-determination for British people.

The 1970s are where the great debate around Europe truly began in Britain with the 1975 referendum on the EEC. During the campaign the main political parties at the time were broadly in support of Britain's membership of the EEC.<sup>26</sup> The biggest opposition at the time to the EEC was the Labour party who's left wingers argued that the EEC was a capitalist, pro-business club that did not look out for the workers.<sup>27</sup> Tony Benn was the most vocal Labour opponent during the campaign, centering his arguments against membership of the EEC around the idea of self-determination stating that the European project was on the path to a federal state. The Conservatives were broadly for the EEC at the time, but there was vocal opposition from right wingers who spoke for the first time about the infringement of sovereignty and identity made against the EEC.<sup>28</sup> These ideas would develop through the decades and are the first examples of the idea of self-determination as an argument against the European project. The 1980s saw another flashpoint with Margaret Thatcher's 1988 'Bruges speech' which was a rebuke of Jacques Delors' goals of deeper economic and political ties across Europe.<sup>29</sup> Both Labour and the Conservatives at this time shared concerns of a closer integrated EEC infringing on the parliamentary sovereignty of Britain.<sup>30</sup> The objection to the EEC of infringement of the sovereignty of parliament continued into the 1990s and would find a new dimension to it that would heighten the self-determination of the British people argument even more.

The Maastricht Treaty and its politicisation of the European project had a major effect on British Euroscepticism because it provided a new argument. This new argument was exemplified in the changing of the name from 'Community' to 'Union' which was a major signal of this new politicisation of the European project.<sup>31</sup> This argument was enhanced by the use of referendums across Europe notably in France and Denmark to give the people a say on further European integration. Eurosceptics in Britain had a clear link to make between Parliamentary sovereignty and the sovereignty of the people through the mechanism of a referendum.<sup>32</sup> This was the full crystallisation of the idea of self-determination in the Eurosceptic movement in Britain. The 2000s saw the arguments against the EU shifting, in a darker manner, towards immigration in the wake of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement of the EU which saw the inclusion of Central and Eastern European nations. This was a dominant argument in the Eurosceptic movement in the 2000s and came to a head in the 2016 referendum with the 'breaking point' poster depicting a crowd of refugees walking, very much evocative of a specific Nazi propaganda poster from the 1930s. The European election

debates between Nigel Farage, Leader of UKIP, and Nick Clegg, then Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Democrats, was the clearest presentation of the arguments from both sides of the European debate in Britain, to that date.

What came out of this debate, and had been seen in the 90s, is that the arguments of the Eurosceptics, namely sovereignty, identity and taking back control, resonated more with the public than the arguments around the economic benefits.<sup>33</sup> The idea of self-determination which was utilised in the 2016 referendum has developed over many decades and, as has been outlined, has developed from the idea of sovereignty of the British parliament and by extension the British people. This development of the argument reached a head in 2014 when UKIP topped the polls in the European elections, the first time a party other than Labour or the Conservative had done so since 1910.<sup>34</sup>

The 2016 referendum on the issue of the UK's exit from the EU was held for purely political reasons, the result of decades of internal party strife within the Conservative party.<sup>35</sup> The result at the 2014 European election and YouGov polling from the debate between Farage and Clegg during that election, which declared Farage the winner of the first debate by 57% and the second debate by 68%, brought the argument for an in-out referendum to a head.<sup>36</sup> The next year, the Conservative Party manifesto for the 2015 General Election included a pledge to hold a 'straight in-out referendum of the European Union by the end of 2017'.<sup>37</sup> With the Conservative Party winning a majority in the 2015 General Election, and in so doing moving from a Coalition Government to a Majority Government, they were able to move forward and pursue a referendum on Europe.

There are several factors that contributed to the Leave win in the 2016 referendum and scholars are still pouring over the election to understand why the public voted in the manner they did. There were two specific reasons for the outcome: the demographic divide and the loss of identity.<sup>38</sup> Following the 2016 referendum many stated anecdotally that the UK had become very much divided, on closer look at drivers of the result it has become evident that demographic differences were a big factor in the result of the referendum. The age and educational demographics of a specific voting constituency have been highlighted as major factors for how that area voted in the referendum.<sup>39</sup> Education as a factor for voting one way or the other in the referendum is evident from the fact that in fifteen of the twenty 'least educated' areas of the UK the voters supported Leave in the referendum.<sup>40</sup>

This can be interpreted as a situation in which those people 'left behind' by globalisation and disaffected with politics, voted to get some control back, which fed into the overarching message of 'hope' sold by the 'taking back control' slogan of the Leave campaign.<sup>41</sup> The second factor highlighted, age, is similarly evident when looking at areas and the way they voted. Nineteen of the twenty 'oldest' areas voted for Leave in the referendum.<sup>42</sup> Alongside the demographic drivers of the result, the national identity was a driver of the Leave result: there was a particular focus on the idea of the infringement of parliamentary sovereignty and the claims of 'taking back control'. It is a compelling argument for why Leave won.<sup>43</sup> Cultural concerns had a significant effect on the choice of voters specifically highlighting that those who believed the idea of the EU infringing on British identity were more likely to support Leave.<sup>44</sup> These findings identify self-determination as a potential driver of the outcome of the 2016 referendum. However, the importance of self-determination is nuanced by recent studies showing that countries with high levels of exclusive national identity do not have automatically high levels of Eurosceptic voting.<sup>45</sup>

### 3. Analysis

The analysis of themes approached by the two campaigns indicates two important similarities: 1) they have rarely used general messages about self-determination and chose instead particular themes for their arguments and 2) the messages on the campaign websites were dominated by the theme of economy, while security played an important part for both campaigns. The differences lie in the ways they understood self-determination (e.g. Leave went for immigration and sovereignty and democracy vs. uncertainty and human rights and environment).

Figure 1 presents the distribution of themes used by the Leave campaign. Only one in ten messages approached the issue of self-determination in general, focusing extensively on the “take back control” slogan applied to a variety of issues. These messages speak about the overall benefits of leaving the EU and touch upon a variety of topics. Self-determination is framed as a cause for all the positive outcomes that are derived from exiting the EU. For example, the post from 19 April 2016 cites from an essay written by one prominent Brexiteer for the *Today* program:

I want us to vote to Leave the EU before it's too late, because that's the safer choice for Britain. If we vote to stay we're not settling for a secure status quo.

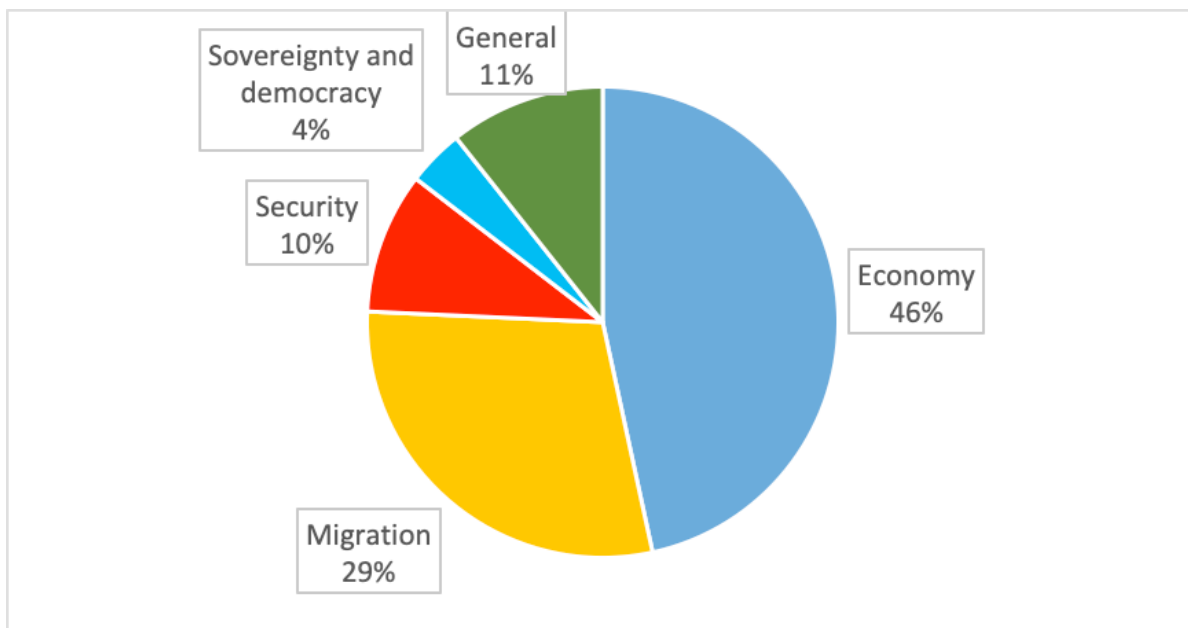
We're voting to be hostages locked in the back of the car and driven headlong towards deeper EU integration. Brussels has already set out some of its plans for the next great transfer of powers to the EU in what's called the “Five Presidents’ Report”.

The EU wants more power over taxes and banks. Sadly, we've surrendered our veto on these moves. And - what's worse - if we try to object, the European Court of Justice can overrule us.

Almost half of the messages focused on economy using both general arguments related to how the financial market and business would thrive outside the EU, but also specific issues related to how leaving the EU could bring economic benefits for key areas. Out of the total of 48 posts related to the theme of economy, there is a good balance between the general arguments (27 posts) and the arguments for specific areas: National Health System (NHS) 12 posts, agriculture and environment 5 posts, and employment 4 posts. To understand the difference between the framing of self-determination with respect to economy, it is best to use two examples. The general frames usually refer to an improvement of economic conditions if Britain goes on its own, with positive effects on the business environment, financial markets and investment in general. One post on 29 April 2016 argues that:

A group of prominent city leaders have today joined together to voice their support for a Vote Leave in the forthcoming EU referendum in June. In a letter signed by more than a hundred signatories, including Peter Cruddas, Michael Geoghegan, Luke Johnson, Peter Hargreaves, Moorad Choudhry and Paul Marshall, the group argues that the City would prosper outside the EU, strengthen its lead as the world's largest international financial centre, and continue to make a major contribution to the UK economy and employment, without the threat the EU poses to our financial services industry.

**Figure 1: The distribution of themes used by the Leave campaign (N = 103)**



Another avenue used by the Leave campaign was the waste of British money by the EU officials. According to most messages, money is spent on what other institutions – and not the British ones – desire. One post on 26 May 2016 refers to the fact that the EU legislation determines major losses for the British budget.

Between 2010 and 2014, EU public procurement legislation imposed costs of at least £8.4 billion in real terms on the taxpayer. This is three times what will be spent on flood defences in England between 2015 and 2021, six times the cost of the new Queensferry Crossing in Scotland, or enough to build 25 new hospitals.

The theme of NHS is framed through a negative definition of the status quo according to which Britain contributes £ millions every week, money that could be used to improve the NHS. The amounts vary from £100 million to £350 million, the latter being encountered more often. To reveal the importance of this topic, we note that the first post on the official campaign website devoted to leaving the EU was about the NHS. One post from 9 June 2016 builds on statistics of NHS waiting time to make a point about the urgency to use funds for the health system:

Our NHS is under pressure from increasing demand and the fact that we have finite resources. If we Vote Leave we can spend some of the money we set aside for Brussels on the NHS. The extra £100 million a week for the NHS after we Vote Leave would be a big boost, meaning more doctors, more nurses and more hospital beds. Outside of the EU we can spend our money on our priorities and take back control of our borders, economy and democracy. To do that we need to Vote Leave on 23 June.

Immigration is a large component of the Leave campaign with more than one quarter of the posts being devoted to this theme. Similar to economy, it can be divided into a general approach of the theme, in which the great perils of immigration and border control can be solved if decisions are taken by Britain, and a particular approach of specific themes. Out of the total of 30 posts related to immigration, 20 are devoted to the general threat of immigration on the British society and



10 frame the negative effects on economy (4 posts), education (3 posts) and health (3 posts). The general messages against immigration revolved around the burden that Britain feels from letting in EU citizens. Towards the end of the campaign, the topic of potential Turkish immigration – once Turkey joins the EU – became quite prominent. This group of migrants raise important cultural, economic and security threats since their number was expected to be very high. One example of the general rhetoric to be observed throughout the campaign can be found in the post from 13 June 2016:

Since 2009, close to four million people have been given the right to come to the UK, with Moroccans, Albanians and Turkish citizens the main beneficiaries. The number of people coming to the EU is increasing each year and it is becoming unsustainable. This level of migration puts a strain on our invaluable public services, as well as jobs and wages. The British people are absolutely right to be concerned.

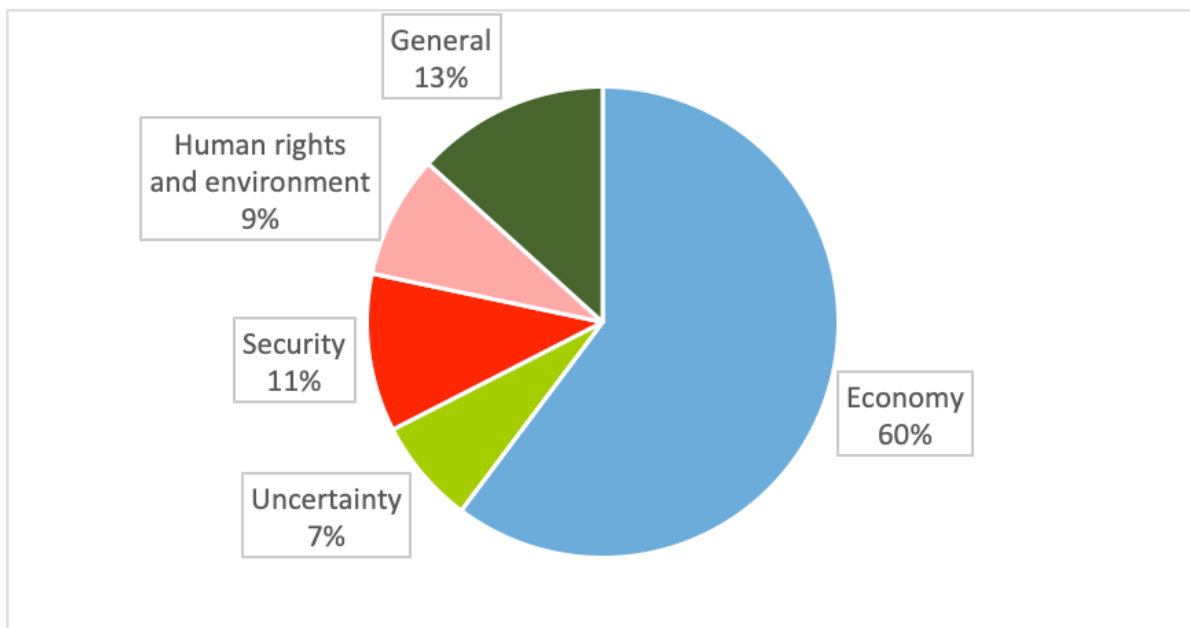
The topic of security focused extensively on the idea of border and criminality control. One of the key arguments used is that the criminals from EU countries cannot be sent back home and they fill up the UK prisons, putting a burden on the taxpayers (e.g. the post on 3 June 2016). Another point made by the Leave campaign was overlapping security and migration. One post from 8 June 2019 emphasizes that anyone in possession of an EU passport or identity card can enter the country unless they are listed as major security threats. Even if the person is listed, then reasons to bar individuals from the UK have to be revealed, which may endanger national security.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of themes used by the Remain campaign. The general posts look at the benefits of being part of the EU and advantages that may be lost by the British citizens once they are out. One of the key arguments is about Britain having a stronger voice in the international system as part of the EU (e.g. the posts on 20 May and 9 June 2016) or risking isolation as a result of exit (e.g. another post on 9 June 2016 citing the organiser of a major music festival in the UK). The post from 19 June, summarising the leading article from the Economist two days before, includes a series of reasons for which exit can be detrimental to both sides:

A vote to quit the European Union on June 23rd, which polls say is a growing possibility, would do grave and lasting harm to the politics and economy of Britain. The loss of one of the EU's biggest members would gouge a deep wound in the rest of Europe. And, with the likes of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen fueling economic nationalism and xenophobia, it would mark a defeat for the liberal order that has underpinned the West's prosperity.

**Figure 2: The distribution of themes used by the Remain campaign (N = 83)**





Similarly, to the Leave side, the economy forms a large share of the Remain campaign: 60% of all posts. Half of the posts referring to economy refer to the general damage that a leave could produce for the financial markets, inflation, business, asset prices etc. The tone and content of messages mirror the posts of the Leave campaign but from the other angle. They show how self-determination could bring economic hardships and miss the economic opportunities provided by the EU, e.g. the posts of 19 June 2016 about the warning of the Monetary Policy Committee. The other half of the posts related to the economy refer to particular issues such as exports and trade (8 posts), jobs (8 posts), foreign investment (7 posts) and wages (2 posts). The content of a post on 3 June 2016 refers to a real threat of losing jobs because the service sector in the UK would be effected. This does not apply only to private companies, but also public sector jobs are at risk: “Labour say there could be more than half a million job losses across the public sector if we leave the EU” (post on 14 June 2016). The arguments about foreign investment are straightforward and refer to the loss of appeal by an isolated Britain. The core of the argument is summarized in a post on 19 June that refers to one major investor in the UK:

In a letter to *The Times*, the Microsoft founder, who has invested more than \$1 billion in Britain, raises questions over his future commitment to the country if voters back Brexit next week. He indicates that access to the EU’s single market, which other European leaders say they will deny to Britain if it leaves the bloc, helped to swing Microsoft’s decision to site research facilities in Cambridge.

The issue of security, common with the Leave campaign, has a spin on counteracting security threats as part of a larger unit that can coordinate and cooperate. The idea behind most messages is that intelligence services cannot work in isolation and would be difficult for the UK to solve contemporary salient problems like terrorism problems on its own (e.g. the post on 8 May 2016). Another argument builds on the close ties between police forces and the anti-trafficking laws at European level prevent and discourage human trafficking (19 May 2016). The last post has an overlap with the theme of human rights, which is specific to the Remain camp. The post addressing

this theme refer to the progress made as part of the EU, which would be lost. For example, the post on 24 May 2016 reads “A new report by the TUC says that leaving the European Union could turn the clock back on women's rights, hitting equal pay and protection against pregnancy discrimination”.

The theme of uncertainty is also specific to the Remain campaign, which focuses on what happens after Brexit, with reference to the lack of a specific plans for Brexit. The key argument is that once the leave is decided, the legal situation will be chaotic and will damage a broad range of sectors from economy to environment and security. The post on 16 June 2016 summarises the essence of this theme, also pointing at the paradoxes of leaving the Eu without a clear plan afterwards:

The first point to note is that if we still wanted access to the EU single market of 500 million consumers, our largest trading partner and the biggest single market in the world, then we would have to abide by the EU regulations and laws governing that market - so, for example, safety standards for food, cars, toys, chemicals and medicines. But, crucially, we would no longer have any say on those regulations and laws, despite the fact that a substantial proportion of UK business would have to abide by them.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This article analysed how self-determination was framed by the Leave and Remain sides during the Brexit referendum campaign. Our qualitative thematic analysis of the two official campaign websites covers 186 posts and provides several interesting findings relative to the topic of this special issue. First, the two camps presented self-determination as a combination of general and specific threats or opportunities. The Leave camp emphasised the perils of staying in the EU for the development of the British economy, migration control, security (including borders), and sovereignty and democracy. All these were under the slogan “take back control”, by using a contrast framing technique in which the EU was presented as the key obstacle to allocating domestic resources in these domains. The Remain campaign used a rhetoric in which self-determination was presented as part of a greater picture, which brings important economic, security, human rights and environment benefits to the UK. Since two themes were common (economy and security), the two camps focused on different elements in their attempt to convey their message. For example, with economy the Leave side argued that the financial resources put by the UK in the EU could be used to improve the health system, the agriculture and environment, and address unemployment. The Remain camp referred to the presence in the Single Market as a boost for exports and trade, foreign investment, better wages and more jobs. In essence, these results confirm that the online campaigns took place along the same lines with the offline campaigns. The two sides used similar themes online and offline (according to previous research), making the two types of campaign complementary and convergent.

Second, the two sides used a limited number of general arguments in favor of self-determination. Only one in ten messages of both camps followed that path and touched upon more elements. Instead, both camps opted for a thematic use of messages in which key areas were targeted. Overall, they favored a breaking down of the broader themes into smaller and more tangible advantages of disadvantages. Although there was a dominance of economy among the themes, the particular sub-themes were quite different, as explained above. The broad theme of migration was also broken down into smaller sub-themes that can be easily understood by voters: the implications of migration for education, economy and health. Sometimes, the website posts used overlapping

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themes like migration and security for Leave or uncertainty and economic damage for Remain. The strategy of presenting self-determination also relied on unique themes on which each of the two camps were not directly attacked by the other camp: migration control and sovereignty and democracy (Leave) vs. human rights and environment, and uncertainty (Remain).

Third, the content of the themes was a combination of reasoning and emotionality. The analysed website posts illustrate that the Leave side tended to favor the emotionality in its themes more than the Remain side. Some of the quotes provided in the analysis section of this article are illustrative for the ways in which facts, ways of action, general challenges and potential threats were put together to provide a compelling story. The framing techniques varied from metaphor and contrast to spin. The latter was particularly visible when approaching the same issue from different angles, e.g. criminality as a result of migration for Leave and as a result of insufficient cooperation with neighbors and isolation for Remain.

These results reflect the complexity of the issue on which Britain voted in June 2016. The self-determination issue has many components and can hardly be narrowed down to one core message or to one key idea. Due to the history of the concept of self-determination in the British Eurosceptic movement, it is unsurprising that its usage in the referendum on Britain's exit from the EU was complex. For all these reasons the two camps moved beyond general messages and aimed to appeal to voters through more particular themes that can find an equivalent in the daily lives of citizens. This has been done systematically and quite similarly by the two camps. They sought to address both salient issues in society like economy or security, but also to build on themes where they had the upper hand (migration for Leave and uncertainty for Remain). Although exploratory in its nature, this article has potential empirical implications for the study of issue framing in campaign referendums. It shows how in a divisive campaign the two camps had a similar approach towards the themes and framing of self-determination. While this similarity may not immediately help in explaining the outcome of self-determination referendums – as indicated in the introduction to this special issue – it can indicate the necessity for a more thorough causal relationship between these messages and the outcome.

Further research could look deeper into the reasons for which the themes were selected or why these approaches resembled. Interviews with those involved directly in campaigns could provide useful insights into how they see self-determination. Such interviews could reveal if the chosen themes were proactive or reactive strategic moves. Alternatively, and closely linked to the idea of explaining the outcome from the introduction to the special issue, research could also account for the ways in which voters perceive the themes and frames presented during the campaign, e.g. through surveys. Also, future studies could expand the analysis to social media to account, for example, for the Twitter or Facebook messages used throughout the campaign. Since social media is considered an important tool for contemporary political participation, such an analysis could complement and nuance our findings.

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