# Political Discourse and National Identity Construction in the Brexit Campaign

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## Abstract

*The paper examines the function of political discourse, specifically campaign slogans, in shaping and challenging national identity throughout the Brexit campaign. Utilszing Goffman's framing theory and Brubaker's and Cooper's notions of identification and categorisation, the paper examines how the Leave and Remain campaigns employed language methods to influence popular conceptions of Britishness, sovereignty, and belonging. The study emphasizes how phrases like "Take Back Control" and "Stronger in Europe" shaped critical political and economic issues, constructing divergent national identity narratives that divided voters. This research seeks to analyze the rhetorical efficacy of these slogans to uncover the fundamental contradictions in national identity and sovereignty that influenced the Brexit referendum's outcome.*

**Keywords:** national identity, political discourse, framing theory, categorisation, identification.

## Introduction

Brexit has become one of the most significant political events of recent decades, not only affecting the geopolitical relationships between the United Kingdom and the European Union but also transforming how British national identity is perceived. National identity is considered a complex and multidimensional notion that encompasses how individuals and groups perceive themselves as part of a nation. It is influenced by historical, cultural, social, and political factors.

Numerous scholars across various disciplines have extensively explored the concept of national identity. For instance, Anderson (2006: 7) approached national identity from the perspective of a socially constructed phenomenon and described it as an „imagined community" where the members of a nation regard themselves as belonging to a greater collective, even though the majority of them will never come into direct contact with one another. Calhoun (1993) brought out the importance of national identity from a na-

tionalist viewpoint, framing it as a form of social cohesion and collective cultural consciousness that impacts political behaviour. In the context of Brexit, the most pertinent definition is provided by Smith (1991), who characterises it as a collective identity rooted in shared symbols, myths, and the historical and cultural memories of a nation. The concept aligns with how political discourse in the Brexit campaign utilised historical narratives and cultural symbols to construct and shape national identity. Additionally, it supports the idea that the campaign employs cultural elements to influence public opinion, highlighting a distinct British identity in contrast to European identity. Goffman's Framing Theory (1974) posits that the intentional application of language, metaphors, and narratives in political discourse profoundly affects public perceptions and interpretations of national identity. This process influences individual perceptions and associations with political and national narratives, thereby affecting their understanding of identity within the broader sociopolitical context. Expanding on Goffman's theory (1974), which emphasises the selective presentation of reality by political actors to shape public perception, Brubaker's and Cooper's (2000) notions of identification and categorisation offer an essential framework for comprehending the construction and mobilisation of national identity in political discourse. His theory of identification questions conventional views of identity as a fixed or inherent trait of people or organisations. He contends that identity ought to be perceived as a fluid, situational, and dynamic process, influenced by the interplay between self-perception and external categorisation. Their definition of categorisation emphasises the external mechanisms via which groups are defined and distinguished. Political entities, media, and organisations classify individuals and groups according to perceived political, social, or cultural characteristics, hence perpetuating divisions between "us" and "them".

## Aims and methods of research

The primary aim of this paper is to explore how political discourse, particularly through slogans used in the Brexit campaign, functions in constructing and contesting national identity. This analysis utilises Framing Theory (Goffman 1974) and Brubaker's and Cooper's (2000) concepts of identification and categorisation as the theoretical framework to examine the linguistic choices inherent in the campaign. The study analyses the role of political rhetoric, particularly campaign slogans, in influencing and contesting national identity during the Brexit campaign. This study analyses how the Leave and Remain campaigns utilised linguistic strategies to shape public

perceptions of Britishness, sovereignty, and belonging, drawing on Goffman's Framing Theory (1974) and Brubaker's and Cooper's (2000) concepts of identification and categorisation. The study highlights how slogans such as *"Take Back Control"* and *"Stronger in Europe"* influenced significant political and economic matters, creating contrasting national identity narratives that polarised voters. This study aims to examine the rhetorical effectiveness of these slogans to reveal the inherent inconsistencies in national identity and sovereignty that affected the Brexit referendum's result. . These slogans function as instruments for political communication and as mechanisms for influencing and mobilising popular perceptions of British identity, sovereignty, and belonging.

The research focuses on the following key objectives:

1. To identify the frames emerging from the Brexit campaign slogans, revealing how these frames shaped the narrative around national identity.
2. To examine the processes of categorisation and identification embedded in these slogans.
3. To analyze the linguistic strategies that enhanced the persuasive power of these slogans and contributed to their rhetorical effectiveness.

Given the presumed systematic disparities between the Leave and Remain campaigns, we propose that the rhetoric utilised in the slogans of both campaigns will disclose divergent, and potentially conflicting, frameworks of national identity and political interests. These contrasting rhetorical methods are anticipated to reveal fundamental differences in the formulation of British identity and may illustrate how these opposing discourses contributed to the wider polarisation of the public during the Brexit campaign.

## Research results

### 1 Sovereignty frame

The slogan *"Take Back Control"* used by the Leave campaign, framed sovereignty as the central issue of the Brexit debate. This perspective indicates that Britain's membership in the European Union resulted in a substantial loss of autonomy, highlighting the necessity to restore national authority over critical domains such as legislation, borders, and economic policy. The expression <u>take back</u> conjures a story of loss and restoration, resonating with those who perceived the EU as having compromised Britain's self-governance. This aligns closely with Goffman's (1974) concept that framing can galvanise popular sentiment by emphasising perceived threats to

sovereignty. The slogan is succinct and impactful linguistically. The term *take* denotes activity and urgency, whereas *back* signifies the restitution of something that rightfully belongs to Britain. *Control* serves as a broad but emotionally charged term, encompassing governance, economic regulation, and border security. The simplicity of this language made the slogan highly effective, as it was easily understood and emotionally resonant with voters (Chilton 2004). This type of framing capitalises on the emotional appeal of restoring what was lost, positioning the Leave campaign as a movement dedicated to defending British sovereignty against external influences. From a categorisation perspective, the slogan creates a clear distinction between Leave and Remain supporters. Those who support Brexit are framed as patriots who want to restore Britain's independence, while those who favour remaining in the EU are implicitly categorised as complicit in the loss of national sovereignty (van Dijk 1997). This binary categorisation is reinforced by the identification process: by aligning with the slogan, Leave voters identify themselves as protectors of British values and traditions, viewing the EU as an external force that has eroded Britain's autonomy. This identification with sovereignty strengthens their sense of national pride and creates a collective identity around the notion of British exceptionalism (Brubaker, Cooper 2000).

Conversely, the Remain campaign's slogan, *"Stronger in Europe,"* framed sovereignty not as an absolute concept but as something that can be enhanced through international cooperation. The slogan suggested that Britain's global influence and security were stronger within the EU, challenging the notion that sovereignty is synonymous with isolation. By using the comparative adjective *stronger*, the slogan implied that pooling sovereignty with EU members amplified Britain's power on the world stage. This linguistic choice countered the Leave campaign's narrative by reframing sovereignty as a collaborative endeavor rather than a purely national one (Fairclough 2013). In terms of categorisation, Remain supporters are portrayed as globally minded individuals who see the benefits of shared governance and collective influence. This categorisation implicitly casts Leave supporters as isolationist or inward-looking, unwilling to embrace the realities of a globally interconnected world. Identification with the Remain campaign's slogan encourages voters to see themselves not only as British citizens but also as part of a broader European community, reinforcing a dual sense of identity that encompasses both national and supranational affiliations (Brubaker, Cooper 2000).

## 2. Security frame

The phrase *"Let's Take Back Control of Our Borders"* employed by the Leave campaign, positioned national security as intrinsically linked to sovereignty, especially over immigration. The emphasis on _borders_ implies that Britain's security was undermined by its EU membership, perceived as hindering the nation's ability to exert complete control over immigration. This narrative resonates with voters' anxieties regarding external threats, portraying Brexit as a mechanism for reclaiming authority over immigration and, thus, safeguarding national security. The linguistic focus on _take back_ underscores the notion of retrieving lost authority, while _control_ and _borders_ suggest a feeling of territorial integrity and defense against external influence (Wodak, Krzyżanowski 2008). This slogan categorises Leave supporters as guardians of Britain's territorial integrity and security. Proponents of stricter border control are characterised as persons who value national safety and sovereignty. Conversely, Remain supporters are tacitly classified as more permissive on immigration and security issues, prepared to sacrifice national safety for the benefit of EU membership. This categorisation creates a stark divide between those who are seen as defenders of Britain's borders and those who are portrayed as indifferent to the security risks associated with EU immigration policies. This slogan also facilitates a strong process of identification. Leave voters, who align with this message see themselves as active participants in safeguarding Britain's sovereignty and security. By focusing on the need _to take back control of borders_, voters are encouraged to identify with a nationalistic vision of security, where control over immigration is central to protecting the nation from external threats. This identification process is closely tied to feelings of national pride and a desire to restore Britain's full autonomy over its territorial borders.

In response, the Remain campaign's slogan, *"Stronger, Safer, Better Off in Europe"* framed security as a collective responsibility, emphasising the benefits of shared intelligence and cooperative defense within the EU. The comparative adjective _safer_ reinforced the idea that Britain's security was enhanced, not diminished, by being part of a larger European network. This framing positioned the EU as a source of protection against global threats, suggesting that leaving the EU would weaken Britain's ability to defend itself against terrorism and other security risks. The language used in this slogan highlights interdependence and mutual security, contrasting with the isolationist tone of the Leave campaign. The possessive pronoun _our_ emphasises collective responsibility, while _safe_ appeals directly to voters' concerns about personal and national security. This framing categorises Remain supporters as pragmatic individuals who understand the importance

of alliances in maintaining national security, implicitly positioning Leave voters as isolationist and disconnected from the realities of modern security challenges (Wodak, Krzyżanowski 2008). Those who identify with this slogan are likely to see themselves as global citizens, recognising the value of shared security frameworks and viewing Brexit as a threat to Britain's ability to protect itself effectively.

## 3. Economic Frame

The slogan of the Leave campaign, *"Britain pays in, but gets nothing out"* framed the economic relationship between the UK and the European Union as one-sided and fundamentally unfair. It implied that Britain was contributing financially to the EU but receiving little or no benefit in return. This framing focused on the perceived imbalance of the UK's financial contributions, positioning EU membership as a drain on British resources without reciprocal value. The message capitalised on voter frustrations, suggesting that the UK was being economically exploited and that Brexit would correct this economic injustice by halting payments to the EU.

The simplicity and binary structure of the slogan—*pays in* versus *gets nothing out*—were crucial to its rhetorical effectiveness. Phrases *pays in* emphasised an ongoing financial burden, while *gets nothing* underscored a complete lack of return. The stark contrast between these terms heightened the perception of unfairness and waste, making the economic relationship with the EU seem like an onesided deal. Linguistically, the slogan is both emotionally charged and easy to digest, ensuring that the message resonated across a wide range of voters. As Chilton (2004) suggests, political slogans often rely on emotional undertones to amplify their persuasive power, and this was particularly true in how the Leave campaign framed economic arguments.

Through this framing, Leave supporters were categorised as financially prudent, concerned with fairness, and eager to protect British economic interests. They were presented as rational actors who wanted to end what they perceived as an unequal financial arrangement with the EU.

In contrast, Remain supporters were implicitly categorised as either indifferent to or complicit in this perceived imbalance. This division set up Leave voters as protectors of Britain's economic interests, while Remain voters were portrayed as willing to accept Britain's financial exploitation for the sake of political unity with the EU. Categorisations are essential in political discourse, as they reinforce in-group and out-group dynamics, creating a strong sense of identity within political movements. This slogan also individualised the economic argument by making voters feel that their

personal money—through taxes and contributions—was being misused. By personalising the issue, the slogan suggested that each British citizen was paying into a system that did not reward them, making Brexit appear as a rational and responsible financial choice. The implication was clear: by voting Leave, individuals could stop this perceived economic waste and ensure that their money would be spent on domestic needs rather than being lost to the EU. This individualised sense of economic injustice, made the decision to leave the EU feel not only logical but morally justified for voters who saw their financial interests at stake.

The Remain campaign reacted with the slogan *"EU Membership: Protecting Our Economy"* portraying the European Union as a protector of the UK's economic stability. It proposed that remaining in the EU would guarantee Britain's inclusion in a stable and prosperous economic framework, protecting the nation from foreign disruptions that could result from withdrawal. The emphasis on *protection* responded to voters' apprehensions on the hazards of Brexit, especially its capacity to jeopardize national economic security. This phrase framed Brexit as a peril to economic stability, emphasising that departing from the EU would result in considerable financial harm. The linguistic choices in the Remain slogan emphasised safety and security. The verb *protecting* was active and reassuring, that EU membership acted as a protective measure for Britain's economy. The use of the possessive pronoun *our* personalised the message, making it feel relevant to every individual in Britain, as if the economy belonged to all citizens and needed to be preserved for everyone's benefit. This personalisation of the economic argument strengthened the impact of the slogan, as it suggested that voters had a direct role in safeguarding the nation's economic well-being. Political messaging that personalises economic concerns tends to be more effective, as it makes the stakes feel more immediate and personal. This slogan distinctly characterised Remain supporters as those who prioritised economic stability and were wary of implementing substantial changes that could adversely impact the economy. It depicted them as pragmatic and risk-averse, prioritising the safeguarding of the existing economic system over the introduction of uncertainty. Conversely, Leave proponents were tacitly labeled as imprudent, prepared to endanger the economy for the pursuit of political autonomy. This split highlighted the distinction between individuals who valued economic stability (Remain) and those who embraced risk (Leave), establishing a narrative of caution versus audacity. By inviting voters to think about how Brexit could affect their jobs, incomes, and overall financial well-being, the slogan *"Protecting Our Economy"* individualises the benefits of EU membership. It encouraged voters to see themselves as stakeholders in the national economy, making it their personal respon-

sibility to protect it by voting to remain. The phrase _our economy_ fostered a personal connection to the broader economic landscape, suggesting that each individual had a role in ensuring economic stability. This personalised appeal made the slogan more impactful, implying that every voter had a stake in preserving Britain's economic health, much like van Dijk's (1997) assertion that political discourse often hinges on creating a shared sense of responsibility among voters.

Overall, the contrasting economic frames of the Leave and Remain campaigns illustrated the deep divisions over how voters perceived the EU's impact on Britain's financial well-being. While the Leave campaign focused on economic self-sufficiency and fairness, the Remain campaign emphasized stability and protection, presenting two competing visions of Britain's economic future.

## Conclusion

The Brexit campaign underscores the significant influence of political discourse on national identity and political conduct. The Leave and Remain campaigns strategically employed framing, linguistic choices, and categorisation to influence voter views by offering divergent images of Britain's sovereignty, security, and economic prospects. The Leave campaign's slogans, notably _"Take Back Control"_ and _"Britain pays in, but gets nothing out,"_ leveraged themes of diminished sovereignty and economic exploitation, resonating with voters' national pride and aspiration to reclaim British autonomy. These slogans portrayed the EU as an external entity eroding Britain's self-governance while depicting Leave proponents as champions of British values and autonomy.

In contrast, the Remain campaign utilised themes like _"Stronger in Europe"_ and _"Protecting Our Economy"_ to depict EU membership as vital for ensuring Britain's security and economic stability. Their strategy highlighted collaboration and common power, framing EU membership as a method to augment British influence and safeguard the nation against external dangers. Although it possessed logical allure, the Remain campaign failed to generate the emotional fervour that the Leave campaign effectively captured. The analysis of these slogans, demonstrates that political discourse in the Brexit campaign transcended mere policy advocacy; it galvanised national identity by formulating conflicting narratives regarding the essence of British identity in the 21st century. The Leave campaign's focus on restoring sovereignty and economic fairness strongly resonated with people disillusioned by globalisation and supranational governance, whilst the Rema-

in campaign's call for stability and cooperation was insufficient to neutralise the emotional impact of this narrative.

In conclusion, the Brexit vote transcended a mere political debate on EU membership; it represented a wider conflict concerning national identity and Britain's global standing. The slogans utilised by both campaigns served as potent instruments of political dialogue, influencing public perception and galvanising voters by connecting political decisions with entrenched convictions such as British identity, sovereignty, and security. The examination of these discursive methods highlights the significant influence of political discourse in forming and challenging national identity, providing essential insights into how analogous processes can influence forthcoming political discussions and referendums.

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