**Brexit: is this truly a victory of the people against the elite?**

**By**

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**(1064 word)**

Many of the analyses that have emerged as a result of the United Kingdom’s referendum to remain in or to leave the European Union have dubbed the Brexit win a triumph of the people against the elites. The main spokespersons of the “leave” camp, Nigel Farage for instance, based their campaign on the claim that they were siding with the people against the cosmopolitan elite.

“Brexiters”, however, were led by what could arguably be called the political, economic, and cultural elite of the country. Think of Boris Johnson, for instance, former mayor of London who holds a degree from Oxford, or of Michael Gove, who also studied at Oxford and is Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, or of Nigel Farage, who was formerly a broker in the City and is currently the European Deputy and Member of the famous private East India Club, to name a few. Besides the biographical details of the main “leave” camp representatives, the victory of the people against the elites also doesn’t seem to take into account several key socio-economic factors.

From a simplistic point of view, the “people against the elite” perspective might suggest that the people represent only 52% of the population and that the greatly loathed elite represent 48% of the population (not to mention the 28% of registered voters who did not exercise their right to vote in the referendum). Shown this way, the concept of elite versus people seems ambiguous, as the leading class could not possibly represent 48% of the population. Furthermore, using the people against the elite theory to describe the Brexit victory does not account for important generational, birthplace, regional, and educational divisions.

The first schism between the electorate is generational: voters younger than 50 largely voted to stay in the European Union (75% of 18-24 year olds and 56% of 25-49 year olds), while older voters opted for Brexit (56% of 50-64 year olds and 61% of those aged 65 and older).

As can be expected, a majority of citizens who immigrated voted to stay in the EU: of the United Kingdom’s 382 localities, dozens are made up of more than 30% of citizens born outside of the country. Only four of these voted for the “leave” camp (Luton, Hillingdon, Barking & Dagenham, and Slough).

The third division is geographic: regions in the East, the Midlands, and Wales (ironically a major recipient of EU development funds) largely favoured an exit from the EU, while others, including Scotland, Northern Ireland, and big cities such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool voted to maintain the status quo[[1]](#footnote-1).

During the campaign, the ten major British trade unions leaders have issued a letter, published in *The Guardian[[2]](#footnote-2)*, calling their six million members to vote to stay in the European Union (EU) during the June 23 referendum. Considering that employees in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are more likely to be trade union members than the UK as a whole[[3]](#footnote-3), we can noticed that, except for Wales that voted “Leave” at 52.5%, Northern Ireland and Scotland voted “Remain” at respectively 55.8% and 62.0%. Exception to the rule, London has the lowest trade union density in the United Kingdom and voted at 59.9% for the “Remain” option.

Finally, education levels indicate a fifth division in the electorate: those holding a secondary school education voted in great part to leave (66%) while those with a university education mainly voted to stay in the EU (71%).

This brief statistical analysis shows that several important divisions exist between the different types of voters. However, none of these allow for a clear division between the “people” and the “elite.” Using these data, the presupposed “elite” might be defined as those who are young, born outside of the country, live in specific regions and hold a university degree and a trade union membership. Rather than coining Brexit a victory of the people against the elite, it would be fair to say that the results of the election indicated a victory of anti-elitist and populist sentiment. It was a victory of the inflammatory discourse that attempts to separate and manipulate crowds, telling them that they do not belong to the elite and therefore must think differently from the elite. This type of discourse is far from the courageous political debate that attempts to convince the electorate, using careful reflection and argumentation, that certain opinions are rooted in reason and vie for the public interest.

Ironically, Brexit’s anti-elitist discourse was upheld by the populist elite that named themselves spokespersons of the public opinion. Public debates on this issue were blocked by tactics to leverage an opposition between an imaginary people and a hated elite, rather than fueled by a discussion on ideas and ideology. Rather than debate, the intention of these spokespersons was to divide and as a result, democracy suffered.

**Bibliography**

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1. Following is breakdown of the votes by quoted regions and cities: East (56,5% Leave); Yorkshire & The Humber (57.7% Leave) South East (51.8% Leave); East Midlands (58.8% Leave); West Midlands (59.3% Leave); Wales (52.5% Leave); Scotland (62% Remain); Northern Ireland (55.8% Remain); London (59.9% Remain); Manchester (60.4% Remain) and Liverpool (58.2% Remain). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The letter “Trade union members should vote to stay in the EU” was signed by Len McCluskey (Unite), Dave Prentis (Unison), Tim Roache (GMB), Manuel Cortes (TSSA), John Smith (Musicians’ Union), Dave Ward (CWU), Matt Wrack (FBU), John Hannett (USDAW), Gerry Morrissey (Bectu), Roy Rickhuss (Community) and published in *The Guardian* on June 6, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These three regions are the only regions in the United Kington with a trade union density superior to 30% in 2015. For the whole United Kingdom, the proportion of employees who are trade union members in 2015 is 24.7%. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)