Whether in or out, Britain is divided

EU future

EU vote may be close but problems will not evaporate, writes Matthew Goodwin

Britain is about to decide whether or not to continue its membership of the European Union. For the first time in more than 40 years the British people will have a direct say over their relationship with their European neighbours. Long known for their higher levels of scepticism towards the EU, and their much lower levels of knowledge about how the organization works, the British people’s decision at the remain-or-leave plebiscite looks set to have a major affect on the future evolution of the EU, which is already grappling with multiple crises, as well as domestic British politics.

Contrary to early expectations of a comfortable win for the Remain camp, for much of the referendum campaign the race has been close – too close for some. According to the ‘Poll of Polls’, which calculates average support based on the six most recent polls, at the start of the year the Remain camp was fairly comfortably in front, by 10 points, with 55 per cent to Leave’s 45 per cent. Yet since then the race has narrowed. At the beginning of April Remain was on 51 per cent to Leave’s 49 per cent and at the start of May the two sides were tied, with each on 50 per cent of the vote – once voters who said they were undecided had been excluded.

While it is now fashionable to treat such polls with scepticism, there is also some evidence to suggest that it is the Remain camp that holds some important advantages. A first and somewhat neglected finding is that most voters in Britain are not expecting Brexit to happen. It is often argued that prediction markets are more accurate than the polls and if this is true then Remain has little to worry about – while polls tell us that both sides are within the margin of error, only around 17-20 per cent of voters actually think that the result will be a Leave vote.

Second, if the referendum is – as many expect it to be – decided by public worries over risks to jobs and the economy then there is no question that those who are campaigning to keep Britain in the EU hold the strongest card. As reflected in the results of numerous surveys, a majority of voters’ associate Brexit with Britain having less global influence, as the bigger economic risk, as being bad for jobs, as making the country’s economy – and their own finances – worse off, as being bad for pensions and as being the riskier option.

This is not to say that voters do not associate Brexit with any benefits – most think that Brexit could actually reduce terrorism, would be good for the NHS, would improve Britain’s immigration system, would lower overall levels of immigration and would – on balance – be ‘better for Britain’. Yet the problem for the Leave camp is that most voters have also clearly concluded that the overall risks of Brexit outweigh the benefits.

Many Britons voice dissatisfaction with how EU membership – notably through the free movement of EU workers – is changing Britain but they simultaneously are wary of the risks that accompany the alternatives. If this remains the case until polling day then it will be difficult for Eurosceptics to avoid the conclusion that they failed to de-risk Brexit in the minds of voters and set out a compelling alternative. Given that Eurosceptics have been agitating for a referendum since the passing of the Maastricht Treaty more than 20 years ago, it does appear remarkable how little they have been able to say about what a post-Brexit Britain looks like.

Third, at least in the eyes of ordinary voters, it is the Remain camp that has, overall, had the better campaign. Recent surveys by companies such as ORB suggest that

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most voters feel that the Remain camp has offered the clearer vision of what will happen after the referendum, has run the best campaign with a clear message and is more credible and trustworthy. Interestingly, more voters also say they have heard from Remain. The effects of campaigns are often exaggerated but such findings feed into a sense that most people simply do not view the Leave camp as a credible option.

Fourth, while at the time of writing the two sides remain closely bunched within the margin of error, Remain has arguably enjoyed a stronger position of late. Through much of April the pro-EU side was ahead in most polls and, particularly in polls conducted by telephone, and held commanding leads of up to 11 points. With not long to go, it is worth noting that Remain’s position in these phone polls, which until recently had been registering falling support for remaining in the EU, has now stabilized. Recent phone polls have given the pro-EU side a significant lead of 7 or 8 points, which is broadly in line with more rigorous academic surveys.

None of this is to say that Remain will definitely emerge victorious, although these underlying advantages help to explain why the betting markets currently give this outcome an implied chance of 71 per cent.

Much will also depend on how levels of turnout affect the vote and how voters respond on the day. Indeed, throughout the campaign we have learned a great deal about who these voters are. Commentators often assume that this is a referendum about the detail of EU membership yet the reality is quite different. It is, in my opinion, far more accurate to view this moment in British political life as merely the latest expression of a longstanding divide that underpins our society.

On June 23 support for remaining in the EU will arrive mainly from younger or middle-aged Britons who tend to have more qualifications, social mobility and financial security. These are voters who tend to reside in more urban, prosperous and diverse parts of the country, places such as London, Oxford and Brighton, where in surveys public support for Brexit has reached some of the lowest levels on record. These are also voters who, when pushed, tend to view their vote as an attempt to protect Britain’s economic position and express their progressive and internationalist values.

On the other side of the divide are the Leave voters, who look quite different and clearly feel uneasy with the general direction of Britain – older, white, working-class or self-employed Britons who are often struggling on lower incomes and have few qualifications to their name.

Identity is also important to these voters who, amid a fragile United Kingdom, are far more likely to align with an English rather than British feeling of identity. Unlike their Remain counterparts, these voters view their decision on June 23 as an effort to reduce immigration, strengthen national identity and preserve their way of life. They are also slightly more likely to claim that they will turn out on the day. But be careful not to read too much into claimed voting intention: if all the people who said they would turn out at the 2015 general election had actually turned out then we would be currently living under Prime Minister Ed Miliband.

For the Leave voters Britain’s EU membership is merely one of an array of threats that they feel to their identity, national culture and ways of life. This is why, should Britain vote to remain in the EU, the referendum might do little to resolve this underlying divide and why there will remain a significant reservoir of public support for campaigns that oppose European integration, the free movement of EU workers, rising net migration and rapid social change more generally.

Should Leave exit the referendum with upwards of 40 per cent of the national vote it is difficult to envisage a scenario in which these intense concerns over Europe and migration simply evaporate.

In summary, so long as immigration, national identity, borders and security remain salient then there will remain in Britain – as in other European states – a constituency of disgruntled voters who are more than willing to continue to protest against the established parties, regardless of what happens on June 23.

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