# BREXIT: A REFERENDUM UNPREPARED FOR SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

# ABSTRACT

The Brexit referendum has consolidated itself as the most divisive political confrontation in the EU's history. Most of the heated debate surrounding it has been observed and discussed online so for the purpose of this paper we will be analysing the subject through the lenses of social media and determine if the major parties at the time truly understood the importance of the referendum and that it would have been most likely won on the web. We shall also be looking at the main actors involved with Brexit and the claims and irregularities that have taken place during the campaign, as well as trying to determine if social media is a healthy landscape for democracy.

# INTRODUCTION

Brexit is without a doubt one of the most unexpected and divisive events in recent memory, and once it is eventually carried out, will influence decisively the future international developments for decades to come. The United Kingdom formally left the European Union by February first 2020. The only real and undeniable truth regarding Brexit is that the UK's public opinion has been fractured and splintered by resentment and enragement for the other side, with polarized banter commonly making headlines in news all around Europe and beyond. In numerous interviews, too many to list, common citizens all over the British Isles express a shared sense of frustration, regardless of political affiliation, social background or age band, a sense of distrust and contempt towards the current political establishment that rules the United Kingdom, a political establishment that has been unable to properly react to the change brought about by the people's decision, a political establishment that presented itself to be incompetent and clueless, even weak for all of the world to see. What has been clear however is the will of the British to conclude this sad, by many even humiliating experience that is causing continuous protests all over the country.

But how have we come to this point? What were the main factors that brought us here? Truth is that there are too many variables to determine with certainty which was the cardinal factor that determined this outcome. So far many studies have focused mainly on the overall activities and undertakings of the Leave campaign and the impact it had on social media and try to pinpoint the outcome as a direct result of their decision making. One aspect that is often outshined and often overlooked in these analyses is a similar consideration of the Remain campaign and the efforts they have undertaken to win the referendum. So, for the purpose of this paper, we will be looking at social the media aspect, popular sites such as Twitter and Facebook to establish if it was a determining factor during the Brexit campaign in changing and reinforcing public opinion and assess its influence when compared to other kinds of traditional media, seeing what was the emotional response connected to Brexit threads online and how interactions on social media have affected the people's choice regarding the 2016's referendum.

The result of the Brexit referendum came like a frozen breeze for the vast majority of people around the world. At first major news outlets were shocked by the result as it seemed impossible that such an event had really occurred. However, those who had been observing the referendum closely and the campaigning on both sides carefully knew that such an occurrence was significantly more than a remote possibility. Support on both sides came in many forms, however one in particular revealed itself to be the tipping point for victory, the debate online. By 2016 most of the UK's electorate had

transitioned from traditional media to new media such as online newspapers and social media platforms.

If we take a close look at the reach of social media influence on the general public in the UK we find that there has been a steep decline of the print and a constant rise of social media news sources, and that they account as a source of information for about 35% of the UK's public (Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2016). Most importantly, social media has become the second most important source after dedicated news sites (Newman et al 2016). In another two studies it appeared that about 43% of people who receive news online do so through social media, amongst the young ranging from 16 to 24, the percentage rises to 61%, of which 16% rely solely on social media for news (Ofcom 2015-2017).

These findings are hardly surprising, the sheer speed and accessibility of online information generates an enormous appeal on the public and grants a quick and easy way to receive news with a simple swipe on our smartphones. We should not forget however that social media is not simply a passive medium to receive information, since most of the appeal of social media is to take an active approach on discussions and to share ideas and opinions on the matter at hand. As soon as social media sites became more and more prevalent politicians were quick to spot the potential influence that this audience oriented medium could have on public opinion, in fact as of 2016 most of the UK's most influential politicians had a Twitter account (around 87%) and a pool of nearly 15.8 million of accounts in the UK (Benoit 2017). This data gives us a rather clear picture of just how important social media had become for the UK's electorate by 2016. The general appeal had moved from traditional media such as radio or television to new media such as social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

For those who had paid particular attention to this shift knew that the media battle on the Internet would have been more important than ever to win the referendum. Amongst these there were Farage, Boris Johnson and their entourages who had set out to win an apparently impossible referendum since they were not only not well respected by the UK's main establishment's political forces, but were also frequently involved in numerous controversies regarding their personal lives or divisive messages while also being frequently accused of being racist and classist. And yet by February first 2020 the United Kingdom had officially left the European Union, and on the last day, Farage until that point a member of the European Parliament mocked and the EU for and reinforced the willingness expressed by the British on the day of the referendum people to be independent.

Yet rather bizarrely the question presents itself repeatedly throughout the last couple of years, most shockingly than the victory of Leave, how could Remain lose the unlosable election while having

an enormous head start on their main adversaries? Was it due to a lack of attention or effort by the Remain forces or was it due to the resources and efforts put in place by Leave, such that they could not be countered through traditional means? Could it be one of the two or perhaps a mixture of the two? It is indeed a rather difficult question to answer as the main actors are numerous and the variables in play even more. Throughout this paper we shall be looking at how the two sides of the referendum constructed their campaigns online, what steps the main political actors took to support their sides, the main messages used to generate support and how effectively the Leave and Remain campaigns managed to mobilize audiences. More importantly perhaps we shall attempt to get an accurate picture of how capable were the two sides facing the referendum and if they were capable to fully utilize social media to reach their goals. After having assessed all these variables we shall try and determine if the undertones, messages, tools for information gathering and state of public discourse online are indeed useful tools for democracy or if they are indeed a harmful tool to the democratic process that reward purely chaotic banter without presenting to the public solid evidence.

## THE LEAVE CAMPAIGN ONLINE

The Leave campaign online has been characterized for its whole duration by a very active, sensational, often controversial online campaign heavily characterized by a high activity on social media, especially Twitter, and a great presence on non-establishment communication channels. The personalities behind the Leave campaign were even more controversial and divisive for their previous history and messages, not to mention the innumerable claims and slogans thrown around the campaign period and the general distrust towards their figureheads. Yet Leave managed to do what at the time seemed unthinkable and was capable to get the majority on election day. How was this possible that Cameron would lose to a fringe group and could the result have been foreseen? This question requires a deep inquiry rather than a straight answer for it would be disingenuous to give a simple answer to a complex matter. Therefore, in this chapter we shall take a deep look at Leave's Twitter campaign and the various characters that were mainly involved with the success of said campaign and to conclude we shall be looking at the various claims made throughout the referendum and trying to understand why they were so effective.

**Campaigning on Twitter**

Twitter has proven to be a fundamental tool for the Leave campaign, not only because it has seen a significant rise of popularity during the last decade, but also for the level of engagement it produces, from the original poster to the single individuals able to share and retweet the original.

Twitter, because of its ease of adaptation and real-time responses from the followers, is one of the most widely used social media platforms by politicians (Matsuo, Benoit 2019).

Leave was quick in capitalizing on this factor, making it one of their most effective tools for campaigning, not only because it made communication easier and quicker, but also because it because it engaged voters on a more personal level. The Leave campaign were faster out of the gates on Twitter and dominated even when at a lower ebb in opinion polls (Llewellyn, Cram 2016). From the data available the Leave head start was apparent, they knew the true potential of this tool and were quick outrun and surpass Remain.

Another characteristic that Twitter held was the capability of fostering more heated debates compared to a face to face discussion, often leading to polarized banter between users.

Leave supporters were aware of this, in order to have a successful campaign you must be capable to involve users and potential voters to a deeper level both to bolster your ranks and at the same time get your message around by having users spread it as much as possible.

This has been already being analysed in many studies before as Twitter is the space where most heated debates take place and as a consequence they also generate a greater reach and are more likely to be shared and discussed (Kim and Yoo, 2012; Dang-Xuan et al.; 2013; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013).

Polarization for Leave was an incredibly useful tool, as it can be utilized to win over strategic geographical areas for the final vote, in particular Leave was able to determine that the communication between users was polarized, and the polarization was correlated with the geographical placement of Twitter users (Bastos, Mercea and Baronchelli, 2018).


This strategy proved to be incredibly effective, Max Hanska and Stefan Bauchowitz (2017) took on the task of reconstructing an accurate representation on Twitter's info-sphere by collecting more than 7 and a half millions of tweets dating back to the months preceding the 2016's referendum and subsequently dividing them between leave and remain oriented. Their results are unambiguous, leave supporters were not only more numerous but also more active by a factor of 1.75-2.3. Leave users were also significantly more prone to interacting and coordinating with each other, rarely bothering to challenge their ideals or confronting the other side of the debate in a deeper manner than repeating slogans or sharing memes, who had become by this point undeniable instruments to

spread political ideas in a humorous manner or deeply distasteful depending on the subject at hand or the interlocutor. This lead to a situation where users are not exposed to different opinions and different views from their own online, and as such find themselves surrounded by other individuals that agree with them, creating the so called "echo chambers", isolated networks of likeminded people that reinforce their own believes while ignoring outsider views. This has been observed in studies conducted by Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) and Halberstam and Knight (2016), the latter have also conducted a study in 2016 on Twitter and found out that users on Twitter engage with other users sharing similar ideology and find a high degree of homophily (e.g., compatibility).

Furthermore, Leave MPs were far more active on Twitter than Remain MPs, generating a larger amount of tweets, greater user involvement as well as retweets and mentions, as well as cooperating better with other Leave MPs by mentioning them and retweeting them more often than Remain consistently throughout the campaing. (Matsuo and Benoit 2019).

All in all, we can see that the overall activity of Leave on Twitter was greater and more effective than their counterpart, it is even more clear to see once we look at the daily activity in the month leading to the referendum as shown in the table below from the study conducted by Llewellyn and Cram (2016).
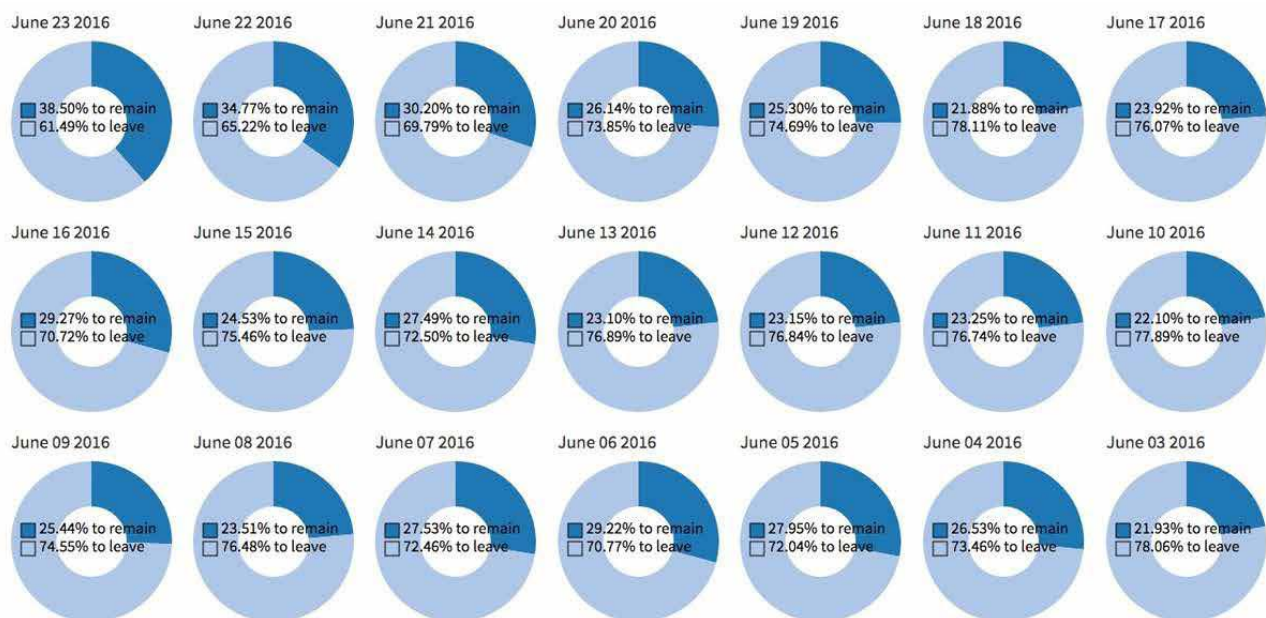


**Figure 1:** Pro-Leave and Pro-Remain Sentiment in Twitter June 2016

**Ukip and Nigel Farage**


Nigel Farage has been perhaps the most outspoken critique of the European Union since the 90's. In his political youth Mr Farage joined the Conservatives but became disillusioned with the way the party was

going under John Major. Like many on the Eurosceptic wing, he was furious when the prime minister signed the Maastricht Treaty, stipulating an "ever-closer union" between European nations. Mr Farage decided to break away, becoming one of the founder members of the UK Independence Party, at that time known as the Anti-Federalist League. Even when his deep distrust of the European Union should have driven him away from its political mechanisms, Farage was determined to see the United Kingdom out of the Union, so he became a member of the European Parliament to see his design made manifest, no matter how much his ideas were shunned away by both his domestic political environment or the little support he could muster form abroad. And for the next 20 years he remained constant in this intention.

He has never hidden its disapproval of this institution, remaining constant throughout the years that the UK should leave the EU.  When the referendum was called for from Cameron, Farage lost no time and made sure that Ukip would be one of the main forces leading the battle for the referendum, a party devoted to guarantying that Leave would win. Farage and his associates have always been looked at with scorn and distrust by all establishment parties in Westminster, so it would seem bizarre that a fringe and recently formed party would be able to generate so much attention on traditional media and momentum throughout the course of the campaign. Despite these glaring disadvantages Farage and his party were taken on board the Leave vessel by the Conservatives and other Leave campaigners as the last regarded and additional force on their side essential if they wanted to beat Remain.  Ukip proved to be a force to be reckoned with online, as despite being a fringe party always managed to be at the centre of debates, one of the famous ones being the hashtag #usepens on Twitter (Mary Mitchell, 2016). Farage's presence on YouTube could also not be disregarded as most of his interviews were reposted online and gaining a lot of traction often reaching hundreds of thousands if not millions of views. This is due in large part to the controversial ideas he broadcasted, the most famous of which was the topic of immigration, generating an uproar of outrage by other political forces on the opposite side of the spectrum, especially the progressives.  Nonetheless this granted unprecedented visibility on the news, given to him primarily by his opponents, several interviews of his despite the negative response generated several millions of views on YouTube, both by Leave lead channels and by several progressive news outlets such as the Guardian. In the comments sections of these videos we can see the effects

of echo chambers clashing with each other in heated debates. As detailed by Dr. Neil Ewen (2016) some of the most controversial messages ever released by Ukip include firstly a video showing images of riots across Europe voiced-over by Donald Trump reading a poem about a supposedly injured snake that bites and poisons the person who had rushed to help. Then they released a photo of ISIS fighters accompanied by the message: "Act now before we see an Orlando-style atrocity…" in reference to the homophobic mass killing of the previous 12th of June. And then they released a picture were Farage was photographed in front of the notorious 'Breaking Point' poster featuring refugees fleeing Syria.

Yet this is exactly what Farage and his party were hoping for, capitalizing on a strong backbone of disillusioned, sceptics and old British voters who had lost all hope in the status quo and needed their thirst for a radical political change quenched. Farage mainly aimed to be seen as tribune for the disenfranchised, not just the older, comfortably off middle classes alienated by rapid social change caused by mass immigration, but working class voters left behind in the hunt for jobs and seemingly ignored by the increasingly professionalised "political class".

Ukip focused on getting across the message that the EU was just a waste of public funds for the UK and that the European technocracy should be ended then and there to regain political independence in an increasingly globalised world.  The objective was not to propose an alternative to the status quo but rather that anything would have been preferable to the current establishment. As Prof. John FitzGibbon (2016) put it, Leave campaigners were clear on what they disliked about the EU, were in unison about future participation in the Single Market as part of a wider global trade strategy for the economy, but were negligent in articulating how this goal would be achieved.

The key to success that granted Ukip and Farage these surprising results was the target audience they spoke to that made them successful on the day of the referendum.

Overall we can see that despite being clearly an outsider and being looked at with distrust by the establishment, Farage managed to generate quite a lot of noise in the English political scene and become one of the most well-known figureheads amongst Leave, perhaps alongside Boris Johnson if not more as far as popularity is regarded.

**Arron Banks**

Aaron Banks is a very wealthy entrepreneur who has been involved deeply in the political campaign of Nigel Farage and their eventual success on election day. Banks has long been a friend and colleague of Nigel Farage as they share the same ideology and goals for decades. As Arron himself recalls in the book "The Bad Boys of Brexit" (2016) his first direct involvement with Ukip came

about in 2014 when he met at launch with Nigel Farage who was asking a donation of a hundred thousand dollars for the party, Arron accepted and first ended on the spotlight of British media since he was formerly a donor for the Conservatives.  Right after the referendum campaign had been announced the two set in motion immediately, Farage provided the image of the strong leader and anti-establishment figure, meanwhile Banks would ensure financial support for the cause. In 2015 as reported in Shipman's "All Out War" Arron and Farage were debating what to do about the referendum as they thought Conservative Euro sceptics were too disorganized and would never allow Farage into the debate as he would repel swing voters. In the summer of 2015 Banks gave a voice to Farage by funding a separate online campaign called Leave.EU hoping to get conservatives on their side of the debate. The same year Banks consulted with an American pollster called Gerry Gunster looking for advice, the latter told him that referendums are won mainly by emotional appeal accompanied with facts. Farage himself described later in an interview the process: "Banks created content that was very different in nature to what the establishment Conservative politicians were doing," he said. "It had more humour. It had more edge. Not everything they did was everyone's cup of tea, but hey, that's life. It was a much more populist campaign." Things were not smooth with the rest of the leave movement by this point however, as there were clear divisions on how the general campaign should be led. Arron was very vocal about his disliking for this and even described, perhaps not too flatteringly, Douglas Carswell, a Eurosceptic M.P. and a key figure within Vote Leave, as "borderline autistic with mental illness wrapped in." Again in his book he continued "We played the media like a Stradivarius," noting that "if we spent eight million in the referendum, we got thirty-five, forty million in free publicity" by outraging liberal commentators. He wanted to follow the example of Donald Trump overseas and his style of campaigning and strong online presence. Arron Banks himself confirmed this point "We are going to be blunt, edgy, and controversial, Donald Trump-style," Banks wrote in "The Bad Boys of Brexit," adding, "If BBC Producers aren't spluttering organic muesli over their breakfast tables every morning, we won't be doing our job."

From the passages above we can deduce that although Banks was not directly involved in interviews or in campaigning he had clear ideas on how the campaign should be led and how this would have translated into the digital world were the overwhelming part of the debate was taking place, while his Leave allies were often in direct opposition to his ideas and opted for a more traditional style of campaign. His views were in direct opposition to the mainstream Leave position and yet their target audience was exactly the opposite of the Euro friendly well off higher class, while Banks sustained in multiple occasions that Leave.EU was created to appeal to the average working class worker, who had serious concerns with the ongoing European integration and

immigration implications. Iain Dale, a broadcaster and a prominent Brexiteer, who published "Bad Boys," told Ed Caesar in an interview (The Chaotic Triumph of Arron Banks, the "Bad Boy of Brexit", 2019) that if Leave.EU had been the official campaign, Leave would certainly have lost, but that "without a doubt" the two campaigns had dovetailed.

**Cambridge Analytica**

Understanding the audience you are trying to appeal to has always been a central pillar for any kind of political campaign. Not only will you be able to gain grass root support without encountering stark resistance, the most beneficial aspect will undoubtedly be being capable to immediately win over your audience by telling them exactly what they want to be told. A phrase usually used to express exactly this is winning the hearts and minds of the people, once that is done you shall have the keys to the front gates of an impregnable fortress for it is much more likely that people will follow you because you inforce them believes rather than trying to change their minds or challenging their lifestyle. This is exactly what the organization known as Cambridge Analytica sought to do for the right client.

Cambridge Analytica was a company devoted to data analysis and data mining, giving advice to political campaigns on the base of the data collected at their disposal. What set Cambridge Analytica apart from other similar companies was their capability to construct a very accurate psychometric profile of users they had information on. Once the profile has been constructed, messages can be custom made to appeal to a certain audience that matches that particular kind of profile, making more appealing, more effective and most of all pin point accurate on the target. This is why for many decades, campaigns have made use of control groups and think tanks in order to get the message they wanted to spread just right. One can easily imagine the kind of advantage a similar kind of technology could give a particular candidate during an election or a referendum and they would be perfectly correct. Several famous politicians have requested Cambridge Analytica's services prior to Brexit, amongst which we can draw Ted Crux and Donald Trump. What made Brexit's case special was that at the time Cambridge Analytica was drawing these profiles using data coming from the profile of Facebook's users without their consent, all while Facebook knowingly allowed this to happen. This nearly limitless database would allow to track users based on their friendships their affiliations and their preferred media, even allowing them to construct the profile of citizens who may have never voted or partaken in political discussions elsewhere.

Needless to say if Cambridge Analytica did provide paid services to the Leave using user's data without their consent to shift political opinion, it would constitute a major criminal offence.

Collaboration between Cambridge Analytica and Leave has been discussed, investigated and reported numerous times since the scandal about the company broke out. The whole affair is surrounded by speculations accusations and theories following what has been revealed during the last years, as such one can imagine just how hard it can be to draw with certainty a clear line regarding the nature of cooperation amongst the two parties without risking to report a false or distorted truth. What has emerged with certainty however, is that during investigations conducted by the House of Commons the following has been reported, taken from a direct excerpt from Alex Hern's article on the Guardian (2019):  - Brittany Kaiser, the former director of business development at the shuttered political consultancy, supplied the emails to the digital, culture, media and sport committee. She argued that they showed that, despite claims to the contrary, the partnership between the two organisations went beyond exploring the potential for future collaboration. "Chargeable work was completed for Ukip and Leave.EU, and I have strong reasons to believe that those data sets and analysed data processed by Cambridge Analytica … were later used by the Leave.EU campaign without Cambridge Analytica's further assistance," Kaiser wrote in a letter to Damian Collins, the committee chair. The emails show Cambridge Analytica staff, including Julian Wheatland, the company's chief operating officer, discussing with Leave.EU staff whether or not to share the results of analysis performed on Ukip data. "We have generated some interesting findings that we can share in the presentation, but we are certain to be asked where the data came from. Can we declare that we have analysed Ukip membership and survey data," Wheatland asked Leave.EU's Andy Wigmore and Ukip's then general secretary, Matthew Richardson. He was rebuffed. Wheatland also told Cambridge Analytica staff that the relationship was intended to be formalised. "I had a call with Andy Wigmore today (Arron [Banks, founder of Leave.EU]'s right-hand man) and he confirmed that, even though we haven't got the contract with the Leave written up, it's all under control and it will happen just as soon as Matthew Richardson has finished working out the correct contract structure between Ukip, CA and Leave," Wheatland said in an email to Cambridge Analytica staff. -

Following the fallout of the scandal members of Leave.EU and Ukip amongst which Arron Banks have repeatedly denied having had a collaboration with Cambridge Analytica, stating that no transactions have ever taken place. Cambridge Analytica went bankrupt shortly after the scandal became matter of public opinion. Regardless of any evidence that transactions between the two parties had taken place or not, it would be naive to assume that Cambridge Analytica's work had no

influence on the overall Leave modus operandi and strategy given what close relationship the two shared during that time period. As such it would be even more naïve on our part to assume that such work had no concrete influence on the overall result of the Brexit referendum.

**Dominic Cummings**

Dominic Cummings was the person responsible for the overall architecture of Leave when it came to the strategies and message deliveries during the referendum campaigning. Quite the outsider and an unconventional character he has been part of the UK's political scene long before the referendum of 2015.

In the late 1990's made his first appearance worthy of note by entering the world of right-wing pressure groups becoming campaign director for Business for Sterling a campaigning group dedicated to stop the UK from entering the Euro zone in 2001. Despite never being part of the Conservative party he was still of the idea that the euro was a project doomed to fail, same thing was valid for the EU, a bureaucratic lumbering giant. His distaste for bureaucracies which he considered just a great waste of public resources, and his low consideration of politicians gave him the motivation needed to campaign against a referendum called for by Tony Blaire in 2004, whose aim was to form a regional assembly in north east England. John Elliot remembers how during the referendum Cummings helped him out to set the agenda for the day and remembers him in that occasion as "Not very talkative but highly influential and single minded". The NO vote later on with 78% of votes. The success brought by this result brought him to the attention of Tory minister Michael Gove in 2007 and brought him into the Cameron's coalition government to help out reform the ineffective education system often called "the blob", a subject very dear to Cummings. During this time Cummings began to build his ideas and presence online, writing about his ideas and building his own blog. As 2014 came around Cameron was dissatisfied with the education reforms carried by Cummings as they had become very unpopular with voters, and even labelled him once as a "carrier psychopath", Dominic Cumming would later abandon the coalition, dissatisfied and bitter towards Westminster's establishment. Two years later the opportunity would present itself to Cummings to truly put to the test his abilities as a campaigner as the Leave movement and Boris Johnson himself would present themselves to Dominic Cummings with the promise that he could manage the campaign following his vision of a modern and all-encompassing online mobilization. He would have to defeat exactly the same establishment he worked with years prior and win the

apparently unwinnable referendum. Being deeply involved with politics but deviating significantly in views and methods with other mainstream political actors, as an ideological outsider he knew perfectly what was needed to mobilize the electorate to their cause. As we have previously explored in this paper, Twitter would become a central pillar of communication during the referendum and online ads would be the battering ram leading them to victory. Cummings himself in a blog post in 2017 said that Vote Leave sent out nearly "a billion targeted digital adverts" at the end of the campaign as "adverts are more effective the closer to the decision moment they hit the brain", a point on the 'availability bias'. Given the opacity of social media, he said this activity went largely unnoticed by political journalists. Not only that but political consultancies gave his campaign the capability of reaching citizens who may have never voted and that were by all means invisible to the political establishment. In order to create resonating messages Cummings decided to opt for the exact opposite of what his adversaries were doing at the time, and chose a hearts over minds approach as not only it taps deeply into human behaviour and subconscious decision making but also because such messages are more relatable and easy to understand for the average voter since they do not require pre requisite knowledge of policy making or national and international law. The most famous example of such messages is undoubtedly the slogan "Take Back Control". Cummings himself (2017) stated that originally the message was "Take Control", however he later changed it to the new form as "'back' plays into a strong evolved instinct—we hate losing things, especially control". This shows not only the enormous ingenuity of Cummings when messages and their spreading is involved, he understood perfectly the class of people he was aiming towards to win the election and knew that in order to mobilize them he did not need to sell them a new idea or agenda, but simply channel their frustration and desire for change into a political action. It is perhaps not surprising how after the referendum and the following coalition of Theresa May, when Boris Johnson was elected as prime minister he immediately summoned Cummings as his main strategist since they had been so successful working together during the Leave campaign.  If anything it should be a testament to the effectiveness of Dominic's strategies and the high regard he was held in even after the campaign was won.


**False Claims Circling Around**


During the referendum there have been numerous heated debates regarding the future of the United Kingdom, within or without the European Union. Most of these used hyperbolic banter and apocalyptic scenarios that could not be taken seriously even by the most biased political participant.

Yet during the referendum some of these messages made it regardless in headlines across digital and physical newspapers across the country and treated as possibilities and in the most extreme cases, certainties. The most remembered in infamy by all during the referendum was without a doubt the poster created by the Leave.EU campaign, the immigration poster on Turkey here below.



**Figure 2:** Vote Leave Facebook ad (2016)

There are surely more posters printed by the Leave campaign that evoke more visceral images or that generate more animosity and hostility such as the BREAKING POINT poster, however the latter never directly mentioned any numbers or made a claim regarding any particular country and will be therefore discussed later in this paper. The reason why this poster in particular deserves more relevancy compared to others is that it was part of a collection of posters with similar messages all regarding the possible entry of Turkey into the European Union and a subsequent dissolution of borders. This poster was carefully crafted to create a sense of fear and urgency within the United Kingdom's electorate due to an imminent mass immigration coming from Turkey, even going as far as to visually suggest that the entire population of Turkey would suddenly move to the United Kingdom. Of course the team behind the message were very scrupulous to avoid making a written claim about it as to avoid being fined or sued for spreading disinformation. Yet to the average viewer it is rather obvious what message the poster is trying to convey despite the obvious hyperbolic and rather impossible scenario suggested. Immigration has been perhaps the most hotly debated topic of the last decade, as such it is unsurprisingly simple to rally people to their banners with any sort of incitation or call to arms without solid claims or data to back them up. As such posters such as this were incredibly effective to transmit the intended message to the average voter, who might be unaware or disinterested in international law and the inner workings of the EU.

This contributed enormously to add confusion to the political discussion around immigration as the average voter received conflicting messages on the number of immigrants that were moving into the United Kingdom, some claims online mentioned several millions of immigrants while the truth was that as divulged by the Office for National Statistics in 2015 accounted for 330.000 people yearly. Yet for politicians against high amounts of immigration such as Nigel Farage that was still too high and advocated for the number to be reduced to 30.000 people yearly.

**Main Messages**

Throughout the referendum the Leave campaign had a clear focus on what to do to have the best possible chance to win the referendum, from the selection of their voters to their messages they had in mind. But just how effective their messages could have possibly been to win un unwinnable referendum? Right from the very beginning the Leave campaign aimed to mirror the exact opposite of what Remain was trying to achieve. While the Remain messages were very dry and rational, often talking about the benefits of the European Union and the potential losses that would incur to the economy if Brexit were to win, the Leave narrative was by contrast overwhelmingly focused on emotion. The cardinal idea behind it was that to conquer the hearts of average voters that are generally uninterested with foreign policy, the messages should first and foremost be easily understandable and appeal to the nation's identity. Dr. Darren G. Lilleker (2016) put it perhaps in the clearest way possible: "The reasons why the Leave supporters appeared most passionate reflected a sense that they had long wanted the UK out of the EU. They had previously been frustrated that not everyone had agreed and because of this their Brexit dream had gone unrealised until now. Thus underlining the negativity and scare stories were hopeful messages from citizens who expressed their desire to create what they believed would be a freer country able to better determine its own destiny." Ukip and Nigel Farage explored this concept many times throughout the years that the European Union was just a technocracy built by Germany to undermine all other countries in Europe and that the United Kingdom should exit as soon as possible. He was also frequently criticized by his political opposition for evoking frequently the image of the British Empire in a time where not only it is a distant memory but also an impossibility as in this modern and interconnected world, empires are just a memory that belongs to the past. Yet again this has proven to be very successful to win over the nostalgic elderly in the final referendum since despite them knowing the impossibility of such an event, nostalgia is a powerful emotional tool to win over people. Another message that was widely used during the Leave run up to the

referendum was undoubtedly the immigration issue. Most discourse surrounding the issue of immigration were treated often enough as a matter of invasion, we have previously explored the series of posters published regarding Turkey, however the most remembered poster throughout the campaign and that attracted the most attention must have surely been the BREAKING POINT poster with Nigel Farage standing in front of it. The poster featured a column of Syrian refugees on march to escape poor life conditions. The way the message was presented was to perhaps not too subtly suggest that foreign immigration in the UK was not only central, but that if the nation were to remain inside the European Union then the country would undoubtedly be invaded by immigrants. This caused an uproar on many news outlets and many more either called him and his party a bunch of xenophobes or pointed out how this was a blatant scare tactic with little substance or evidence to back it up. Not only that but the poster intentionally or not resembled quite closely a piece of Nazi propaganda used to by the Third Reich to antagonize and compare to vermin a class of people group. Yet despite the expected backlash the poster was successful in a way- "Across the national press, the 'Breaking point' controversy was highlighted as a key moment in the campaign. Of 56 national press articles reporting criticism of the poster as xenophobic between 16th and 24th June (identified through a simple Nexis database keyword search), most focused on its uncouth pandering to the worst of public instincts, yet nonetheless noted the likely resonance of its message with some voters (Dr Kerry Moore,2016)." The greatest strength of the Leave campaign was the ability to change the discourse from a matter of public policy and economics to the realm of emotion and national pride, by fighting on their ground of choosing and switching the attention from reason to emotion during their campaign they were able to capture their voters completely. The most effective message of them all as we have previously explored was undoubtedly "Take Back Control", constructed by Cummings and sold by the charismatic Boris Johnson the Leave campaign promised their crowd not a rational choice to better insert themselves into this new globalized Europe but instead promised them that if they won the election they would do anything in their power to ensure that the United Kingdom would solve all the problems that had previously derailed their life and that they would be able to determine their own destiny, by your choosing. The message was also sold rather well, having it printed on the side of a coach and having it accompanied it by a slogan to redirect Euro funding to the NHS. Of course this is by all means and improbable if not impossible promise to maintain, yet the message is still extremely powerful since emotion is the land of the irrational and few things make people feel lost like losing points of reference in their lives, as such retaking control of your life that has been led astray is a promise easy to get behind. Their methods of delivering the message was also emotional, accompanying their pamphlets and tweets online with Union Jacks and verses from old British Empire songs, the

most famous of which was Rule Britannia. Their messages were also polarizing, not trying to appeal to a wide range of people but rather to galvanize their already existing support and rallying them to the cause, often enough spreading messages and ads of dubious sincerity or substance, - "First, they released a video showing images of riots across Europe voiced-over by Donald Trump reading a poem about a supposedly injured snake that bites and poisons the person who had rushed to help. Then they released a photo of ISIS fighters accompanied by the message: "Act now before we see an Orlando-style atrocity…" in reference to the homophobic mass killing of 12 June."- (Dr Neail Ewen 2016). The overarching narrative for the Leave movement be it Leave.EU or the Boris Johnson's campaign on the NHS, the central and underlying feeling transmitted was undoubtedly an impending feeling of doom, if the Leave campaign were to fail then the United Kingdom's future would be bleak and irredeemable. These themes were consistent and pervasive throughout the referendum campaign, steering the public discourse in their favor and choosing not to engage their opponents on cold statistical data but rather on feel, these were influential if not determining in influencing voter turnout on the crucial day of the campaign. To put in more appropriate words, Dr Mike Berry (2016) put it simply- "Leave campaigners employed a classic KISS (Keep it simple stupid) strategy. They concentrated on a simple message - 'Take Back Control' which was repeated at every opportunity. The message was effective because it was both easily understood by different social groups and open to multiple interpretations."

**Main Strategies**

As we have seen discussed previously in the chapter, the Leave campaign had a clear picture of what they needed to do in order to have the best chance at winning the media battle. The way they were going to approach the subjects of discussion were going to be just as important as the message itself if not more. We have seen how they opted for exclusively emotional messages, however that was not enough, to ensure having a successful campaign the Leave had to make sure that the ground they were debating on was as polarizing and as emotion driven as possible, as such the main topic discussed by Leave MPs was the matter of immigration. Cameron at the time had a really weak and ambiguous immigration plan in a time where he immigration crisis had reached its peak; it was rather foreseeable that Leave campaigners would strike the establishment where they would be weaker, despite taking a lot of flak and being called racists or even fascists by their political adversaries they still manage to expose uncertainty in the plans on the future the Prime Minister had. Of course reaching your typical audience on mainstream media such as the BBC would only

return you accusation of being a populist and deviate the discourse on the European Union to a single aspect of the campaign, of course we know already by this point that the Leave campaign opted not to engage its opponents primarily on the television debate stage but on the online new media, thus speaking to a much larger and diversified audience. As to be pinpoint effective the architects of the campaign made use of the nearly limitless pool of users collected by policy consulting companies such Cambridge Analytica, the messages were sent not only on a platform where there is no moderator, they were sent directly to users with a possible dovetail political opinion with extreme precision and in an enormous quantity. The main target audience identified by the biometric profile put in place by this company is personified by the middle aged working class voter who has been alienated by the new international and globalized European job market. For this very reason most Leave speeches were filled with older references that such a generation could easily get. As the PR specialist Greg Delaney noted "it

resonated across the extraordinary Leave patchwork of parliamentary fundamentalists, elderly nostalgics and quasi racists as well as large sections of the discontented working poor. In a world where very few people other than the very rich feel they have much control over their lives, it promised an alternative future." This gives a perspective of how aware the campaign was of what their audience wanted to hear, particularly in those regions of England and Wales where the full economic growth of London had not been reached, and resentment towards the central government grew out of this feeling of being neglected. Dr Russel Foster (2016) observed this phenomenon after the aftermath of the election, "This emotional surge was not most keenly felt in the nations or the capital but in those post-industrial provinces of England which have spent forty years as backwaters; such places have not shared the same degree of power and prosperity as the devolved nations and the metropolis." Resentment, vitriol and frustration may not be a solid foundation to build a long lasting political experience, alongside out of touch comments, divisive statements and questionable methods used to know your audience; however, their effectiveness to sell your message to a large audience and call them to arms for a short period political objective has proven to be extremely effective.

The overall leave campaign might have not started with the best chances to win an, at the time, unpopular prospect, but the skillful knowledge and utilization of the digital battlefield and resources at your disposal has proven to be in the worst case scenario influential if not decisive in the best, for the turnout and shift in popular opinion gearing towards the day of the referendum, Independence Day as it was to be called by some news outlets in the following weeks. Yet we must recognize the Leave strategy to have been clear in purpose and execution throughout the campaign despite the minor setbacks met along the road.

# THE REMAIN CAMPAIGN ONLINE

The Remain campaign started out with the advantage of being sponsored and supported by the current prime minister Cameron and counting on the seemingly easy choice from the public of not changing the status quo, yet as it came to be it was insufficient to win the media battle. How could have this taken place? What choices could have been made that turned the unlosable referendum into an historic loss for the United Kingdom's head of state and a substantial shift in foreign policy? The answer is not straight forward as we have seen in the parallel with the Leave campaign, rather it was the culmination of a series of poorly made estimates and a reluctance to commit fully to the campaign. In this section of the paper we shall look at the at the main actor who held the responsibility of the campaign on his back namely Cameron and the messages and strategies his team settled on to beat their Leave counterpart.

**Cameron**

In 2015 Cameron called for the referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union in the hope for a swift victory and consolidate his position as Prime Minister and silence the criticism of his opposition at the same time. As head of his publicity campaign he appointed John Oliver to shape Remain's messages towards the public. The curious case of the Remain campaign was that contrary to Leave, Cameron was the only prominent party leader to fully support the United Kingdom's membership to the EU as other prominent figure such as Jeremy Corbyn did not pledge their allegiance to the Remain campaign, both to avoid a case of "blue on blue" and association with the conservative party (Michael Higgins 2016), and also due to Labour's long history of criticism of the European Union and protest on workers' rights (Professor Christoph Meyer 2016). What did not help Cameron's position was also the close association he had with the British establishment, which is what the electorate resented so much as we have already explored in the previous chapter. The way he was perceived by a large portion of the people was little more than a puppet manipulated by

Angela Merkel, which he did too little to disprove and to distance himself from (Dr Andrew Glencross 2016). Rather disastrous was also Cameron's immigration policy as it became a frequent target for his political opposition, particularly from Nigel Farage. In order to downplay the criticism directed towards his immigration policy Cameron came up with the slogan "no more something for nothing" which was a severe misunderstanding of the public mood towards the European Union (Dr Andrew Glencross 2016). Perhaps most surprising is how a veteran politician such as Cameron inherited the figure of the detached politician such as john Major and Tony Blair, as well as not taking into account how the older voters were not fond of a European identity, rather they tended towards the idea that the European Union only swamped and undermined a British identity (Dr Andrew S. Crines 2016). Instead of reinforcing his weak points that his adversaries were exploiting, Cameron kept on repeating the benefits the United Kingdom would benefit from if they decided to remain inside the European Union. Furthermore, he advocated for a more participating and central United Kingdom within the European Union while claiming to keep the nation a stranger to their immigration policies, what he called the "best of both worlds" (Kirsty Hughes 2016). In the end it is easy to see how Cameron has been faulty in his reasoning for calling a referendum he did not see as a challenge nor was he ready to fight for and win, while being politically isolated, deaf to criticism and single minded in facing policy issues. In the end Cameron not only made the mistake of calling for a referendum only to secure his position and not being ready to defend it but also impersonating in this way the great malcontent that his political adversaries kept lunging at, making him an easy target for criticism and the boogie man that Leave so desperately needed him to be in order to win.

**Main Messages**

The Remain messages were supposed to convince the public that the position of the United Kingdom would be more favorable if the country remained inside in the European Union; in theory defending the status quo grants an advantage to the one defending it, but it depends enormously on what you base your defense upon. During the course of the referendum the Remain campaign was overwhelmingly based on the economic benefits the nation would benefit from staying inside the European Union. This seems, on the surface level, a powerful tool to bring people on your side of the debate as it is a logical thing to point out since it has real and potentially unexpected impact on everyone's livelihood and future. However, it is the way you present it that makes all the difference as the emotion carried by the message is just as powerful if not more than the message in itself, as we have seen with the case of the Leave campaign. The Remain messages were far less impactful

than the 'take back control' slogan their opponents used (Kristy Hughes 2016), as their impact can be summarized on the micro scale in what the 'Project Fear' was. The movement stemmed from the joint effort of celebrity capitalists and other important figures to convince the public of the potentially disastrous repercussions of the country leaving the union. The problem lies in a fear munging message delivered by an elitist group about a topic that to the average voter concern mainly them in particular, as Prof Matt Hills (2016) puts it, "it can't just be about the economy, stupid". The general idea that filtered through to the working class was this entrepreneurial high class group of people were trying to make Remain win simply to protect their interests. What is perhaps more surprising was the inability of Remain to see this interpretation of their messages. Moreover, Remain demonstrated their inability or perhaps unwillingness to correct or disprove claims about the European Union made from the opposite side, namely the slogan frequently used by Leave about 350 millions of pounds given by the United Kingdom to Brussels each week, "The failure to brand the £350 million claim as a lie perhaps came in part from the lack of unity across the Remain campaign." (Kristy Hughes 2016). Taking a closer look at Remain's messaging it is quite obvious how Leave was able to exploit their weaknesses and Remain's unwillingness to adapt to their counterpart's punches. Perhaps the most glaring problem was their weak stance on immigration, while Leave made it the backbone of their campaign.

**Main Strategies**

Remain's strategy has been lackluster to say the least, as we have managed to explored so far, the Remain campaign was less active on online social media and had far less cohesion that Leave, only surpassing them in volume during the last couple of days before the referendum. Outside of the online world they were not doing much better as the few representatives they had were in direct opposition and did not share a common objective. The type of messages they used were logical and easily interpretable as directed purely towards themselves and for their interests only, those messages that threatened the success of their campaign were ignored and not contradicted, and the messages their adversaries used against them received no significant opposition or concrete response. Furthermore, the approach Remain favored the most was giving speeches about the benefits of staying inside the European Union, given by university student inside their own universities for other students, a category of people that generally already leaned towards Remain anyways; for all effects and purposes Remainers were talking between themselves trying to convince on another of things they already believed in (Dr Darren G. Lilleker 2019). After having a dive inside what the approach of Remain was to the election, the image of the seemingly unlosable election does not seem to hold up as convincingly as before, especially considering how much effort

and awareness of the battle they were fighting their adversaries had displayed up until the end of the campaign. It is evident the Remain campaign was conceived with several flaws from the start: the assumption of victory, the underestimation of the social media spectrum and most glaringly the absence of a united front, we can therefore fairly assume that the Remain strategy was not only inadequate but even built on frail foundations.

# IRREGULARITIES FOUND IN THE REFERENDUM

The Brexit referendum was possibly the first political campaign carried out in the United Kingdom where the social media landscape was going to be more influential than the traditional media, even more so than the General Election of 2015. Because of this, funding for the campaign was going to be redirected in ads sent to online users across the nation rather than spent on traditional means such as physical paper ads or pamphlets, even television broadcast would be of secondary importance, as we explored before the majority of the electorate was using online means to receive news and get informed about current events. The difference lies in funding lies in the additional difficulty met in tracing transactions made to buy ads as they are very hard to track and to determine if they reached the intended target. Because of this we shall look at what irregularities the two sides were responsible of.

**Leave Financial Irregularities**

The founder of Leave.Eu Arron Banks has been involved in a three year long judicial process launched by the Electoral Commission and was initially allegedly charged with the criminal offense of breaching the electoral law and for exceeding by nearly a million pounds the spending limit for a political campaign. Investigations by the National Crime Agency initially suggested that there may have been grounds for a criminal offense regarding the donations received by Leave.EU. During the course of the investigation the Electoral Commission fined in May 2018 Mr. Banks for 70.000£ for failing to present adequate receipts regarding the spending of the campaign. Meanwhile VoteLeave was fined 61.000£ for exceeding the maximum spending limit of 7m£ on the campaign, VoteLeave initially appealed for this fine but later on dropped charges. In September 2019 Mr. Banks was

found not guilty by the National Crime Agency for breaching electoral law or receiving funding from third parties or from abroad, therefore the National Crimes Agency dropped charges and declared they would no longer continue investigations against Leave.EU, Mr. Banks or other affiliates.  Despite not there being any criminal offense we can clearly see how unregulated spending on advertisement on online ads can clearly be widespread and difficult to track down.

**Remain Financial Irregularities**

The Electoral Commission found guilty in late 2017 the Liberal Democrats remainers, called the invisible party during the election for their near irrelevant role despite being the most Euro friendly party (Prof Andrew Russell, 2016), for "failing to provide acceptable invoices or receipts for 80 payments" (Henry Mance Financial Times 2017) and subsequently were fined for 18000£. In the same period "Britain Stronger In", the official Remain campaign, was fined for 1250£ for not providing three invoices on aggregate payments. In comparison to the fines issued to Leave this might seem almost tame and yet shows the same pattern of payments and receipts unaccounted for during the referendum.

# CONCLUSION

The Brexit referendum has changed forever the history of modern Europe and the geopolitical balance within and without the European Union, the scale of which is still to be determined. What is clear however, is how the political future of a country can be shaped with vague promises and arguments built on more than frail foundations. This problem is only exacerbated by the relatively new online dimension as it dilutes the discourse surrounding the discussion into a slew of soundbites with little weight carried behind them. While this has always been a problem for any kind of political campaign as accountability and verifiability of messages are the foundation of a well-functioning and long lasting democratic political landscape, Brexit has shown us that the future of a country is decided on an issue the electorate has little comprehension or interest in; and the political class builds their campaign on the frustration or sense of tribal belonging of a particular class of people without necessarily giving an insight on the entirety of the matter at hand while highlighting one particular aspect and not considering the ramifications. This problem is only

exacerbated by the lack of a back and forth discussion on the digital landscape but rather various shouts directed into the void with the hope of catching people's attention. The online world presents us with yet another crutch to consider which is the problem of messages spread by bots. Yuriy Gorodnichenko, Tho Pham and Oleksandr Talavera (2017) examined in a study the volume of tweets circling around and their corresponding share compared to the total for each side for Brexit and the 2016 presidential elections, finding that data seems to suggest that the political side with the most tweets circulating around supporting their cause may have a good predictor to determine the outcome. Their research also includes an in-depth analysis of bots' activities during the crucial weeks preceding the referendum. After carefully deconstructing bots' behaviour, speed at which they tweet or retweet and the emotional response they are able to generate, the team of researchers concluded the following: humans have little to no influence on bot behaviour, while the complete opposite is true when we look for the reverse dynamic, for bots have great influence on humans, moreover the activity of pro-Leave bots generated a vastly greater number of retweets compared to pro-Remain bots. The day before the referendum the actual volume of tweets of pro-Leave accounts amounted for about 60.69 % of all tweets, but once tweets and retweets generated by bot activity was included, the percentage rises to 62.76 %. This shows us how faceless automatons are used to influence elections without necessarily knowing who the message is being sent from. The problem does not limit itself to bots however, as we have seen before it is much easier to have advertisement unaccounted for online as tracking ads is much harder than physical pamphlets or televisions spots due to the decentralised nature of the web. More severe than all however, is how the online landscape rewards brief and often out of context soundbites aimed at rallying the audience rather than inform them. Dr Sophie Quirk (2016) offers an insight and summary of the issue "As journalist John Rentoul observed, its participants 'mainly traded soundbites.' When the debate turned to the topic of immigration, Remain repeated the maxim that there could be 'no silver bullets', while Leave leant upon their platitude: 'take back control'.", this reflects how discourse online is more often than not is purely one dimensional as there is no real discourse or critical analysis of the issue but only acceptance or rejection of the statement presented as social media put in direct contact the electorate and politician but remove moderator, intermediary and response. After considering all these aspects, we should not make the mistake of considering social media as an inherently harmful tool for our democracies but as a resource to ever increasingly involve the electorate in the democratic process, what we ought to do is to learn from the Brexit experience to ensure our political discourse does not become polarized, single minded and most especially influenced by external actors we have no way of identifying, but to use this referendum as a tool to perfect and

refine future political campaigns to ensure that we use social media as a mean to enhance our political experience rather than be used by them.

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# Sintesi

**SUNTO**

La Brexit è stato il referendum più divisivo degli ultimi anni, portando il Regno Unito fuori dall'Unione Europea e cambiando lo scenario geopolitico per i decenni a venire. Ma come è stato possibile un evento del genere? Nel corso di questa tesi cercheremo di rispondere a questa domanda analizzando i vari attori coinvolti e i metodi utilizzati per raggiungere questo risultato.

**INTRODUZIONE**

Nel febbraio 2020 il regno unito ha ufficialmente lasciato l'Unione Europea, dopo quasi 4 anni dopo il risultato del referendum. Dopo il risultato finale molti sono stati i discorsi polarizzati che circolano intorno al referendum, l'unica cosa certa è che l'elettorato britannico è uscito frammentato e diviso da questa elezione, a prescindere da estrazione sociale, età e impiego, ma come siamo arrivati a questo punto? Arrivati al 2016 l'elettorato britannico faceva affidamento sui social media come fonte di notizie principale, per gli osservatori più astuti era chiaro che chi avesse voluto vincere l'elezione avrebbe dovuto sapersi muovere in questo nuovo mondo virtuale per vincere la folla. Come hanno agito la campagna Leave e Remain? Come hanno saputo utilizzare gli strumenti a loro disposizione? Ma soprattutto il mondo virtuale è una piattaforma adatta ad ospitare elezioni democratiche? Osserveremo i messaggi delle due parti ed analizzeremo chi ha saputo usare più efficacemente le armi a loro disposizione.

**LA CAMPAGNA LEAVE ONLINE**

La campagna Leave è stata caratterizzata per tutta la sua durata da messaggi sensazionalistici ed una base molto attiva specialmente online spesso oggetto di critiche per via dei loro personaggi di spicco ed i loro messaggi contraddittori e divisivi. Nonostante questo sono riusciti a vincere l'apparentemente elezione invincibile. Perciò ci soffermeremo ad analizzare gli attori di rilievo più importanti e le loro tattiche, per comprendere come siano riusciti in questo compito apparentemente impossibile.

**La campagna Leave su twitter**

Twitter si è dimostrato uno strumento indispensabile per la campagna Leave non solo per la crescita in popolarità riscontrate nell'ultimo decennio ma anche per il vantaggio di essere uno degli

strumenti più utilizzati dai politici per l'accessibilità semplice e la facilità d'uso. Inoltre Twitter si è dimostrato fondamentale non solo per la semplicità con cui si possono raggiungere individualmente gli elettori ma anche per il fatto che si può comunicare ad un livello più intimo rispetto ad altri media come la televisione. Grazie alla dimensione online senza riscontro visivo con gli altri utenti Twitter permette lo svilupparsi di discorsi e dibattiti più polarizzati. La polarizzazione come dimostrato da molti studi spinge maggiormente gli utenti ad andare a votare ed è particolarmente legata alla posizione geografica che rende più semplice per i candidati vincere le circoscrizioni più contese e così vincere luoghi chiave per il voto finale. Diversi studi hanno dimostrato come la campagna Leave ha dominato Remain su Twitter per volume di tweet e per tutta la durata della campagna eccetto l'ultimo giorno prima del voto. Considerando tutte queste variabili non è sorprendente come Leave sia riuscita ad ottenere un notevole vantaggi su Remain online.

**Nigel Farage e Ukip**

Nigel Farage è stato per più di vent'anni un aspro criticatore dell'unione europea, non è sorprendente come quando è stato annunciato il referendum abbia colto al volo l'occasione per assicurarsi che il regno unito uscisse dall'unione europea. Schernito e deriso dall' establishment britannico ha formato il suo partito l'Ukip senza perdere tempo, concentrandosi sulla fascia bersaglio adatta per la sua campagna. Mirando agli elettori più vecchi e disillusi ed anche ai pensionati più smarriti Farage è stato in grado di creare una base molto forte specialmente online, grazie alle sue dichiarazioni più divisive e generando molta trazione online con le sue interviste spesso controverse. Tuttavia è esattamente quello che lui ed il suo partito stavano sperando, ottenere il supporto dei votanti disillusi e delusi dalla classe politica al potere al momento e cogliendo tutte le opportunità possibili per screditare loro e l'unione europea e nel mentre facendo leva sull'indecisione dei suoi avversari.

**Arron Banks**

Arron Banks è stato il donatore più importante di Ukip ed è un imprenditore molto abbiente che ha contribuito in modo fondamentale al successo di Leave. Precedentemente un sopportatore del partito conservatore Banks si è alleato fin da subito con Farage per vincere il referendum, finanziando il suo partito e creando una campagna parallela a quella ufficiale la Leave.EU. Giocando su messaggi molto più diretti e populistici dei suoi oppositori, e creando un divario con i suoi alleati i conservatori, Banks ha creato un movimento di spicco all'interno di Leave con l'obbiettivo di sdegnare i suoi avversari e di generare molta discussione intorno a sé online. Nonostante Banks non abbia fatto personalmente campagna ha finanziato e diretto personalmente la direzione di Leave.EU spiegando minuziosamente tutte le sue decisioni nel libro "The Bad Boys of

Brexit". In un'intervista ha concesso che se il suo movimento fosse stato il volto principale di Leave probabilmente on avrebbero vinto agendo come hanno fatto sono stati in grado di sommare le forze delle campagne parallele.

**Cambridge Analytica**

Cambridge Analytica è stata una società di consulenza politica con la caratteristica di creare profili biometrici molto accurati di ogni elettore studiato. Durante il corso della campagna Brexit Cambridge Analytica ha offerto i propri servizi a Leave.EU anche se transizioni di pagamento fra le due parti non sono mai venute alla luce. Quello che ha portato la socieà all'attenzione della stampa mondiale è stata la rivelazione che l'ultima prendeva i dati utilizzati per schedare gli elettori da i profili di diversi milioni di utenti di Facebook senza che questi dessero il loro consenso. La società è fallita in seguito allo scandalo ma la loro importanza nell'influenzare gli utenti indecisi e portarli dal lato deciso dal loro compratore non può essere ignorata e anche se nessuna traccia di pagamento è stata rinvenuta sarebbe sciocco pensare che dato lo stretto rapporto della società con Leave.EU questi dati non abbiano avuto alcun effetto sul risultato finale dell'elezione.

**Dominic Cummings**

Dominic Cummings è stato il direttore e architetto della campagna Leave creando i messaggi che li hanno portato alla vittoria. Grazie all'esperienza accumulata in passato da precedenti campagne online e al divario creatosi fra lui e l'establishment britannico i servizi offerti da Dominic sono finiti tra le braccia di Leave. Sapendo esattamente come comunicare agli utenti che Leave aveva bisogno di influenzare Cummings ha creato il famoso messaggio "Take back control" simbolo della campagna e di indiscussa efficacia grazie alla componente profondamente emotiva che raccoglie in sé il microcosmo della strategia Leave che gli ha garantito una posizione nell'entourage di Boris Johnson quando questo è diventato primo ministro anni dopo.

**Falsità passate per vere**

Durante la campagna Leave ed in particolare l'Ukip di Nigel Farage sono stati protagonisti di diverse controversie e critiche dovute alle loro posizioni estreme sull'immigrazione e alle affermazioni e poster fatti nei mesi precedenti al voto. Di spicco fra i vari appare uno che dipinge la Turchia come rampa di lancio per gli immigrati diretti verso il regno unito arrivando a millantare che potenzialmente fino a 76 milioni di persone si sarebbero dirette verso il paese, una cifra pari all'intera popolazione della Turchia. Nonostante l'impossibilità di tale affermazione il messaggio, sparso online, trasmette un senso di grande urgenza e timore per chi lo guarda e che non considera

la verosimiglianza dello scenario, per questo insieme al poster "Breaking Point" sono stati gli elementi più condannati e criticati dell'intera Brexit.

**Messaggi principali**

I messaggi propagati da Leave come "Take Back Control" hanno giocato sulla profonda componente emotiva della campagna, il ritorno ad una realtà più semplice e familiare ed il senso di abbandono in cui i loro elettori sono stati lasciati dal governo corrente. Leave ha venduto agli elettori il ritorno ad una maggior unità nazionale e la rinascita del regno unito in una potenza paragonabile all'impero britannico nonostante tale scenario sia alquanto improbabile se non assolutamente impossibile. Ciononostante Leave è riuscita a spronare la propria base a votare in una elezione la cui importanza hanno venduto come esistenziale e come inizio di una ribellione contro l'agglomerato burocratico dell'unione europea, venduta al pubblico come un regime autoritario paragonabile alle dittature del passato.

**Strategie principali**

Fin dall'inizio la campagna Leave ha dato grande enfasi alla dimensione online del dibattito e assumendo Cambridge Analytica per poter raggiungere quegli elettori che non solo erano poco partecipativi ma in alcuni casi addirittura che non avevano mai votato. Mandando messaggi personalizzati studiati attentamente per risonare con quegli individui che rispecchiavano l'identikit dell'elettore disoccupato e infuriato con la corrente classe politica britannica e recettivo ad appelli di una realtà più familiare alla propria gioventù. L'inizio della campagna Leave potrebbe essere iniziate con premesse alquanto sfavorevoli ma dopo aver analizzato attentamente tutti i passaggi volti a vincere questa elezione apparentemente senza speranze, si può osservare come in realtà questa vittoria non sarebbe stata dopotutto impossibile.

## LA CAMPAGNA REMAIN ONLINE

Al contrario dei loro avversari Remain aveva a prima vista con sé tutte le carte necessarie per una facile vittoria, il supporto del primo ministro Cameron, il supporto dei giovani a degli studenti e la difesa dello status quo che raramente è cambiato radicalmente. Quindi sorge spontaneamente la domanda su come sia stato possibile perdere questa elezione apparentemente imperdibile, per ottenere una risposta dobbiamo dare uno sguardo agli attori coinvolti i messaggi ed il ruolo di Cameron.

**Cameron**

Cameron era il simbolo dell'establishment britannico, vedendo il suo ruolo di primo ministro messo in discussione ha indetto il referendum sicuro di vincerlo per poter silenziare le critiche rivolte a lui e consolidare la sua posizione. Per la durata della campagna raramente si è preoccupato della dimensione online del referendum, apparendo nell'occasionale dibattito televisivo, e anche in queste occasioni millantando accordi più favorevoli con l'unione europea per far spiccare il regno unito piuttosto che difendere la posizione del paese all'interno dell'unione. La sua credibilità era sminuita dalle deboli proposte e precedenti deludenti sulle politiche di immigrazione nel regno unito a la sua posizione era assolutamente isolata non avendo alleati sufficientemente forti o convincenti per difendere il Remain. La colpa della sconfitta del Remain è esclusivamente di Cameron per aver indetto un referendum non necessario e aver dato per scontato una facile vittoria.

**Messaggi principali**

La campagna Remain ha giocato quasi esclusivamente sull'elemento economico della situazione, sottolineando i vantaggi di cui la nazione avrebbe giovato restando nell'unione senza parlare dei benefici di cui già gioiva e ricorrendo a tattiche quasi intimidatorie per convincere gli elettori ad evitare il disastro economico. Il culmine di tale campagna può essere riassunto ne "Project Fear" un'iniziativa composta e promossa da vari personaggi di spicco del establishment britannico dando l'immagine di un gruppo di intellettuali distaccati dediti a terrorizzare gli elettori per difendere i propri privilegi. Forse più grave di tutti è stata la loro incapacità di affrontare i loro avversari sulle dichiarazioni fatte dagli ultimi.

**Strategie principali**

La strategia Remain appariva fin da subito fallace siccome la maggior parte dei dibattiti organizzati prendevano piede all'interno di università e comizi studenteschi, essenzialmente parlando a sé stessi. Non ha di certo aiutato la relativa assenza totale del movimento sui social media dove sono stati eclissati dai loro avversari per messaggi generati e numero di attori, superando la loro controparte su Twitter solo nell'ultimo giorno di campagna elettorale prima del referendum. Avendo un fronte frammentato e senza un obbiettivo comune è facile osservare come l'elezione già vinta non era solida come superficialmente molti ritenevano.

**IRREGOLARITÀ SUI FINANZIAMENTI**

Il referendum sulla Brexit è stato la prima elezione dove la componente online avrebbe ecclissato i media tradizionali, non è quindi difficile immaginare come la maggior parte delle spese per la pubblicità sia stata diretta sugli annunci distribuiti dai social media. Grazie a questa relativamente

nuova dimensione della campagna è facile immaginare come sia più difficile rintracciare irregolarità di queste spese più difficili da rintracciare.

**Irregolarità di Leave**

La campagna ufficiale Leave e Leave.EU sono state trovate colpevoli di aver superato il limite di massimo di spesa per la campagna e hanno ricevuto multe di rispettivamente 61000£ e 70000£.

**Irregolarità di Remain**

Sebbene non colpevoli di aver superato i limiti di spesa i liberal democratici hanno ricevuto una multa di 18000£ e Britain Stronger ha ricevuto una multa di 1250& per non aver presentato quattro ricevute.

**CONCLUSIONE**

La Brexit ci ha mostrato come sia diventata importante la dimensione online dei social media e come una solida presenza sul web possa premiare o dannare un'elezione. Nonostante la maggior partecipazione da parte dei cittadini fare campagna online presenta numerosi problemi come la vulnerabilità dei dati personali degli elettori, la piaga dilagante dei bot online e il continuo bombardamento di pubblicità da parte di agenti di cui non conosciamo l'identità. Sarebbe un errore da parte nostra condannare i social media come elemento di natura dannosa che premia solo la propagazione di messaggi sensazionalistici e che alimentano solo emozioni reazionarie, ostili e polarizzate; tuttavia non possiamo ignorare come la mancanza di vero controllo del web possa esporci al pericolo di una distorsione del processo democratico anziché essere uno strumento al servizio della democrazia.