

Bremain or Brexit? Graduate Students as ‘Multipliers’

Written by Günter Walzenbach

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GÜNTER WALZENBACH, MAY 23 2016

‘Multiplier effects’ are usually the subject matter for macroeconomics and students of economic growth. An injection of capital into an investment project is likely to have a larger effect for the wider economy than the lump sum of the original amount due to additional positive knock on-effects; spurring both consumption and production activities. This point is usually proven with the help of mathematics and real observed changes in terms of income and production. Similar patterns, however, could be at work at an interpersonal level. The investment that graduate students have made into their education, if used appropriately, easily transforms into larger benefits for society as a whole simply by means of communication, much like the spreading of a rumour. For that reason, we can expect that the student community will play an important role leading up to the forthcoming referendum on British membership in the European Union (EU). More specifically, those in higher education devoted to the study of the European Union in a variety of modules and degree courses may play a vital part in swinging the final result in the June vote.

Opinion polls have been wrong in the past, but if we take their informed guess work seriously, voter turnout will be crucial on this occasion. This is, of course, a familiar theme for the Bristol and London communities who just recently elected new mayors with the change in political fortunes largely explained on the basis of increasing participation rates, in effect swinging the results in unexpected or unorthodox directions.

Accordingly, the Economist (May 7th 2016, 23), suggests that if turnout is below 60%, Brexit is most likely to happen, while a voter turnout above 60% will work in favour of Bremain. A major component in this calculation is an expected age gap in voting behaviour with younger generations. They are much more inclined to support continuing membership than older age groups. In fact, two-thirds of younger voters seem to contemplate their future rather with than without the Union in mind. A similar picture emerged in a small group of randomly selected UWE students at an interview session with ITV News. About half of them were in favour of staying in, but an almost equal number was undecided or unsure whether they would cast a vote at all. Only one interviewee was a convinced Brexit supporter.

UWE European Politics lecturer Gunter Walzenbach and students star in @itvwestcountry news item on EU referendum pic.twitter.com/dfBY09ikaM

— UWE Bristol News (@uwebristolnews) May 20, 2016

For some political scientists the argument might stop here, as always, hoping that a large number of citizens have internalised their democratic rights sufficiently enough to turn up at the voting booth. Given the long-term economic and history-making consequences of the EU referendum, however, it is worthwhile to consider a bit more thoroughly the dynamics of the student vote.

To some extent the aversion of students to extend their time horizon beyond the average three-year degree course may be balanced in the context of this particular referendum by an outward looking, cosmopolitan, attitude that comes with youth. More tangibly, the changes in the fee system of UK universities have alerted many students to the cost saving opportunities, specifically for post-graduate study, in continental Europe. In many cases their perceptions of Europe have been shaped already by individual experiences with the Erasmus exchange programme, work placements or related study abroad experiences. Many graduates seek employment with large, internationally

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operating companies because of their clear career trajectories, job security and the prospect to spend part of their working life in another country. Similarly, many local small and medium-sized businesses are able to create new opportunities for their employees in close exchange with European partners due to geographic proximity and the availability of joint business models. The social safeguards and labour rights that have been established throughout the Union add another important layer to facilitate individual mobility.

Students, perhaps more so than others, realise that 'Europeanisation' is not a one-way street working to the advantage (or disadvantage) of a single country. An Erasmus student at UWE's partner university, the Collegium Civitas, for example, does realise straight away the internationalisation of the teaching experience and degree of standardisation that has occurred in Poland, both in terms of course delivery and module choice. S/he will also recognise the substantial number of foreign students that have made the same decision and spend a year in Warsaw. Finally, there will be an all too familiar British department store and coffee chain waiting just across the road.

Surely, students of the politics of European integration, comparative European politics, EU external relations or the international relations of Europe are more engaged with the core themes of this referendum than most parts of the general public. In particular, they will be familiar with the effort, time and perseverance it takes to develop a reasoned opinion on some of the most challenging topics in the current debate, such as the free movement of people, the single market project and the European security architecture. Their own personal learning experience tells them that an academic year might still not be enough to comprehend fully the intricacies of the European Union project and the politics of its constituent parts the member states.

This timescale, of course, is hardly appealing to any side of the referendum campaign. For that reason, a special responsibility falls into the hands of our graduate students, to act as 'human multipliers', discussing and debating the referendum in their own social circle and at home with friends and family. Some of them, indeed, might want to take an imaginary re-sit and start with busting some of the excessive jargon that often comes with the academic study of the EU. Although it has become commonplace for media outlets of various kinds to leave the really difficult stuff to another web-link or another online discussion group, it is much more fun to give this a try in your own social circle. What again did we mean by the Monnet method, the Petersberg tasks, the *acquis communautaire*, *commitology*, own resources, constructive abstention, *Brusselization*, the six-pack, ... ? Exploring together some of the less known mechanisms and procedures of EU policy making, no doubt, will generate positive multiplier effects much faster than economists would ever want us to believe.

About the author:

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