

# Europe's Biggest Eurosceptics: Britain and Support for the European Union

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Euroscepticism, defined as the 'the idea of a contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration' (Taggart, 1998: 365), has surged in Britain in recent years. This is reflected, for example, by the strong showing of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in national and European elections. Despite being foiled by the first-past-the-post electoral system which gave UKIP only one Westminster seat they secured the support of 12.7% of the electorate in the 2015 general election to become Britain's third largest party in terms of vote share (Clarke *et al.*, 2016: 137). Moreover, UKIP's recent success has also transpired at the supranational level as illustrated by the latest European Parliament (EP) elections with UKIP commanding the most seats of any British political party within the Strasbourg chamber in both 2014 and 2019. Vehement opposition to the European integration project within the EP is not solely the domain of UKIP however with Eurosceptic parties such as National Front of France, Golden Dawn of Greece, and Jobbik of Hungary, for instance, winning more seats in 2014 than in any other EP election (Bebel and Collier, 2016: 14).

Despite the swell in opposition to the European integration project throughout the continent the British public remain the most Eurosceptic when contrasted with their continental peers. This is most readily illustrated by the Brexit referendum, an undisputed watershed moment for the future of European integration. Britain's commitment to a free vote on membership of the European Union (EU) usurped the political elites of many other member states who, despite their rhetoric, have long resisted calls from their domestic publics to offer an in/out referendum (Oliver, 2015: 81). The reasoning behind the extraordinary resistance to the supranational union in Britain is due to the fact that elite opinion is substantially more Europhobic in the United Kingdom (UK) than in any other European member state (Sanders and Toka, 2013: 16; figure 1). The significance of this cannot be overstated: since its initial inception as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, the European project has been an elite-driven enterprise that mass publics know very little about (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2007: 649). Position issues on European matters are therefore the exclusive domain of elites within all EU member states (Stevens, 2013: 536). As mass publics use cognitive shortcuts to reach opinions on unfamiliar objects (Sanders and Toka, 2013: 23), they are strongly susceptible to the cueing efforts of such elites. Thus, as a consequence of the predominately Europhobic British elite no other EU member state has less trust in the EP than the UK, an undeniable symptom of the country's fervent Euroscepticism (Muñoz *et al.*, 2011: 558; see table 1).

The reasons for Britain's unrivalled levels of anti-EU sentiment – again, induced as a consequence of the actions of the country's elites – have deep roots in the history of British exceptionalism (Bebel and Collier, 2016: 17); thus, this is where our discussion shall begin. It will be illustrated how in the aftermath of the Second World War elite apprehension towards European integration was compounded by Britain's so-called 'island mentality' which resulted in Europe being conceived of as an external actor against which the UK defined its national identity. Following this, the pivotal role played by the Europhobic print media in maintaining this uniquely British and non-European identity will be illustrated. It shall then be highlighted how Euroscepticism is exacerbated by the UK's main two political parties, the Conservatives and Labour, an atypical practice for centrally aligned actors within the left-right political spectrum. The Eurosceptic outlooks of the two parties will be explained through their relationships with the Eurosceptic media and the dynamics of the UK electoral system, after which this paper will conclude by offering a brief outlook regarding the future of European integration.

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## The History of British Exceptionalism and Europe

British opposition to the EU is strongly influenced by the belief that immigration must be controlled (Bebel and Collier, 2016: 16). Immigration is an issue that has been salient in the consciousness of the British public long before the UK was accepted into the European community. Tensions between immigrants and citizens were stoked throughout the late nineteenth century and persisted into the twentieth century due to arrivals from former parts of the empire with British animosity towards immigrants peaking during the empire's decline (Oliver, 2015: 84). Thus, in the aftermath of the Second World War, as the post-imperial order took shape in the midst of extensive decolonisation, the UK was inhibited from constructing a national identity on the basis of ethnicity or civic characteristics (McCrone and Kiely, cited in Gifford 2006: 856)[1].

This legacy has persisted through to the present day with measurements of British identity via civic traits producing very low scores (McLaren, 2015: 96). The inability of the UK to construct an identity around ethnic or civic characteristics as it struggled to find its place within the international system in the post-empire era thus necessitated the need for the British to unite under one common banner against an 'other'[2]. Europe, and its associated political institutions, thereby became a means to an end (Gifford, 2006: 856).

The ability of the UK to conceive of Europe as the 'other' is a direct consequence of British exceptionalism. In the aftermath of World War Two, Britain was motivated by a desire to maintain the post-war balance-of-power as there was an underlying fear of the possible ramifications of a German-dominated supranational European community (Gifford, 2006: 863). Therefore, until the German question could be abated the UK wished to initially distance itself from Europe thereby leading to the creation of its 'special relationship' with the United States. Although such a relationship did develop between the two countries its existence was short-lived, dwindling in significance as British and American interests drifted apart after the mid-1960s (Sanders and Edwards, 1994: 418). However, this perception was lost on the British with a survey of the country's elites by Sanders and Edwards revealing that 80% of respondents still believed in the existence of a special relationship with the United States during the 1990s (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the elites did view Europe as central to Britain's future interests although they were staunchly divided over the value of political cooperation in a wide range of policy areas (*ibid.*: 434–438). This reflected the ambivalence that British policymakers had displayed towards Europe since the UK's acceptance into the economic community. In sum, Britain's island mentality, augmented by its need to form a national identity against an 'other', reinforced by the maintenance of the myth of a special relationship with the United States decades after its decline, resulted in the English Channel becoming not only a physical obstacle to pro-European British attitudes but also a psychological one (Startin, 2015: 313).

## Persistent Past, Distorted Future: Britain's Distinct Public Sphere

Ever since the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 the public have consistently conceived successive governments to be permanently handicapped in their attempts to control immigration (McLaren, 2015: 126). This perception has been sponsored, if not fostered, by none other than the predominately Eurosceptic British press. The benefits of EU membership are seldom conveyed by the print media in the UK unlike on the continent where the case for EU membership is often transmitted (Startin, 2015: 316). The circulation of Eurosceptic newspapers which number over five million in Britain, more than double that of Europhile newspapers (*ibid.*; see table 1), is largely responsible for the country's unrivalled hostility towards the European integration project. Daddow (2012) argues that the press convinces the political elite from all sides of the political spectrum in Britain – particularly the incumbent Labour and Conservative governments – that they will suffer negative electoral consequences if their leaders attempt to promote a more enlightened European outlook. For example, Peter Mandelson, a significant figure within the hierarchy of the Labour Party since the 1980s, stated that former prime minister Tony Blair was reluctant to offer a referendum on Europe because he was fearful of the significant damage that a backlash from Rupert Murdoch – a prominent media mogul who owns much of the Eurosceptic press in the UK – could do to Labour's chances of being re-elected (Daddow, 2012: 1227).

Euroscepticism has undoubtedly been mainstreamed within the UK press as epitomised by the *Daily Express*, with its attempts to shape the UK's agenda on the European integration project described as 'unrivalled in the history of

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tabloid[s]' by the likes of Startin (2015: 318). The donation of substantial six-figure sums from the owner of the *Daily Express* to UKIP and the appointment of a UKIP peer as the deputy chairman of the newspaper in 2014 effectively transformed the *Daily Express* into a mouthpiece for Britain's staunchest Eurosceptics. Consequently, the newspaper has persistently expressed strong anti-immigrant sentiments with hyperbolic front-page headlines such as 'Migrants make mugs of us all' and 'We must stop the migrant invasion' (Startin, 2015: 319). Although Britons recognise that their mass media is Eurosceptic, Bruter (2009) illustrated through a unique experimental design that this does not undermine the media's ability to make Britons feel significantly less European than their continental neighbours by deprecating the value of the EU *vis-à-vis* continual reinforcement of British national identity.

The relationship between national identity and Euroscepticism is not straightforward however with research suggesting that national identity both adds to, and detracts from, support for EU integration. Hooghe and Marks (2004) showcase that those who hold exclusive national identity<sup>[3]</sup> in the UK are around 30% more likely to be Eurosceptic than if they hold multiple identities – the strongest effect of exclusive national identity in determining Euroscepticism within any member state (p. 417). The authors suspect that the predictive power of exclusive national identity in determining the likelihood of being Eurosceptic in European states is positively correlated with the magnitude of elite divisions over Europe (*ibid.*). Elite signalling through policy changes, for example, are understood by the public via cognitive shortcuts who typically respond by either maintaining the new issue position or changing the party they support (Stevens, 2013: 536). However, when elites are split over Europe the abundant availability of a plethora of competing cognitive cues intensifies mass ambivalence towards the EU, particularly when there is no consensus between the media and political elites (Stoeckel, 2012: 39).

As levels of ambivalence are amplified when party positions on European integration differ greatly (*ibid.*: 38), it is thus unsurprising that the British are more Eurosceptic than the rest of Europe given that the country's two main political parties have never adopted a unanimous pro-EU stance from the 1960s through to the 2010s (Stevens, 2013: 540; see figure 1)<sup>[4]</sup>. This is clear evidence of the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism within British politics, underlined by the fact that many UKIP supporters are former Conservative voters (Bebel and Collier, 2016: 16). Typically it is parties' positions on the left-right political spectrum that dictates the likelihood that they are Eurosceptic with peripheral parties at the extreme of both ends of the spectrum likely to be more Eurosceptic than those positioned towards the centre (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002). As a consequence, in most EU countries outright Euroscepticism is constrained to the politics of opposition (Gifford, 2006: 854). In contrast, the typically fragile and small government majorities generated by the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system offers more oxygen to Eurosceptic voices who form a sizeable unit within the ranks of both Labour and the Conservatives (*ibid.*: 853). Thus, unlike in all other EU states, the debate over European integration in Britain is not confined internally within UK political parties; instead, it is a highly salient party political issue. This, therefore, makes achieving a political consensus on a party-wide EU stance from even one of the UK's major political parties near impossible (Gifford, 2006: 858).

## Conclusion

This work has detailed the nexus of interactions between the mass public, political elites, and the media to explain why the British are more Eurosceptic than their continental peers. In short, the UK's island mentality that intensified in the aftermath of the Second World War was reinforced by political and media elites who thus mainstreamed Euroscepticism within the British consciousness. However, this is not to say that it is necessarily the actions of the elites who make the British Eurosceptic. Rather, the function of this paper was to demonstrate that the influence of the UK's Europhobic elites simply explains why the British are *more* Eurosceptic than the domestic publics of all other European member states.

Regardless of the result of the Brexit referendum, Britain's bond with the EU will continue to be a source of contention for many years to come; in or out of Europe, the UK's close geographical proximity with the continent means that fates of each will always be somewhat intertwined. The country's relationship with Europe is thus more complex than simply deciding whether or not it should remain within the EU. The European integration project poses profound questions about UK party politics, its media landscape and, most importantly, the country's sense of national identity – or lack thereof. Thus, until such matters are settled the three-tiered EU identified by Vasilopoulou (2013: 162) as consisting of the core nineteen Eurozone countries, the eight other European states, and the UK on the periphery

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looks set to remain for the foreseeable future.

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## Notes

[1] This is in stark contrast to most other European nations who formed strong notions of national identity conditioned upon ethnicity as a result of the Second World War.

[2] For further details on Britain's attempts to find a new role in the post-imperial order, see Sanders (1989).

[3] Defined as an allegiance to only one nationality e.g. individuals who self-identity solely as 'British' as opposed to 'Scottish', 'British' and/or 'European'.

[4] For an excellent overview of the persistent inconsistent positions that both the Conservative and Labour parties have adopted over Europe, see Forster (2002).

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