

The Contemporary Politics of the United Kingdom: Brexit, Identity, and Democracy

Symposium on the Contemporary Politics of the United Kingdom: Introduction and Reflections

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DOES POLITICAL SCIENCE CARE ABOUT BRITAIN?

I begin this symposium introduction with an observation:

The study of British politics is in decline in America.

Although my evidence is anecdotal and impressionistic, my sense is that political science teaching, research, and careers are less likely to involve UK politics and the Special Relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom.

To be more specific, I will provide a list of testable hypotheses. I hope that they ultimately will all be proved wrong, but I am not optimistic.

H1: The number of British politics classes taught in American political science departments is declining.

H2: Research on British politics is less common among American scholars.

H3: The overall presence and visibility of the United Kingdom has declined markedly in the American political science discipline.

For faculty members of a certain vintage, this is a sea change from the status quo of an earlier era. The mention of British politics likely will call to mind Samuel Beer—

Rhodes Scholar, World War II veteran, Harvard professor, political doer and thinker, president of the American Political Science Association, and Fellow of the British Academy. His Harvard obituary stated that “He launched the thorough study of British politics that made him celebrated in Britain as the man who knew their politics better than they did” (Hall et al. 2011). Can we imagine an American academic with such a career today?

The dwindling of scholars in the Samuel Beer mold could reflect a Britain that has become less central to global politics. It may be that someone who grew up in a world where Britain “ruled the waves,” studied in England, and fought with the British would naturally find it a crucial subject of teaching and research. Perhaps Beer’s career development reflects unique personal experiences as well as a moment in time when Britain was still powerful. Does the passing of his generation, and a march of time that has not always been kind to Britain, mean that American interest will inevitably decline—and maybe that it should?

A waning study of Britain also could reflect broader changes in higher education priorities. A recent BBC story (Jeffrey 2020) noted a decline in the study of Britain in the humanities, suggesting that the cause was disciplinary changes: “British studies is up against shifting trends in American universities as history and English departments focus less on Western Europe and more on other parts of the world.” The story also indicated that humanities departments believed such changes could make their degrees more “relevant” to students and thereby stem—so to speak—the loss of majors to STEM.

In political science, we might ask whether a declining interest in the United Kingdom reflects real-world developments, scholarly fashions, or student interest. Regardless of the answer, there are good reasons for political scientists to keep Britain in their scholarly gaze. As this symposium introduction suggests, we can learn much about contemporary politics and policy through comparisons with the United Kingdom, and students may have a greater interest in Britain than faculty perceive. A diminished place of Britain in the discipline, therefore, has negative implications for research and teaching—as well as for a Special Relationship that continues to be relevant to global politics.

WHY POLITICAL SCIENTISTS SHOULD CARE ABOUT BRITAIN

This symposium may not convince readers to develop a British politics specialty, but they may come to see this field as relevant to what they already study. In addition to the topics examined by the contributing authors, many others can be

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usefully investigated from a comparative perspective. If scholars are interested in (to name only a few subjects) nationalism, class politics, immigration, direct democracy, social identities, elections, constitutionalism, regionalism, and political parties, then the study of the United Kingdom is for them.

In making these arguments, I am building on a *PS: Political Science & Politics* tradition of trying to interest political scientists in another nation: Canada. In three separate decades, this journal has published a symposium that examines Canadian politics (Leal 2006, 2017; Weaver 1993). Not only is Canada a fascinating nation, but its politics also involve topics that are relevant to many fields of study. Weaver (1993) pointed out that “Canada poses a number of important issues and concerns to scholars of American and comparative politics, including the difficulty of building coalitions for institutional reform, the development of minority-group identities, and the political dynamics of direct democracy institutions such as referenda.”

In the second symposium, Leal (2006) further observed that “One might also add that Canada is of interest to those who care about parliamentary government; about the efforts of nations to manage regional, ethnic, and linguistic diversity; about cooperation and negotiation in the international area; about regional economic integration and political cooperation.” These points should have greater resonance today, in an age when politics across the Global North is shaped by related dynamics.

Teaching British politics also provides a rare opportunity to discuss a big-picture issue: the development of political, economic, and religious freedoms. In political science, we often sideline such topics, but surely our students deserve to know about them, including all of their limitations and imperfections. I might go so far as to see a direct line from the Magna Carta to the Chicano Movement and other struggles for human rights, freedoms, and justice. This may not be a fashionable perspective in some academic circles in which the past serves as a punching bag, but the British contribution to ideas of freedom is a necessary story to learn. It is especially important in an age when the classical liberalism forged in the United Kingdom and the United States is under global threat from a wide variety of anti-democracy movements.

Nevertheless, as I noted in my first symposium (Leal 2006), scholars are reluctant to think about Canada, despite

the many good reasons for doing so, and the same appears to be true about Britain. Part of the reason is the scholarly preference for specialization and insularity. In the American politics field, for example, the joke has long been told that it is “the last of the area studies, and the only one that does not require field work.” This need not be true, however. This is no time to hide in a disciplinary silo—even the most insular

scholar should realize that understanding contemporary American politics requires at least some reference to the more general dynamics shaping the globe, including the United Kingdom. One might argue that such work is the job of comparativists, but few seem eager to include Britain in the scholarly conversation.

Moreover, the study of Britain may face additional obstacles that reflect contemporary academic cultures but that are difficult to quantify. For instance, to teach British politics is to risk a certain amount of opprobrium because it may bring down on us the title of “Anglophile.” Few intend this as a compliment because it can imply pretention, classism, and the desire to live in a Merchant Ivory film. Despite all of the excellent scholarly reasons for studying and teaching Britain, our colleagues may see us as more interested in tea and crumpets than in politics and policy.

Furthermore, could Britain be too controversial in the contemporary academic environment? For example, we hear claims that Britain remains intertwined with empire (Sanghera 2021) and divided by class (Jones 2011), which may suggest to some faculty that Britain is a problematic subject. We may ask ourselves, “If my course does not address such topics, does this somehow imply acceptance or indifference? And if it does discuss them, will this generate fraught debates about subjects ranging from Winston Churchill to empire itself?” Although historians have seen complexities in such figures and structures (Blake and Louis 1993; Darwin 2012; Packwood 2023), we should not be surprised if faculty seek to avoid controversies.

Finally, some faculty may doubt that today’s students are interested in Britain; however, the popular culture of recent generations includes much content with direct British origin or indirect inspiration. This includes the Harry Potter phenomenon; new film adaptations of Jane Austen novels; docudramas such as “The Crown”; new Sherlock Holmes series; movie franchises such as “The Kingsman”; streaming series such as “Bridgerton”; the social media aesthetic of Dark Academia; and the Harry and Meghan twist to that longest standing of dramas: the Royal Family.

Whereas this might be dismissed as ephemeral popular culture, it also could be interpreted as a renewal and continuation of British “soft power.” When considered alongside more traditional items of British cultural production

(e.g., literature, theater, music, and art), it is no wonder that the nation continues to play a central role in the global imagination. As observers have long noted, culture can have important political implications and, on campus, it can lead students to an academic interest in Britain—and even reinforce ideas such as the Special Relationship. If the study of Britain has declined in America, this may reflect changing scholarly trends more than changing student interest.

DOES BRITAIN MATTER TO AMERICA AND THE WORLD?

As suggested previously, a declining interest in British politics also could parallel a declining United Kingdom. In this way, a waning British presence in research and teaching may reflect multiple factors, including a rational academic response to a changing political world.

The idea of a diminished Britain, often due to self-inflicted wounds, is common in the United States, although there is plenty of pessimism in the United Kingdom itself. In a review of the nation's maladies and their causes, *The Economist* (2022) recently asked, "Who Nobbled Britain?" King and Crewe (2014) detailed a long record of official incompetence in *The Blunders of Our Governments*. An article by Nelson (2014) in *The Spectator* discussed "Why Britain Is Poorer Than Any US State, Other Than Mississippi." Woods (2022) asked in *The New Statesman*, "Why Does Nothing Work in the UK Anymore?" A Comment by Grant (2022) in *The Daily Telegraph* argued that "Britain Is Broken—and Nobody Can Be Bothered to Do Anything about It."

Whether Britain can resolve its many domestic and foreign policy challenges is beyond the scope of this introduction, and although some might claim that these challenges are none of America's business, the Special Relationship needs two to tango. A nation past its sell-by date makes a poor partner for the United States.

Of course, many scholars on both sides of the pond doubt whether such a relationship exists or ever has existed. Some find this a rather lowbrow idea, while others simply doubt that an honest reading of history reveals anything but the typical cooperation and conflict of two powerful nations. Another possibility is that the concept simultaneously represents and creates the reality. If there is truth to Oscar Wilde's (1891) claim that "life imitates art," then perhaps the Special Relationship helps to create a special relationship.

An optimist could argue that despite its myriad problems, the United Kingdom nevertheless has many opportunities and advantages, which makes it worthy of both our scholarly and strategic attention. In particular, its cultural production along with its higher educational system and respected media give the nation a distinct advantage on the global stage. Many nations are vying for power but few have the attractions of Britain. Some countries are developing "hard" military and economic power, which they throw around the globe, but they will never be "cool"—and "cool" matters. Although "Cool Britannia" may have left the lexicon by the time Tony Blair left 10 Downing Street, the nation regularly draws attention in ways that transcend the politics of the moment.

For these reasons, Britain may be able to "punch above its weight." We also might note the continuing attractions of America's cultural production and political ideals, despite all the critics ranging from the academic left to the populist right. The Special Relationship, therefore, represents a unique binational alliance of culture, economics, and politics that cannot be replicated by oppressive and uncool police states.

THE SYMPOSIUM ARTICLES

This symposium focuses on contemporary questions of identity and democracy that have been brought into relief by Brexit but are decades in the making. Across the Global North, we have seen controversies that revolve around identities such as class, nationalism, race-ethnicity, religion, region, and localities. These questions also bring to the fore debates about understanding "the will of the people" and how to interpret electoral and direct-democracy outcomes. The symposium articles do not examine or explain Brexit itself, about which there already is considerable research, but instead explore key issues raised by the Brexit referendum and seek to understand if and how it has shaped subsequent politics.

The established and emerging scholars in this symposium tackle these issues in a variety of ways and using an array of data and methods. Although no symposium can cover all topics, we hope that this selection of research helps readers to better understand contemporary UK political dynamics and also encourages more comparative research that involves Britain.

In the first article, Ed Fieldhouse, Jonathan Mellon, Geoffrey Evans, Christopher Prosser, Jane Green, and Jack Bailey use British Election Study (BES) data to investigate the role of Brexit in the two subsequent parliamentary elections. Observers have asked whether the outcomes, particularly the substantial Conservative majority in 2019, primarily reflect a short-term Brexit shock or longer-term shifts in political alignments (e.g., class). The authors posit an alternative perspective: that such choices are false. It may be that long-term trends (particularly changing party attachments) made the electorate more susceptible to political shocks such as Brexit.

Fieldhouse et al. find evidence of party sorting after Brexit, with Conservative and Labour supporters now predominantly Leavers and Remainers, respectively. The data also show changing party support during the past three elections based on class, education, and age. Although it is difficult to conclude whether a realignment has occurred, the authors note that the rise of new identities that compete with existing party identities may be a sign of change. Years after the referendum, Remain and Leave identities are still strong. Although future electoral dynamics are difficult to predict, the characteristics of the parties have changed based on an interplay of long-term changes and short-term shocks. Therefore, "the shadow of Brexit will continue to dominate electoral alignments."

Sara Hobolt and James Tilley investigate Remain and Leave identities, finding that they are associated with specific policy preferences, thereby paralleling the way that traditional party identifications function. These associations do not simply sort

by partisanship, however. For example, Remainers in both the Conservative and Labour parties are more liberal than Leavers. This indicates that Brexit views have become a separate dimension of contemporary UK politics. Furthermore, respondents were able to identify specific policy positions along the Brexit dimension, particularly for social issues such as immigration. Hobolt and Tilley also used a survey experiment to demonstrate that when Remain supporters are provided with cues about in-group support for policies, they can change their views to more “correctly” align with those of other Remainers. Leavers do not show similar changes, but this may represent a floor effect.

Although recent surveys show a decline in Brexit support, the authors note that in 2022, two thirds of respondents still had a Brexit identity. The strength of this identity is greater than that of British partisan identification and almost rivals that of American party identification. Hobolt and Tilley also point out that recent changes in Brexit support in part reflect demographic changes: the passing of some Brexit supporters, the opposition of newer and younger voters, and the opposition of those who did not vote in 2016. When 2016 voters are analyzed, changes in Brexit views are smaller.

Nicole Martin and Maria Sobolewska point out that despite the tremendous attention given to the Brexit referendum, the votes of ethnic minorities have received little attention. This is a consequential topic because, contrary to expectations, approximately 1 million ethnic-minority voters supported Leave. Beyond the referendum itself, it may be that they were more likely to support Conservatives in subsequent elections; therefore, the authors study the ethnic minority vote in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 parliamentary elections. They also examine semi-structured interviews to better understand vote choices. The data include individuals with Bangladeshi, Black, Indian, Pakistani, and Black African identities.

Martin and Sobolewska’s analysis indicates no clear realignment in 2019 of minority Leave voters, although Conservatives made single-digit gains. Concerning Brexit itself, the interviews found that many ethnic minorities supported the immigration limitations emphasized by the Leave campaign, particularly for Eastern Europeans. They also perceived differences between the migration experiences of their group and the new arrivals and believed that the latter negatively affected public services and employment opportunities. In 2019, however, minority Leave voters did not necessarily support the “Get Brexit Done” party. One explanation is how they perceived issues of race and ethnicity. Minority Leavers who voted Conservative saw race-ethnicity as not very important to their votes, whereas Labour supporters perceived it as a key factor. The Labour supporters may have agreed with Leave campaign arguments, but this was not necessarily relevant to their 2019 partisan choices.

Lindsay Richards and Anthony Heath inquire about the unity of the United Kingdom, specifically testing how the “nations” of England, Scotland, and Wales perceive themselves and one another. Within England, they investigate regional and class differences. The questions are not explicitly about politics but rather responses to questions about whether

other groups “share my values,” are “people I could get on with,” and are “straightforward and honest.”

The results reveal some sharp and negative differences, such as between Scotland and England, how the North perceives the South, and how the working class perceives the middle class. Richards and Heath also observe that some groups are more coherent than others in that they are more positive about themselves, particularly the Scottish, Northerners, and the working class. This has important implications for the future of a polity that already has been strained by Brexit, the Scottish independence referendum, and various social and political changes.

William Allen and Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij ask whether the outcome of the Brexit referendum represented “the will of the people” or whether more information might have caused these same voters to make different choices. They note that even in the post-Brexit landscape, claims about the popular will continue to be relevant because Leavers and Remainers have claimed that it requires, respectively, an end to the question or additional voter input. More generally, in a political environment in which constitutional questions increasingly are settled through referenda, these questions about interpreting the popular will should only become more important.

Allen and Ahlstrom-Vij’s article therefore presents a diagnostic tool for understanding whether public opinions can vary according to different information levels. By examining post-referendum BES (2017) data, they find that support for Remain would have been approximately 10 percentage points higher if the electorate had the highest levels of political knowledge. This is a much more significant effect than that typically found in the information and elections literature (i.e., approximately 3%). The goal of “stress testing” claims about the popular will is not to re-fight Brexit (or other electoral battles) but rather to better understand this increasingly common direct democracy feature in British politics.

Jamie Pow and John Garry continue the theme of public information and decision making by examining the potential of deliberative mini-publics to shape public opinion about controversial and consequential policies. This is particularly relevant for British politics in light of two recent developments. First, the nation has been roiled by controversial topics in recent years that have been decided by referendum (e.g., Brexit and Scottish independence, as well as the Alternative Vote proposal). Second, there may be a political consensus that referenda should decide controversial questions with constitutional implications. How the public makes these decisions and whether outcomes can be improved by mini-publics are topics that need more scholarly attention. More generally, mini-publics may be an important way for the public and legislators to gain additional perspective on that much-debated concept: “the will of the people.”

Pow and Garry report that the extant literature can be pessimistic about the utility of mini-publics in ethnically divided regions and for addressing controversial issues. However, by studying two separate mini-publics in Northern Ireland about a public policy issue (without an ethno-national

dimension) and a constitutional question (with such a dimension), they find encouraging results. Specifically, respondents reported positive experiences (in terms of respectful discussion and being heard), especially for the more ethnically fraught topic. Reported opinion change was lower for the constitutional question, which was contrary to expectations but nevertheless showed deliberative effects on average. In summary, the article challenges claims that deliberative discussions inevitably will fail in locales with deep identity fissures.


Finally, Eric Kaufmann, David Leal, and Joe Tafoya examine how English respondents evaluate the Englishness of various national images and whether such views have electoral implications. They also make comparisons with a parallel sample of Americans, who assess the Americanness of similar images. The images include factors such as landscape, history, friendliness, neighborhoods, religion, and sports and therefore go beyond official political symbols. This has implications for a “nationalism from below” that may operate on a different dimension than adherence to political and constitutional symbols that originate from above. In this way, the article is complementary to the Richards and Heath contribution to this symposium, which does not examine explicitly political views.


The results show that the English (and American) respondents do not agree on the Englishness (and Americanness) of these symbols and that these variations are shaped by partisanship, ideology, religion, and race-ethnicity. Furthermore, Kaufmann, Leal, and Tafoya find some independent effects of these images on right-populist opinions and voting behavior in both nations. Nationalism from below may well be a factor that political scientists should spend more time investigating.


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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST


The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■


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