**Asylum and Immigration Issues: Brexit Lessons for Sweden**

Abstract

Since the UK’s referendum to leave the European Union (Brexit) passed, many onlookers have attributed the mobilization of blue-collared voters to xenophobia and racism among other issues aligned with identity (Kaufmann 2016). While identity has certainly played a visible aspect in the run-up to the referendum, and has most certainly been utilized by United Kingdom’s Independence Party (UKIP, Great Britain’s right-wing populist party), this research assumes that to better understand what led to this feeling of angst and alienation among Britain’s working class, we must also address economic and structural factors, e.g., the shift in the quality of life and income among British working class citizens affecting voter mobilization (Gest 2016). Using what we know about societal impacts in Britain, to apply these lessons elsewhere in Europe, the research looks to Sweden. To offer partial explanations for the rise of the Sweden Democrat’s (Sweden’s populist faction), the research then looks at similar indicators contributing to the rise of inequality in Sweden (privatization of education and healthcare and notable shortage of housing). Sweden was selected as the secondary case of analysis as it is considered the most comprehensive welfare regime in Europe and has recently received the greatest number of refugees per capita in Europe. Sweden is therefore a strong case for future comparative analysis for other EU member states facing steep challenges associated with globalization (immigration, security and international markets, etc.). While often scholars are rightfully reluctant to bring labor migrants and refugees into the same analytical framework, given the current atmosphere in Europe, I suggest that the UK referendum offers a warranted point of comparison; immigration is one of the most salient topics facing the EU today. Irrespective of the type of immigration, one lesson from Brexit is that economic downturns allow populist political movements to develop. This research serves to offer insight into underlying economic and structural issues which should also be taken into consideration when conceptualizing the rise of the far-right in Europe.

**Introduction**

With 52 percent in favor and 48 percent opposed, last June the United Kingdom (UK) voted to leave the European Union (EU). Nine months later, on 29 March 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May activated Article 50, officially initiating the UK’s departure from the EU. While there are several explanations for Britain’s decision to exit (otherwise known as “Brexit”), many have pointed to xenophobia and other immigration-related issues as a primary catalyst. Since 2004, with the inclusion of Central and Eastern European nations such as the Baltics and Cyprus (sometimes referred to as the A10 countries) in the EU, immigration has become much more politicized and focused upon by EU skeptics. During the Brexit campaign, the United Kingdom’s Independence Party (UKIP) built support with its anti-immigration rhetoric. At the heart of their message were claims of the deleterious effects associated with post-2004 labor migration from A10 member states. More recently, a different type of immigration, that of refugees, has affected other parts of Europe. While often scholars are rightfully reluctant to bring labor migrants and refugees into the same analytical framework, given the current atmosphere in Europe, I suggest that the UK referendum offers a warranted point of comparison; immigration is one of the most salient topics facing the EU today. Irrespective of the type of immigration, one lesson from Brexit is that immigration is a strong and divisive asset to by populist political movements. To underscore this connection, this research looks to Sweden who, since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, has received the greatest number of refugees per capita in Europe.

**The Path to Brexit: Lessons from Manufacturing an Exit**

At the center of this discussion is the argument concerning whether Brexit is motivated simply by economics, or if the reason for the UK’s separation from the EU is deeper and more nuanced. The economics-based perspective constructs a regional/municipal narrative of what is occurring in Britain. This perspective, structured as London versus the rural areas and the rich versus the poor, is a dichotomy similar to that which was seen in the recent US presidential election where the Rust Belt (less-educated, low earning, and often xenophobic) was pitted against the coastal cities. Kaufmann (2016) has argued that Brexiters were motivated by identity rather than economics, and that age, education, nationalism, and ethnicity were more relevant than occupation or earnings. Conversely, Gest (2016) explained that until recently the white working class occupied the middle class of British and American societies. Today, members of this demographic feel neglected by mainstream political representatives. In the UK, economic disenfranchisement, nativist sentiments, and fear of the unknown have inspired a remarkable level of support for rightwing fringe groups such as UKIP. Factors leading to this anger and disenfranchisement not only include the loss of good jobs and comparatively high incomes, but also middle class social status and respect. This displeasure should not come as a surprise to politicians, as it was their policies that most damaged the working class. In addition to ill-suited political maneuvering, technological advancement and the transformation of the labor market have also taken its toll.

Many are quick to point to racism and anti-immigrant sentiments, but as Gest’s work shows, the backlash against immigration also has structural elements that have led to this now-common feeling of alienation and angst. Much of the political attention in Europe is focused on immigration, leaving those who once held prominent positions in society and made middle class incomes feeling abandoned and ignored. Here, I examine the economic factors that motivated Brexit, which I believe preceded those attached to identity. There is no doubt that racism and xenophobia exist throughout the UK; however, this paper assumes it was economic and systemic pressures that first enabled UKIP to target immigrants as the primary scapegoat. Prior to the referendum, in 2014, Luke Akehurst, a Labour councilor, highlighted the typically older male voters drawn to UKIP were concerned more about “bread and butter issues,” rather than immigration per se.[[1]](#footnote-1) John Mann, an MP for Bassetlaw believes “these voters are rarely racist. Their concern is about security of employment, access to housing [and] quality of education.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He suggests it would be in the best interest of Labour to hone in on these issues, and avoid corroborating the notion that the issues are fundamentally embedded to the rate of immigration. Since the 1980s, inequality in Britain risen substantially. Between 1980 and 2010, there has been a 43 percent reduction in middle-income households. Likewise, there has been a 60 percent increase in poor households. According to an analysis of census data by Hennig and Dorling of the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford, London has witnessed an 80 percent increase in poor households and a 43 percent decrease in middle income households. Roughly 36 percent of London households are now classified as poor (up from 20 percent in 1980), and 37 percent are middle income (down from 65 percent).[[3]](#footnote-3) Given the reduction in quality of life for many throughout Britain, as well as the accompanying sense of alienation from their political representatives, typically blue collar communities associated with production and industry – once comparatively affluent but now economically suffering – became the ones most easily convinced that they needed to be protected from the “threat” of immigration.[[4]](#footnote-4) In these depressed areas, many were persuaded to vote “leave” because they believed it would return certain forms of employment back to Britain and thus increase their personal prosperity.

Brexit did not happen overnight, and it did not come without warning signs. Prior to A10 members joining the EU, many in the UK feared that a wave of immigrants from economically weaker states would come to more affluent member states at an uncontrollable pace. One indication of this apprehension is that only the UK, Ireland, and Sweden were immediately accessible to those coming from Central and Easter Europe. From 2006 to 2016, the number of EU workers in Britain grew tenfold. By 2016, there was a reported 2.23 million EU workers in the country.[[5]](#footnote-5) Coupled with these sharp increases and institutional struggles such as housing shortages and wage reductions was the recognition that the politicization of immigration would be a fairly simple matter. Yet this doesn’t necessary equate to xenophobia. Such massive transformations should not be simplistically tagged as either “good” or “bad,” “democratic” or “nationalist.” Blanchflower and Shadforth (2009) highlighted the very real impacts of immigration on the most at-risk British residents. They examined the impact of the flow of workers from the A10 on the UK economy, and found that wages for vocations most susceptible to competition from the new flow of workers (e.g., low-skilled) saw weaker wage inflation. They documented how the presence of the new wave of foreign workers increased the general fear of unemployment, arguing that this flow of workers (i.e., the supply) exceeded the UK market’s demand that it reduced both inflationary pressure and the natural rate of unemployment. With the global economic downturn and perpetual transformation of greater London from middle class suburbs to what many now consider to be as lower class immigrant slums, as well as the rise in competition for low-skilled labor, the changing attitudes of Britain’s voters are not surprising. It was only a matter of time before a political party like UKIP would court working class communities as a means of rising to power. The attention these disenfranchised voters received was motivation enough to head to the polls and cast their ballots.

Brexit supporters found the EU’s bureaucratic reach too extensive and British influence and sovereignty in continual decline.[[6]](#footnote-6) Conversely, those wishing to stay hypothesized that if a medium-sized island wanted to continue to have international influence and remain secure, it needed to a be a part of a larger block of like-minded countries. In other words, if states were to safely operate in the current global context, they would have to work together and present a united front under an umbrella of solidarity; only then could they craft effective mechanisms for staving off the very real challenges of globalization (e.g., the global financial crisis of 2008, the most recent flood of refugees, and the growing hostility from Russia, among other threats). We are now seeing that many throughout the EU are expressing sentiments similar to those expressed by Brexiters. Euroscepticism is not solely a British phenomenon.

What can be learned from Brexit and applied to other case studies? First, a sharp negative economic transition among a large portion of the population is likely to insight populism. The votes of the lower, less-educated class of society are typically not easily mobilized.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet as with the US presidential election and the impact of the Rust Belt, this year the more depressed regions of Britain went to the polls. Moreover, populism is on the rise throughout Europe. The types of immigrants relocating to the UK and Scandinavia tend to be different, but this research, like Gest’s work, assumes that rather than chasing issues associated with identity, an analysis of economic shifts will help us to better understand these changing times.

**Factors Contributing to the Rise of Populism in Scandinavia**

Throughout Scandinavia, Folkhemmet (the People’s Home) is the normative foundation of all policy formation, though this philosophical grounding is more obvious in some countries than others. At its core, Folkhemmet is the idea of the community itself serving as home. With this comes the significant requirement of public engagement, a substantial social contract. The belief is that as a society advances, so should all of its citizens. Considering these staunch requirements, many attribute the success of the Scandinavian model to cultural homogeneity. Inevitably, then, the byproducts of globalization bring this system’s longevity into question. For Sweden specifically, many are now predicting the end of Swedish exceptionalism (Rothstein 2014). Joppke (2007) and others have argued that the success of the European welfare state has always been highly dependent on ethnic consistency. Rather than focusing on cultural sameness, Schall (2016) underscored the faltering of Sweden’s Social Democratic hegemony, and the resulting opportunity for anti-immigrant sentiment that led to the demise of Sweden’s “miraculous” welfare machine. The question, then, is whether populism resulted from the fall of this type of political ideology, leading to the rise of anti-immigration sentiments in Sweden? But if Schall is correct, then why have Norway, Denmark, and Finland, all politically similar, also significantly supported right-leaning parties?

At the core of the Scandinavian social contract is the expectation of substantial civic participation, as evidenced by forbunds (study circles) and the emphasis on full employment. Unlike Britain, Scandinavia is just now truly beginning to tackle major questions related to immigration. Despite recent efforts to attract labor-based migrants (such as Sweden’s 2008 policy to encourage foreign labor), the majority of immigrants arriving are asylum seekers. This has become increasingly frequent since 2011, with the civil war in Syria and enormous influx of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. At the crux of the challenge of absorbing these newcomers is the need to rethink some of the core principles of Scandinavian social democracy, such as their centrist, top-down regulatory approach to local markets and general definition of equality. Along with demographic changes, Scandinavia also faces shifts in their market and labor orientation. It is likely that as with Britain, if economic pressures continue to grow, and inequality continues to rise, then populist parties will continue to rise in popularity. To explore this question further, the following highlights the transformation of the opportunity structure, available housing, and more specifically for Scandinavia, the privatization of goods generally associated with an expansive Scandinavian welfare state (e.g., education and healthcare).

**Factors Contributing to the Rise of Populism in Sweden**

Over the last decade, the Sweden Democrats (SD), Sweden’s far-right political party, have risen from being a fringe group with neo-nazi roots, to gaining 13 percent of the popular vote in 2014. In late 2016, the polls suggested that 17 percent of Swedes approved of SD’s outlook for Sweden. In the upcoming 2018 election, Åkesson (the leader of SD), expects to gain a quarter of the vote. As with Marine Le Pen, Åkesson’s “spring cleaning” of some of its more radical members has made the party more respectable to many. The greatest boost to the party’s popularity came as a result of the 2015 refugee crisis. Prior to the heavily politicized event, research using data from the Swedish Welfare Survey found attitudes toward the welfare state had remained stable throughout the first decade of the current century (Svallfors 2011). However, Ivar Arpi, an editorial writer for *Svenska Dagbladet*, has claimed that he has never seen the country more polarized. He explained that many Swedes are worried about their political leaders’ ability to deal with the effects of mass immigration, writing:[[8]](#footnote-8)

The ground is shaking, I would say. What's happening now is that we are challenged in the core of our identity … There [are] two Swedens right now. There's the human rights, open borders, internationalist Sweden — the one that's held power for so long. And then there's the more constrained version of Sweden, like [favoring a] welfare state for citizens first and foremost, and our resources are limited.

He has warned that with current and future immigration, Swedish culture will change, and the country will not be as welcoming in days to come. With SD becoming more and more prominent, we must ask ourselves what factors currently incite fear with regards to immigration.

Along with social democracy, one longstanding Swedish goal is to make each generation more educated than the last. While this has, for the most part, been achieved, it has had a direct impact on Sweden’s opportunity structure. The nation’s labor market now consists of only about 5 percent low-skilled employment. Due to these high standards, avenues typically available to refugees are now scarce. Not coincidentally, the largest body of SD’s support is white, working class men who did not attend university. In an analysis of 2014 voting patterns, more than 16 percent of SD were former supporters of the Social Democrat party. These individuals are not necessarily neo-nazis, but rather working class (Duhan 2014) voters who feel that the political mainstream (e.g., the Social Democrats and Moderates) no longer take their needs into consideration (Beider 103). Hübinetter and Lundström (2011) have pointed to a lost sense of national identity as an explanation for this party’s rise, arguing that SD has given primacy to “whiteness.” While this may be true, especially at the time of the party’s founding (when it was associated with a revival of neo-nazism), its most recent and significant surge is more closely tied to economic strife and changes within the Swedish opportunity structure than it is to a backlash against multi-culturalism or a sense of white supremacy. These are, perhaps, byproducts or pre-existing social realities in Sweden, but my research has not shown them to be the root cause of the rise of populism, nor an appropriate descriptor for all of those who vote SD.

Over the last two and a half decades, several significant factors have contributed to a shift in Sweden’s political orientation. First, several facets of the welfare state have since become privatized and less equal, more so than at any time prior. Equality of education, the proverbial hub of social democracy, has been threatened. In 1994, state reform allowed for anyone who met basic standards to open a school and bring in students at the state’s expense. Just over a decade after enacting the legislation, the number of students being privately educated rose from just over one-percent to more than ten percent in 2008.[[9]](#footnote-9) Gustav Fridolin, Sweden’s Education Minister, has noted:

This [educational reform] used to be the great success story of the Swedish system. We could offer every child, regardless of their background, a really good education. The parents’ educational background is showing more and more in their grades. Instead of breaking up social differences and class differences in the educational system, we have a system today that’s creating a wider gap between the ones that have and the ones that have not.[[10]](#footnote-10)

While privatization has been blamed for the decline in educational performance and threat to equality, other factors have also contributed.

Along with the recent influx of refugees, many have pointed to risk factors associated with the economically depressed and heavily segregated communities that pervade Sweden. In a multilevel analysis, Szulkin and Jonsson (2007) asked whether ethnic segregation in Sweden’s schools, fueled by increased residential segregation, was linked to the recent negative trend in educational outcomes. Via their examination of two cohorts of 188,000 students and 1,043 schools and linking educational information with census data on social origin, these researchers found that ethnic density in schools depressed grade point averages, especially for immigrant pupils. Disproportionate educational attainment results in increased inequality. Its effects alter how many view the welfare state and their particular role in terms of contribution.

Other factors have also contributed to Sweden’s shift towards populism. Despite the nation’s reputation as a leftwing utopia, it has become a laboratory for rightwing radicalism. Since 2000, with the entrance of the Moderates, a coalition of liberals and conservatives has introduced for-profit schools, reduced the welfare deficit, and privatized a portion of the health service.[[11]](#footnote-11) Since 2010, private companies have been allowed to establish general practitioner-style services throughout the country, and are paid out of taxpayer money. As might be expected, these clinics are usually established in wealthier urban areas. In addition, eldercare now is privatized, which has led to several new challenges for Swedes entering their golden years.

Like Britain, housing in Sweden is also a major concern. In fact, the housing shortage has become so dire that nine out of ten Swedes live in municipalities currently facing housing scarcity.[[12]](#footnote-12) In Stockholm, there are a reported half million people on apartment search waiting lists. On average, it takes eleven years to receive an apartment. While Stockholm is one of Europe’s fastest growing capital cities, the issue of housing has put significant pressure on citizens who have lived there for decades. Irrespective of identity-driven reasons for moving towards rightwing populism, these are all underlying structural and economic factors contributing to this political shift. The visible economic and structural instability has paved a clear path and accessible motive for politicizing immigration as the main pitfall of Sweden’s exceptionalism.

Immigration and refugees have long played a significant role in Swedish politics. Recently, however, they have become an extremely divisive issue. Combined with a high number of refugees relocating to Sweden and private reform (deregulation), Sweden is now facing new challenges similar to those seen in Britain. If there is one clear outcome of these changes, it is that they have resulted in an increased level of inequality. This is in direct conflict with the ideals that provide the foundation of Swedish – and more broadly, Scandinavian – political design. Housing, health care, and education are only a few of the issues influencing voters to move toward a more conservative point of view.

**Conclusion**

Article 50 has officially been enacted. Great Britain is the first nation in the EU to retract its membership. Leading up to the referendum, several factors have served as key catalysts of this change. However, immigration is the most commonly discussed. Like the UK, other EU member states are grappling with this issue, and none more than Sweden. Some research has argued that a backlash against immigrants is identity-driven; however, this study suggests that it was economic and structural pressures that first served to increase the popularity of populism. As expressed by James (an Ilford/Greater London local who voted to remain in the EU):

Brexiters are often seen as disillusioned nationalists. Immigration was definitely one of the main factors. In the run up to the vote, the media and “leave” campaign focused on various areas of government and finance, [saying] that we would save money. This influenced those that were unsure. But when you visit areas of greater London, you really see why Brexit is happening. Many locals in Ilford speak of how the area has changed in recent years and attribute this to large levels of low-skilled foreign labor who lack any applicable skills for the British labor market ... When you live in an area of London that seems so disconnected from Westminster, you can see why the people voted to leave.

His sentiment reflects those similar to Gest. While many are quick to label those who voted to leave, they often neglect the real experiences of people living in areas of staunch transformation and recent degradation. No longer enjoying a living wage or being able to purchase a home, compounded with the loss of personal self-regard (often associated with achieving a middle class income), has weighed on many natives of these areas.

This research assumes that the development of similar sentiments will lead to the rise of populism throughout Europe. To shed light on similar factors, this article highlighted pressures associated with privatization (e.g., education and healthcare), as well as the shift away from low-skilled employment and affordable housing. Nonetheless, Sweden remains Europe’s most expansive welfare state. Aligned with the rise of inequality and given its economic and social orientation, if refugees are unable to enter the labor market, more rightwing, anti-immigration sentiment will develop. With such large leaps toward privatization and pervasive inequality, many have argued that Sweden is losing her exceptional political orientation and social solidarity (Rothstein 2014). Waves of immigration from A10 countries (as was the case for Britain) and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa are being used by populist movements as scapegoats for Europe’s current struggles. This is optimal fodder for groups seeking to attract more traditionally centrist voters. In Sweden, SD continues to rise in popularity. Åkesson expects to garner a quarter of the vote in 2018; it is clear that Sweden’s political landscape is changing. Over the last twenty-five years, Sweden has moved from a utopian liberal order to a laboratory of political liberalism and growing conservativism.

While the British model and Norden are significantly different, they are also quite similar. Indeed, the anti-immigration sentiment embedded in the “leave” vote was directed toward the flow of inner-EU workers, rather than those directly associated with the refugee crisis. Higher levels of immigration is padding the populist agenda and sparking the fears of those who have fallen on the hardest of times, even when the situation isn’t directly attributable to immigration. Gest’s work shows this to be the case in depressed areas in greater London; evidence of privatization and an increase in inequality highlights this in Sweden. The extent to which equality can be sustained throughout the Norden and tolerance toward refugees retained remains to be seen. Over the years, the UK has received several large waves of immigrants, and since the 1980s has perpetually debated capitalism vis-à-vis expansive welfare. If the same holds true for Scandinavia and inequality continues to blossom, it is likely that Sweden will continue to gravitate toward a more conservative political outlook. Given Sweden’s historical foundation, something Brexit-like is probably far off, but globalization is affecting how EU members view their role and at the core of this debate is immigration. While competing views suggest Euroscepticism emanate from more identity-based roots, we must first look to economic and structural challenges that ignite populist reactions to marginalized groups. As evidenced by the UK, negative changes in economic capability result in more conservative voting trends. How these issues can be alleviated is a topic for further research.

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