**TWO TRIBES? UNPACKING THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF BREXIT**

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**Introduction**

During the 2010s European Union studies have turned increasing attention to the impact of domestic politics on integration. The Eurozone, refugee and Brexit crises are amongst the fundamental challenges presented to the EU that have prompted renewed theoretical and analytical debate. The EU and its policies have become more contested in member states through rising Euroscepticism, the impact of Eurozone austerity and increased attention to issues of identity, thus making agreement at EU level more difficult. Brexit is a particularly strong expression of this phenomenon in a member state that experienced Euroscepticism before others and, thanks to Prime Minister David Cameron’s attempt to settle this controversy through a referendum that was then lost, voted to leave the EU altogether.

Whilst some commentators have regarded Brexit as a consequence of a persistent difficult relationship between Britain and the EU—in other words a British-centred explanation—this paper takes a comparative perspective. It seeks to add to the theoretical reflection in the EU studies literature by examining the case of Brexit and deploying theory to make some sense out of what has been a complex process, at least within British politics. Because of its comparative aspirations the paper is not just about Brexit, for it seeks to situate that process in the wider context of member state-EU relations. The circumstances may be distinctly British but they are part of a heightened contestation rooted in domestic politics that is impacting on the EU.

The paper is structured in four parts. We start by a review of the insights of the existing literature into the crisis decade of the EU. We then identify the main trends in interpretations offered by the Brexit literature. The next section develops an alternative explanation for the ‘new’ domestic politics of European integration that takes into account the contemporary situation. We then apply our analytical framework to explaining Brexit, focusing primarily on the time-period from the commencement of re-negotiations by the Cameron government through to the present.[[1]](#footnote-1) Finally, we conclude.

Our distinctive analytical approach is to apply the principles critical integration theory (see Bulmer and Joseph 2016; 2019) but with the distinction that they are applied in this paper at the member state, rather than the EU, level. In practical terms this means that we explore the changing macro-structural circumstances in global politics and political economy along with their impact on UK politics and political economy; how the political forces, primarily the British government, political parties and other forces, have responded to these changes in their European policy (agency); and how this contestation has played out within the institutions of UK politics (structure). We understand domestic political contestation to be organized around alternative visions of politics and economics—we term them competing hegemonic projects—and seek to demonstrate how the ensuing political cleavages have presented major problems for governments and political parties over the Brexit time-frame.

The relationship between structure and agency is an important part of our explanation, and we draw on a strategic-relational approach make sense of how the UK has responded to European integration (Hay 1998, 2001). Key instances of agency include Prime Minister Cameron’s decision to hold a referendum in the event of a future Conservative government; the ‘red lines’ selected by Prime Minister May in interpreting the referendum result; her decision to call a general election in 2017; and a whole set of tactical choices in seeking parliamentary approval of the Withdrawal Agreement while leading a government with no overall majority. Yet these instances of agency cannot be considered without reference to the institutional context within which it is embedded. Understanding how strategic agents manage and mobilise competing hegemonic projects in a particular institutional context, which both constrains and facilitates political action, is central to our explanation of Brexit. In particular, we suggest that the UK’s unique constitutional and institutional fluidity led to the adoption of political strategies for managing the European issue which produced a series of unintended consequences – thereby contributing to Brexit.

**Brexit and the state of the art in integration theory**

In seeking to explain how the UK’s relationship with the EU came to the referendum outcome in June 2016 and the subsequent negotiations to leave, we seek to identify appropriate theoretical reference-points in order to try and make sense of the empirical detail. We focus on frameworks that address the bigger picture of the UK’s relationship with the EU rather than meso- and smaller-scale approaches that are better attuned to shedding light on relationships in particular policy sub-fields. In consequence, we focus more on integration theory than the governance literature.

In recent years there has been a renaissance in attention to integration theory as authors have sought to assess its suitability for understanding the EU’s ‘crisis decade’. Several journal special issues have focused on this challenge (Ioannou, Leblond and Niemann 2015; Laffan 2016; Hooghe, Laffan and Marks 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2019). In their assessment of how grand theory has helped understand the Eurozone, refugee and rule of law crises, along with Brexit, Hooghe and Marks (2019) find that both neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) have less to say about Brexit than postfunctionalism. We delve a bit deeper into this finding in reviewing the state of the art of the existing literature.

The most developed integration framework that puts member state preference formation to the fore is liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) (Moravcsik 1993; 1998; 2018). The first stage of this theory focuses precisely on preference formation at the domestic level, and is based on a liberal theory. As a particular (liberal) form of international political economy drives the theory it sees preferences emerging from the interaction of domestic groups and actors, particularly business, with governments. States come together at the international level with their different preferences, with the larger states playing a more influential role in negotiating bargains that bring all the states gains in facing the global political-economic context. The resultant agreement enables the delegation of new powers or new policy responsibilities to supranational institutions.

Brexit is a fundamental challenge to this understanding of integration. The influence of business on the June 2016 Brexit decision or on the government’s Brexit negotiations within the terms of Article 50 has been limited. The Conservative Party—traditionally the party of business—has adopted other priorities. Indeed, the logic of LI is turned on its head as the advocates of Brexit have argued that the UK will be better off outside the collective agreements that it had negotiated. That is presumably an underlying reason why Moravcsik (2016), in his pre-referendum commentary, regarded the whole exercise as illusory such that in the event of a vote to leave, it would not in fact happen. Leave politicians would ultimately have to recognise the realities of the UK’s place in a globalised world and the reliance ‘on the EU to secure and stabilise trade, investment, travel, litigation, national security and political values’ (Moravcsik 2016). The implication was that politicians were ‘fiddling around’ in the face of political-economic realities, implying that an actual Brexit would represent a shock, to the system. Domestic preference formation perhaps explained some softening of the May government’s stance as negotiations proceeded, notably the agreement on a 21-month transition period to enable businesses to adapt. LI’s insights into the Brexit decision and the resultant negotiations are therefore rather limited.

There are some characteristics of LI that underlie its limitations for exploring Brexit. First, in ontological terms it is a positivist/rationalist approach that brings with it parsimony but may not satisfy those preferring a post-positivist approach. It is also elitist in nature—government elites matter—and thus collides with one of the realities of Brexit, namely that discord amongst Conservative Party elites led to a referendum that gave voice to the people as a whole and, indeed, to some voters signalling their discontent with governing elites in voting Leave. This process departed from the standard account of LI that attributes key importance to economic interests and geo-politics in defining member state preferences. It is therefore difficult to align LI with the Eurosceptic and populist positions that were given voice during the referendum campaign and with the rise of the United Kingdom Independent Party, UKIP.

The recent rise of new intergovernmentalism as an interpretation of EU governance recognises the increased salience of domestic politics within the EU (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015a; 2015b; Hodson and Puetter 2019). However, it is much less clear on propositions as to *how* domestic politics is important and therefore on explaining the motivation behind Brexit.

Neo-functionalism sees a different logic to integration, compared to LI (Niemann, Lefkofridi and Schmitter 2019). It is once again elite-driven, but by different elite processes. However, the mutually reinforcing processes of spillover, as well as implicit assumptions of path-dependency, struggle to cope with the disintegration that Brexit presents. Its main contribution might prove to be explaining the way in which the EU27 have established a unity of purpose in negotiating with the UK, motivated by the desire to avoid contagion effects of Brexit (Laffan 2019 forthcoming).

A key development in EU governance, most evident in the British referendum result but also present in populist responses to the Eurozone and refugee crises, was the decline in elite control over EU policy. The transfer of core state powers to the EU level encountered increasing resistance from European publics (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). The long-standing European integration theories are consequently challenged not only because of their teleological assumptions about integration but also because of their elitist foundations. This applies to neo-functionalism—with its emphasis on elites transferring allegiance to the supranational level—as much as to business and government elites in LI.

Hooghe and Marks (2009) had already identified the elitist weakness in their ‘postfunctionalist’ analysis of how wider publics had moved from providing a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus on the policies of member states’ elites to integration. Three claims are central to postfunctionalism (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 1-3): that European integration and governance has become politicized, not only in episodic referendums but also in elections; that the views of public opinion and parties have become important in relation to debates about integration; and that identity has become an important reference-point in political contestation about the EU. These are key observations and bear directly on Brexit.

An important contribution of postfunctionalism was to highlight the new political cleavage around identity that sits alongside the longer-standing left-right cleavage in relation to socio-economic policy issues (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 14-18). The ‘gal-tan’ cleavage between green/alternative/libertarian voters and those favouring traditionalism, authority and nationalism was key (see also Hooghe and Marks 2018). Once again this observation resonates with the experience of voting in the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. Postfunctionalism has much to offer in analysing the political sociology of the UK vote to leave the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2019: 11-12). Specifically, it can help understand the decision to hold a referendum and the resistance to European integration, expressed in the demand to ‘take back control’, as one of the motivations behind the vote to leave the EU

Postfunctionalism has also led to the developing literature on politicization. This literature develops a research agenda centred on the first of the assumptions of postfunctionalism. Thus it identifies the wider chorus of voices now articulating views and impacting on EU policy. The key contributions of this literature are to identify ‘(a) the growing salience of European governance, involving (b) a polarisation of opinion, and (c) an expansion of actors and audiences engaged in monitoring EU affairs’ (de Wilde et. al. 2016: 4). Politicisation thus also offers a view of the politics of EU policy that extends out well beyond elites and captures the current climate where Eurosceptic parties, such as UKIP, challenged the position of mainstream counterparts on European integration.

Both the postfunctionalist and politicization literatures provide important insights that correct elitist assumptions of the longer-standing integration theories. Neither has yet been applied to understanding wider aspects of member state-EU relations. Whilst both theoretical approaches are inherently comparative, the politicization literature in particular tends to focus on quite specific issues, for instance the voting patterns of German deputies during the Eurozone crisis (Wonka 2016). Both literatures are associated with a positivist approach to social science and the use of quantitative data.

For the sake of completeness, we should note that social constructivists would wish to deploy an alternative, inter-subjective, ontology that places emphasis on how the reality of the UK-EU relationship has been constructed over decades, with an issue such as sovereignty forming an identity-based rallying point for Eurosceptics. In other words, the social construction of reality has arguably been an important factor for much of UK membership and certainly was during the referendum campaign (see Oliver and Wilson 2017). The framing of the debate, not to mention misleading claims, departed from a sense of ‘natural reality’ to ‘social reality’. The way in which the referendum result was constructed by the May government as a mandate for an end to free movement at the anticipated cost of full membership of the single market also enables constructivist analysis to shed important insights.

Finally, we note that Brexit runs against the Europeanization literature that was prominent in the 1990s and, with the transfer of the *acquis communitaire* to the candidate states, in the 2000s. (e.g. Graziano and Vink 2007). The Europeanization literature was primarily concerned with the downstream impact of the EU upon member states. Whilst there was research on resistance to/non-compliance with Europeanization (Saurugger 2012) and how Europeanization was exploited as a resource in other domestic political contestation (Woll and Jacquot 2010), the magnitude of Brexit is qualitatively different. This literature remains problematic in the context of Brexit, which is essentially about ‘*de*-Europeanisation’ (Outhwaite 2019). It is a form of dis-integration that has itself come to be theorised in recent times (Vollaard 2014; Webber 2019).

Our overall conclusion at this point is to argue that the tools for interpreting Brexit remain under-developed. ‘Bottom-up’ domestic politics approaches to understanding EU policy-making have been developed in the past but in a quite different state of integration (Bulmer 1983). Such analyses have remained under-specified and under-developed. We seek to address this deficiency and provide an account of Brexit that incorporates macro-social change and how political actors within the UK have contended with these challenges alongside European integration itself in such a way that led to the Brexit vote and the complex legacy its implementation presents for the British state. Before we develop our approach further, we give a brief review of the existing accounts offered in relation to Brexit.

**The literature on Brexit**

Existing explanations of Brexit differ significantly with respect to the relative causal significance attributed to structure and agency. Accounts that develop a political economy approach highlight the long-term structural drivers of Brexit. For example, Hopkin (2017) and Blyth and Matthijs (2017) view the UK’s departure not as an isolated event, but part of a populist, ‘anti-system’ politics sweeping western democracies since the financial crisis. This backlash constitutes a rejection of mainstream political elites and values, and challenges the consensus around economic integration, free markets and liberal values. In the UK, this new politics has been compounded by the failure of austerity to restore economic growth and the refusal of politicians to provide real ideological choice. By contrast, Thompson (2017) views Brexit as a consequence of the UK’s ‘singular’ macro political economy. She explores the interaction between contingent political decisions and events, such as the 2015 general election and 2016 EU referendum, and pressures arising from the changing political economy of the UK and EU, which she argues made the Leave vote ‘inevitable’. Thompson’s argument is that the roots of Brexit lay in Britain’s eschewal in 2004 of transition arrangements on freedom of movement for the new EU accession states which led to a significant rise in immigration from the Eurozone periphery. Moreover, she points to the importance of the Eurozone crisis, and the determination of Eurozone states to push ahead with further integration, as exposing the UK’s lack of influence. These structural conflicts forced the Cameron government to seek special protections for the City of London which antagonised relations with other EU leaders and eroded democratic consent for membership at home. They also highlighted the contradictions in the Cameron government’s strategy of pledging to hold a referendum to prevent further powers being delegated to Brussels (the referendum ‘lock’), while also demanding treaty change as a way of returning powers to Westminster.

From a constructivist perspective, Gifford (2017) employs a critical political economy perspective to explain Brexit. He argues that successive UK governments have deliberately sought to differentiate Britain from the rest of the EU. This has been achieved by constructing a distinctive Eurosceptic political economy which positions the UK as an ‘outsider’ or ‘neo-liberal pioneer’ that strives to reform the EU in the UK’s mould. Brexit is viewed as the consequence of a populist turn in this Eurosceptic discourse, with Leave supporters claiming that the EU is no longer in the UK’s economic interests and incompatible with notions of sovereignty and autonomous nationhood.

Finally, explanations from political science emphasise the socio-institutional roots of Brexit. Like Thompson, Jessop (2016) interprets Brexit as a singular event, but one that is a symptom of a continuing organic crisis of the British state and society. The Brexit ‘conjuncture’ reflects a long-running split in the establishment, a worsening representational crisis in the party system, a growing crisis of authority for political elites, a legitimacy crisis of the state, and a crisis of national-popular hegemony over the population. Similarly, Menon and Salter (2016) and Glencross (2016) see the outcome of the EU referendum as the result of the confluence of several long-term and contingent factors. Both draw attention to the domestic party-politics of EU membership; namely, the importance of longstanding intra-party divisions over European integration, and the failure of successive governments to challenge Eurosceptic assertions or trumpet British leadership in the EU. Against these historical-political ‘background conditions’, Menon and Salter judge Cameron’s strategy of renegotiation and referendum as an exercise in political expediency which was highly reckless.

While these accounts provide important and valuable insights into Brexit, we argue that there remain significant gaps and deficiencies in the existing literature. First, and most problematically, none of these accounts specifies the precise relationship between structure and agency. With a few exceptions (notably Thompson 2017), there is a tendency to view Brexit in quasi-teleological terms, as the result of a linear process rooted in EU enlargement, the Eurozone crisis, a crisis of the British state, and/or Eurosceptic discourse, which generate pressures for political separation. From this perspective, the role of contingency is limited to the timing and speed of the process, not the outcome. The literature arguably lacks a convincing theoretical account that locates political actors in their strategically-selective context (Hay 2002: 126-134).

Second, the emphasis on the political economy of Brexit stresses the importance of underlying socio-economic structures, but says relatively little about how these are mediated or interpreted by agents through distinct ideational and discursive lenses. The key strength of Gifford’s (2017) work is to show how Eurosceptic discourse has been deployed strategically to legitimate the UK’s continued EU membership. In doing so, however, this account risks falling into the trap of ideational-determinism: that is, viewing Brexit as the logical but unintended consequence of a set of ideas promulgated by UK political elites.

Finally, most explanations have sought to explain Brexit as a singular event or as a result of the UK’s singular political economy or domestic party-political context. Problematically, this generates a sui generis problem: if Brexit is a unique and unpredictable event, the extent to which comparative insights can be used to leverage our understanding of the process is inevitably limited. Although Hopkin (2017) and Blyth and Matthijs (2017) address this to some extent by subsuming Brexit into a wider anti-politics backlash, these accounts exogenise causation by relying on external socio-economic shocks for their explanatory power. What is therefore lacking is a theoretically-grounded framework for analysing the political dynamics that underpin wider processes of European disintegration, of which Brexit is a single case (Rosamond 2017). In particular, we need an account of Brexit that endogenises macro structural drivers of change, while avoiding reducing analysis to micro level strategic agency. We suggest that this can be addressed through a meso level analysis of the role of ideas and institutions.

**Critical integration theory**

Based on our discussion of the theoretical approaches as well as the emergent literature on Brexit, we argue that a richer account of the domestic politics of European disintegration necessitates an analytical approach which better balances structural aspects, emphasising institutions and path dependencies and the important role of agency, expressed through party management, party-political contestation, Euroscepticism, populism as well as lobbying. The framework we present develops from critical integration theory and the assumptions upon which it is based (Bulmer and Joseph 2016). This approach emphasises a three-way relationship between macro-structural change, political agency and the institutional context within which political actors select their strategies and tactics. We consider each of these in turn.

First, macro-structural change is important because we are keen to understand developments such as the changing form of capitalism (marketization and financialization), changing patterns of governance (for instance, depoliticization), securitization and demographic change (including population movements) as important overarching developments that are *intrinsic* to our explanation. These macro-structural developments are like the shifting of tectonic plates. Pressures build up from them gradually and cumulatively. However, they contribute to the eventual seismic event that is triggered by just one stage in what is a much larger pattern. The analogy of the natural environment breaks down, of course, in that human agency can trigger the political earthquake. Nevertheless, we argue that it is important to incorporate these underlying structural changes into the account rather than just labelling them as exogenous.

Political agency is very important in an account of Brexit. Political choices such as Cameron’s Bloomberg commitment to a referendum on membership, or the choice of Theresa May and her government to prioritize an end to both free movement and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice over continued membership of the single market are an important part of any account. Yet so are the choices of voters in the referendum itself. In order to account for political agency we make two steps. The first is to explore the wider cleavages and struggles in politics and political economy when confronted with the macro-structural changes of the contemporary era. We explain these through the notion of competing hegemonic projects. The second step is to examine the strategy and tactics of political actors in managing the challenges that they face. This means exploring how agency is exercised within the prevailing institutional context (to be considered below).

The notion of competing hegemonic projects is drawn from the work of a group of neo-Gramscian scholars in Germany (see Buckel 2011: 643–644; also Kannankulam, 2013). Its appeal is that it outlines a simplified set of contours of political debate against which we can locate the positions of political actors and voters alike. The projects are heuristic devices that simplify reality but we argue that they assist with understanding the complexity of the debates on Brexit (as well as the refugee and Eurozone crises—see Bulmer and Joseph 2019). They give a sense of the political contestation that is at stake and therefore offer an alternative macro-political ‘take’ on the subject matter considered by postfunctionalism and the proponents of the politicization literature.

The predominant hegemonic project is a neoliberal one that has been strongly entrenched in British politics since the transformative changes in economic management introduced during the Thatcher era. Advocates of this approach push for market solutions at domestic and global levels in relation to manufacturing and through introducing analogous arrangements to create markets in the provision of public services. The project appeals to European integration as a mechanism for widening and deepening markets, and extols the benefits of British leadership in an attempt to reform the EU in an economic liberal direction (Baker and Seawright, Gifford 2016). For example, the Thatcher government was a key advocate of the creation of the single European market (Baker and Seawright 1998). Successive governments—Conservative and Labour—have pushed for the single market’s extension to services and financial services as well as advocating a liberal external trade policy and limits to EU regulatory burdens. There was no fundamental change to the paradigm during the New Labour years. Indeed, Prime Minister Blair’s advocacy of what became the 2000-10 Lisbon Strategy was concerned with increasing competitiveness and it adopted market-like processes such as benchmarking and league tables that presented little domestic concern about the sovereignty implications (James 2012: 16-18). The appeal of neoliberalism is linked to a positive understanding of the macro-structural change arising from globalization, i.e. that it is beneficial. The neoliberal hegemonic project has significant advocates in post-referendum UK politics, notably the position of the Trade Minister, Dr Liam Fox. Its ‘hyperglobalist’ form, identified well before leaving the EU was on the table, was ‘to regain parliamentary sovereignty in order to seek to become a deregulated, privatised, low-tax, low-welfare, low-union, low- public-spending, offshore island, which would take full advantage of its links with markets in North America and East Asia’ (Baker, Gamble and Seawright 2002: 410). It was only one strand within the Conservative Party. Another favoured ‘open regionalism’ and regarded the EU as the vehicle to achieve this goal. Kenneth Clarke is arguably the last remaining figure of what was a larger group advocating this position (Baker, Gamble and Seawright 2002: 415). It was not too far apart from some of the policies of New Labour under Tony Blair. Nevertheless, the consequences of financial crisis commencing in 2007, the adverse effects of globalization on certain communities and concerns about increasing inequality have begun to reveal the limits to the predominance of the project.

The second and third hegemonic projects are both welfare-statist in orientation, reflecting the classic left-right division in politics. They differ in the means pursued, particularly in relation to the role of the EU. Thus a national-social hegemonic project aims to preserve strong social welfare systems at the member-state level through an interventionist state role designed to offer re-distributive outcomes and mitigate the adverse effects of the neoliberal system. This project has been advocated from centre-left and trade union circles across Europe but also has its advocates within the UK. This is the project most closely aligned with the current Labour Party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. It is also associated with left wing support for Brexit (so-called ‘Lexit’) on the grounds that the EU represents a hegemonic neoliberal project, and that policy makers can only pursue a more radical redistributive and interventionist policy agenda by leaving (see Bickerton 2018, Streeck 2018).

The third project is also concerned with social welfare but its advocates have taken the view that it needs to have an EU or international dimension. The origins of this approach lie particularly in the efforts of Commission President Jacques Delors in the 1980s, when he sought a ‘social dimension’ to the EU. The objective was to avoid adverse social consequences arising from the single market. This pro-European social-democratic hegemonic project had modest consequences (but see Corbett 2008). Nevertheless, it did have quite an important impact in the UK that helps explain some of the continuing political contestation. For Mrs Thatcher herself this initiative was a major factor (along with Delors’ advocacy of monetary union) that led to her famous Bruges speech (Thatcher 1988). This speech, the downfall of Mrs Thatcher in 1990 and the UK’s ill-starred two-year membership of the European Monetary System’s Exchange-Rate Mechanism (ERM) form key reference points for the espousal of the national-conservative project (below) amongst elements of the Conservative Party. Delors’ ambitions for the social dimension also had a transformative impact on the British centre-left. His 1988 speech to the Trades Union Congress led the chairman, Ron Todd (the general secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union), to declare that after a decade of Thatcherism the EU was ‘the only card game in town’ (quoted in Corbett 2008). As part of the party’s modernisation under Neil Kinnock and John Smith, Labour shed its left Euroscepticism and embraced European integration as a mechanism for resisting neoliberal reforms and entrenching social rights at the supranational level. A decade later Tony Blair’s international efforts with the ‘Third Way’ represent an extension of this pro-European social democratic project. The project remains an important reference point in British politics, providing the intellectual foundation for Ed Miliband’s leadership of Labour, many Labour MPs and members, as well as the basis of support for the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, and a large section of the Liberal Democrat party.

The fourth ‘national-conservative project’ has brought together forces resisting further integration. It has gained popular support from those who have lost out from globalization and who resist left-liberal cosmopolitan politics. The roots of this project lie in the fringe politics of the Bruges Group, the Anti-Federalist League, the development of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Under the leadership of Nigel Farage, UKIP’s populist, anti-elite strategy of demanding a referendum on EU membership and advocating the UK’s withdrawal proved highly effective. Success in European elections gave it voice and funding, enabling it to achieve a 12.6% vote share in the 2015 general election, albeit with only one MP (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

But the project also finds expression in those members of the Conservative Party (and many post-Thatcher generation MPs) that drew anti-EU conclusions from the Bruges Speech and the ERM debacle; national sovereignty needed to be regained. Successive Conservative leaders since John Major have increasingly sought to appeal to ‘soft’ Euroscepticism, short of calling for full withdrawal, by deliberately differentiating the UK as an ‘outsider’ from the rest of the EU, ruling out UK participation in further integrationist measures, and calling for the repatriation of policy making powers to national parliaments (Forster 2002; Daddow 2013; Gifford 2016). The growth of Eurosceptic populism has become part of a wider pattern across the EU, compounded by the Eurozone and refugee crises (see Leruth et al 2018). This project aligns most clearly with the ‘tan’ position in the ‘gal/tan’ cleavage identified by Hooghe and Marks (2009) between green/alternative/libertarian voters and those favouring traditionalism/authority/nationalism. The identity politics of the national-conservative project largely pitches English nationalism against supporters of the EU or indeed those professing a British identity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The final project is left-liberal in outlook. It is influenced by cosmopolitanism and environmentalism and its concerns focus on human rights, women’s rights and issues of justice and political liberalism. European integration tends to be supported from an idealistic standpoint, although open to criticism when it falls short on liberal principles. This is arguably a more loosely organised hegemonic project than the others, reflecting a post-materialist outlook, but it finds important expression in the Liberal Democrat and Green parties. The weakness of the political ‘centre’ in British politics and the divisions within the two main parties, whereby pro-EU centrism has been marginalised, account for this project’s difficulties in gaining traction in relation to Brexit.

These five projects therefore represent organizing reference points in the political contestation over Brexit in the UK. We will utilize them in our application to explaining Brexit below.

To explain how and why conflict and competition between these distinct hegemonic projects culminates in Brexit, we analyse how they interact within the particular institutional context in the UK. The hegemonic projects may capture key cleavages in political contestation, but it is the particular institutional context within which these are located and embedded that is key to our explanation of policy change. Institutions are important analytically because they integrate the analysis of agency and structure. In line with Hay (2002: 127) institutions provide the strategically selective context within which political actors engage in strategic action in pursuit of their political or policy goals. This context can be both constraining and facilitating. Institutions favour certain strategies over others, nudging strategic agents to pursue particular policy trajectories or political strategies to manage external pressures or ‘shocks’ and/or realise their strategic intentions. However, strategic action also produces direct effects upon the structured context by facilitating strategic learning and enhancing awareness of the constraints and opportunities afforded by it (Hay 1998: 43). Strategic agents can therefore use this information to periodically reconfigure the institutional context to further their political or policy goals.

Our analysis is founded upon the multi-level pattern of governance within the UK and out to the EU as the all-important context for the conduct of political actors. The institutional dimension is partly a matter of configuration, comprising the exact pattern of MLG, executive-legislative relations (and the adversarial system at Westminster). It also embodies institutional legacies: the institutional and policy path-dependencies that also play a key role in shaping political actors’ strategic behaviour. Thus the Brexit process cannot be viewed in isolation from existing patterns of European policy established over the years. Nor does the EU wish to unravel its own institutional structure and *acquis communautaire* to give the UK a special deal for fear of unravelling the outcome of sixty-five years of European integration. Finally, there is the scope that the institutions offer for creating a ‘social reality’ out of the institutional set-up. By this is meant the way in which institutional reality can be constructed, such as the onerous intrusions ascribed to the European Commission or the parliamentary (and national) sovereignty that has occasionally been presented as intrinsic to the nation’s integrity.

**Explaining Brexit**

We begin this section by outlining the three macro changes which provide the structural context for our analysis of Brexit: EU migration trends; the Great Recession; and the Eurozone crisis. The framework is then used to explain how the issue of European integration has been managed by the governing parties since 2010; namely, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government from 2010 to 2015; and the Conservative Government from 2015.

At the macro level, structural changes provide the broader strategic-selective context within which political agents make strategic choices. We identify three here. First, the UK has experienced high levels of migration from lower-wage economies in central and Eastern Europe. This pattern stems in large part from the decision of the then Labour Government to forgo transitional restrictions on freedom of movement in relation to the accession in 2004 and 2007 of ten states to the EU (Thompson 2017). This decision was to have the unintended consequence of making immigration an increasingly salient policy issue (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017), particularly in a context of economic distress caused by the Great Recession. It was compounded by the EU refugee crisis during 2015-16 in which political instability in North Africa and the Middle East caused a surge in refugee numbers entering the EU (Bulmer and Joseph 2019) that generated significant negative press coverage in the UK, some of which was ‘constructed’ by Leave campaigners, assisted by parts of the print media.

The second macro level change concerns the 2008 financial crash and the Great Recession. The immediate impact of the crisis led to the taxpayer-funded bail-out of two high street banks and a variety of special measures by the central bank to support the financial system. But in the medium to longer term, the severe contraction in the economy, declining tax revenues and record levels of public debt provided the pretext for the incoming Coalition Government to develop a programme of austerity, combining large public spending cutbacks with moderate tax increases. These policies exacerbated wage stagnation and rising inequality, which had been apparent over the previous decade. It is against this negative economic backdrop that we have seen an ‘anti-system’ and ‘anti-elite’ backlash, characterised by growing disillusionment with mainstream politics and parties, and increasing support for populist parties such as UKIP (Hopkin 2017).

The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis constitutes the third structural change relevant to Brexit. The bail-out of several Eurozone states since 2009, triggered by their inability to refinance government debt, graphically exposed the governance failings of the single currency. Moreover, the subsequent enforcement of harsh austerity measures by the troika of EU institutions and the IMF has highlighted the dominance of German leadership and ordo-liberal economic orthodoxy. This has fuelled anti-EU sentiment and contributed to the rise of anti-EU parties in both the Eurozone core and periphery (Bulmer 2014). The UK’s position outside the Eurozone has provided some isolation from the political turmoil surrounding the crisis. Yet at the creation of the 2010 Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government—a novel development in recent Westminster politics—there was real concern about the financial-market exposure of the UK’s public finances due to the experiences of Eurozone debtor states, and this reinforced the decision in favour of austerity politics. Further, the Eurozone’s determination to strengthen its institutional framework has exacerbated existing tensions with the UK, such as London’s status as the EU’s largest international financial centre, and the fact that it now lies outside the new Banking Union (Thompson 2017).

To understand how these structural developments contributed to Brexit, we examine how their impact is mediated by the interaction of hegemonic projects around European integration. These hegemonic projects are important analytically because they help to explain how strategic agents (i.e. political actors) interpret, make sense, and respond to these abstract macro level changes. The divisiveness of the European issue in UK politics reflects the fact that the two main parties commonly appeal to competing hegemonic projects, effectively to manage the tensions that these generate within their respective parties. For example, the Blair Government embraced ‘utilitarian supranationalism’ by presenting a positive vision of UK membership and providing EU-level leadership around several important, but relatively low-key, integration initiatives (Bulmer 2008). Yet this was tempered by ambiguity over more explicitly integrationist projects, such as the EU Constitutional Treaty and the single currency. In both cases, the party leadership feared that these would create internal party divisions and alienate voters. In response, the Blair Government’s strategy was to take the final decision over the UK’s participation out of the hands of the government and parliament, and instead to commit to putting both to a public referendum. As a deliberate strategy of depoliticization (see Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller 2006), the referendum pledge proved highly effective, enabling Labour to win three successive elections with large parliamentary majorities.

Since 1997 the divisions within the Conservative party over Europe became increasingly pronounced, and it faced a mounting electoral challenge from UKIP. To manage these internal tensions, and draw support for the national-conservative project away from UKIP, David Cameron as leader made the symbolic decision to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the European People’s Party in the European Parliament in 2009 and form a new grouping of right-wing Eurosceptic parties.

The formation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government following the 2010 election posed a profound challenge given that the two parties expressed opposing views on European integration drawn from competing hegemonic projects. The demands of managing this contestation reinforced the depoliticization strategy pursued by the previous government. The strategy now had three key elements, all of which involved attempting to reconfigure the institutional context in the pursuit of political goals (depoliticisation). First, the 2011 Fixed Term Parliament Act was designed to provide greater political stability by restricting the government’s ability to call a snap general election. Although this was in part a symbolic act intended to reassure the markets at the height of the Eurozone crisis (Seldon and Finn 2015), it also had the potential to defuse the European issue by reducing short-term electoral pressures on the government.

Second, the Coalition Government used the referendum pledge to rule out the UK’s participation in further European integration. The coalition agreement guaranteed that there would be no further transfers of sovereign powers to the EU until the next election. This was strengthened the following year by the European Union Act (2011) which committed the government to holding a public vote in the event of future treaty change – the so-called ‘referendum lock’ (Wellings and Vines 2016). While this strategy bought the government some time with Eurosceptic backbenchers, over the long-run it arguably proved counterproductive. In particular, pledging to hold a referendum on any treaty reform was a high-risk strategy at a time when the Eurozone was in crisis and further integration was high on the EU’s agenda. As Thompson (2017) argues, the referendum lock undermined Cameron’s strategy to exploit Eurozone integration to repatriate powers to the national level by making EU leaders (particularly Germany) less willing to undertake treaty reform – a gamble that was graphically exposed by the UK’s failure (in effect) to block the Fiscal Compact in December 2011.

The third part of the strategy was to conduct a detailed review of the ‘balance of competences’ between the UK and the EU. This exercise, conducted between 2012 and 2014, gathered evidence from a wide range of stakeholders to assess the appropriateness of the division of powers between the national and supranational levels. As a strategy of depoliticisation, however, it had mixed results. On the one hand, the review facilitated the management of inter-party relations within the Coalition as the initiative was strongly supported by the Liberal Democrats. On the other hand, the review’s conclusions were largely supportive of the status quo, which further antagonised Conservative backbenchers. As William Wallace (2017: 3), a Lib Dem minister at the time notes: ‘The response of No. 10 … was to bury them …’

Cameron’s depoliticization strategy was an exercise in party management, designed to temper support for an immediate referendum on UK membership that had been backed by 81 Conservative MPs in a Commons motion in 2011. Yet the strategy failed. In January 2013, under relentless pressure from Eurosceptic backbenchers, Cameron promised, if elected in 2015, to establish a ‘new settlement’ for Britain in the EU, following which he would call an in/out referendum on EU membership. The Bloomberg speech (Cameron 2013), as it became known, represented a clear shift in strategy from deliberate *depoliticization* to strategic *politicization*. Rather than continue trying to deescalate internal party tensions over Europe, Cameron sought to respond to populist pressures by committing to renegotiating the UK’s terms of membership and putting this to a referendum (see Jennings and Lodge 2018). We interpret this response as one shaped by – and deliberately designed to (re-)shape – the particular institutional context within which the Cameron Government found itself. In other words, the Bloomberg speech represented an attempt to find (another) institutional solution to an intractable political problem (European integration).

During the final two years of the parliament, it became abundantly clear that this response had done little to quell support for the national-conservative hegemonic project. For example, in January 2014, 95 Conservative MPs signed a letter calling for parliament to be able to block and repeal EU laws via a repeal of the 1972 European Community Act. Meanwhile support for UKIP continued to surge, with the party gaining 27.5% of the vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections, and winning two by-elections following the defection of two Conservative MPs to the party (Menon and Salter 2016). Somewhat ironically, however, the strategy proved sufficiently effective to enable the Conservatives to secure an overall majority at the 2015 election, thereby ‘locking in’ the prospect of an in-out referendum.

Cameron’s politicization strategy was predicated on two assumptions: first, that the UK could secure membership terms through renegotiation that would be better than those it currently enjoyed; and second, that these terms would appeal to both the neoliberal and national conservative hegemonic projects. The UK’s renegotiation strategy therefore deliberately combined different, and arguably contradictory, elements. On the one hand, it sought to push Europe in a more liberal, market-oriented direction by strengthening the single market to raise competitiveness and growth, while demanding special protections for non-euro members, and particularly to defend the interests of the City of London. On the other hand, the government also called for a stronger role for national parliaments, and a symbolic opt-out from the treaty commitment to ‘ever closer union’. In 2014, new demands related to the ability to restrict the welfare entitlements of EU migrants were added. This was a direct response to UKIP’s success in exploiting the EU refugee crisis by mobilizing support around the need to end freedom of movement.

The outcome of the renegotiations during 2015-16 was neither transformative nor trivial (Booth and Ruparel 2016). Cameron secured a series of modest changes, including an exemption to ever closer union, a new ‘red card’ procedure to strengthen national parliaments, new guarantees for the status of non-euro states, and new restrictions to in-work benefits and child support payments to EU citizens (Menon and Salter 2016: 1306). Framed by the UK and EU as a ‘New Settlement’, these concessions fell significantly short of expectations. Consequently, the renegotiation strategy failed to draw support away from the national-conservative hegemonic project. As a result, 138 Conservative MPs defied the Prime Minister by supporting the Leave campaign in the referendum called for 23 June 2016.

The referendum campaigns mobilized support from different hegemonic projects. The official pro-Remain campaign, Britain Stronger in Europe, drew heavyweight backing from the Prime Minister, Chancellor, the majority of the cabinet, and most other Westminster party leaders. Its central message focused on the importance of EU membership for economic security, and aimed to mobilise a broad coalition of support around the neoliberal and social democratic hegemonic projects. By contrast, the pro-Leave campaign was divided between two groups. Leave.eu, back by UKIP leader Nigel Farage, promoted a strident national-conservative message which stressed the need to ‘take back control’ of national borders, and to reassert parliamentary sovereignty and national democracy. Vote Leave, backed by six cabinet ministers, London Mayor Boris Johnson, and Labour MPs Gisela Stuart and Kate Hoey, struck a more moderate tone. Its message balanced the need for tougher immigration controls with an appeal to the neoliberal hegemonic project, projecting a positive vision of an open and competitive Britain that was free to sign new trade deals with the rest of the world. Support for this strain of neoliberal Euroscepticism, or ‘hyperglobalism’, has historically been based in the libertarian wing of the Conservative party (Baker, Gamble and Seawright 2002). Moreover, the Vote Leave campaign also attempted to appeal to the national-social hegemonic project by claiming that it would invest the UK’s weekly £350m EU budget contribution—a constructed ‘reality’ into the health service.

We do not seek to evaluate the two campaigns in detail here. Suffice to say that in mobilising support around competing hegemonic projects, the pro-Leave campaign proved more effective than the pro-Remain campaign. Leadership and organisation proved to be two key causal factors. On the Remain side, David Cameron’s position had been compromised as a result of the outcome of the renegotiations, and his conversion from potential Brexiteer to committed Remainer lacked credibility (Menon and Salter 2016: 1308). Meanwhile, the support for EU membership offered by the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was often less than effusive (McTague et al 2016). The party was also internally divided between pro-European supporters of the social democratic project, which included most of the shadow cabinet, and the party leadership, whose sympathies many suspected were closer to a Eurosceptic national-social project. By contrast, the pro-Leave campaign benefitted from charismatic and populist leadership, in the form of Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage (Hobolt 2016). Paradoxically, the Leave campaign also benefitted from having two separate organisations as this enabled them to tailor simple, but often contradictory, messages (on tougher border control, promoting free trade, and stronger public services) that could appeal to diverse constituencies (Behr 2016). These messages could appeal to supporters of both neoliberal and national-conservative projects.

The roots of the failure of Conservative party strategy between 2010 and 2016, and the defeat of the Remain campaign in the referendum, lay in macro structural changes (EU migratory flows; the Great Recession; and the Eurozone crisis) and how it sought to manage them in interaction with meso-level institutions of governance in the UK. These institutions are important because they provide the strategically-selective context within which political actors deploy strategic action in relation to the challenges posed by macro structural change.

The institutional context was critical in structuring the behaviour of political actors in several ways. First, the institutional context provided an important source of path dependency that constrained and ‘locked in’ the decisions of successive governments. The Blair Government’s strategy of using referenda to depoliticise historic decisions related to European integration (Constitutional Treaty ratification and single currency membership) was a critical juncture. Not least it established an important political precedent, creating the expectation that henceforth all major decisions related to European integration would be put to a public vote. In our view, the Brown Government’s ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 without a referendum reinforced this. It became a source of considerable political controversy and was exploited by both UKIP and the Conservatives, both of whom demanded that the treaty be put to a public vote (Gifford 2014). This episode undoubtedly played an important role in shaping Cameron’s subsequent commitment to a referendum ‘lock’ on future EU treaty reform. In effect, by establishing a new normative standard for ratifying major decisions on European integration at home, the Blair Government’s strategy for managing European integration itself became institutionalised, thereby ‘tying the hands’ of future governments.

Second, the use of the referendum as a political strategy was only possible because of the UK’s distinctive constitutional fluidity. UK governments have the power to periodically re-write the constitutional and institutional rules of the game: using referendums to take decisions out of the hands of parliament and delegating them to the public. Moreover, governments have significant discretion over the timing of such votes, the organisation of the campaigns, and the wording of the questions. The referendum therefore proved highly flexible as a tool for managing the conflict between competing hegemonic projects. But this constitutional fluidity also gave rise to several unintended consequences which arguably contributed to the Brexit vote. The first was to establish a precedent which became institutionalised over time, thereby constraining the constitutional autonomy of future governments. The second was to undermine the UK government’s ability to exploit future Eurozone reform to repatriate powers to the national level, because it made EU leaders less willing to engage in treaty reform. Third, the pledge of an in-out referendum arguably helped the Conservatives’ to secure a (surprise) overall majority at the 2015 election, thereby forcing Cameron make good on the manifesto commitment. Fourth, the sequencing of events also had unanticipated effects. In particular, Cameron’s decision to make the in-out referendum conditional on renegotiating the terms of the UK’s membership was a high-risk strategy. Not simply because it relied on the UK extracting meaningful concessions from Brussels, but because it relied on implicitly discrediting the current terms of UK membership to justify the negotiation of a so-called ‘New Settlement’.

Third, shifting the location of political contestation over European integration from parliament to the wider public arena fundamentally changed the institutional context within which actors mobilise and manage competing hegemonic projects. This context provided new opportunities for charismatic leaders to mobilise a wider body of support outside Westminster, and to engage sections of society that do not traditionally vote, around the national-conservative hegemonic project. It also provided scope for populist parties like UKIP to reactivate policy issues, such as immigration, which have been deliberately depoliticised by the main Westminster parties. The Leave campaign’s central message, that UK citizens would be ‘better off’ if parliamentary sovereignty was restored, EU immigration was restricted, and the UK’s budget contribution could be reinvested in public services, was a powerful one which resonated with many voters in deprived areas. By contrast, this institutional context constrained the capacity of the Conservative government to manage this political contestation. After years of austerity and stagnant wages, mobilizing mass support around an alternative neoliberal hegemonic project that promoted European integration on the basis of its deregulatory and liberalizing credentials was always going to prove difficult. Nor was an attempt to negotiate a slightly ‘looser’ relationship with the EU likely to pacify those who viewed full withdrawal as the logical end point of a ‘Eurosceptic political economy’ articulated by successive British leaders (Gifford 2016).

To summarise, the Brexit outcome can only be understood through a framework that analyses how macro structural changes interact with the institutional context to shape the behaviour of strategic agents. Next, we briefly examine the post-referendum context.

**Negotiating Brexit**

Following the political turmoil caused by the referendum and the Conservative leadership contest, the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, set about trying to devise a new political strategy for managing Brexit. During the first few months of her premiership, the government failed to provide clear direction as the Conservative party, and Parliament as a whole, was deeply divided between supporters of a so-called ‘soft’ Brexit (which we define as membership of the single market and customs union) and a ‘hard’ Brexit (which involves withdrawal from both). May concluded that to manage internal party divisions and (re-)build electoral support, it was essential to mobilise support around the national-conservative hegemonic project. She calculated that neither Conservative backbenchers, nor Leave voters, would countenance any ‘backsliding’ on EU membership. More importantly, the government believed that ending freedom of movement was the main concern animating Leave voters; consequently, this ruled out any attempt to remain in the single market through membership of the European Economic Area (EEA). Appealing to the national-conservative project would also enable the Conservatives to directly target UKIP voters and to build a broad, right wing coalition of support (Clarke et al 2017). The government’s strategy, as set out in May’s Conservative party conference speech in October 2016, and reaffirmed in the Lancaster House speech in January 2017, was therefore to pursue a hard Brexit. Yet this created further constitutional difficulties because a hard Brexit was opposed by the Scottish National Party government in Edinburgh and by the Labour-led coalition in Cardiff. Meantime the compatibility of this goal with Northern Ireland’s wish to avoid re-introduced border controls with the Republic raised further concerns.

May’s decision to call a snap general election in June 2017 reflected confidence that this strategy would deliver a large Commons majority. The fact that this strategy spectacularly backfired, producing a hung parliament and forcing May to seek a confidence-and-supply deal with the Democratic Unionist Party, is a testament to how it generated unintended consequences, given the particular institutional context. The election outcome can be interpreted in part as a consequence of the May Government’s attempt to mobilise support around the national-conservative project; in doing so, the Conservative party marginalized and alienated supporters of the neoliberal hegemonic project, many of whom had voted Remain and/or preferred a soft Brexit. Evidence comes from the business community, which complained that their concerns over Brexit were being ignored within government (Financial Times 2017a; see also Lavery 2017). It is also supported by initial analysis of the results of the 2017 election which indicate that large numbers of Remain voters, many in the south east of England, voted for Labour in protest at May’s hard Brexit strategy (Heath and Goodwin 2017). In response, there was a notable softening in both tone and rhetoric from the government around Brexit. May sought to heal internal party divisions around transitional arrangements to avoid a ‘cliff edge’ scenario for Brexit. This can be viewed as an attempt to reconcile supporters of both the national conservative (hard Brexit) and neoliberal (soft Brexit) projects. Led by Chancellor Philip Hammond, the government also set out to rebuild relations with its natural supporters in the business community with the creation of a new business advisory council on Brexit (James and Quaglia 2019).

The challenge of negotiating Brexit has been profoundly shaped by the institutional context. We offer three examples. First, the process for managing the Brexit negotiations has resulted in the largest upheaval of Whitehall departments since accession. Institutional reform has circumvented the normal process for coordinating EU business by creating a dedicated Brexit Department. As with the referendum pledges, the UK’s unique constitutional and institutional fluidity has facilitated this process, enabling political actors to find ‘quick fix’ institutional solutions to deep-rooted political problems. The cost of doing so, in terms of the logistical challenge and bureaucratic upheaval, is slowly becoming apparent. The IfG reports, for instance, that bureaucratic turf-wars have produced a ‘culture of extraordinary secrecy’ which have fatally undermined Whitehall’s traditional strengths in terms of information exchange and cross-departmental coordination (see Owen et al. 2018).

Second, with turnout for the EU referendum, which formally had ‘advisory status’, reaching 72 per cent, ahead of the 66 per cent at the 2015 general election, the constitutional fluidity initially created a situation where direct democracy trumped representative democracy, constraining the scope for political action on the part of the post-referendum government led by Theresa May. Over time, however, the same constitutional fluidity enabled Parliament to reassert itself over the Brexit process. For example, ambiguity surrounding the process for triggering Article 50 led a private citizen, Gina Millar, to take the UK government to the High Court. Although the November 2016 outcome reaffirmed the role of Parliament in giving final authorisation, the process by which any final Brexit deal with the EU will be ratified remains a significant cause of controversy (Armstrong 2017: 213-228). The true extent of this became apparent in March 2019 as the government’s ability to secure parliamentary approval for the Withdrawal Agreement led MPs to successfully seize control of the parliamentary agenda, culminating in a series of unprecedented ‘indicative votes’ in an attempt to find a way through the impasse.

Finally, tensions between the constituent nations of the UK have increased as a result of the fact that the majority of voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to Remain. In Scotland, the SNP government has made little secret of its attempt to use Brexit to push for a second referendum on independence by 2021. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, the salience and intractability of the Irish ‘backstop’ issue in the Withdrawal Agreement has been compounded by May’s reliance on the DUP for its survival in Westminster, and the ongoing suspension of power sharing in Stormont.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have argued that the European issue in recent times has created significant fissures in UK politics. By deploying the notion of competing hegemonic projects we have seen how both main British political parties were divided on the European issue in the mid-2010s: between the neoliberal and national conservative projects (Conservatives) and between the national and EU social projects (Labour). Inter- and intra-party divisions over integration have been a recurrent feature of the UK’s relationship with EU, even before accession. Governments with a weak majority were always at risk, as the different experiences of the Cameron and Major governments revealed. However, the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition proved to be particularly explosive.

Vulnerability to a major eruption on the European issue had been managed by governments taking advantage of the UK’s distinctive constitutional fluidity, i.e. the ability of elected governments to reconfigure the rules of the institutional game. Although this strategy worked, for a time, as an exercise in *depoliticisation*, it failed catastrophically when deployed as an exercise in strategic *politicisation*. Since the referendum the UK’s constitutional fluidity has proved to be more a hindrance than help in reassuring the regions and nations, the City and manufacturing interests, never mind Remain voters, that their voices will be heard in the negotiations.

Attributing Brexit to either long-term macro structural changes, or the contingent actions of reckless political actors, we argue, is therefore insufficient as an explanation. Rather, greater explanatory leverage is provided by exploring how governments and other actors mobilize competing hegemonic projects around European integration within a strategically-selective (yet flexible) institutional context. Our first conclusion, therefore, is that macro structural change, the UK’s distinctive constitutional context, and competing hegemonic projects are *all* intrinsic to a complete explanation of Brexit.

Our second conclusion steps outside of the comfort-zone of proclaiming the singularity of the British case. We argue that the management of hegemonic projects is intrinsic to all EU member states. Hegemonic projects are transnational by nature and exist across all EU member states. All of them are addressing macro structural change, such as globalization and migration. The institutional context differs; policy legacies differ; historical context differs. It is this macro and meso-level context that shapes the behavior of political actors: whether it is Chancellor Merkel ‘managing’ domestic public opinion on the Eurozone and refugee crises or the rather different, illiberal ‘anti-Brussels’ approach pursued by Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban. The positions and strategies of national governments on European integration reflect how agency (parties, leaders) mobilize support and manage contestation between competing hegemonic projects within a distinct national institutional context. Our framework, we suggest, offers the foundations for a ‘new’ domestic politics approach to understanding the EU through analysis of its member states.

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1. This paper is a work in progress (like Brexit!), and this version of the paper ends in March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For reasons of space we set aside the complexity of identity politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, although noting that they are also bound up in the ramifications of the 2016 referendum vote and Brexit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)