# The Brexit vote has only deepened the political and social divisions within British society

*The UK is now one of the most unequal societies in Europe. The country's acute territorial differences are only likely to multiply in the coming years. The polarisation between the political right and left is staggering. The society is also now divided by generations. In light of the above, **Christopher Lord (ARENA)** argues that Brexit is both a product of the breakdown in the British social and political system and a likely source of further crises within it.*

It is a well-known problem of political systems that majorities may be arbitrary, unstable and indeterminate. Any one possible majority can defeat other possible majorities with the result that decisions can be arbitrarily manipulated by those who get to decide which options are considered in which order. Brexit Britain faces a particularly dangerous version of that problem. Not only is the UK deeply divided on all alternatives to EU membership. There is no stable majority within British politics for any one approach to Brexit. And yet, whoever is in HM Government, and however weak that Government is, it will still have significant powers to select arbitrarily between conflicting approaches to Brexit just through decisions of timing and procedure. All that within a political system that is unusually exposed to dangers of majority or even plurality domination.

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Around the time the UK first entered the European Communities, many political scientists debated why the UK political system was so widely accepted when it usually allowed just one party – often with much less than 50% of the vote – to exercise power on its own for up to 5 years. Amongst answers were the following:

- First, the UK was an unusually homogenous society.
- Second, British parties competed for the centre with the result that even those who voted for losing parties could often expect similar policies from the winning party of government to those their own preferred party would have enacted.
- Third, although a state of four nations, territorial cleavages within the UK were (with the partial exception of Northern Ireland) largely subsumed into a single left-right dimension of political competition.
- Fourth, that single left-right dimension was as weak as it was unifying – left-right dominated in the absence of much else to argue about.

By enjoying a simple one-dimensional structure of political competition without polarisation and without smothering other forms of political choice, the UK avoided the dangers a more multi-dimensional form of political competition might have posed for a political system that allows governing majorities to exercise so much power on their own. Where choice is multi-dimensional, yet the system majoritarian, mere pluralities cannot just govern to the exclusion of others. Those are also the conditions where choice does not depend on an invisible hand of political competition for the people's vote to the exclusion of the all too visible hand of a government that is itself able to select between competing and contrasting pluralities that have no more title than one another to be considered the 'will of the people'.

All the foregoing conditions for the stability of the British political system were already eroding before Brexit. Brexit is both a product of the breakdown in the British political system and a likely source of further crisis within it. Far from being homogenous enough to be inoculated against all dangers of plurality domination inherent in its political system, the UK is now one of the most unequal societies in Europe. Part of the Brexit vote can be explained by that inequality. 'Groups vulnerable to poverty' were more likely to support Brexit.

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Second, newly acute territorial cleavages within the UK are likely to multiply the difficulties of Brexit. Two of the four nations of the UK voted for Brexit and two against. Of the two that voted for Brexit, Scotland is itself divided on whether it should remain in the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is only recovering from decades of civil conflict with the help of a peace process which could itself by disrupted by Brexit. Yet, taking account of the special circumstances of Northern Ireland is only likely to sharpen the contradictions between different forms of Brexit. To avoid a physical boundary, the UK might need to remain in a customs union with the EU. That would be incompatible with Brexiters' hope that leaving the EU would free up the UK to negotiate free trade agreements of its own all around the world. Moreover, without a physical boundary along its mainland frontier with the EU, the UK will have to rely more heavily on administrative checks within the UK itself to satisfy those who were lead to believe in the 2016 referendum that Brexit would reduce immigration from the Union.

Third, in place of a one-dimensional structure of political competition, the UK does not just have territorial cleavages. It also has two distinct left-right cleavages: one preoccupied with markets, the other with immigration and identity. All that interacts with what is surely the most intractable feature of Brexit: namely, the difficulty of discerning any stable equilibrium within British politics for any one approach to leaving the Union. For some, hard Brexit means open markets. The UK should leave the single market and the customs union to operate like a giant Singapore, with a zero-tariff regime and radical deregulation. The UK, on those assumptions, would need to remain open to whatever capital, labour and trade flows are required by its complex supply chains, and by the goal of keeping its economy at the cutting edge of international competition. For others, though, hard Brexit means hard boundaries, immigration control, and limits to the globalisation of markets and life chances. Yet, however, contradictory the Brexit coalition, it may come together again to oppose many of the trade-offs needed for a soft Brexit.

Fourth, the UK is now divided by generations. Opinion surveys indicate no majority for Brexit in any age group under 45. In one survey only 12% of the 18–24 age group thought that Brexit was "right." 65% thought it "wrong."



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Further referendums and general elections may be needed to decide the form of Brexit. Yet going back to the people may not produce an answer either. John Curtice identifies the problem.

> 'Voters cannot be divided into those who want a soft and those who want a hard Brexit. Both approaches are supported by a majority of voters…On the one hand, there is near universal support for maintaining free trade between the UK and the EU…On the other hand, about seven in ten voters believe that the UK should be able to control immigration from the EU'.

Once, however, voters are asked which they would support if a choice really had to be made between those options, opinion remains every bit as divided as it was in the referendum itself. As Curtice continues, 'if people are asked whether the UK should allow EU migrants to come here if this were the only way UK firms could trade freely with the EU, 49% say that the UK should allow free movement, 51% that it should not.' Once, then, the main trade-offs are taken into account, leave and remain still seem to be two equal and opposite forces.

So, the predicament is something like this: only by offering choices that explicitly trade off the two left-right cleavages – the identity cleavage and the open market cleavages – can even English opinion decide what it wants from Brexit. Yet, any feasible trade-off between the cleavages still seems likely to split English opinion 50:50. And, beyond England, there may, in any case, be few forms of Brexit that will work for all parts of the UK.

Given such confusion, UK Governments – over what may turn out to be a long process of Brexit – may be tempted to impose particular solutions through party disciplines, pressure of deadlines and particular procedural framings of choice. There would, most obviously, be a huge difference between two kinds of second referendum: one with a choice between the terms of any Brexit and not leaving at all; another with a choice between the terms and leaving without any agreement.  But losers in either case – or in any other procedure that decides the eventual form of Brexit – will know that majorities might also have existed for quite different ways of leaving or even staying within the Union. For younger voters forced to live in a Brexit Britain for which they did not to vote, it is one thing to accept being outvoted in a referendum. It is another to accept a Brexit that does not follow unambiguously from a public vote without intervention of more contestable decisions of procedure and timing. The referendum was supposed to settle the UK's relationship with the EU. Instead, it leaves the UK as a deeply divided society with a political system whose propensities to plurality domination are precisely the opposite to what is needed to practice democratic politics in a society that is not just deeply divided but deeply divided along more than one dimension of choice.

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Note also that it is not just a plurality that may be able to impose substantive choices through procedural decisions. A 'majority within a plurality' – a majority within either the Conservative or Labour party – may be able to do that. Many in the Conservative Party may come to see the dangers of a 'majority within a plurality' deciding the form of Brexit – and, therefore, the whole nature of the economy and society in which they have to live – if that majority within a plurality ends up being formed, not as they too glibly suppose, within the Conservative Party, but, rather within a Labour Government. Farage Brexit. Redwood Brexit. Davis-negotiated Brexit. Starmer Brexit. Corbyn Brexit. If a left-wing form of Brexit prevails in the Labour Party and then a Labour Government, there may be many Conservatives – and many other Brexiters – who might come to understand the deep dangers and injustices of a political system that, at no one point, allowed all varieties of leaving and remaining to be decided in relation to one another.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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