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ARTICLE



A disruptive moment? Parliaments, Brexit, and the future of European integration

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ABSTRACT

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU) does not only challenge the idea of an ever-deeper integrated union; it also calls into question the very principles on which the European political order has been established. Against this backdrop, the contributions of this Special Issue set out to analyse how parliaments, that is political institutions at the core of democratic systems, have positioned themselves towards and reacted to Brexit. In this introductory article, I first discuss the meaning of Brexit as yet another major *political* crisis with serious consequences potentially affecting the role and functioning of representative institutions and actors across the EU. Having taken stock of the extant literature on the parliamentarisation and politicisation of the EU, I then detail the cross cutting issues that permeate this Special Issue, namely: How do parliamentarians assess the UK's decision to withdraw from the EU and its consequences? Does Brexit exacerbate existing political divisions or does it generate new cleavages? To what extent have parliaments attempted to and succeeded in influencing Brexit negotiations and their outcome? Finally, the rest of the introductory article provides an overview of the articles constituting this Special Issue.

KEYWORDS

Brexit; European integration;
Europeanization;
Parliaments; politicisation

On 23 June 2016, 51.89% of British voters chose to leave the European Union (EU). If the outcome of the referendum was clearly the choice of the British people, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU – a process known as Brexit – will have – and in fact already has had – major consequences for Europe as a whole. Much attention has been devoted to analysing Brexit from a British perspective, be it the voters' choice, the social or economic impact on the country or the future relationship with the EU (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017; Evans and Menon 2017). However, the implications of Brexit are manifold (e.g. Bulmer and Quaglia 2018; De Ville and Gabriel 2019) and they go well beyond the borders of the UK. To give only but a few examples, they concern citizens' rights (Kostakopoulou 2018), EU and national laws (Farrand 2017), bilateral relations between member states (Krotz and Schild 2018), the future of world politics (Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond 2017; Svendsen 2019) as well as a host of economic sectors (Howarth and Quaglia 2017). Against this backdrop, the purpose of this special issue is to move beyond the *policy* consequences of Brexit and, instead, look at how *political* actors, and more specifically parliamentary actors, have reacted to it in order to assess its long-term consequences for the European political order.

Brexit: a test for the European democratic order

Of course, Brexit highlights first and foremost a crisis of legitimacy of the European project as 'an ever closer integration' process. Following decades of continuous enlargement and deepening, it is the first time ever that a member state has decided to reclaim its full autonomy.¹ Brexit has consequently been widely acknowledged as one of the most serious crises currently faced by the EU, with far-reaching and potentially damaging political implications for the process of European integration (Nugent 2018). A negative sentiment towards the UK's withdrawal from the EU has been widely shared across the continent, including by the public at large. For example, in 2016, an opinion poll revealed that 70% of respondents from 10 European countries considered that the UK leaving the EU would not be good for the EU. The figures were as high as 89% in Sweden, 75% in the Netherlands, and 74% in Germany (Pew Research Center 2016, 10). According to some of the most astute observers, the possibility of a European 'disintegration' even looms on the horizon (Rosamond 2016), although others have stressed the specificity of the British case (Wind 2017).

Brexit is not only a shock affecting the day-to-day functioning and internal balance of EU institutions as well as a challenge for the future of European integration; to a very large extent, it can also be regarded as calling into question the very democratic principles and mechanisms on which the EU is built. In this respect, one should first remember that the deficiencies of democracy in the EU were a key argument behind the 'Leave' campaign (Khabaz 2018). This is not the place to examine whether or not this argument was misleading. Suffice it to say that Brexiteers were very vocal about the mismatch between, on the one hand, the prevailing policy-making mode of the EU based on consensus and constitutionalism and, on the other hand, the British tradition of parliamentary sovereignty (Schmidt 2020). Second, it is highly meaningful that the British decision to withdraw from the EU was taken after a popular referendum in which the majority of voters decided against the official position of the (Conservative led) government as well as that of the two main opposition parties (the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats). Following the French and Dutch referendums against the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, this new vote highlights an enduring gap in European integration between 'ordinary' citizens and political elites (Hooghe 2003). In sum, and thirdly, Brexit epitomizes a 'global crisis of democracy' resulting notably from an extreme social and political polarisation (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). The divisions generated by the Brexit referendum have deep emotional roots that hinder the democratic principles of mutual respect and contradictory discussion (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2020). The lack of trust in traditional media, which was also very apparent during the Brexit campaign, is another critical dimension of this contemporary crisis of democracy (Dahlgren 2018).

In other words, Brexit is both a symptom and a catalyser of a *political* crisis whose ramifications extend well beyond the UK. In fact, the British decision to withdraw from the EU brutally interrupted the quiet business of 'politics as usual' throughout the EU. To start with, the extended negotiations in view of a withdrawal agreement and, later, of a trade agreement have shifted attention away from other important issues and priorities toward one that was neither wanted nor decided by the UK's partners. Even though, faced with a risk of contagion, the remaining 27 member states have been able to present a relatively united front, agreeing on a common negotiating mandate and monitoring the negotiation process have been time consuming, as they involved many European Council meetings and discussions within the European Parliament and Commission (Emily Jones 2020). Besides, Brexit was all the more disruptive as it unfolded in a highly uncertain legal framework. This was indeed the first time a member state had invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, which provides only limited indications as to the actual withdrawal process and has been subject to conflicting legal interpretations (Nicolaidis 2013). In other words, actors have benefited from a margin of appreciation in implementing the procedure, which is both an advantage and a source of tensions. Thirdly, the UK's withdrawal changes the balance of power within the EU. The change is not only meaningful at the intergovernmental level: the departure of the British also has consequences for other EU institutions such as the Commission and the European Parliament where

it will alter the ideological equilibriums. However, it is not clear which political forces will benefit, or suffer, from the departure of the UK.

By and large, the British referendum constitutes a major disruptive event for the European political order. Because it affects and will continue to affect Europe as a whole (including the very idea of an ever deeper integrated union), it forces political actors of all kinds to react and position themselves. Research on this dimension is only emerging. If it logically pays particular attention to the UK (Gamble 2018), scholars have also examined *inter alia* the discourse in leading centre-right newspapers in France, Germany, and the Netherlands (Bijsmans, Galpin, and Leruth 2018), public support for EU integration (De Vries 2017) as well as the (so far) limited consequences of Brexit on national party politics (Taggart and Szczesniak 2018). By putting a special emphasis on parliaments and parliamentarians, this special issue further explores the reactions of political actors and institutions, which are at the core of the democratic chain of delegation and therefore play a major legitimising role.

Brexit through the lens of the literature on the Europeanization of parliaments

The focus on parliaments and parliamentarians has at least two justifications. On the one hand, as directly elected institutions, parliaments are at the juncture between citizens and political systems. They thus have a crucial legitimising function in the context of the democratic crisis highlighted by Brexit (Christiansen and Fromage 2019). Concretely, even though MPs' preferences are certainly not fully congruent with those of citizens, parliaments are a good indicator of the political moods and trends throughout the EU. They provide an insight into how key political actors view and frame the issue of Brexit. They are the only political space in the national realm in which issues related to the EU's policies, politics, and polity are systematically confronted with the ideas present in the member states' societies (Lord 2007). Empirically, the analysis of the reactions of parliaments and parliamentarians to Brexit allows different types of comparisons for a more robust picture of the global evolutions in the EU, especially across party families.

On the other hand, one should not neglect the direct and indirect implication of parliaments in the Brexit process itself. According to Article 50 of the Treaty on EU, the European Parliament must ratify any withdrawal agreement. As for national parliaments, they have no formal role according to Article 50. However, it was anticipated that if the future EU-UK trade deal was a 'mixed agreement', the ratification process would require a vote of national (and some regional) parliaments. In other words, in some cases, parliaments – starting with the British House of Commons and the European Parliament – were directly involved in the bargaining process and the ratification procedure. In other cases, the role of parliaments was not as directly decisive, but they were – at least theoretically, able to influence in a more diffuse manner the position of their government in the ongoing negotiations.

As such, this special issue fits into the tradition of Europeanisation research, *i.e.* the analysis of how political actors, institutions, and policies are impacted by and adapt to EU integration (Börzel and Risse 2007). In particular, there is a rich and abundant literature on parliaments and the EU which cannot be done justice to in a few lines (for an overview as regards national parliaments and the EU, see: Auel 2019). Here I simply want to underline three major trends that are more particularly relevant in the analysis of parliaments and Brexit.

The first and, undoubtedly, most significant trend concerns the changing institutional framework and the increased involvement of parliaments in EU affairs, which has only grown since the first observation that backbenchers were learning to fight back (Raunio and Hix 2000). It is a well-established fact that the legislative prerogatives of the European Parliament as well as its nomination and accountability functions have increased in treaty after treaty (Hix and Bjørn 2013). In parallel, national parliaments have also increased their capacity to weight on EU affairs, be it by tightening their scrutiny of the national executive (Auel and Christiansen 2015) or by coordinating more closely with each other (Lupo and Fasone 2016). From a legal perspective, the Treaty of Lisbon, which has been described as the 'Treaty of parliaments', recognizes for the first time an explicit role for

parliaments which are henceforth expected to 'contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union' (article 12 TEU) (Fromage 2018).

Another key development in the literature on the Europeanization of parliaments has to do with the importance of actors' motivations and behaviours. Research has indeed questioned whether having formal powers translated into actual parliamentary activity (Auel 2007). It shows that the observation of the evolution of legal rules and institutions is not enough to capture the transformations underway with regard to the role of parliaments in the EU (Auel, Rozenberg, and Tacea 2015). The focus must also be on the individual level, as the effectiveness of parliamentary prerogatives is contingent upon the motivation of individual actors to get involved in EU affairs. Consequently, the recourse to specific tools of parliamentary scrutiny varies greatly across time and countries, parties and even individual MPs. Beyond the legalistic analysis, it is thus particularly necessary to conduct a careful empirical analysis of the involvement of parliaments in the Brexit process. Work in this direction is only at its very beginning (Closa 2020; Kaniok and Brusenbauch Meislova 2019).

Thirdly, and linked to the previous point, it is clear that partisanship plays an important part in explaining the involvement of parliaments and their members in European affairs, and it should equally be taken into consideration when analysing the impact of Brexit. The literature has in particular suggested that the development of tighter scrutiny procedures is related to the presence of Eurosceptic party groups in the parliament (Raunio and Wiberg 2000). It has indeed been observed that parties taking distinctive positions – in particular critical ones – on European integration make it most salient in their appeals, while mainstream parties, which face the reputational difficulty of distancing themselves from increasingly unpopular opinions on Europe, avoid dealing with such issues. The involvement and attitude of parties are thus the result of ideological as well as strategic considerations. In parliamentary life, the attitude of individual parliamentarians and their motivation to scrutinize and influence the executive on European matters is therefore directly related to whether they belong to the majority or the opposition (Navarro and Brouard 2014).

For parliaments and parliamentarians, however, Brexit is an unprecedented challenge that calls for renewed investigations, of which this special issue constitutes a first attempt.

Brexit, party competition, and the politicisation of the EU

In fact, what makes Brexit particularly intriguing when considering the parliamentary side of the matter is that it shifts attention from the question of integration to that of *disintegration* (Rosamond 2016; Erik Jones 2018; Schimmelfennig 2018). Indeed, Brexit involves a major paradigmatic change in EU studies. For many decades, the main puzzle scholars faced was how to explain a process of supranational integration that contradicted many of the assumptions on which the study of international relations was established. While scholars were quick to acknowledge the limits of European integration and its non-linear nature, the possibility of a partial or complete dismantlement of the EU seemed particularly unlikely. What seemed improbable until recently has however now become tangible and requires a renewed approach. Additionally, the uncertainties surrounding the ultimate outcome of Brexit – even after the end of the transition period and the entry into force of the new trade agreement between the EU and the UK – are a unique challenge for political actors that have to deal with these consequences in the short, medium, and long terms.

In light of these developments, the contributions to this special issue address three intertwined questions regarding the situation of parliaments and parliamentarians *vis-à-vis* Brexit. First, how do citizens' representatives across Europe assess the UK's decision to withdraw from the EU and its consequences? In other words, what is their attitude towards and opinion on this unprecedented instance of European *disintegration*? In this respect, two contradictory reactions have been anticipated. In the medium to long term, the British decision to leave the EU could reinforce Eurosceptic narratives and trigger a 'domino effect' in other countries (Besch et al. 2019). Or, on the contrary, it could prompt politicians from the remaining member states to take new initiatives to preserve and

strengthen the unity of the EU (De Gruyter 2019). Which scenario will prevail remains an open question and a future object of research.

A second related question, which this special issue tackles, relates to the salience and politicisation of Europe in the aftermath of Brexit. Does Brexit receive much attention from MPs? Does it exacerbate existing political divisions or does it generate new cleavages? Have parliamentary actors and institutions used Brexit to push particularistic political agendas? In recent years, the major crises faced by the EU have resulted in a growing politicisation (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Maricut-Akbik 2019; Statham and Trenz 2013). This trend has also been observed at the parliamentary level (Auel and Christiansen 2015). In many respects, Brexit is a single critical event – comparable to the migration and the Eurozone crises – that questions the very nature of the EU project and therefore has the potential to trigger intense debates over European integration. However, it has also been noted that the politicization of Europe does not happen automatically or simply by chance: it is driven by political actors and their mobilisation strategies (Höglinger 2016; Hutter and Grande 2016), which receive particular attention in this special issue.

Thirdly, have parliaments attempted to and succeeded in influencing Brexit negotiations and their outcome? What positions or views did parliamentarians seek to promote in these negotiations? What future model for the EU did they defend? As pointed out previously, parliaments have not been directly involved in the negotiation process. However, they are traditionally in charge of scrutinizing their government's EU policies, which allows them to exert indirect influence. In doing so, parliaments may have faced a trade-off. As has been shown in the case of the European Parliament, increasing the parliament's impact on the Brexit process requires uniting the political parties, which partially contradicts the logic of politicisation (Closa 2020). Whether parliamentarians were united or divided on Brexit is therefore likely to affect their collective influence.

Empirically, the articles in this special issue rely on a variety of original material from the parliamentary field (such as parliamentary speeches and debates, votes, questions, as well as an elite survey) to answer these questions. They cover a range of cases including regional and national parliaments, from Eastern and Western Europe, small and large countries, founding member states and relatively recent ones, as well as the European Parliament. They all address the immediate political reactions to and consequences of the British decision to leave the EU and of the Brexit negotiations. With the exceptions of the articles by Thomas (2021) and by Costello (2020), the contributions take the 2016 referendum as their starting point. This special issue opens with two articles on the British case, setting the stage for further explorations. First, Thomas (2021) contribution investigates anti-EU discourses in the House of Commons in the process leading up to the decision to leave the EU. It shows that the Europeanisation of the House of Commons has paradoxically led to an evolution shared across different parties overemphasising the necessity of restoring the UK parliament's (fictional) autonomy and veto position. It thus already highlights two trends that other contributions also stress *mutatis mutandis*: the prevalence of democratic concerns in the Brexit debates, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the effect of politicisation (that has fed anti-EU feelings).

In the next article, Auel and Umit (2020) analyse the vote on the Withdrawal Bill, which took place in the House of Commons in February 2017 to authorise the government to notify the EU of the UK's intention to withdraw from the Union. By focusing on parliamentarians who did not follow the mandate given by the country in the referendum, their aim is to explore dilemmas arising from situations where parliamentarians are faced with opposing injunctions from different principals, such as the voters in their constituency and their party. The empirical analysis reveals the strategic basis for parliamentarians' attitude toward Brexit: parliamentarians who represented strong remain constituencies and who held a more marginal seat were more likely to deviate from the national (referendum) mandate.

Moving beyond the borders of the UK, Marangoni and Navarro (2020) provide a first overview of MPs' reaction to Brexit in nine distinct national parliaments. More specifically, they ask whether MPs anticipate negative or positive consequences of Brexit for the European integration process. Their analysis uncovers a cleavage between pessimist and optimist MPs, with the former believing EU

integration has gone too far and that the Brexit referendum will weaken the EU while the latter think EU integration should go further and that Brexit will strengthen the EU.

The next four articles rely on country cases to explain reactions to Brexit, and more particularly the salience of the Brexit issue and its politicisation. Analysing parliamentary speeches in Ireland between 2014 and 2019, Costello (2020) applies the 'rally around the flag' hypothesis to Brexit and elite support for European integration. His results show that there was indeed a significant and sustained pro-EU rally among most Irish parties. Strikingly, the biggest Eurosceptic party, Sinn Féin, largely ceased its criticisms of the EU in order to get behind the national cause and the EU negotiators acting on behalf of the country.

By relying on parliamentary questions in the Belgian (regional and federal) parliaments between 2013 and 2017, Sierens and Brack (2020) ask to what extent the attention paid to Brexit differs across parliaments in a multilevel setting and whether parties emphasize the same issue across different levels. They notably demonstrate that differences exist between parties and regions with indications of greater specialization and more technical discussions at the regional level than at the federal one. Moreover, they note that opposition parties have not been very active in asking questions on Brexit.

The low politicisation of Brexit, which Sierens and Brack observe in Belgium parliaments, is also evidenced by Kaniok and Brusenbauch Meislova (2020) in their article on the Czech and Slovak parliaments. In these two countries, however, the majority of politicizing interventions are those by politicians of opposition parties and the position of parties on European integration seem to affect their propensity to politicise Brexit, with Eurosceptic MPs particularly keen to do so.

The picture is slightly different in the German Bundestag, as Baloge's (2021) article reveals. Contrary to what one might have expected, parliamentarians from the far-right Eurosceptic AfD are not particularly active when it comes to debating Brexit. Nevertheless, Brexit does provide the AfD with an opportunity to distance itself from mainstream parties, although the party does not officially promote a German exit from the EU.

An article by Brusenbauch Meislova (2020) dedicated to the European Parliament concludes the special issue. It focuses on the influence the European Parliament was able to exert on the talks between the EU negotiators and their British counterparts. Brusenbauch Meislova observes that, within the Article 50 process, the EP established itself as a distinct, ambitious actor in its own right. Its democratic legitimacy and the relative absence of national parliaments in the withdrawal talks allowed the European Parliament to position itself as a voice for all EU citizens.

Note

1. Algeria and Greenland, which also withdrew from the European Communities, are instances of territories reclaiming independence from their respective state, not from the European Communities as such (Patel 2018). They thus do not really compare to the UK and Brexit.

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