Britishness and the EU

Looking to the past not the future? An analysis of the use of history during the EU referendum campaign.

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Importance

History is often used in political discourse to justify arguments. Beyond being a justifying tool, history provides indications about the regard in which a group considers their own identity.

The issue of the EU in British politics is also a significant method which one might use to conceptualise the 'British' identity. The question of having multiple identities is often disputed when Britain's membership of the EU arises. The EU also brings to the fore the question of what the British identity actually is.

As a case study to examine the British identity, historical references during the EU referendum provides the perfect method in order to do this.

Image. 1

Image. 2

Simply campaigning material or reflections of an imagined identity?

Aims

• Determine the differences between the *Leave* campaign and *Remain* campaign in their use of history.
• Assess the literature of 'decline' to determine when Britain was deemed to be progressing by the campaigners.
• Analyse the use of visual sources in order to assess continuities in the campaigns.
• Determine the differences in *Remain* and *Leave*'s identities.

Methods

• Collect newspaper articles and campaign speeches in order to determine how the Leave and Remain campaigners think about the past.
• Analyse the references to previous Prime Ministers in order to understand the different historical interpretations over time. By doing this, particular differences between the campaign's interpretations of the past can be assessed as part of a continuum.
• Contrast these conclusions against concepts of the 'British identity' and then assess this against other campaign materials such as visual sources to check how representative the conclusions are.

Image. 3

Image. 4

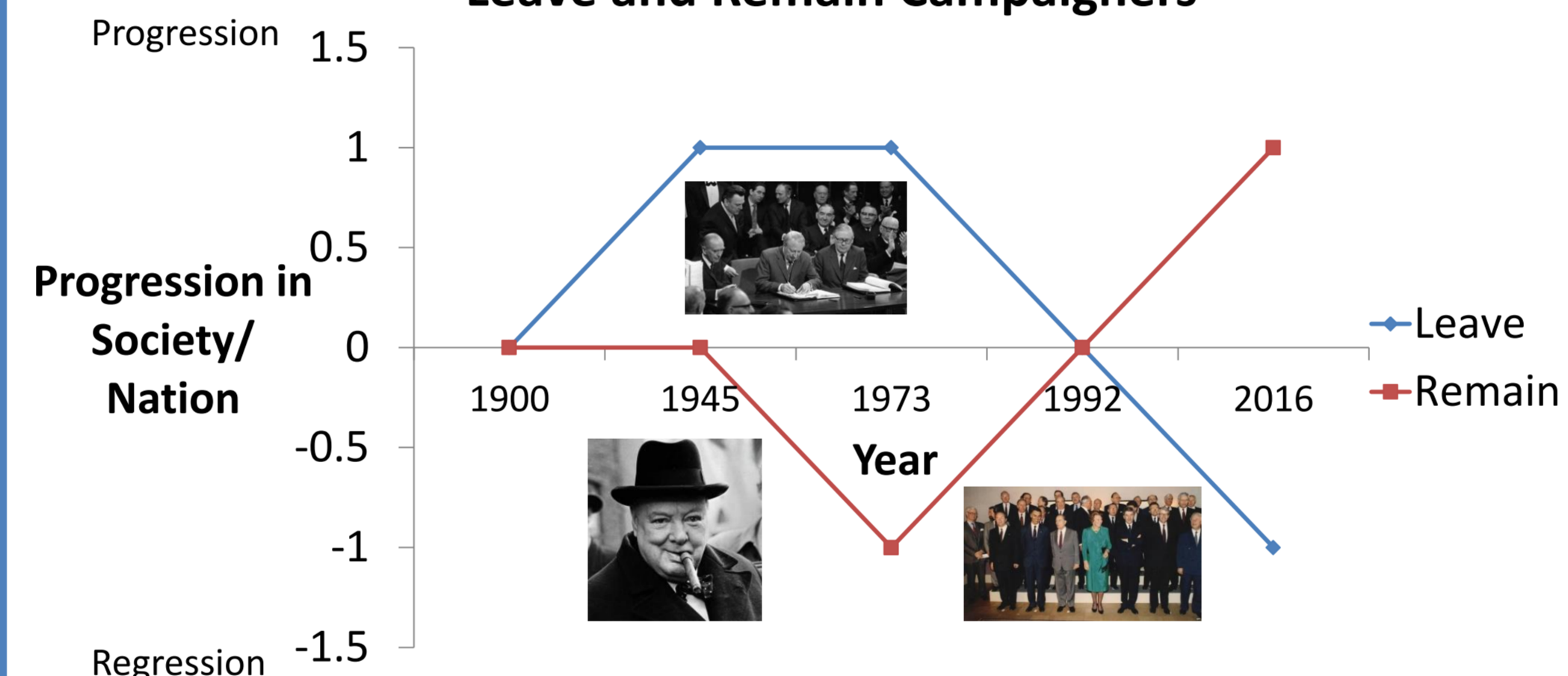**Visual trajectory of Britain's Progress according to the Leave and Remain Campaigners**

Fig. 1

Findings

1. By assessing speeches and articles, the project was able to draw conclusions about how the *Leave* and *Remain* campaigners considered society at given moments in the past and which events effected its degradation or elevation. This is shown in a visual way in Fig.1. Here, it was in 1973 when the United Kingdom gained membership of the European Economic Community that the linear trajectory that Britain was on changed according to the campaigners. It was in 1992 though, with the Treaty of Maastricht, that the fate of the country truly altered course.

   • By gauging when each Campaign noted periods of 'decline', and by analysing the use of the references made to Winston Churchill, Harold Wilson, Margaret Thatcher, and John Major, this graph was able to be plotted. It is however a macro level overview of the perceived direction which Britain has taken, so would necessarily change between different political party affiliations, ideology, and age.

2. The literature and the visual sources reaffirmed the conclusions about *Remain* and *Leave*'s identity, and what Britishness to them truly entails.

Visual Sources

The Comparison of Image 3 and Image 4 capture the quintessential issue of the campaign for identity politics.

• Firstly, the two campaigns attempt to claim symbolic landmarks to support their campaign.
• This is done in a conscious manner as the buildings and food being appropriated are ones which are commonly held to be key icons on the national landscape and British identity.

Conclusions

Ultimately, this research found differences between the *Remain* and *Leave* campaign's sense of identity. Seeking to maintain the prominent position which Britain has on the international stage, both the *Remain* and *Leave* campaigns have sought to justify their action as the best option in order to maintain Britain's position of authority. It is upon this backdrop that the foundation of the British identity is observed. Andrew Gamble noted that it was Britain's empire that was 'the most important transnational space inhabited by the British and it had a profound impact on British politics, … and about the role of the British state in the world'. The use of historical narratives from both *Leave* and *Remain* were identifiably the modern remnants of Britain's imagined self image, founded in the era of empire. However references to perceived declination, and also reaffirmed in the visual sources of the campaigns, distinguished how *Leave* and *Remain* considered how the idea of Britain was either undermined or multiplied by EU membership. While *Leave* considered a more autonomous route towards international relations to be more akin with the British identity, the *Remain* campaign saw the EU to be the most advantageous route for Britain's international prestige. Both however sought to use history to appropriate the same issue of achieving transnational dominance into their campaigns.

References

Image 1: "Vote Leave," Facebook, last accessed 01 October 2016, https://www.facebook.com/voteleave/photos/a.512228762287386.1073741828.505084413001821/615320315311563/?type=3&theater

Image 2: "Open Europe," Facebook, last accessed 01 October 2016, https://www.facebook.com/OpenBritain/photos/a.1016792188361105.1073741828.1014500498590274/1200767939963528/?type=3&theater

Image 3: "Vote Leave," Facebook, last accessed 01 October 2016, https://www.facebook.com/voteleave/photos/a.512228762287386.1073741828.505084413001821/563899383786990/?type=3&theater

Image 4: "Open Europe," Facebook, last accessed 01 October 2016, https://www.facebook.com/OpenBritain/photos/a.1016792188361105.1073741828.1014500498590274/1153237171383272/?type=3&theater

Andrew, Gamble., *Between Europe and America: The Future of British Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pg. 62