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BREXIT, voice and loyalty: rethinking electoral politics in an age of interdependence

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, known as Brexit, scholars of international affairs have a chance to reflect on what this unanticipated event means for global politics. Many scholars have started applying standard political economy models based on the distributional consequences of trade or the sociotropic sources of individual policy positions to understand voter preferences. In this essay, we move the conversation using the lever of the New Interdependence Approach to reflect on the referendum process more generally. Rather than viewing globalization largely as an exogenous shock that is filtered through national institutions and cleavages, we argue that it has the potential to alter the political issue space as well as the institutional opportunities available to political actors. In conclusion, we push scholars of both comparative politics and international relations to develop a research agenda for electoral politics in an age of interdependence.

KEYWORDS

Brexit; interdependence; electoral politics; globalization; transnational; opportunity structures.

With the end of the media postmortem on Brexit – the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union – scholars of international affairs have a chance to reflect on what this unanticipated event means for global politics.¹ The preliminary evidence presents substantial problems

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for many standard accounts of international political economy that focus attention on the economic consequences of openness for individual voters. The European project is the most extensive example in modern history of international market integration – a system in which states have given up control of crucial aspects of regulation (e.g. banking, food production, online markets) to international bureaucrats, in the belief that this will allow them to achieve efficiencies in trade in goods and services.

The economic benefits should be compelling to the median voter in ways that should predominate in referendum voting, where there are no institutional blocks to a simple up–down vote. In David Lake's summation (2009: 227–228), 'Large constituencies – at the extreme, a single electoral district for the entire country – incline policy toward the general welfare, assumed to be the free flow of goods, services, and factors of production' (see further Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff, 2002; Bailey, 2001). Furthermore, policy analysis prior to the vote and initial market reactions signaled that there was no evidence that Brexit would help the economic prospects of UK citizens (UK Treasury, 2016). To the contrary, the decision will likely have long-lasting economic downsides. Voters by a decisive margin, then, have rejected arrangements that economists would see in their best interests. We expect that this puzzle will motivate scholars to focus on understanding voter preferences and how they do or do not conform to models of political economy that emphasize the distributional consequences of trade or the sociotropic sources of individual policy positions (Rho and Tomz, 2016; Guisinger, 2009; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009).

This work will no doubt result in fruitful scholarship. That said, we believe that it misses an opportunity to examine a much more fundamental transformation in world politics laid bare by Brexit. Economic openness is not simply an exogenous shock to domestic politics but a source of opportunities at the international and transnational levels, some of which may be quite unexpected. Building cross-national markets is necessarily and inevitably a political project, requiring the forging of institutions, and the building of alliances that seek to influence those institutions. As a result of the push toward economic openness, many of the more important aspects of politics move beyond the nation-state, meaning that political actors stymied in their domestic political context now have new opportunities to express political voice, even if they remain loyal to the ideal of the independent nation-state.

This helps explain one of the great ironies of the Brexit vote. The most important long-term advocate of Brexit – the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – received its greatest electoral success through institutions created as part of European economic integration. UKIP was founded on the idea that the UK should leave the European Union. Long unable to win significant national representation under the UK's

first-past-the-post electoral system, UKIP seemed destined to obscurity like many other nationalist or populist parties in the UK. The party, however, found political life in European Parliamentary elections, which now rely on proportional representation and thus offer greater opportunities for niche parties. Between 1999, when proportional voting was introduced in UK elections to the European Parliament, and 2014, UKIP increased its vote share and share of seats in European Parliamentary elections, culminating in its victory in the 2014 elections, where it topped the national poll with 27.5% of the vote, winning 24 seats in the European Parliament. It has used its representation in the European Parliament to build its legitimacy as a functioning party and develop a broader political platform. Ultimately, UKIP was able to organize a European party group and secure funding from the European Union, which it used to promote its drive for Brexit (McCann, 2016).² Those groups and voters that were most reluctant to support greater economic openness deployed new global political institutions to undermine the openness project.

In this short intervention, we argue that one useful way forward to better understand such complex dynamics is to see political parties through the lens of international political economy. On the one hand, increasing interdependence between the domestic and international economies affects the *issue space* that political parties compete within. On the other, international structures created to deal with interdependence offer opportunities to some political parties to use *international structures* to circumvent or even transform domestic institutions that they are unhappy with. The intersection between changing issues and changing opportunities can lead to important political change.

In short, we suggest that political parties, just like firms, regulators and non-governmental organizations can be analyzed using the tools of the New Interdependence Approach (NIA) (Farrell and Newman, 2014, 2015, 2016) which are designed precisely to understand how increased interdependence reshapes both the goals and opportunity structures available to domestic and transnational actors. Briefly, the NIA posits that globalization is leading not to the eclipse of the state or an unembedded state of anarchy, but to a new condition of *rule overlap*, in which increased conflict and confusion between hitherto distinct national rules systems gives rise to disputes over how or whether existing national bargains need to change. It also gives rise to *cross-national opportunity structures* for actors looking either to defend or to reshape their own or others' existing rules and bargains at the domestic and international levels. These opportunities result both from the fact that economic openness has generated new transnational institutions and the opportunity for actors to forge transnational alliances. Finally, access to these rule structures is *asymmetrically distributed* so that some actors (those with access to the relevant cross national opportunity structures) are advantaged and others not.

The NIA provides tools to think systematically about the ways in which party politics are being transformed by globalization – the transnationalization of issues and the creation of opportunity structures, and how these relate to each other. It hence avoids the methodological nationalism that has bedeviled much of the existing literature (Callaghan, 2010; Oatley, 2011) and prevented it from integrating the insights of a growing body of research on the interaction between globalization and party politics. By using this approach, we highlight the connection between two emerging literatures and the NIA. One looks at how greater economic integration has embedded electoral politics within the international context. The other examines how the EU provides new opportunity structures for European political parties. Joining the two suggests a research agenda that focuses on the ways in which transnational and global institutions generate new venues for political parties to develop their platforms, recruit new members and enjoy electoral success.

Empirically, the NIA also sheds considerable light on the more specific puzzle of how the UKIP was able to shape the political debate within the UK, reintroducing the issue of European integration in ways that pushed the Conservative Party to call for a referendum in order to mitigate its own internal party tensions. In short, increasing interdependence changed the domestic issue space within the UK. This provided a potential opportunity for the UKIP, which could mobilize against European integration and the compromises of economic interdependence more generally. However, the UK electoral system made it extremely hard for smaller parties to compete in national elections. The shift to a proportional representation system for the European Parliament in 1999, combined with the greater ease of attracting protest votes in ‘second-order’ elections and the resources made available to European political parties allowed the UKIP to build itself up in ways that would otherwise have been impossible. Without a changing issue space made possible by greater European integration, the UKIP would never have emerged in the first place. Without transnational opportunity structures made possible by European integration, it could never have thrived as a party.

In the remainder of this article, we briefly discuss the existing literatures on electoral politics and globalization, and parties and EU level transnational opportunity structures, discussing how the NIA provides a way to integrate them. We then examine how this helps to explain the rise of the UKIP and other nationalist populist parties. Finally, we set out several possible streams of future research that might emerge from a concerted effort to build a model of electoral politics in an age of interdependence.

ELECTORAL POLITICS IN AN AGE OF INTERDEPENDENCE

While work on globalization has stressed the interdependent nature of decision-making, much of this research has focused on policies rather than politics. Work on diffusion, in particular, has demonstrated quite decisively that policy-makers face a number of channels such as learning, competition or mimicry through which actions taken in one state affects policies in their own states (Simmons et al., 2006; Brooks, 2007; Braun and Gilardi, 2006). This relationship has been shown in a wide variety of public policies ranging from pension systems to regulations for digital technologies. Such global pressures, then, challenge theoretical and methodological assumptions that pervade standard IR theories as well as traditional accounts of party politics and electoral systems. Many comparative political accounts, in particular, have hewed to a strong version of methodological nationalism, in which states and their electoral politics are viewed as independent observations (Callaghan, 2010). International forces may serve as a shock to domestic politics as is often portrayed under the banner of second-image reversed-style arguments (Gourevitch, 1986), but there is often a separation between the domestic and international as well as between the national units.

A new strain of findings, however, suggests that such interdependencies go well beyond policy choice and implicate the foundations of party politics. In other words, global forces may alter voter behavior, party platforms and issue space, and electoral opportunities (Kayser, 2007). For example, Hellwig (2008) has found that voters consider the constraints that their government faces due to globalization. In cases where governments are constrained, voters shift their focus from economic issues to more ideological or social issues. In this case, globalization both neutralizes economic accountability and alters the political agenda that drives voter priorities. Similarly, Kayser and Peress (2012) find that globalization's effect on voter accountability occurs in a given structural context. Voters and elites benchmark national economic outcomes in relationship to other peer states, shifting the reference point for economic voting to a much more dynamic and global context. An additional stream of work suggests that parties and their promise of electoral success have been significantly shaped by interdependence. On the one hand, dominant parties have struggled. At the same time, new niche parties have learned from one another and barrowed key platform frames from one another. Rydgren (2005) demonstrates how the *Front National* combined ethnonationalist xenophobia with anti-establishment populism to create a powerful party platform that re-energized extreme right parties across Europe. While these various findings have often emerged across a number of different subfields and research programs, they suggest the anemic quality of standard depictions of electoral

politics, which treat each national political system as methodologically or theoretically autonomous.

At the same time, a complementary literature on European politics suggests an important role for European institutions in transnational party development. European Parliamentary elections tend to be treated by national voters as 'second-order elections' (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Marsh, 1998) which means that voters' choice is often not dictated by the belief that these parties will press through a specific administrative program, but rather is determined by attitudes for or against the government in power, or the desire to express opinions on single issues. This provides potential opportunities for parties that otherwise might have difficulty in performing well at the ballot box. Furthermore, European party groupings provide significant resources for political parties. Some of these flow through the groupings within the European Parliament. Some also flow through the major European party 'families,' which have established structures for common discussion and alliance building across countries. Yet there are broader benefits for 'Europarties' (Johansson, 2005). Parties which have gained seats in at least a quarter of member states, or received at least 3% of the vote in at least one-quarter of member states are entitled to statutory funding, which in principle cannot be applied to national parties, but which in practice may indirectly be helpful to them. Unsurprisingly, this has created incentives for seemingly strange bedfellows to come together to create Europarties.

Integrating the above literatures with the NIA, we draw a number of insights as to the transformation of party politics in an age of interdependence. First, there is growing evidence that the issue space across which parties compete is shaped by global as well as domestic forces. Of course, there is an extensive body of existing work that examines how, for example, different coalitions are affected by changing factor prices, giving rise to new political cleavages. Yet this literature more or less systematically looks to isolate the relevant causal channels from cross-national politics, focusing on economic forces.

This, however, discounts the political channels created by greater economic integration, which reorient voter, media and elite priorities and the way they evaluate parties and governments. Interdependence generates a condition of *rule overlap*, in which firms, goods and even individuals find themselves governed by rules from multiple jurisdictions (Berger, 2000; Raustiala, 2009; Kaczmarek and Newman, 2011). Such rule overlap creates tremendous uncertainty for business interests and citizens as they seek to navigate these conflicting rule sets. This offers the opportunity for political entrepreneurs to use transnational institutions to reintroduce issues that maybe have seemed settled in the domestic political sphere. At the same time, as the institutions developed to manage globalization become more salient, they give rise to a number of

possible issues that political actors can mobilize around, such as policy autonomy, out-group threat or technocracy. Our account, then, emphasizes the possibility of an endogenous interaction between international and domestic issue spaces.

Second, global interdependence does not simply change the issue space across which parties compete. It also potentially provides new *cross-national opportunity structures* for parties that are able to reach out into the political institutions created by openness (Farrell and Newman, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Moschella, 2016). This is especially important for parties in member states of the European Union, where both political interdependence and relevant institutions are relatively advanced. The directly elected legislative institution of the European Union provides important resources to parties competing at the national level. Parties and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) that are elected to the European Parliament not only have some increased influence and visibility, but can also count on generous allowances for parties and individual members. They can use their time in the Parliament to develop procedural and legislative skills. Most important, they get to grow their brand through second-order elections. At the same time, electoral rules for these new transnational institutions often follow different rules than their domestic counterparts. Parties that may be stymied by domestic political rules can strategically leverage the transnational setting to increase their chance of electoral success.

Third, the opportunity structures and political resources generated by interdependence are likely to be *asymmetrically distributed* – some parties are able to take advantage of them while others cannot (Farrell and Newman, 2014; Newman and Posner, 2016). In the European context, for example, parties which are not members by force of ideology or inclination of one of the grand European party families are not able to make use of the opportunities for informal coalition building that they offer. Purely regional or separatist parties, for example, have found it difficult to take advantage of Europarty funding, and have taken unsuccessful court actions as a result (Laible, 2008). Other resources are more useful to some parties than others. The benefits of second-order elections to the European Parliament are plausibly greater for parties in first past the post systems, which otherwise would find it harder to crack the stranglehold of the duopoly, than in proportional representation systems, where it is easier for single issue or minority appeal parties to find a place in the ecosystem.

The combination of changing issue space and changing resources suggests that the NIA potentially offers important purchase on the UKIP's success (and why, under other conditions, it would plausibly have failed), the dynamics behind Brexit, and its broader repercussions for the European project. Increased interdependence – and the challenge it posed to Britain's existing national political bargains – generated new

opportunities for populist parties like the UKIP. European opportunity structures paradoxically helped the UKIP to survive and even to prosper, providing it with resources that would have been unavailable had it been confined solely to national politics. Finally, the asymmetric distribution of resources highlights how extraordinarily lucky the UKIP was – without access to the quite specific opportunity structures that it was able to take advantage of, it almost certainly would have languished and perhaps died.

THE UKIP: POLITICAL INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE RETRENCHMENT OF ECONOMIC OPENNESS

The UKIP – like similar parties in other countries – has mobilized around the perceived incursions of the European Union into British politics and democracy. It has not only sought to take the UK out of the EU but to freeze immigration, claiming that there is a profound disconnect between Britain's pro-Europe elite, and ordinary voters. This has allowed it to attract voters from the Conservative Party (Lynch et al., 2012) and from Labour.

The key to the UKIP's importance is that it has effectively challenged the ability of Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, which used to constitute Britain's two-and-a-half party system, to control the issue space across which parties competed. Previously, this issue space ranged from soft Euroscepticism in the Conservative party (a desire to radically reshape the EU as a set of market arrangements) to the different forms of European solidarity offered by the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. As the late Peter Mair (2013) observed, UK politics had a more pronounced Eurosceptical tinge than most continental European countries, but was nonetheless dominated by a pro-EU elite, which sought systematically to sideline radical Euroskeptics. The UKIP – far more successfully than its predecessor, the Referendum Party – presented the case for a hard Euroscepticism, and repeatedly pressed for a referendum in which British subjects would be able to vote on whether Britain remained part of the EU. Mair's analysis suggests both that the intrusions of the EU into national democratic decision-making offered political opportunities for new parties, and that the EU-friendly elites of the UK and elsewhere had become increasingly disconnected from ordinary voters. As Gifford (2014) argues, this allowed the UKIP to present itself as the champion of the British people against outside forces that were rigging the game against them. In doing so, the UKIP was able to expand its platform from simply an anti-EU party to a party that stood against the political ramifications of openness – out-group threat, technocratic rule and policy dependence.

This opened up the opportunity to profoundly transform British politics when Conservative prime minister David Cameron, who had previously adopted a ‘best not mentioned’ approach to Europe, agreed to a referendum on EU membership in order to dampen down pressures within his own party. Cameron expected the ‘Remain’ side to win the referendum handily. However, the Remain side, which saw itself as “the pluralist, liberal, centrist force in British politics,” did not realize how narrow its actual base of support was (Behr, 2016). In Rafael Behr’s description, it found themselves becoming “the informal party of defensive liberalism – the unpopulists,” as the UKIP and its allies gleefully led a popular revolt.

Mair and Gifford’s diagnosis – that the weakening of representative structures has damaged mainstream political parties – cuts against political science arguments that voters are less likely to hold parties accountable for economic setbacks as globalization proceeds (Hellwig, 2008; Kayser and Peress, 2012). If their findings generalize, then the rapid advance of globalization may have more profound consequences for the issue space that parties compete over and how they are evaluated than contemporary statistical analyses would predict (Guisinger, 2009).

Not only has interdependence reshaped the issue space, but it provided resources that were necessary for the UKIP to thrive. First of these was the existence of regular elections to the European Parliament, which paradoxically helped Euroskeptics more than euro-enthusiasts in the United Kingdom. Especially after Parliament elections moved to proportional representation, they provided an opportunity for the UKIP to campaign on an anti-Europe platform and to win both publicity and electorally. Even while the UKIP remained a negligible party in national elections (Abedi and Lundberg, 2009), it enjoyed extraordinary success in Parliament elections, culminating in its victory in 2014, where it won 24 seats, as opposed to 20 for Labour, and 19 for the Conservative Party.

The second crucial benefit that the UKIP enjoyed was access to European funds. Brack (2013) reports that UK Euroskeptics in the European Parliament have been particularly prone to a behavior that she describes as strategic absenteeism, e.g. turning up to Parliament’s plenary sessions to ensure that the party gets its funds. In the description of one former UKIP MEP: ‘If I don’t come and put my card in the slot to vote, I don’t get my money to give to the party’ (Brack, 2013: 97). Farage’s party grouping in the European Parliament, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, received UKP 4.7 million in European funding over a three-year period, in addition to UKP 1.5 million for its ‘Europarty,’ the Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe and an associated foundation (Morris and Hopkins, 2016). This funding has been critical to the UKIP, which has historically neither enjoyed large private donations (Watt, 2016), nor large-scale funding under the UK ‘short money’ system (where it only has one elected MP).

Increased interdependence and the EU's ever more intrusive role in domestic politics gave the UKIP its mobilizing issue. New transnational opportunity structures provided the party with the necessary resources to bring this issue to the public. In a counterfactual world, where EU rule-making was similarly unpopular in the UK, but where parties like the UKIP had no access to European resources, it is highly unlikely that they would have been able to be successful. Both European elections and European party support sustained the UKIP – without it, they would have had little chance of changing national politics. In the frank description of UKIP leader Nigel Farage, 'the first-past-the-post system is brutal to a party like us' (BBC Staff Writer, 2013). If the UKIP had not had European Parliament elections under a more favorable electoral system than first past the post, it would have struggled to gain an electoral profile in British politics. If, as its original founders preferred, it had not gone to Strasbourg and Brussels and hence forfeited funding, it would have been crippled by a lack of resources. Ironically, the UKIP would never have been able to take the UK out of the EU, if it hadn't had the EU's help.

A quick glance across Europe suggests that the UKIP is not the only party to benefit from such a dynamic. Mimicking the UKIP strategy, the Front National in France has mounted a similar strategy, leveraging transnational politics to promote its domestic party position. Marine Le Pen led her party to a decisive European Parliament election result in 2014, receiving nearly 25% of the vote. As an MEP, Le Pen has honed her political skills and the party's platform and she will now test the benefits of such transnational opportunities in the upcoming presidential election in France. Like Brexit she faces difficult odds but Europe may have ironically helped rather than hurt her chances (Treib, 2014). At the very least, and in keeping with the central thrust of our argument, interdependence has played a critical role in transforming the issue space being debated.

CONCLUSION

Like the end of the Cold War or the 2007 Great Recession, the Brexit decision demands that political scientists take a step back and consider how empirical realities require a re-examination of our theoretical priors. In this brief essay, we hoped to use the insights of the NIA to push scholars to consider the political consequences of economic openness for electoral politics. Here we stress that globalization is not simply an economic shock that restructures factors or skills profiles and thus preferences. Instead, we draw attention to the ways in which the politics of interdependence generates new issues (policy autonomy, out-group threat, technocracy) as well as new arenas for parties that wish to reorganize the terms of political debate around these issues.

We see a number of productive next steps that might help build a broader research agenda that would unite the NIA with electoral politics. First, this essay offers a series of empirically testable propositions, which should be assessed more rigorously to determine their broader usefulness. To understand how the issue space is being altered by globalization, scholars need to conduct a cross-national comparison of issues derived from rule overlap and the political consequences of interdependence. Existing studies already point to the importance of rule overlap in a range of critical sectors including finance, migration and online markets (Bach and Newman, 2010; Farrell, 2006; Lavenex, 2006; Posner, 2009), to name a few, but more work needs to be done to develop a comprehensive mapping. Following on this exercise, it would be useful to apply the insights of Kayser, Hellwig and others, who suggest that such changes in the issue space will be evaluated with the international context in mind. It seems plausible, for example, that policy autonomy may only become salient in large to middle-sized economies, and that voters, the media and elites may have already accepted policy dependence in smaller or more structurally dependent countries which have little choice but to be policy 'takers' rather than 'makers'. This might, for example, explain why dollarization/euroization seems to be acceptable in some countries but meets heated resistance in others (Lake, 1993).

One useful test bed for these theories is the changing set of cross-national relationships among non-traditional right-wing parties. If Nigel Farage began by seeking financial support from Brussels, he is now looking to the Trump administration for more intangible forms of validation. Le Pen's National Front was initially able to draw on loans from a Russian bank to support its efforts, although these resources have since dried up. Controversies over the international connections and interactions of these parties are likely to reveal data which can better uncover the ways and extents to which different parties can or cannot draw on cross-national opportunities, highlighting the complex relationship between traditional and accepted forms of funding (such as the EU) and more controversial forms of financial support and legitimization.

Second, a growing body of research has documented an explosion of international parliaments and other participatory mechanisms (Šabič, 2013; Tallberg et al., 2013; Kingsbury et al., 2005). This research has tended to emphasize the question of whether these bodies do or do not resolve the democratic deficits associated with global governance. Our intervention suggests an alternative reading of such bodies, one in which they become an alternative site of contestation for actors who would otherwise be confined to their domestic setting and the institutions thereof (Tarrow, 2001; Ayoub, 2013). Studies should investigate the ways in which political entrepreneurs use such transnational political settings to expand their political resources and circumvent domestic political

blockages. One important way political entrepreneurs may do this is to link up with like-minded groups in other jurisdictions to forge cross-national alliances, which can build coalitions within such international parliaments and participatory bodies.

Our overarching goal in this essay is to focus scholarly attention on the political consequences of international openness. It is ironic that the UKIP and other nationalist populist parties succeeded in leveraging European institutions created to facilitate openness to mobilize politically against integration. These same parties have increasingly used the Internet and new forms of media that underpin globalization to forge alliances across Europe and between Europe and other regions including the United States. This suggests the *prima facie* value of a research agenda that brings together research on international interdependence and research on party politics in a more systematic fashion. We acknowledge, of course, the literature on party politics has quite as many lessons to offer to political economy as vice versa, even if we do not have space to develop these lessons too in a short article. Ultimately, we believe that better dialogue between both understandings of politics would lead to a productive conversation on the transformation of electoral politics in an age of interdependence.

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NOTES

1. We are grateful to @wanderingaengus and Brad DeLong for the title of the paper.
2. And one only has to look across the channel to see similar dynamics at work in France with the Front National.

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