



The impact of Brexit: polity, politics, policy

Cleo Davies

To cite this article: Cleo Davies (2023) The impact of Brexit: polity, politics, policy, Journal of European Integration, 45:6, 963-969, DOI: [10.1080/07036337.2023.2236423](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2236423)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2236423>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 28 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6703



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The impact of Brexit: polity, politics, policy

Cleo Davies 

School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies, University of East Anglia

ABSTRACT

Assessing the impact of Brexit involves disentangling the extensive and complex web of rules and relations that developed over decades of EU membership and integration, as well as analysing the effects on businesses, citizens, and the state. For scholars, the exercise is all the more challenging because Brexit has been a ‘moving target’. Nevertheless, what does emerge is the transformational reach of Brexit for the UK, with implications for its polity, politics, and policies. The UK seems at a crossroads. Relations with the devolved administrations will need to be rethought even as the Westminster model appears reinforced. The UK is still grappling with balancing newfound regulatory autonomy and managing divergence from the EU, and its role in the world is still in flux. For the EU, Brexit did not transform into a full blown existential (disintegrative) crisis. It still faces potential existential crises, but these are not because of Brexit.

KEYWORDS

Brexit; UK-EU relations; UK politics; Regulation; Agricultural Policy

Introduction

In considering the impact of Brexit across the four volumes reviewed in this article, two observations stand out. First, Brexit is an ongoing process and a multidimensional one. As aptly put by the authors of *The Brexit effect*, ‘disentangling the complex knot of relationships with the EU is a difficult and untested exercise that will need some time in order to be brought to completion’ (Baldini et al., 2023, p.45). Some volumes are more successful at navigating the challenge of assessing the impact of Brexit than others. The challenges raised are not only methodological and conceptual but also point to long-term relevance of scholarship on Brexit when the object of analysis is a ‘moving target’.

The second observation is that the impact of Brexit is likely much more consequential for the UK than for the EU. As Vernon Bogdanor writes in his introduction to Sophie Loussouarn’s edited book *Brexit and its Aftermath* ‘there is hardly any aspect of Britain’s political or constitutional life which is unaffected’ (Bogdanor, 2022: 4). What emerges from the volumes reviewed in this article is the transformational reach of Brexit for the UK, with implications for its polity, its politics, and its policies. These range from the constitutional question of devolution post Brexit, and the specific challenges for Northern Ireland, to realignment in party politics, as well as setting rules and standards outside the EU legal

CONTACT Cleo Davies  Cleo.Davies@uea.ac.uk

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

and political order and the need to equip its civil service to deliver on policy objectives in areas that used to fall under the remit of the European Commission, such as agricultural policy.

The impact of Brexit: polity, politics, policy

The volumes reviewed provide evidence of the impact on the UK's constitutional settlement, its politics and party system, as well as the transformation in policy, notably as a result of the type of relationship defined by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and the policy choices of the UK government.

The 26 chapters of the *Research Handbook on Legal Aspects of Brexit* are testimony to the extensive and complex web of rules and relations that developed over more than 40 years of EU membership and integration and the legal and regulatory effect of Brexit on businesses and citizens. The volume provides an impressive collection of contributions by experts covering constitutional implications of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, including of retained EU law, as well as changes in private international law or criminal justice and security, for instance, or the issue of regulatory autonomy. Meanwhile, in *The Brexit Effect*, Gianfranco Baldini and colleagues find that the British political system is now moving towards a Westminster Model as a result of Brexit. The insight that the executive is strengthened as a result of the Brexit process is echoed in Andrew Blick's chapter on the constitution in *Brexit and its Aftermath* and in Alan Wager's chapter in the *Research Handbook on Legal Aspects on Brexit*. In terms of political realignment, Alan Wager also finds that Brexit has accelerated the process. John Curtis, in his chapter in *Brexit and its Aftermath*, hones in on the realignment in Scotland where he concludes that voters' party preferences became aligned with views on Brexit away from a YES/NO independence on Scotland. However, as pointed out by Gianfranco Baldini and colleagues in their conclusion, what is less clear is the extent to which realignment will be a long-term feature of the British political system.

The Brexit Effect presents the political-constitutional outcomes of the strains that played out during the Brexit process. The book is a compelling analysis of the impact of Brexit on the UK political system from an institutional perspective, drawing on Lijphart's framework and variables, leaving out the administrative and cultural perspectives. The analysis focuses on the changes to the constitution and the British Political Tradition (BPT), only considering policies if these have a transformative effect on the politics and the polity in three key dimensions of UK political system – party-system, executive-legislative relations, and center-periphery relations. Using process tracing, the book aims to capture the direction of travel of the UK political system and is a welcome and rigorous attempt to disentangle what has occurred because of Brexit and what has happened during the Brexit process. The book offers a compelling analysis which would benefit in being completed by analysis of the impact of Brexit on the 'cultural consensus' that underpins the British Political Tradition, epitomised by the saying 'government knows best', because at its heart is the issue of trust in government and institutions of government. Indeed, the authors point out in their conclusion that 'the delivery of Brexit may not provide a satisfactory answer to the deep causes of discontent, as the initially bottom-up revolt was highjacked by a Conservative party still linked to an elite view of politics', at the core of the British Political Tradition (Baldini et al., 2023, p. 173). Thus, if institutionally the Westminster model is reinforced as a result of the Brexit process, its legitimacy basis may

be weakened. Furthermore, because of delinking of voters from political parties, the gap between voters and the decision-making system may be growing, which would further weaken the legitimacy basis.

The collection of chapters in *Brexit and its Aftermath* are divided into two sections, with the first covering aspects to do with the British constitution, politics, and the specific policy area of financial services, and a second section focusing on a number of key relationships for the UK's foreign policy post-Brexit. The chapter on the border on the island of Ireland takes an alternative approach to the institutional and regulatory perspectives on the impact of Brexit on the border and uncovers the 'voices' of the people who have lived experience of the border in a context where 'the old binaries of identify have returned to Northern Ireland's frame of reference' (Breen, in *Brexit and its Aftermath*, 2022, p.60). In doing so, the chapter seeks to engage with the question of 'whether there can ever be shared acceptance of regulatory frameworks along the border' (ibid, p. 60). In terms of policy, whilst Stephen Jones' chapter on financial services is a very good summary of the changes to the regulatory environment and highlights the need for a clear UK policy strategy to maintain its financial services pre-eminence, the chapters on foreign policy in the second section of the book are weaker. Authors cover a lot of historical ground in their respective chapters on the UK's relationship with Germany, with France, with the United States and the EU-UK relations to present their views on the future direction. The combined effect is a strong sense of the UK at a crossroads, with its role in the world and its relations with its closest neighbours still in flux, now that it is a country 'outside the EU, but still in Europe'. The chapter on the future of British trade policy by Greg Hands, in which there is no mention of the EU but there is a section on a trade agreement with the US, is a reminder of how some objectives and political narratives have fallen by the wayside.

The collection of chapters in *The Governance of Agriculture in Post-Brexit UK* documents how UK agriculture will inevitably face changes that relate to the impact upon farmers' financial security, food security in the UK, rural development, land management, animal welfare, and environmental protection. From this perspective, the interdisciplinary set of contributors to this volume is a strength. The chapters offer a first stock-taking of the challenges that arise from leaving the CAP under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement and the TCA, as well as a first assessment of the legal and governance implications of decisions made to accommodate the changes to UK's agricultural policy so far. Ludivine Petetin's chapter, for instance, demonstrates the interaction between the impact of Brexit on reshaping multilevel governance towards a stronger executive with 'a command-and-control frame', and the lack of foresight in the formulation of agricultural policies with risks for policy effectiveness in the future. Christie Sietto documents how the UK has seized the opportunity to set high standards in animal welfare by recognizing animal health and welfare as public goods in the Agriculture Act 2020. However, the way this interacts with decisions in other areas, in particular international trade, may end up weakening standards regardless. The development of a comprehensive policy vision for agriculture appears uncertain and, despite rhetoric to the contrary, there could be more continuity in the ideas underpinning government policy pre and post EU membership, as is suggested in Viviane Gravey's chapter.

The short conclusion pulls together the major threads that emerge from the initial stock-taking: the complications that have arisen as a result of the Withdrawal Agreement

for Northern Ireland and the barriers to trade that exist despite the TCA; the challenges in formulating an agricultural policy given that agriculture is a devolved matter and the subsequent risks of fragmentation; the impact of trade agreements and the ‘very little legal guarantee that has been offered apart from the establishment of the Trade and Agriculture Commission’; and the concerns regarding the extent of the UK’s future regulatory divergence from EU rules long term. It is, however, more of a starting point to what could be more theoretical engagement with the impact of Brexit on regulation and governance that better ties together the multiple and cross-sectoral dimensions of agricultural policy post-Brexit.

Though most of the content reviewed in this article addresses the implications for UK domestic and foreign policy, the fourth section of *the Research Handbook on Legal Aspects of Brexit* is a collection of chapters on the courses of action for the EU27 post-Brexit. With the UK withdrawal, not only did the EU see a reverse of membership, it lost one of its largest and most influential members and financial contributors. The immediate impact of Brexit on EU budgetary discussions are comprehensively covered by Richard Crowe in a chapter that highlights how the EU successfully navigated one of the thorniest issues, whilst other chapters examine what it may mean for differentiated integration (Alicja Sikora, Chapter 23) or treaty reform following the Conference on Europe (Fabbrini, Chapter 25). Others, acknowledging that any long-term implications are difficult to foresee, take a historical perspective to make informed suggestions or predictions about the future direction of travel, for instance, for the single market (Chapter 21) or enlargement (Chapter 24). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Adam Cygan and Adam Lazowski in their conclusions, the EU ‘arguably faces existential challenges’, but these are not a result of the Brexit process. Sophie Loussouarn suggests otherwise and concludes the last chapter in her edited book with the possibility that other EU member states may follow suit and put membership to a vote. Rather enigmatically, the closing sentence of the book puts forward that ‘Denmark and Spain are now thinking of organizing referenda on EU membership [and] are now viewing the EU with growing suspicion’ (Loussouarn, 2022: 212). However, whilst Euroscepticism is not a bygone phenomenon, there is consensus that Brexit has dampened any calls for emulating the UK’s decision to leave the EU (Walter 2021). As is well documented in the chapters by Adam Łazowski on the Withdrawal Agreement and Joris Larik and Ramses A. Wessel on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the EU’s approach to, and management of the negotiations was one of the major reasons why Brexit did not transform into a full blown existential (disintegrative) EU crisis. Instead, the Brexit process generated unity and decisive action, a process that, according to Brigid Laffan and Stefan Telle, is an indication of ‘a further step on the path of polity formation and the willingness to deploy collective power’ (Laffan and Telle 2023, 264). Gostyńska-Jakubowska and von Ondarza (2020) examined the extent to which the EU could replicate the institutional innovations it developed for the Brexit process in its external relations. But it remains debatable.

Challenges to studying the impact of Brexit

In an excellent review article of the book *Brexit: Legal and Economic Aspects of a Political Divorce*, Joris Larik outlines some of the issues that have arisen for legal scholarship because of Brexit being a ‘moving target’. He finds that scholarship has had to remain

speculative and abstract at times or there are question marks over its long-term relevance – its shelf-life (Larik 2023). There are some parallels with the *Research Handbook on Legal Aspect of Brexit*. A number of chapters take a historical approach, looking back at the trajectory of UK participation as an EU member state to then put forward some tentative views on the future direction of travel. Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska and Adam Łazowski, in their chapter on the UK-EU relations, took a historical perspective, tracing the UK's contribution to EU decision-making, how it evolved, and was tested by the Brexit process before successfully outlining what this implies for the UK's approach to maintaining influence in Brussels with the EU institutions. But some chapters remain very tentative whilst others have been over-taken by events. For instance, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has set the EU's enlargement policy in a completely different direction than is suggested in chapter 24. Nevertheless, while some chapters may appear outdated, the chapters in the handbook provide a synopsis of complex aspects of law, and are valuable in themselves for understanding the technical implications of the Brexit Process.

Law is not the only discipline that has to grapple with the challenge of analysing a moving target. International relations and political science suffer from the risk of becoming a running commentary or being obsolete. Analysis can appear rather speculative or quickly outdated. In a crowded field of publications, *The Brexit Effect* is a valuable and welcome contribution. It presents strong hypotheses and conclusions on the direction of change of the British political system based on clear conceptual delimitations. The additional chapter on Covid in the book also points to the fact that disentangling the impact of Brexit from other transformative processes or events presents its own conundrums for the study of the impact of Brexit.

Moreover, if establishing the future direction of the impact of Brexit is a challenge, so too is recounting the past. The excellent essay by historian Robert Saunders (2023) is both an op-ed for historians to engage with Brexit but also highlights the challenges of writing a history of Brexit and the subsequent methodological innovations that will inevitably be required.

The work on policy and regulatory change post-Brexit is largely a developing field. Regulatory divergence is one of the major concerns going forward. In some areas, there are constraints that derive from the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement and the TCA, in others international legal regimes will apply (Kassim, Ennis, and Jordan 2021; Kassim, Davies, Ennis and Jordan 2022). Moreover, unintentional divergence, or what Stephen Jones terms 'drift from the continent' in his chapter on financial services in *Brexit and its Aftermath*, may also occur as the EU updates rules or adopts new ones. Here, frameworks that can conceptualise policy change are valuable and de-Europeanisation – the removal of the UK from the influence of the EU, its rules and policy agenda (Kassim, Ennis, and Jordan 2021, 70) – is set to be a growing area of inquiry. Moreover, policy choices to diverge or continue to align with EU standards and rules, as well as the UK's capacity to develop and implement its own policy and standards, raises the question of what type of regulatory state will emerge in the UK post-EU membership.

Statecraft post Brexit

Beyond the scholarly challenges of studying the impact of Brexit, British politics is still in a process of adaptation and reinvention. The key narrative of 'Global Britain' already

appears obsolete. Institutionally, whilst the British political system may now be moving towards an ideal-typical Westminster model once again, Gianfranco Baldini and colleagues, in a compelling final chapter, underline that the UK constitution is still very much in flux. In turn, Adam Cygan and Adam Łazowski write, in their concluding chapter, that the 'UK Constitution must over the coming years continue to absorb the changes and challenges brought about by Brexit such as the impact on the Northern Ireland Border and the devolution settlements and the future role of the judiciary with application of Retained EU law' (Cygan and Łazowski, 2022, p. 541). At the same time, Irene Antonopoulos and colleagues warn of the risk of fragmentation across the devolved administration in agricultural policy and underline 'the need for the four nations to further build their institutional and scientific capacities' (2022, p.203).

In his introduction to *Brexit and its Aftermath*, Vernon Bogdanor points out that 'statesmanship of the highest order' will be required to bring about a settlement acceptable to all territories. As Michael Moran argued in his book *The end of British Politics?*, the outcome of the referendum held on the 23 June 2026 was also the failure of statecraft – understood as 'the creative exploitation of political opportunities for the strategic use of state power' (Moran 2017, 15) – to create a new European identity for the British state (Moran 2017, 80). British politics is not only having to adapt, it will need to be reinvented.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Cleo Davies  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0205-1015>

Reviewed Books

Irene Antonopoulos, Matt Bell, Aleksandra Čavoški, Ludivine Petetin (eds). *The Governance of Agriculture in Post-Brexit UK. First edition.* New York: Routledge, 2022.

Baldini, Gianfranco, Edoardo Bressanelli, and Emanuele Massetti. *The Brexit Effect : What Leaving the EU Means for British Politics.* Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2023.

Łazowski, Adam and Adam Cygan (eds). *Research Handbook on Legal Aspects of Brexit.* Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022.

Loussouarn, Sophie (ed) *Brexit and its Aftermath.* Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022.

References

Baldini, G., Bressanelli, E. and E. Massetti. 2023. *The Brexit Effect : What Leaving the EU Means for British Politics.* Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Bogdanor, V. 2022. Introduction. *Brexit and its Aftermath.* In *Brexit and its Aftermath*, edited by Sohie Loussouarn, 1–10. Bloomsbury Academic.

Cygan, A., and A. Łazowski. 2022. Conclusion - Life is going to be different. In *Research Handbook on Legal Aspects of Brexit*, edited by A. Cygan and A. Łazowski, 538–556. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Gostyńska-Jakubowska, A., and N. von Ondarza. 2020. *The Barnier Method: Lessons Learned from the EU's Institutional Approach to the Brexit Negotiations*. European Policy Centre (EPC). available online at: https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2020/6_Barnier_method.pdf.
- Kassim, H., C. Davies, S. Ennis, and A. Jordan, eds. 2022. *Regulation After Brexit Revisited*. October 2022. Available at: <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/cof5nr4y/production/a272625913ee2292e86aa12459bace12d7314ed9.pdf>.
- Kassim, H., S. Ennis, and A. Jordan, eds. 2021. *UK Regulation After Brexit*. February 2021. Available at: <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/cof5nr4y/production/6b561ed4f6753b100c7d07e17af51e59cce2b79f.pdf>.
- Laffan, B., and S. Telle. 2023. *The EU's Response to Brexit United and Effective*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26263-0>.
- Larik, J. 2023. "Writing for 'Brexiternity'? Reflections on Legal Scholarship on a Moving Target". 50." *Legal Issues of Economic Integration* 50 (2): 211–226. <https://doi.org/10.54648/LEIE2023008>.
- Loussouarn, S. 2022. The new relationship between the UK and the EU. In *Brexit and its Aftermath*, edited by S. Loussouarn, 194–212. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Moran, M. 2017. *The End of British Politics?*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49965-9>.
- Saunders, R. 2023. "How Do We Write the History of Brexit?" *The Political Quarterly* 94 (2): 230–236. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13252>.
- Walter, S. 2021. "Brexit Domino? The Political Contagion Effects of Voter-Endorsed Withdrawals from International Institutions." *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (13): 2382–2415. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414021997169>.