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Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Relationship Between Left- and Right-Wing Newspapers in the Brexit Debate

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Title: Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Relationship between Left- and Right-Wing Newspapers in the Brexit Debate

Research Question: *How did left-leaning British newspapers frame the European Union and conversations surrounding the 2016 UK referendum in the lead up to the vote and to what extent do they differ from their right-wing counterparts?*

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1. Introduction

The 2016 UK referendum can be understood as one of the most divisive and polarizing political campaigns leading up to a vote in which 51.9 percent of the UK public (with a 72.2 percent voter turnout) voted to leave the European Union. Almost seven years later, there has been an incredible amount of research done on the topic in an attempt to explain the outcome of the 2016 UK referendum. The research and subsequent literature which exists focuses on a wide range of topics and variables in an attempt to come to terms with the final decision of the UK being the first member to exit the European Union. Some authors have placed emphasis on the influence of the UK's unsteady history and tough relationship with the EU, assessing and attributing the result of the vote having to do with the impact of the United Kingdom's eurosceptic "legacy" (Evans & Menon, 2017; Usherwood 2018; Usherwood, Leruth & Startin, 2017). Others have combined this idea with the citizen's dissatisfaction with the national government and the rise of populist parties as the impetus for a referendum to be held (Igwe, 2022; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Additionally, much research has been done on trying to understand the role of the British press leading up to the referendum and how the coverage of the issues surrounding the referendum such as sovereignty, immigration, and economic factors impacted the outcome of the vote (Simpson & Startin, 2022, Deacon et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2016). Building on this conversation, Simpson and Startin (2022) have discussed the role of a the British tabloid press (BTP as it is referred to in their research) in the months leading up to the vote and concluded that this particular subset of the media in the UK had a significant role in influencing the vote to ultimately leave the EU, touching on right-wing bias tabloids in particular for "tipping the vote towards Brexit".

All of these factors have been discussed at great length when attempting to come to terms with the ultimate decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union almost seven years ago, but how can one understand how anti-Europe sentiments have found their way into the mainstream so much so that the UK became the first country to exit the Union? Scholars (Khabaz, 2018; Simpson and Startin, 2022; Phillips, 2019) credit the right-wing media in particular such as newspapers, broadcasts and social media outlets like Twitter for dominating the discussion and framing the referendum in a particular way which led voters to believe that if the UK remained a member of the EU, the economy would get worse, immigration would increase, sovereignty would diminish, hence promoting the discussion that the UK needed to "take its country back". But can we attribute only these right-wing media outlets to create this narrative by themselves? Surely if the vote was such a close call, then the left-wing media played a role in expressing some

Eurosceptic frames in the run up to the 2016 UK referendum which may have led voters to ultimately lose trust in the European Union and want to leave.

Euroscepticism is not a new concept, as it can be traced back to the start of European integration (Helm, 2016; Elsas et. al, 2016) The term “Euroscepticism” along with its definition has continued to evolve in a large and somewhat complicated way, particularly as it becomes more present in mainstream society. It is hard to come to an exact definition of Euroscepticism as there are many changing elements and varying degrees, but it can generally be described as opposing some aspect of European integration (Leruth, Startin, Usherwood, 2017; Hooghe, Marks, 2007; Boomgaarden, et. al, 2011; De Vries, 2018; Mudde, 2012) to name a few key scholars who have discussed the subject). Perhaps most notably, Taggart (1998) has defined Euroscepticism as “the idea of contingent or qualified opposition to the process of European integration”, adding in varying levels of “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism depending on the amount of discontent or distrust one has with the EU (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002, 2008, 2018). ‘Hard’ Euroscepticism implies “outright rejection” of the European project which includes political and economic integration, particularly the current form of integration, while ‘soft’ Euroscepticism involves “contingent or qualified” opposition to European integration, which may take the form of ‘policy’ specific Euroscepticism or ‘national interest’ Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004). These definitions have been criticized for being “broad and unclear” by scholars, with Kopecky and Mudde (2002) referring to “soft Euroscepticism” as being “too inclusive”, noting that soft Eurosceptics may still have varying idea of integration and about what their desires for what they want the European Union to look like, which is important to delineate. While Eurosceptic attitudes are most often brought to the surface by challenger parties in various countries, these anti-European attitudes, which include both hard and soft Euroscepticism, have made their way to the other end of the spectrum and have become prevalent in far left-wing and even migrating to center-left parties as well, proving that Euroscepticism has become more mainstream and prominent in recent years (Brack, Startin, 2015; Meijers, 2017; Trieb, 2020). By having an explanation (admittedly, a broad explanation) of the conversations surrounding Euroscepticism, one can now have some more background knowledge when discussing Euroscepticism in terms of the 2016 UK referendum.

Euroscepticism has been present in the United Kingdom long before the Brexit referendum was called in 2016 by the prime minister at the time, David Cameron. Famously, Stephen George labeled the United Kingdom as an “awkward partner” of the EU since it joined the European

Economic Community in 1973 and the relationship between the two ultimately evolved to a breaking point just 43 years later. As time has evolved, Euroscepticism has gone from the “margins to the mainstream” with Startin (2015) arguing that a “tipping point” of Euroscepticism was reached in 2015 when it comes to Eurosceptic attitudes. He argues that due to factors such as the rise of UKIP (The UK Independence Party) and the growing hostility and doubts about the European Union, that citizens of the United Kingdom would soon be unable to weigh the benefits and cost of the UK’s membership to the European Union if asked to debate the future of the relationship between the two (Startin, 2015). Startin (2015) goes further in his argument to blame the influence of a particular subset of media, the tabloids, in the United Kingdom for the reason its citizens are unable to make rational and informed decisions about the future of the relation between their country and the European Union. Startin is not alone in their thinking as several other scholars have joined in on the discussion surrounding the role of the UK media to discuss the rise in Euroscepticism. For Young (1999) and Forster (2002), the rise in Euroscepticism in the UK has origins in the reporting which occurred specifically in the right-wing press. Daddow (2012) builds on this idea, saying the rise of Euroscepticism can be more specifically traced back to the influence of mogul Rupert Murdoch and his media company News UK, citing Murdoch’s desire for commercial gains and fear of possible anti-monopoly European competition policy as a potential reason for touting Eurosceptic headlines in the companies’ newspapers. Much like Euroscepticism seeping from the outskirts to the mainstream in political parties, this has also become the case with mainstream media outlets, both right-wing and left-wing forms of media displaying and discussing anti-European headlines in their respective formats. A particular subset of media outlets which have been especially ruthless in the publication of anti-European headlines in the UK were the popular tabloids, a popular newspaper which consist of usually loud and eye-catching headlines. These tabloids in the United Kingdom latched on to the Brexit campaign when it was announced in 2016 and created their own style of reporting, which scholars believed played a large role in influencing the outcome of the vote (Simpson and Startin, 2022; Foos and Bischof, 2021; Zappetini, 2019).

Euroscepticism and the role of the media in influencing public opinion as two separate schools of thought have merged together in the particular case of the 2016 Brexit referendum (Leconte, 2015; Bijsmans, 2017; Caiani and Guerra, 2017; Michailidou, 2018; Maccaferri, 2019; Kryzyzanowsk,2019; Bijsmans, 2021). These scholars believe that in this particular event, the media played a large role in helping the public decide if the United Kingdom was going to remain a member of the European Union, or be the first sovereign country to exit the political and

economic union. With the number of media outlets available at one's disposal, it would be impossible to ignore the impact that it could have on public opinion, and Brexit is not an outlier. The 2016 UK referendum has been used to understand the role of the media in influencing public opinion and setting the public agenda and has been studied in depth by scholars (Hinde 2017; Gavin 2018; Bijsmans, 2017; Foos and Bischof, 2021). Much of the literature which exists on this topic focuses on the impact of right-wing bias newspapers (Simpson and Startin 2022; Hinde 2017; Hawkings 2012; Forester 2002; Young 1999; Phillips, 2019) and the rhetoric used by the right-wing press to influence the public on certain topics, but very little literature exists on analyzing the left-wing bias newspapers and how the European Union was framed in the run-up to the Brexit referendum in this particular subset of media.

1.1 Research Question

With much discussion present in the literature observing the discourse and frames used in the right-wing press in the UK in the run-up to the 2016 UK referendum (Simpson and Startin 2022; Hinde 2017; Hawkings 2012; Forester 2002; Young 1999), the left-wing media is often left out of the conversation and forgot about, implying that the study of left-wing media sources is of little importance to this discussion. This thesis aims to fill the gap left by scholars and answer the following question: *How did left-leaning British newspapers frame the European Union and conversations surrounding the 2016 UK referendum in the lead up to the vote and to what extent do they differ from their right-wing counterparts?* The question here is two-fold: first, examining how the left-wing newspapers in the United Kingdom framed certain issues in regard to the Brexit referendum, and then second, comparing these discourses and discussions with their right-wing counterparts to determine any similarities, differences, or particularities in the relationship between the two. By asking this question, one can better understand the role in which the left-wing biased newspapers played in creating discourses, arguments, and narratives surrounding the 2016 Brexit referendum and further analyze the role of the press in influencing the vote. As previously mentioned, the existing literature heavily touches upon the right-wing media, particularly the tabloid press, but rarely discusses their left-wing counterparts. Based on the very small amount of literature that does briefly mention left-wing press, the left-wing press is described as being “reactive” to the right-wing press, taking the agency away from an entire group of media presenters (Hawkins, 2012, p. 573). This statement made by Hawkins was created after the negotiations of the Lisbon Treaty, and obviously much has changed in the past decade. This thesis will aim to dissect this discussion to determine if the right-wing media, particularly looking

at newspapers, both tabloid and broadsheet, are the agenda-setters or if the left-wing press were able to create and push their own agenda to the public effectively. By looking at three specific frames, or talking points and topics, used by the press in the run up to the Brexit referendum, this thesis can directly examine the differences in how each frame is discussed and presented depending on both the type of newspaper (quality vs. tabloid) as well as the political affiliation of each newspaper.

Scholars have continuously debated the relationship between the media and public opinion, drawing on the media's ability to set the agenda by determining which issues are more salient, and therefore continuously appear in the headlines (Boomgaarden, de Vreese, 2006; de Vreese, 2007; de Wilde et al. 2013; Leconte 2010). More specifically, the literature tells us that the *quality* newspapers often act as the agenda-setters for other media (Veltri, 2012), so one can assume that the discourses originate in the "quality" or "broadsheet" newspapers and the conversation is then continued on by the tabloids. However, this thesis will tell a different story in which the conversation does not only go from broadsheet and is then transferred to the tabloid, but rather is transferred by political party as well, from left-wing to right-wing and vice-versa. The aim of this thesis is not only to describe the differences in discourse used by the left-wing and right-wing press leading up to the Brexit referendum, but also to understand how the discourse was created by a variety of different factors, including the political ideology of the press, the differences between the newspapers in the United Kingdom, and perhaps most interesting, the relationship between the two sides and how they influenced each other and acted together rather than as two separate identities as they are often treated in existing literature.

The thesis will proceed as follows. First, in section 1, an overview of the existing literature will discuss the main schools of thought present in this thesis to give the reader a deeper understanding of what work and conversations exists on the subject as well as what topics scholars have yet to touch upon. The review will also aid in setting this piece of work within the broader conversation of the media's role in spreading and influencing Euroscepticism, particularly in the United Kingdom and explain how Eurosceptic ideas are present not only in right-wing tabloids, but also broadsheets on both sides of the political spectrum in the UK. The next section, section 2, will set out the methodology process as well as the research design of this thesis, explaining which newspapers will be analyzed and for what reason to be able to conduct qualitative analysis for the research method. The following section, section 3 will present the research findings which will illustrate the differences between the discourse created by left-wing

and right-wing newspapers regarding three frames used during the 2016 Brexit campaign: economic factors/side effects, immigration, and sovereignty. Finally, in section 4, a more in-depth discussion and analysis of the research findings will provide further discussion surrounding the topic as well as an answer to the research question as stated above.

2. Literature Review

The following section of this thesis will discuss the existing literature with the intent to dissect the theories and discussions already present in the schools of literature surrounding the media's role in politics, as well as how media has contributed and potentially enhanced Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom leading up to the 2016 UK referendum. First, a discussion of literature surrounding how the media plays a role in politics and public opinion is needed to understand how the general public is able to be influenced by the media. As already mentioned in the introduction, the media played a large role in the 2016 UK referendum, so having a background knowledge of how the media has played a role in forming public opinion is important to be able to understand the broader theory used by scholars. Second, for this thesis, background knowledge and understanding of the United Kingdom's relationship with the EU and the Euroscepticism present in the UK media is crucial as well. The history of the United Kingdom and its relationship with the European Union is one that is very unique to other European Union member states, and the media and the press play a large role in that relationship. To come to a better understanding of how Brexit came to fruition, it is important to dissect the Euroscepticism which is present in the UK media. Euroscepticism in the media was present long before the Brexit referendum was announced, and by having a background understanding of the previous Eurosceptic discussions in the UK media, one can understand how the media has previously played a large role in influencing public opinion, which in the case of the United Kingdom, has been inherently Eurosceptic.

2.1 Media's Role in Politics and Public Opinion

First and foremost, it is important to discuss the overarching theme and discussion of the role of the media in politics and public opinion, as it is crucial to understand before further discussing the role of the press in the 2016 UK referendum. As the media continues to become an integral part of one's daily life more and more by the minute, it is important to discuss its role in and the influence it has on politics. One of the most notable functions of the media's influence in politics has been explained by Cohen (1963) who noted that the press "may not be successful much of the

time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*”, meaning that the media is able to influence how citizens think about a particular topic or debate. Continuing on this discussion, there is a great deal of literature which exists on the influence of the media on the average citizen, and it is commonly agreed in political communication that the media matters and plays a crucial role in the democratic process, and therefore affects citizen’s attitudes towards certain policies (Boomgaarden, de Vreese, 2006; de Vreese, 2007; de Wilde et al. 2013; Leconte 2010). Dating back to at least the 17th century, theorists have assigned this important role to the mass media, in particular the press, including newspapers, radio broadcast, television news shows, and recently social media in informing, enlightening, and educating citizens (Holmes, 1991). However, going a step further in this discussion, the specific *type, tone, and topic* of news stories which these different media sources create and publish have large influence as well. The media is able to influence public opinion by politicizing issues and making certain issues more salient than others by keeping them in the headlines and suggesting what readers and listeners should think about these specific issues (Lukes, 1974), meaning they are able to pick and choose what they produce. This discussion warrants a mention of agenda-setting theory, which explains that since much of the public’s knowledge and information about public affairs is mediated or shown through a specific lens, rather than direct, people’s opinions about political issues may be substantially shaped by the selection and presentation of information (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In this case, the specific lens one views a political issue could be a bias or unbiased news source. McCombs and Chyi (2004) argued that ‘cues repeated day after day effectively communicate the importance of each topic.’, meaning that the more a topic is highlighted and discussed in the media, the more attention it receives from the public, and the more that position or cue influences the public’s view on a certain issue. In short, agenda-setting theory explains that elements that are prominent on the *media* agenda, both ‘objects’ and their ‘attributes,’ become prominent on the *public* agenda (Dursun-Ozkanca 2011).

When it comes to discussion of the European Union in the media, scholars argue that the role of media is not only present and legitimate, but it is *fundamental* in shaping perceptions and development of European Union legitimacy in citizens, saying the media is what drives the political reactions and “any measures which support it” (Michailidou, Trenz, de Wilde, 2014), However, this argument takes any agency out of politicians and their role in producing opinions and ideas about politics. With this argument, the role of public figures and politicians has also been questioned by scholars, asking if politicians still steer public opinion on the European Union,

or has the role of online news media become so inflated that their influence matters very little? (Michailidou, Trenz, 2015; Schröder, Phillips, 2007). Building on the discussion of the relationship between politicians, public opinion, and the media, Newton (2006) argues that it is not entirely possible, nor is it inherently important, to delineate whether media coverage of a particular topic is considered a *cause* of public opinion with the media leading the public or a *consequence* with the public leading the media. However, with this being said, it is crucial to not ignore the relationship between the two. What is important however is that all political actors understand that the media is able to determine the topics and stories (and therefore political issues) given to them, and then the public is able to decide what they believe is the priority, so it is important for politicians to not ignore the influence of the media. Public debates and discussions which are represented in the media play an important role as a source of information for citizens, Bijmans (2017) argues, explaining that the media shapes these debates through their selection of reporting topics and contributions using outlets such as editorials (also, see Gaplin and Trenz, 2017). In the particular debate about membership of the European Union, the media plays a significant role in informing not only the public, but also politicians and policymakers, about the choices which need to be made and the consequences of said choices (Copeland and Copsey, 2017). Referring back to Newton's (2006) argument, Copeland and Copsey (2017) here argue that the media coverage is the cause of public opinion rather than the consequence and include politicians more in this argument.

Building on this idea further, each media source (news broadcast, newspaper, tabloid, podcast, television news show) has the ability to report the information they receive in the way they see fit, and with this comes the challenge of news sources reporting the same story in a different way depending on any bias the particular media outlet may or may not have. Combining this idea with the previous discussion of agenda setting theory and the media acting as an agenda-setter for public opinion, Wilde et al. (2013) discuss that the media acts as a "secondary definer" of current events, an interesting term because it explains the role of media as one that regurgitates information and gives this information to the public in different ways. As the media acts as a second definer, they have the ability to frame the debates in whichever way they desire, which is usually in a way which will appeal to their target audience, whether that be readers on the far-right, center, or far-left of the political spectrum. Two media sources on different sides of the political spectrum may receive the same information about a topic yet report it in dramatically different ways depending on the audience they cater to. For this reason, it is important to not only study one side of the political spectrum when it comes to the role of media shaping public opinion,

but rather to look at many different interpretations of the same story and how it is portrayed to various audiences. It is this particular subject that this thesis will add to by dissecting how different media outlets, in particular how politically opposed newspapers, are able to receive the same information, employ the same frames when discussing the 2016 UK referendum, yet produce such different narratives surrounding the same topic.

2.2 Euroscepticism in the UK media

As previously mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Euroscepticism is not a new concept and it has evolved into a subject that has become more mainstream and a larger part of today's society in Europe, consuming the media headlines and making its way into the minds of citizens, whether they identify on the right or left side of the political spectrum. The United Kingdom has experienced Euroscepticism becoming mainstream firsthand as the 2016 referendum resulted in the country being the first in history to exit the European Union since the Union was formed, declaring the ultimate form of Euroscepticism. As previously discussed, the knowledge of the relationship between media coverage and public opinion on EU political affairs has definitely gained traction over recent years (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Thiel, 2008; Michailidou, Trenz, 2015). Adding on to the above discussion surrounding the role of media and how it can influence public opinion, a critical conversation is needed for this thesis which centers around a particular country and its relationship with the European Union, and that is the United Kingdom. Coverage of the European Union has been described as being "dominated" by the Eurosceptic press, producing anti-European rhetoric and stories in many member states of the EU but particularly throughout much of the media produced in the United Kingdom (Cole, 2001; Anderson, 2004; Morgan, 2004; Firmstone, 2008). Daddow (2012, p. 1,219) argues that UK media coverage on the EU moved from 'permissive consensus to destructive dissent', with 'widespread acquiescence' to the European project present in many news outlets transforming into outright dissatisfaction and contention with the status quo of the United Kingdom remaining in the European Union. Daddow makes a powerful case that the UK media is characterized by 'vigorously partisan hostility bordering on a nationalist and in some arenas xenophobic approach to coverage of European affairs', marking the shift and explanation of a more vocal press (Daddow, 2012, p. 1,219). Many of the arguments put forward against the EU in the British newspapers focused on what Leconte (2010) has called political Euroscepticism, related to concerns about democracy and sovereignty in the UK even before the Brexit referendum was called by then prime minister David Cameron (see also, Bijsmans, 2017, 84). In fact, it has been

discussed that this negative reporting of the European Union and political Euroscepticism which occurs in the United Kingdom is more problematic than the reporting in the other EU member states due to the fact that the UK public is extremely ill-informed about developments in the EU (Hawkins, 2012, p. 562). Sharing this train of thought, Dursun-Ozkanca (2011) note that when looking at the press in the lead up to the 2016 UK referendum, it is important to highlight that the British press outlets, particularly the tabloids, tend to be more Eurosceptic when compared to media in other EU countries. Berry (2016) argues that by the time the 2016 referendum was even announced, the public had been “primed” by the media to be Eurosceptic and have doubts about remaining in the European Union. For this reason, it can be expected that the British public had their preconceived ideas and notions about the United Kingdom remaining or leaving the European Union and turned to the news outlets which produced the narrative that aligned with their beliefs.

As explained by Hinde (2017, p. 81), Britain, perhaps more than other countries located in the European Union, has a press which is politically engaged and particularly party biased or prejudiced. This political bias goes beyond the opinion pages which are, of course, inherently opinionated, and has seeped into front page reporting, where many newspapers no longer try to deny or hide their objectivity to a subject. Much of the literature tells the reader that the most “aggressive” press is on the right side of the political spectrum, and tend to be tabloid newspapers rather than broadsheets (Hinde, 2017; Hawkins 2012; Simpson and Startin 2022; Phillips, 2019). Hawkins (2012) identifies a British debate in which right wing press coverage of the EU reflects ‘themes of separation and threat’, where UK interests are ‘excluded or marginalized’ or ‘undermined by EU integration’ (p. 573). In the limited amount of literature which exists on the left-wing press in the UK, Hawkins (2012, p. 573) explains that the coverage tends to be more reactive, reacting to the agenda set by the Eurosceptic right-wing press rather than setting their own agenda.

In newspapers like *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, which are considered to cater to readers on the right side of the political spectrum, the reporting on Europe focuses particularly on interference in domestic sovereignty, and recently in the past 10 years ago, immigration. However, what is important to note about how these stories are reported is the tone in which they are presented to the public, with Hinde (2017) noting that the tone of the right-wing press is often “poisonous” and “vituperative”, with the content often being exaggerated profusely, so much so that the European Union set up a website with the sole purpose of debunking claims made by British press while the

UK was still a member of the Union (Euromyths). While these scholars give an in-depth understanding of the Euroscepticism present in the right-wing media, particularly the newspapers in the United Kingdom, what this discussion fails to address is how these same issues are discussed in the left-wing newspapers, if they are discussed at all. How does the other half report on these issues, particularly when it comes to Brexit?

2.3 Further Discussion

As shown in this literature review on the role of the media in politics as well as the history of Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom, there is a great deal of literature which exists on the media's role in the political arena. It is well debated, and evidence shows that what one consumes in the media ultimately has effects on what they believe and how they act politically, meaning that media has a strong influence on the agenda of the general public when it comes to politics. As shown, most literature about the role of media and Euroscepticism being present in the UK media tends to focus on the outlets with a right-leaning bias, which are media outlets which inherently tend to be anti-European or Eurosceptic, producing exaggerated and intense headlines in an attempt to grab readers attention. This thesis intends to fill the gap that is left by scholars in discussing how these topics are portrayed in the left-wing media outlets, particularly newspapers, both broadsheet and tabloid. The little mention of the left-wing press in the literature identifies them as continuing on from a narrative which has been set by the right-wing agenda, but is this the case with the 2016 UK referendum as well? With the poll of the 2016 referendum vote being so close, it would be naive to think that the left-wing press was completely left out of the conversation as scholars have implied by leaving this side out of the discussion. The following research will prove that the research surrounding the press, particularly newspapers, in the United Kingdom needs to be more nuanced than previous scholars have accounted for. The relationship between both sides of the political spectrum is something that needs to be studied more in depth to determine if the right-wing press is truly the agenda-setter for the left-wing press and how the discourses between the two differ as one would expect, or if they are more similar than one may think.

3. Methodology and Research Design

The next chapter will discuss the methodology and research design used for this thesis. For the particular research question asked, in order to assess the different frames in the left-wing and

right-wing press in the United Kingdom leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, a qualitative analysis will be used. More specifically, content analysis will be used to determine the differences, and what differences (if any) are present between the content of the most common frames, or in other words, the most common topics brought up when discussing Brexit. This method draws upon Harrison and Callan's research (2013, p. 25-26) which outlines that content analysis is 'appropriate for demonstrating how an issue gains traction in the media and to quantify bias in reporting in the press', which is of particular interest for this essay, as the political bias present in each newspaper could potentially determine how the newspaper discusses the particular frame. The qualitative analysis section will also draw upon Semetko and Valkenburg's research on inductive and deductive content analysis (2000, 94-95) which will be discussed later in this chapter to further justify the use of this method.

First, it is important to have an understanding of which media outlets were selected for this research will provide the reader with the reason for choosing the newspapers, and in particular the 5 newspapers used in this research, when there are several credible media sources available to examine. According to Copeland and Copsey (2017), 84 per cent of the UK population claim to have read at least one newspaper over the 12-month period leading up to the Brexit referendum, meaning that newspapers contributed to a large source of information for the average citizen. For this reason, one can assume that a majority of the British public read (either in its entirety, or simply the front page headlines of) a newspaper (broadsheet or tabloid) at some point in the runup to the Brexit vote in June of 2016. Based on what we know about the role of the media from the previous literature review, one can assume that the headlines or stories which were read had an effect on the public's perception of politics and helped form their opinions on the matter. Britain being a Western democracy and having what is known as a "free press", they are able to publish stories and articles which are inherently biased on the political spectrum (Cushing, et. al, 2016, p. 163). Influences such as ownership of the newspaper as well as political affiliations play a strong role in shaping how a story is told in different newspapers (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Cushing et. al, 2016, p. 163) For this thesis, a total of 5 newspapers from the United Kingdom were examined for research in order to cover multiple political biases: *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Times* were used to understand points of view from the right-wing media, while *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* were used to examine arguments from the left-wing media. These newspapers all have a history of producing more politically biased articles for their respective parties (Cushing, et. al, 2016; Simpson and Startin 2022) .According to YouGov (2023) these five newspapers were among the top 10 most popular newspapers in the United Kingdom, and they

each present various political biases to ensure the results of this research are not skewed too far to the right or left. While there are two tabloids being used to understand the right-wing media compared to only using one for the left-wing media, this is because *Daily Mirror* is considered to be one of the only popular far-left tabloids in the UK press (YouGov, 2017).

An additional and important note on the sources used in this research before going on to explain the methodology and research design is that it is helpful to note that there are distinct differences (in terms of quality, headlines, tone, etc.) between these newspapers in the United Kingdom more than their political affiliation. *The Times* (right-wing bias) and *The Guardian* (left-wing bias) are recognized as “quality” or “broadsheet” newspapers, meaning they often are considered to have longer stories and articles which are more complex, truthful, and unbiased (O’Conner, 2011). The research which will follow shows that this is not always the case and that these broadsheets *are* quite biased, catering to the readers on their respective side of the political spectrum and producing stories which do not attempt to hide their objectivity. In regards to “tabloids”, which are sometimes referred to as “popular” newspapers, Conboy (2004, p.47) notes that an important feature used in tabloids is that it “shifts the language from reporting to an engaged and often enraged personalization of the political sphere”, emphasizing the often dramatic tone that tabloids tend to use to grab readers attention. Alba-Juez (2017) mentions that tabloids are usually less serious and more subjective, using headlines which tend to cause a more emotional response and tend to be far more biased than their broadsheet counterparts. By using both formats rather than strictly tabloids or strictly broadsheets, one can understand the wider implications of both sides of the press and can account for a greater reach to the general public rather than focusing on one or the other. As a final note for these articles, it is worth mentioning that these articles were sourced from the online database and website of their respective news outlets. According to YouGov (2023), an average of 41% of Brits get their news from online news sources like *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*, while only an average of 16% of Brits get their news from national newspapers. As information continues to shift from printed to digital forms, broadsheets and tabloids have been able to not only retain their audience but also increase their reach when considering platforms like Google and Facebook, Zappotini (2020) argues. Continuing on, Zappotini mentions the important point that tabloids such as *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror* often provide all articles on their website free of charge, while quality newspapers such as *The Guardian* or *The Times* are usually only available through a paywall subscription. This is important to note because some readers may avoid reading the online broadsheet or “quality” newspapers due to the need to pay in order to view all articles, while many tabloid websites offer the entire media library for free. Knowing now

how these two formats of newspapers differ, a discussion about the methodology and research design will follow.

Even before the UK referendum of 2016 was announced, the press was still actively reporting on the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union and producing headlines which either supported or vetoed the future of the UK to remain in the Union. Similarly, after the votes were cast for the 2016 referendum, the press continued to discuss the future of the United Kingdom after leaving the European Union at great length. For this reason, it is important to set a timeline for which the articles were retrieved to ensure accurate reporting on the frames leading up to the vote in the referendum. February 20, 2016 was the date on which prime minister David Cameron announced that a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU would take place on June 23 of that same year. For this reason, the articles surveyed were taken from this time particular span: February 20, 2016 to June 23, 2016 in order to capture the discussions which took place during the campaign rather than before or after.

The methodology in this thesis uses a qualitative method, more specifically using content analysis of the headlines, titles of articles, as well as the content of the articles produced by the newspapers will be implemented to further examine the headlines, frames, and tactics used by both sides of the British press. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) describe two approaches for content analyzing frames in the news, which are *inductive* and *deductive* content analysis. The deductive approach involved predefining certain frames at the content analytic "variables" to assess and verify to what extent these frames occur in the news (p.94). Deductive is used rather than inductive because with deductive approach, it allows one to examine the frames *most present* in the news regarding a particular subject, and this thesis is not looking to explore all frames used in the British press. Deductive is better suited for this research rather than inductive, which looks to reveal an array of possible frames rather than targeting the specific ones intended to study (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, p.95). Also a particular note of interest and justification for this research method is provided in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) explanation of deductive content analysis, describing that deductive content analysis makes it easier to detect differences in framing between media (i.e., left-wing vs. right-wing, or tabloid vs. broadsheet newspapers) (p. 95).

4. Research Findings

The next section of this essay will go into the research findings after conducting the qualitative analysis, specifically by using deductive content analysis of the articles from the five surveyed newspapers. Based on a study completed by the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture at Loughborough University (CRCC, 2016), it highlighted that national press coverage during the referendum campaign was “highly polarized” with 82% of the press in favor of Brexit. While not surprising to many, the particular issues and frames present in the Brexit debate were extremely polarized when looking at the right-wing and left-wing press, up until the last days of the campaign. Issues were very polarized, as one would expect, between the two camps with Remain-side focused on the economy and pro-Leave still interested in the economy but more focused on issues of migration, sovereignty, and terrorism. For the sake of this research, and as being touched on in the literature review above, we can assume that those in favor of remaining in the European Union were more likely to read left-wing media sources, and those who wanted to leave the European Union were more likely to read right-wing media sources. Simpson and Startin (2022) add that one third of voters made up their mind on how they were going to vote in the final stages of the campaign, emphasizing the role of the polarized press on voters who may have struggled to come to a decision. This section will be separated into first an introduction of the main three frames or topics of conversation used by both sides of the press, explaining how and why the decision was made to choose these frames to analyze. Next, an in-depth analysis of the three frames will follow, dissecting headlines from both the right-wing and the left-wing newspapers to examine how the opposite sides described and argued the three frames in such different ways to one another. An appendix will follow this thesis to show all headlines researched, including the title, date, and publication in which they were printed. Appendix A shows articles produced by the left-wing newspapers, both tabloid and broadsheet and categorizes them by frame. Appendix B is formatted the exact same way, but with articles from the right-wing newspapers.

4.1 Qualitative Findings: Content Analysis

This short introduction section will discuss the qualitative analysis of the surveyed articles in order to further understand what differences exist between how issues were framed in left-wing and right-wing newspapers in the run up to the 2016 UK referendum. When examining the articles from all five newspapers, it became apparent that there are three main frames which were

the most present on both sides of the political spectrum: economic issues and consequences of remaining/leaving, the discussion of immigration, and the question of the United Kingdom's sovereignty were the three most common frames used by the press in order to influence their readers to vote one way or another. Levy, et. al (2016) found strong consistencies in the coverage of these three topics across the right-wing and left-wing press, but their research is more qualitative than quantitative, (see Bijsmans 2021, pg. 332), looking at the numbers of articles produced by newspapers in each of the respective frames rather than the content of the headlines and how they may differ between one another. Adding to this research, using content analysis, particularly, a deductive, analysis based on Semetko and Valkenburg's research (2002), the analysis will separate the articles into the main three frames present in the reporting of the Brexit referendum, and will proceed by discussing how right-wing and left-wing newspapers framed the same issue. In each section, a discussion about the similarities and differences will be discussed as well as examining the relationship between the two sides of the British press. Further conversation will follow in the final section of this essay.

4.2 Economic Frame

Economic factors and the potential economic side-effects of leaving the European Union was a frame which was presented heavily in both the right-wing (pro-Leave) and left-wing (pro-remain) articles of the British press, as well as being present in both broadsheets and tabloids. The topic of economics when it comes to Brexit ultimately stems from a critique of the economic failings of European integration, particularly the handling and aftermath of the Eurozone crisis (Taggart, Szczerbiak, 2018, p. 1204). This frame in particular is a good introduction in allowing one to understand how each side portrayed the issue in severely different contexts, while discussing the same topic. The majority of left-wing newspaper arguments which focused on the economy usually focused on the future and what the economy would look like if the United Kingdom was to leave the EU, emphasizing the potential negative side effects for leaving the European Union, a term some have coined as "Project Fear", which will be flushed out in this section. The word "potential" when discussing negative side effects is key here as the left-wing media focused on many hypotheticals for the future. In an attempt to defend the left-wing media, of course it is hard to fully predict what will happen when discussing unknown territory, but considering this was the argument that the left-wing press relied on to sell their position on the matter. For the broadsheets and tabloids who produced a more Eurosceptic and right-wing discourse, they of course focused on the downsides of the current form or status-quo of the economy, and how

leaving the European Union would benefit the citizens of the United Kingdom financially, as well as boost the economy for the entirety of the UK.

Hobolt (2016) mentions that the economy received more attention than any other frame in the first three weeks of the campaign, which the left-wing press saw as an opportunity to dominate the conversation in an attempt to sway voters into remaining in the European Union. Continuing on this statement, Ramsay and Moore (2017) mention that the left-wing press could be considered the agenda setter when it came to this particular frame as they set the agenda early on in the campaign, a juxtaposition to the argument put forward by Hawkings (2012) as previously mentioned. In terms of how the left framed the economic impacts of the UK leaving the European Union as somewhat of a scare tactic for readers, explaining potential avenues for the UK if they were to leave the EU, and ensured that none of them were good. As previously mentioned, this tactic was quickly labeled “Project Fear” by the right wing media, who accused the left-wing media of trying to scare voters with false narratives about the future, a statement which is almost as ironic as it sounds as will be discussed later. “*BREXIT WOULD COST BRITS £580 A YEAR AS PRICE OF FOOD, DRINK, PETROL, AND CLOTHING ROCKET*” (21 June, 2016) a *Daily Mirror* article reads, warning the public of the specific, yet potential, troubles ahead if they decide to leave the Union. This “Project Fear” was not only used by tabloids, but also by the broadsheets as well, again, juxtaposing the previous literature which describes the tabloids by being the ones to produce more dramatic headlines in comparison to broadsheet newspapers. *The Guardian* follows with an admittedly less intense, eye-catching, dramatic headline but emphasizes this “Project Fear” narrative while adding credibility by citing an international organization: “*IMF SAYS BREXIT COULD TRIGGER UK RECESSION*” (17 June, 2016). Another article published by *The Guardian* quotes “*BARACK OBAMA: BREXIT WOULD PUT UK AT THE BACK OF THE QUEUE FOR TRADE TALKS*” (22 April, 2016), in which United States president Barack Obama disputes an argument put forth by pro-Leave campaigners claiming that the UK would be able to negotiate a fresh trade deal with the US. This anxious tone that *The Guardian* uses is meant to give viewers an uneasy feeling about the future if the UK decides to leave the EU, emphasizing the *potential* economic consequences if they chose to leave, again, reverting back to the “Project Fear”. More articles are available in Appendix A, which can give the reader more information about the headlines used by the left-wing press in this particular frame.

What is important in the discussion surrounding many of these articles produced by the left-wing newspapers, is that they fail to promote the current situation, or the status-quo, instead they focus

on the negatives of what “potentially” or “could” happen if the UK leaves the European Union. This is apparent in both the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, is the fact that the articles struggled to promote the status-quo to the general public. Instead, resorting to “Project Fear” as previously mentioned, was one of the only points of the left-wing press that they had going for them to convince voters to remain in the EU in terms of the economic frame commonly used by the press. This is in line with what Galpin and Trenz (2017) discuss, which is that those who wanted to remain in the EU found it hard to “sell” the idea of remaining in the Union to those who were skeptical. Press on the left side of the argument chose instead to focus on the negative consequences of leaving the EU rather than the economic benefits of remaining in the Union, an important distinction which may have indeed cost them the vote. Based on the understanding and previous discussion of the role of the media and influencing public opinion, if the left-wing press was struggling to come to a coherent and appealing reason as to why the United Kingdom should remain in the European Union, the public who turn to the media for knowledge and information could have found themselves unable to fully support this reason simply based on the fact that the future “could” be worse, when on the other hand, the right-wing press may have slightly more convincing.

Speaking of the right-wing newspapers, a different tone in the headlines is clear to see and understand how they may have influenced voters to side with the Leave-camp when it came time to vote. “*BREXIT MAY IMPROVE PAY*” (3 March, 2016), an article from *The Times* reads, describing that leaving the European Union could lead to a pay rise for low-wage workers, a topic which appealed to many during the Brexit referendum. In another *The Times* article titled “*BRUSSELS BAD FOR BUSINESS, SAYS CLOSE ALLY IN SNUB TO CAMERON*” (5 March, 2016), A Tory peer of then prime minister David Cameron slammed the European Union for “adding to the costs” faced by businesses in the UK. However, the article does little to enforce how exactly the EU is bad for businesses in the United Kingdom, nor does it provide any information on how situations will improve if the UK decides to leave the EU. Instead, it discusses “Project Fear”, the tactic which was previously mentioned when discussing left-wing articles. *The Times* was seemingly the only right-wing newspaper to include headlines such as “*HOW THE EU OUTERES CAN DEFEAT PROJECT FEAR*” (1 March, 2016) and “*FEAR IS THE KEY TO WINNING BREXIT VOTES*” (15 March, 2015), discussing how the Eurosceptic and pro-Leave voters are able to use this left-wing discourse to their advantage.

When not discussing “Project Fear”, the right-wing press decided to focus on issues such as pension decreases and unemployment. However, what is interesting in the right-wing press is that in many of these headlines, they often combine frames, particularly combining the economic frame with the immigration frame rather than sticking with one or the other in hopes to boost their argument. “*EU MIGRANTS MORE LIKELY TO HAVE A JOB IN THE UK THAN BRITISH CITIZENS*” (7 June, 2016) a *Daily Mail* article reads, emphasizing the role in which they believe immigration has played for the British economy and emphasizing the negative of impact immigrants have on the economy. Zappettini (2019) notes and confirms with his research that the British tabloids were able to “re-contextualize” their arguments in order to fit their particular side of the story, which was the case for how the right-wing media approached the economic frame. More article titles and headlines are available in Appendix B, which can give the reader more information about the headlines used by the right-wing press in this particular frame.

One can see that the differences in the economic frame in the left-wing and right-wing press during the lead-up to the Brexit referendum are apparent in content, yet when one looks deeper into the relationship between the two sides, there is a stronger relationship than one might imagine. Ramsay and Moore’s (2017) discussion of the left-wing press being the “agenda-setter” for the frame of economics holds steady in this research, as much of the right-wing coverage of economic issues tended to focus on the rhetoric and discussion put forward by the left-wing press. However, for this particular topic, it highlights how the shift in reporting for the broadsheet newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Times*, which fall victim to producing loud, punchy headlines similarly to their tabloid peers.

4.3 Immigration Frame

Immigration was a particularly salient topic in both the left-wing and right-wing newspapers, but as one could expect based on the above explanation and analysis of the economic frame, the issues were portrayed very differently and with a different tone in order to appeal to their respective readers. Curtice (2018) discusses the fact that immigration was a key voter issue in the 2016 referendum, and that around 70 percent of those that voted Leave believed that net immigration to Britain would decline if the UK decided to leave the European Union (Simpson and Startin, 2022, p. 303). Immigration is a particularly interesting frame as it was one of the frames which was less present at the start of the campaign and gained traction to become one of the most divisive and prominent frames by the time it was time to vote. Based on the headlines of each

topic and the number of articles written on the topic of immigration as the referendum went on, it is clear that the media began to place more emphasis on the frame of immigration, and therefore affected the public's perception and changed their opinion from focusing on economics to focusing on immigration

Moore & Ramsey's (2017) media survey of the EU referendum campaign from 2017 concluded that the coverage of immigration more than tripled over the entire course of the campaign, making it the fastest rising issue during the referendum. This was applicable on both the pro-Leave and pro-Remain sides, but to what extent do the frames differ between the two sides? On the pro-Leave side, or right-wing press, the discussion on immigration was more prominent than that of the left-wing press as one can imagine, but contrary to what many scholars have said (Simpson and Startin, 2022; Gavin, 2018; Sogelola, 2018; Krzyzanowski, 2017), immigration was not a frame solely used by the right-wing press and the frame was frequently used in the left-wing newspapers as well.

As it has been highlighted most by scholars in the past, first a look at what has been written about how immigration was framed in the right-wing press. The frame of immigration was an extremely large part of the Leave campaign's argument in which the right-wing press emphasized the need for the United Kingdom to take control of its border with Europe. Nundochan (2018) notes that the right-wing press openly used language which racialized immigration and immigrants, particularly in a way which created differences between the "self" (in this case the British citizen) and the "other" (the European migrant). Building on this conversation, Hobolt (2016), notes that the divide between the "self" and "other" stems from a feeling of those who feel left behind by the forces of globalization as well as mass immigration due to education, location, and age and this is a large factor in the increase of Euroscepticism particularly in the United Kingdom (p.3) A particular article from *The Times* outwardly directly expresses this sentiment and contributes to the "us" vs. "them" narrative commonly produced by the right-wing press: "*WE FENCE OFF EUROPE AND THEY STILL COME*" (6 March, 2016). In an article produced by *The Sun* titled "*LET US IN: HUGE MOB OF 300 MIGRANTS STORM PORT IN CALAIS IN VIOLENT BID TO SMUGGLE THEMSELVES INTO THE UK*" (21 June, 2016) again, perpetrating the common narrative of "us" vs. "them". As previously mentioned in the discussion surrounding the economic frame used in the discussion about Brexit in the press, the right-wing press tended to combine economic frames with immigration frames, as shown in an article by *The Daily Mail* titled "*£17BN, THE TRUE COST OF IMMIGRATION TO THE UK EVERY YEAR*" (16 May, 2016). This

article discusses how migrants coming from Europe into the UK consume more in public services and benefits than they pay in taxes, with the intention of stirring up the common sentiment that immigrants are taking more from the country than those who were born there. The immigration frame was one that was used quite frequently by the right-wing press, dominating the headlines of the tabloids and broadsheets. Simpson and Startin (2022) discuss that the right-wing press used what they call a “bombardment approach” when it came to immigration, allowing this frame and narrative to take over the press and therefore the minds of citizens. The reader may refer to appendix B for more headlines produced by the right-wing press in the immigration frame.

What is particularly interesting, and inherently less studied, is how the immigration frame is deployed in the left-wing press, and how the left-wing press used this frame in an attempt to enhance their argument of remaining in the EU. Across some of the left-wing broadsheets and tabloids, the topic of immigration was treated as a way in which it would soothe the fears and concerns from the discourse produced by their right-wing counterparts, the opposite of the approach taken when discussing the economic frame. In an article from *The Mirror*, “*DON'T LET FEARS OF IMMIGRATION PUT BRITAIN'S SECURITY AT RISK*” (25 May, 2016), Former Home Secretary David Blunkett ensures that maintaining a relationship with the European Union will help maintain cooperation and control at the border and will aid in the “issue” of migration by doing so. However, as the campaign continued on, and the right-wing press began to dominate the immigration frame and the discourse surrounding immigration by instilling fear and outrage for the Leave crowd, the left-wing press shifted and adjusted their argument slightly. The right-wing sentiment of “us” vs. “them” continued to dominate the public sphere, and the left-wing press had to adjust their discourse in an attempt to gain control of the narrative that was quickly slipping from their fingers. Instead, *The Guardian*'s article “*BREXIT WOULD NOT MEAN A DROP IN IMMIGRATION, HILARY BENN SAYS*” (13 June, 2016) presents Brexit as an ineffective way of dealing with immigration, noting that leaving the EU would not help immigration. The article fails to mention how remaining in the EU would “fix” any problems with the immigration situation that many believed was occurring in the United Kingdom. Instead, the article goes on to discuss the benefits and “necessity” of immigration, which discusses migration as a positive thing which cannot be controlled. Obviously, this rhetoric is in direct contrast to the discussion produced by the right-wing press, and the article goes on to encourage the right-wing newspapers to “be more honest” and calling out voters who believe immigration will drop after the UK leaves the European Union will be “bitterly disappointed”. This is where the left-wing press abandoned their more defensive strategy and out-right challenged the need to reduce migration in the first place, an

interesting shift from their original position. While these headlines acknowledge the concern of migration in the European Union, the arguments put forth by the left-wing press still accept that migration is something that should be controlled, insinuating that something is wrong with the status-quo.

In terms of the immigration frame present in the Brexit debate in the press, once again, the left-wing press had to do more work to suggest and convince their readers why it may in fact be a positive thing to continue to bring immigration in, an argument not easily won considering Britain has a history of having hostile attitudes towards migrants (Tilford, 2015). What started as a discussion on how the EU and the UK would work together to mitigate illegal immigration soon turned into an argument which explained how immigration was actually beneficial to the UK, an argument which few voters seemed to buy. Their shift in argument stemmed from the fact that economic arguments for immigration are usually rare when compared to the argument which states that migration is an economic burden (Goodman, 2017, p. 49), and this research validates that. The common opposition to migration in the United Kingdom (Blinder, 2011; Somerville, et. al, 2010; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018; Tilford, 2016) could help in explaining the right-wing press focusing on the immigration frame more than the economic frame in the hopes of appealing to more voters and encouraging them to vote to leave the European Union. Once again, similarly to the previously discussed economic frame, the left-wing press struggled to make a positive case in voting in favor of the status quo, in this case how remaining in the European Union will assist in helping (what many perceive to be) an issue of migration.

What is particularly interesting and can help explain the way in which the left-wing newspapers acted is research from Van Dijk (1991, 1992) which highlights the way liberal and left-wing politicians share views about immigration with their conservative right-wing counterparts. Goodman (2017, p.49) notes that the claims that the left-wing press made are often defensive and highlight the fact that migration is a problem in the status quo of remaining in the European Union. Similarly, to the economic frame discussed in the previous section, this was simply not enough when it came to trying to create an argument for remaining in the European Union. Based on what we know about how the British population felt about immigration while being a member of the European Union (see Blinder, 2011; Somerville, et. al, 2010; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018; Tilford, 2016; Ashcroft, 2019), the discourse created by the left-wing press was not enough to convince skeptical voters.

4.4 Sovereignty Frame

The third and final frame which will be discussed and analyzed in this essay is the frame of sovereignty, or in other words, the “freedom” or “power” that the UK either had pre-Brexit or had to lose post-Brexit. Moore and Ramsay’s research (2017, p. 165) which has been previously mentioned, confirms that sovereignty was one of the three main frames present in the British press during the lead up to the 2016 UK referendum. Sovereignty has been a particularly salient topic in the United Kingdom and has been on the public agenda since before the 2016 referendum was announced. First, a note on the United Kingdom’s understanding and position on sovereignty before the articles are discussed. Due to the institutional and constitutional characteristics of the legal system in the United Kingdom, the concept of ‘sovereignty’ is quite complex when compared to other nations and sovereignty is what lies at the heart of British resistance to European integration, or in other words, Euroscepticism. (Nguyen-Duy, 2013, p. 80). British journalist A.V. Dicey has created a comprehensive definition of parliamentary sovereignty in the UK describing that Parliament has “the right to make or unmake any law whatever; and further, that no person or body is recognized by the law of England as having a right to override or set aside the legislation of Parliament” (Nguyen-Duy 2013, p. 82). There are varying levels of sovereignty as Nguyen-Duy (2013) adds, differentiating between national, parliamentary, and popular sovereignty. National sovereignty, or “national independence” (Nguyen-Duy, 2013, p. 81) is something that the British public often hold on to the tightest, as this is the particular subset of sovereignty that is challenged most when it comes to European integration due to the fact that members of the European Union must “share” or “pool” sovereignty in particular policy areas in order to achieve collective decisions and solve common issues. This became a particularly hot topic when discussing Brexit, and could be argued one of the leading arguments which led to the 2016 UK referendum in the first place (Gordon, 2016; Gee, 2016;;Menon and Wagner, 2022).

A common and frequently expressed theme under the frame of sovereignty was that those who wanted to leave the EU wanted to “get my/their/our country back” from Europe, a potent slogan and claim first used by Nigel Farage (BBC, 2015), former leader of UKIP. This topic became a strong talking point for those who were in favor of leaving the European Union in 2016 and as the campaign intensified, the phrase became increasingly popular in the right-wing press and those who wanted to leave the EU. In an article from *The Sun* titled “*OUT AND PROUD: IT’S TIME TO BREAK FREE FROM THE EU AND TAKE BACK CONTROL OF OUR LIVES*” (9 June, 2016), former MP John Mann, (who happens to be from the Labour party) said that the UK has had their

“arms tied behind their backs by the European Union”, emphasizing that Brussels is controlling the UK population from a distance and therefore threatening the national sovereignty that the British hold so close to their hearts. In an article from *The Daily Mail*, “*DEFENCE MINISTER SAYS WE MUST QUIT EU TO PROTECT OUR FREEDOM*” (24 March, 2016) citing the notion that it would free the United Kingdom from the European free movement rules and increase security. This emphasizes the next point which is that similarly to the frames above, the right-wing press combined the frame of sovereignty in order to boost their argument. The right-wing press seemed to combine the two frames of immigration and sovereignty quite frequently, highlighting the fact that immigration was truly their number one priority and frame to use while covering Brexit. In an article from *The Sun* titled “*TAKE BACK CONTROL: WHAT WILL BREXIT MEAN FOR MIGRATION*” (21 June, 2016), Robert Fisk describes a new “points system” for migrants coming into the UK, where they will be “judged” based on the skills they bring rather than where they come from and that a “crackdown on migrants” will dissuade those from coming. This would give the UK back the control to decide who comes into the country, rather than allowing the European Union to have that power for them. More article headlines and titles highlighting the sovereignty frame are available in Appendix B.

When examining the left-wing press and how they portrayed the frame of sovereignty, one can see that the right-wing newspapers used this frame far more than their left-wing counterparts, similarly to the fact that the situation was reversed when discussing the economic frame, as the left-wing newspapers took control of the narrative early (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 116; Aslan, Levy, & Bironzo, 2016, p. 20). A particular article published by *The Guardian* titled “*THE BREXIT CAMPAIGN IS WRONG: THE UK IS A SOVEREIGN NATION*” (26 February, 2016) responding directly to claims by the other side in a way to further their argument. The author of the article goes on to explain how leaving the European Union would actually end up less sovereign than they are now, and explains that a sovereign nation knows “that to share what it has in order to get more can be not an act of weakness - but of strength”. “*I WANT MY COUNTRY BACK FROM THE LIARS WHO ARE FANATICAL ABOUT TRYING TO DRAG US OUT OF EUROPE*” (19 June, 2016) a *Daily Mirror* article reads, challenging the narrative that the issues in which the right-wing press exaggerate are issues created in the UK, rather than in Brussels. The article also claims that even conducting a referendum in the first place is enough to prove that the United Kingdom is already a sovereign nation. The argument and discussion that the left-wing press puts forward is one that described the United Kingdom as a nation that is already sovereign, once again

discrediting that Brexit is needed to acquire it. Further mention of headlines present in the left-wing newspapers surrounding this frame are available in Appendix A.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As Keaveny (2016) explains, ‘press releases cannot win or lose an election. What they can do however is increase or shape media coverage, and therefore public perception.’ This sentence perfectly explains the media’s role in the months leading up to Brexit and how the left-wing and right-wing press were able to influence (or not influence) voters. In 2016, Brexit symbolized one of the largest shake-ups of the British political system since it joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Since the UK joined the EEC, Euroscepticism has been prevalent in many facets of society, with the media having a large role in producing, maintaining, and enforcing Eurosceptic attitudes among citizens. As discussed in great length throughout this thesis, the tabloid newspapers throughout the UK have notoriously portrayed the EU in harsh negative terms. The (in)famous headline “*UP YOURS DELORS*” published by *The Sun* (1990) targeting the then European Commission president Jacque Delors was just a drop in the bucket for the Eurosceptic headlines which have been produced throughout history in the United Kingdom. These headlines have become reference points for Euroscepticism in Britain, and the Eurosceptic press believed it was their time to shine when the 2016 UK referendum was announced. Even almost seven years later, the Brexit referendum, as well as the Brexit settlement which came after, has continued to dominate the press in both the left-wing and the right-wing newspapers. There is no doubt that Britain has a highly partisan press, (Anderson, 2004; Morgan, 2004; Firmstone, 2008), and the research provided in this thesis confirms that by explaining the three main frames of the Brexit referendum and how they were portrayed in similar and different ways by not only the right-wing press, but the often less researched left-wing press as well.

At the beginning of the referendum, the economy, immigration, and the topic of British sovereignty became apparent as the three main talking points of Brexit and discussions of these frames quickly became political battlegrounds as the discussion went back and forth between leaving and remaining in the European Union. As previously noted in the research findings, the way in which the two parties framed the topics differed slightly, but not to the extent one might think based on the existing research of the left-wing press in the lead up to the Brexit referendum. By examining the differences in the three most present frames of the Brexit debate, we can return to the original research question asked at the beginning of this piece. *How did left-leaning British*

newspapers frame the European Union and conversations surrounding the 2016 UK referendum in the lead up to the vote and to what extent do they differ from their right-wing counterparts?

By breaking down each frame and examining the discourse presented in both the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers on both sides of the political spectrum, one is able to see the differences, yet sometimes, unusual similarities used by the two parties in order to appeal to their viewers and attempt to sway their readers one way or the other. In addition, and of particular interest, is how the two sides interact with one another in forming and defending their arguments, sometimes using the press as a dialogue between the two parties to combat narratives from the other.

The research provided in this thesis proves that the interpretation of the relationship between the left-wing and right-wing media needs to be more nuanced than the existing literature provides, and shows the limitation of engaging with both sides of the political spectrum separately, rather than as a cohesive unit. To further answer the question posed in this thesis, there are inherent similarities and differences in how the left-wing newspapers framed the European Union when compared to their right-wing counterparts in the run up to the 2016 UK referendum. The right-wing press put forward an aggressive narrative, particularly surrounding the frames of immigration and sovereignty which forced the left-wing press to shift their discussions in a way to combat these arguments and assure the public that these statements weren't accurate. While one would expect the left-wing news media to create a positive view on why the UK should remain in the European Union, the conversation was surrounded by a more negative discourse, particularly focusing on the warnings of economic turmoil as their main argument to voters. The left-wing newspapers were also guilty of creating their case for remaining by going after arguments produced by the right-wing media, rather than creating strong, tangible evidence for voters to understand why they should have voted Remain. By the left-wing engaging more with the right-wing discourse, this shifted the entire newspaper media bias towards the right-wing messages, which means the arguments that the right-wing newspapers put forward were the ones that were the most amplified to the public. This can be explained by the left-wing press using "cold" or less appealing arguments as Zappetini (2019) in an attempt to compete with the right-wing press.

In both the left-wing and the right-wing press, a common theme of British 'exceptionalism' remained prominent throughout many of the frames, yet both sides used different arguments to justify this. The right-wing press emphasized this nationalism by wanting the 'take back control' of their country from migrants coming in from Europe, while the left-wing press spun this narrative as a way to maintain the relationship with the European Union with the intention of cooperating

more closely on certain policy areas (such as immigration) in order to better the lives of British citizens. For many who read the right-wing newspapers more frequently in the United Kingdom, and who more likely voted to leave, the European Union became a representation of all that was wrong with their country and lives (Hinde, 2017, p.81) *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Times* reflected and amplified these discontents, while *The Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian* addressed them, but ultimately failed to create a compelling argument of maintaining the status-quo.

When looking at the results of the referendum and diving a bit deeper into the effects of the media and how they influenced readers, there is potentially more room for more research which this thesis did not touch upon. According to Simpson and Startin (2022), frequent readers of *The Daily Mirror* (the only left-wing tabloid discussed in this thesis) were evenly split when it came to how they intended to vote. (50.7% remain, 49.3% leave). Considering the “cold” or by the end of the referendum, lukewarm support the *Daily Mail* showed for the status-quo of remaining in the United Kingdom, compared to the ‘bombardment approach’ of the right-wing tabloids and broadsheets, this is not that big of a surprise. Referring back to the specific frames examined in this thesis, a specific topic that the left-wing newspapers clung to at the beginning of the referendum campaign is that there would be severe economic repercussions if the United Kingdom was to exit the EU. This became the left-wing press’ main argument in the lead up to the vote, and this fear of an economic recession or depression was what they clung to in hopes of deterring voters from wanting to leave the European Union. However, a crucial component to the argument set out by the left-wing tabloids and broadsheets is that they failed to sell the status-quo; there was hardly any mention of how the European Union was good for the economy, instead focusing on how leaving the European Union would be a disaster. If the left-wing press had the habit of focusing on the future rather than the present, and any exaggeration that came with that discussion, the split may have been more in the left-wing press’ favor and could have majorly impacted the Brexit vote. In line with previous discussions from scholars, the left-wing press was far less negative about the status quo than the left-wing press, particularly when it comes to the immigration and sovereignty frames. (Firmstone, 2016; Levy et al, 2016; Moore & Ramsay, 2017)

While examining the arguments put forth by the left-wing press, we can see that both the tabloids and broadsheet produce a less uniform account of the EU than one could expect (Hawkins, 2012), and this can be attributed to the influence of the right-wing, and in this case Eurosceptic discourse present in the right-wing tabloids and broadsheets. As discussed earlier, broadsheets and tabloids are usually separated when discussing media’s influence, with more emphasis put on tabloids, but

in this case, it is important to look at tabloids as well as broadsheets to understand the reach and influence they both have. To O’Conner’s (2011) and Alba-Juez’s (2017) point of objectivity for “quality” or “broadsheet” newspapers, we can also come to the conclusion that this was not applicable in examining the discussion surrounding the Brexit referendum. Both *The Times* and *The Guardian* exhibited objectivity and bias when reporting on all the three frames, ensuring that they were on the same playing field as the popular tabloids and giving into the more dramatic and eye-catching headlines in order to stir emotion and gain traction in the press. Left-wing *Daily Mirror* along with and the *Guardian* became more partisan in their reporting of the EU referendum. This conclusion is very much in sync with Foo’s & Bischof’s (2022) assertion that tabloid media outlets can be particularly influential if they decide to take a stance on politics because readers are likely to select into consumption for entertainment purposes.

When comparing the overall tone of the messages adopted for both the left-wing and the right-wing press, it is clear to tell that a negative tone was used on both sides of the press. The tone of the messages which were adopted throughout the campaign were frequently quite negative on both sides with the left-wing press being extremely negative about the future, while they struggled to paint a nice picture of what was currently working for the United Kingdom and the European Union and what they were trying to maintain. The tone of the right-wing newspapers was arguably worse and more negative; however, they were able to tell the public what was wrong with the current form of society and how Brexit would change that, which one can argue was a more effective strategy to appeal to voters worries about the future.

Continuing on in this conclusion, is important to note any limitations to this research, as well as provide opportunities for further research on this particular topic so that others may add to the conversation. The first limitation was that not all newspapers in the United Kingdom were sampled for this research, as it was limited to 5. While they are considered 5 of the top newspapers, larger research would lend the ability to discover more articles and how they framed the particular issues. A second potential limitation to this analysis is that with the use of a digital archive, it is difficult to determine which articles were on the front page of the newspaper, a factor that could contribute to ensuring that one topic is perceived as more important than others. Also, for more in-depth analysis, one could look even closer into one frame, assessing the tone and particularities within that frame rather than focusing on all three, as well as looking at the left-wing press in other countries in Europe and how they decided to frame the Brexit referendum from the other side of the English Channel. The left-wing press is often the forgotten child when it

comes to researching the way in which discourse, as the right-wing tends to take over control (much like it does in the press itself), but by providing this nuanced approach to examining both sides of the press, it is apparent that there is indeed more to the relationship between the two than one may think.

Appendix A: Articles Produced by Left Wing Media

Articles from *The Daily Mirror* surrounding the frame of **economics**:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| “Brexit ‘would cost Brits £580 a year as price of food, drink, petrol and clothing rocket” | 21 June 2016 |
| “IMF chief warns Brexit impact on UK would range from 'pretty bad to very, very bad” | 13 May 2016 |
| “David Cameron claims Brexit will add £220 to your family shopping every year” | 22 May 2016 |
| “David Cameron claims Brexit will ‘put a bomb under our economy’ | 6 June 2016 |
| “After Brexit, Boris Johnson the PM would axe public services and ramp up taxes” | 10 June 2016 |
| “EU referendum Leave campaigners dishonestly shifting the blame for problems of their own making” (also touches on immigration) | 12 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Daily Mirror* surrounding the frame of **sovereignty**:

| | |
|---|------------------|
| “Britains relationship with Europe has always been complicated, but Brexit could set us back 2,000 years” | 20 February 2016 |
| “A Vote for Brexit is a vote for life - and if you’re in doubt, don’t vote out” | 18 June 2016 |
| “EU referendum Leave campaigners dishonestly shifting the blame for problems of their own making” | 12 June 2016 |
| “Remain referendum campaigners strip virtually naked to ‘expose the effects’ of UK leaving EU” | 19 June 2016 |
| “I want my country back from the liars who are fanatical about trying to drag us out of Europe” | 20 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Daily Mirror* surrounding the frame of **immigration**:

| | |
|--|--------------|
| “Britain would have to accept MORE migrants if we made Norway style treaty after exit” | 11 June 2016 |
| “Don’t let fear of immigration put Britains security at risk in EU referendum” | 25 May 2016 |
| “Want an idea of what Brexit would be like? Just Look at Norway” | 16 May 2016 |

| | |
|--|--------------|
| “Leaving the EU would endanger our economy, our security and Britain’s influence in the world” | 21 June 2016 |
| “Nearly 500,000 refugees and their kids could flock to Britain from EU by 202” | 31 May 2016 |

Articles from *The Guardian* surrounding the frame of **economics**:

| | |
|---|---------------|
| “IMF says Brexit would trigger UK recession” | 18 June 2016 |
| “Barack Obama: Brexit would put UK ‘back of the queue’ for trade talks” | 22 April 2016 |
| “What happens next if Britain votes to leave the EU?” | 31 May 2016 |
| “EU migrants have no negative effect on wages, says LSE” | 11 May 2016 |
| “Brexit could spread shockwaves through global economy, says OECD” | 1 June 2016 |
| “George Osborne: Brexit would leave UK ‘permanently poorer” | 18 April 2016 |
| “Leave or Remain? The impact Brexit would have on UK jobs” | 20 June 2016 |
| “No single market access for UK after Brexit, Wolfgang Schauble says” | 10 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Guardian* surrounding the frame of **immigration**:

| | |
|--|---------------|
| “Brexit is only way to control immigration, campaigners claim” | 25 April 2016 |
| “The refugee problem is a problem of poverty, not just migration” | 20 June 2016 |
| “Gove: EU immigrant influx will make NHS unsustainable by 2030” | 20 May 2016 |
| “ <i>Sun</i> and <i>Mail</i> ignore the economy to push migration message on Brexit” | 21 June 2016 |
| “Brexit would not mean big drop in immigration, Hilary Benn says” | 13 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Guardian* surrounding the frame of **sovereignty**:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| “The Brexit campaign is wrong: the UK is already a sovereign nation” | 26 Feb 2016 |
| “Sovereignty, autonomy, and Britain’s relationship with Europe | 24 Feb 2016 |
| “The European Union is the worst choice - apart from the alternative” | 15 June 2016 |
| “UK Sovereignty can be both lost and gained” | 29 Feb 2016 |

Appendix B: Articles Produced by Right Wing Media

Articles from *The Daily Mail* surrounding the frame of **economics**:

| | |
|--|---------------|
| “EU migrants are MORE likely to have a job in the UK than British citizens | 7 June 2016 |
| “£17bn, the true cost of immigration to the UK every year” (also immigration) | 17 May 2016 |
| “Brexit means cheaper energy bills for the poor claims Boris Johnson as he slams ‘unfair and damaging’ EU rules on VAT | 31 May 2016 |
| “Brussels diktats ‘costing families £4,600 a year’ | 28 April 2016 |
| “The public is seeing through Project Fear” | 4 April 2016 |

Articles from *The Daily Mail* surrounding the frame of **sovereignty**:

| | |
|--|---------------|
| “Defence Minister says we must quit the EU to protect our ‘freedom’: | 24 March 2016 |
|--|---------------|

Articles from *The Daily Mail* surrounding the frame of **immigration**:

| | |
|---|------------------|
| “‘Staggering’ number of European jihadis: EU’s own border agency admits terrorists are exploiting refugee crisis and lax controls - but he has no idea how many illegal immigrants there are” | 5 April 2016 |
| “Former Labour foreign secretary Lord Owen says the UK should leave EU because its ‘dangerous for British security’” | 25 February 2016 |
| “EU expansion will open our borders to 88 million from Europe’s poorest countries” | 30 April 2016 |
| “Refugees try to sneak into Britain at a rate of one every six minutes” | 10 June 2016 |
| “David Cameron knew 4 years ago he would never meet immigration target while inside the EU” | 21 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Times* surrounding the frame of **economics**:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| “Brexit may improve pay, peer admits” | 3 March 2016 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|

| | |
|--|---------------|
| “Brussels bad for business” | 5 March 2016 |
| “How the EU outers can defeat Project Fear | 21 Feb 2016 |
| “Fear is the key to winning Brexit votes” | 15 March 2016 |

Articles from *The Times* surrounding the frame of **immigration**:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| “We fence off Europe and still they come” | 6 March 2016 |
| “We would have to work with Europe on migrants even outside the EU, says Cameron” | 7 March 2016 |
| “Desperate migrants storm the frontiers of fortress Europe” | 1 March 2016 |

Articles from *The Sun* surrounding the frame of **immigration**:

| | |
|--|--------------|
| “Huge mob of 300 migrants storm port in Calais in violent bid to smuggle their way into UK” | 21 June 2016 |
| “What will Brexit mean for migration” (also touches on economic frame) | 21 June 2016 |
| “4 in 5 jobs went to foreigners last year as number of EU workers double” (also touches on economic frame) | 18 May 2016 |
| “Panicky Remainers pretend Cameron’s benefits tweaks will solve immigration problem” | 15 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Sun* surrounding the frame of **sovereignty**:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| “It’s time to break free from the EU and take back control of our lives” | 9 June 2016 |
| “Brexit is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to escape a burning building, we should take it” | 13 June 2016 |
| “Voting Remain is a greater leap into the unknown than freeing ourselves from EU tyranny” | 3 June 2016 |

Articles from *The Sun* surrounding the frame of **economics**:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| “Michael Gove vows to spend £100m-a-week extra on the NHS is Britain decides to leave the EU” | 3 June 2016 |
| “Open-door EU immigration knocks 10% off UK wages” | 8 June 2016 |
| “Why are the British people paying millions of pounds from the public purse for Turkey to join the EU?” | 21 June 2016 |

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