

January 2019

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Recommended Citation

Reminiskey, Edward (2019) "Hyperdemocracy: Euroscepticism and Elections in the United Kingdom," *History in the Making*: Vol. 12 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol12/iss1/13>

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History in the Making

Hyperdemocracy: Euroscepticism and Elections in the United Kingdom

By Edward Reminiskey

Abstract: In the early hours of June 24th, 2016, the results of a referendum asking the United Kingdom to determine its membership status in the European Union were made official. Decided by a slim majority, the decision was made by the electorate to leave the European Union. To characterize this moment as being uncertain would be an understatement. It stood as a major turning point in twenty-first century politics, and presents an opportunity to explore the recent phenomenon affecting liberal democracy. "Brexit," as it would be referred to, instigated scholars to ask important questions about the contemporary state of liberal democracy. What happens when a liberal democracy undermines itself? How can scholars characterize the latest trends in liberal democracy? This paper attempts to answer these types of questions by viewing recent developments in the United Kingdom, utilizing the lens of hyperdemocracy theory, and applying it to elections and political media analysis.

Initial scholarly work done on hyperdemocracy is significant, but application of such an underdeveloped theory requires additional discussion. In continuing that discussion, this paper will review the precise definition of hyperdemocracy and demonstrate how it is applicable to a specific event like the Brexit referendum. The

reason hyperdemocracy can be used to analyze Brexit, has much to do with the politics leading to the 2016 vote. While the politics are important, this paper additionally focuses on the behavior of the traditional media in the referendum campaign, supporting the main argument that hyperdemocracy was encouraged by the traditional media. Instead of turning to traditional media, the British people took advantage of the social media phenomenon, an imperative of hyperdemocracy and the information age.

Hyperdemocracy

The term hyperdemocracy has appeared in the lexicon of political science at various instances. In *Hyperdemocracy*, written by political theorist Stephen Welch, he discusses in his prelude that the term hyperdemocracy has only been used in specific frameworks, or has been tossed around without much care on the internet.¹ Most notably, the term was used by Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in his book, *Revolt of the Masses*, to describe a state where the “masses” obtain political power by undermining the rule of law and exerting its will through “material pressure.” Welch and his seemingly overlooked body of work, offers an important discussion on the political-theoretical definition of hyperdemocracy that transcends many preceding explanations.²

As the prefix would suggest, a literal definition of hyperdemocracy may cause one to assume that it is simply an excess of democratic zeal. Welch contends that while being important in medical terminology, hyper- cannot be applied in an explanation of democracy.³ Welch argues that democracy cannot

¹ Stephen Welch, *Hyperdemocracy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 1.

² I came across this theory in my research endeavors. I was trying to articulate a term to describe the state of politics that preceded Brexit. With accurate precision, Welch theorizes the conditions that arguably made Brexit, as well as other seismic events like the Trump presidency, possible. His conclusions from the time *Hyperdemocracy* was published coincidentally aligned with my preconceived thoughts on what is being discussed here and in my other research.

³ Welch, *Hyperdemocracy*, 2.

be *precisely* measured in terms of numerical value or quantity. For example, doctors can measure the severity of hyperthermia by taking a patient's temperature. However, a doctor cannot use those numbers alone to diagnose; further examination of reliable symptomatic indicators is needed to treat the patient.

Hyperdemocracy, as a theoretical framework, uses this kind of qualitative and theoretical analysis; it looks at the symptoms beyond the numbers. It is important to note that this is not to dismiss the quantitative work of political scientists. However, for the purposes of this paper, hyperdemocracy as a theory is being used to historically analyze a specific moment in British politics.

Welch ultimately concludes that the best definition of hyperdemocracy can simply be described as the *intensification* of democracy.⁴ But what does this intensification *mean*? The kind of pluralism that should exist in a healthy democratic system bleeds uncontrollably into all levels of society, from the actual political arena into the media, workplace, schools, families, and so on. Welch makes the important statement that the "constitutive" elements that make up democracy are democratized themselves.⁵ Thus, there is an undermining effect, where the intensification of democracy makes democracy a less viable system of governance.

There is much to add to Welch's theory. Borrowing from another hyper-ism prominent in social and cultural criticism, hyperdemocracy may additionally be characterized by the same inversion or distortion found in hypermodernity. Hypermodernity, as put best by French social theorist Gilles Lipovetsky, is the phase succeeding postmodernism, and is defined by hyperconsumption and hypermodern individuals wherein a society's quick progression becomes the norm, and the sense of time becomes alien. His ideas on hypermodernity were originally applied to consumerist societies, but are easily relatable to Welch's theory of hyperdemocracy:

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

The first version of modernity was extreme in ideological and political terms; the new modernity is extreme in a way that goes beyond the political – extreme in terms of technologies, media, economics, town planning, consumption, and individual pathology. Pretty much everywhere, hyperbolic and sub-political processes now comprise the new face of liberal democracies. Not everything is dancing to the tune of excess, but nothing is safe, one way or another, from the logic of the extreme.⁶

Nevertheless, hypermodernity is not completely divorced from the political discussion on hyperdemocracy. The bleeding effect described by Welch is not without merit; it is grounded in larger themes about technological and societal progress. Research on this topic synthesizes these concepts and theories and applies them to a specific and unique moment in British politics, beginning an important discussion on the most compelling features that define twenty-first-century liberal democracy.

A Summary of Euroscepticism in British Elections

While hyperdemocracy does not necessarily translate into “more elections,” a thorough analysis of the EU issue cannot ignore the electoral history of the United Kingdom that preceded Brexit. While the referendum campaign officially started on April 15, 2016, the demand for a referendum and the issue itself predates this by many years. The issue did not come to the forefront electorally until after the 2008 global financial crisis. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that the issue originated in the global financial crisis. Ironically, the argument to leave

⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, “Time Against Time, or The Hypermodern Society,” in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, eds. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris, 156-171 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

conceivably began immediately after the referendum campaign to join the EU in 1973. Neither can one leave out Margaret Thatcher's departure from British politics. Her decision to step down from her tenure as leader of the Conservatives in the early 1990s was largely due to her opposition of any further European integration. Her own party was committed to supporting the newly ratified Treaty of Maastricht, which laid the foundation for a political and monetary union.⁷ When the United Kingdom attempted to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism, a currency valuation scheme for European currencies wishing to join the Euro, it quickly had to retract its ambition to join the common currency in the fiasco known as Black Wednesday. Nevertheless, the European issue would never reach the levels of intensity it has seen in the twenty-first century. Therefore, the following section will summarize the key people and events that encouraged the British government to throw the European issue to the public in a referendum, thus initiating the conditions necessary for hyperdemocracy.

The Treaty of Lisbon ratified in 2009 is perhaps the key turning point in the story of how the United Kingdom came to leave the EU. The most powerful harbingers of Euroscepticism came from the Conservatives, who at this time were the national opposition in the UK Parliament, but had gained a plurality of seats from the United Kingdom in the 2009 European Parliament elections. In response to the ongoing negotiation and ratification of Lisbon by the majority Labour government headed by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the Conservatives significantly changed their tune regarding European politics. Due to their dissatisfaction with provisions in the Treaty of Lisbon, the Conservatives left the major center-right European People's Party, and formed their own party known as the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists.⁸ This was party leader David Cameron's appeasement to Eurosceptics in his own party, and was used to temporarily quell

⁷ Frederick Painton, "It Is Time to Go," *Time* 136, no. 24 (1990): 60-65.

⁸ "Conservative MEPs Form New Group," *BBC News*, last modified June 22, 2009, accessnews.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/8112581.stm.

the rise of the UK Independence Party led by Nigel Farage, a populist juggernaut of anti-EU politics:

We believe Britain's interests are best served by membership of a European Union that is an association of its Member States. We will never allow Britain to slide into a federal Europe. Labour's ratification of the Lisbon Treaty without the consent of the British people has been a betrayal of this country's democratic traditions. In government, we will put in place a number of measures to make sure this shameful episode can never happen again.⁹

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) is a “rejectionist-Eurosceptic” party, as opposed to, generally speaking, “reformist-Eurosceptic” Conservatives, who advocate for the complete withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU.¹⁰ The party began in the 1990s in response to the passage of the Treaty of Maastricht. The party was a small, irrelevant force until the 2000s, when Conservatives and Labour both alienated their traditional bases. Growth of a democratic deficit and low turnout in European elections in addition to dissatisfaction with national politics led to higher

⁹ “Invitation to Join the Government of Britain: The Conservative Manifesto,” *Conservative Party*, April 2010, 113.

¹⁰ Euroscepticism is a difficult term to properly define because it includes a broad range of perspectives on European integration. It could simply mean skepticism of European institutions, but can also include criticism or reformism. Skepticism or criticism doesn't necessarily mean opposition to the EU either. Perspectives can be from the right or the left of the political spectrum. Some Eurosceptics might prioritize criticizing specific problems with the EU over others, such as strong desires for economic cooperation and trade but limits on migration and immigration. Some want reform, while others want disposal of the entire project. UKIP is an outright rejectionist political force, while the Conservatives are nuanced and more willing to negotiate membership terms with the EU.

returns for UKIP.¹¹ UKIP placed second to the Conservatives in the 2009 European Parliament elections. The man that arguably defined the party and led it to national prominence, Nigel Farage, shifted the party strategy from policy advocacy to heavy competition for seats in national and local elections.¹² The key moment in this strategy came in 2013, when UKIP had a net gain of 139 seats in local councils.¹³ Many saw this as a form of backlash from mainly Conservative voters, who were disillusioned by Prime Minister David Cameron and his coalition government with Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron's earlier attempts to regain his base, which were those voters more sensitive to migration issues and the European Union, had failed spectacularly. 2013 was incredibly important for the push of a referendum, because it forced David Cameron to cater to his party's Members of Parliament, whose seats were threatened by diminishing support and the increased vote returns for UKIP. The trend of voter defections would continue into 2014, when elections to the European Parliament would be held.

The 2014 European Parliament elections were a significant turning point in British and European politics. Firstly, political parties viewed them as a prelude to what was going to come in the 2015 general election, where any number of outcomes could take place. The coalition government between the Conservatives and

¹¹ Robert Ford, Matthew J. Goodwin, and David Cutts. "Strategic Eurosceptics and Polite Xenophobes: Support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2009 European Parliament Elections." *European Journal of Political Research* 51, no. 2 (2012): 208.

¹² Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 241-242.

¹³ Christopher Hope, "Local elections 2013: Nigel Farage's Ukip surges to best ever showing, winning 150 seats," *The Daily Telegraph*, last modified May 3, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ukip/10036463/Local-elections-2013-Nigel-Farages-Ukip-surges-to-best-ever-showing-winning-150-seats.html>

Liberal Democrats was incredibly unpopular.¹⁴ The European Parliament elections traditionally served as opportunities for parties to express policy positions not just on the EU, but also on domestic issues. The BBC and LBC debates that took place between UKIP leader Nigel Farage and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, were quite symbolic and representative of this phenomenon. It must be first stated that these debates were far removed from “normal,” the debates were not about who should represent the United Kingdom in the European Parliament, rather they took the role of determining if the country should be in the EU at all.¹⁵ This was a profound moment in British politics, and supports the point about inversion within the theory of hyperdemocracy. Secondly, the 2014 elections resulted in UKIP winning a plurality of seats, the first party to do so since Labour in the early twentieth century. Research has shown that this election was ripe for “strategic voting.”¹⁶

Using the two individuals who participated in the aforementioned debates helps shed light on why this was the case. Farage, a supposed political outsider due to his inability to be elected to Westminster, embodied the kind of monkey wrench that many disaffected members of the British electorate craved. They did not need to agree with all he said, his command of populist rhetoric, combined with his uncensored and charismatic personality, were what they craved. European elections, marred by consistently low turnout in the twenty-first century, bestowed an opportunity for the electorate to vote for a party who could shake the political system in Brussels, while keeping domestic politics relatively untouched. UKIP held no seats in Westminster until several defections later that year. Clegg had much more on the

¹⁴ David Cutts and Andrew Russell, “From Coalition to Catastrophe: The Electoral Meltdown of the Liberal Democrats,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2015): 70–87.

¹⁵ It should also be noted that UKIP and other rejectionist-Euroscptics in the European Parliament are quite fascinating because they are elected to sit in the very institution they want to disrupt, leave, or dismantle entirely.

¹⁶ Ford, Goodwin, and Cutts. “Strategic Euroscptics,” 208.

line, not only defending the United Kingdom's membership in the EU, but also his party's electability in the general elections of the following year. The amount of political capital he had to lose far exceeded the amount Farage had at all. Thus, he could not make any serious mistakes. Unfortunately for him, by the end of the two debates Farage appeared to hold a better position, and one could easily predict the severity of the Liberal Democrats' losses, both in the 2014 European Parliament election and in the 2015 general election.¹⁷ The performance of both candidates in these debates foreshadowed the electoral picture that would emerge in British politics over the next few years. The most significant development from this election is that all over Europe, many Eurosceptic parties' vote shares considerably increased.

The 2015 general election displayed a continuation of the trends that had been sweeping British politics. The Conservatives were expected to lose to Labour according to the polls, but sometimes the pollsters do not have a finger on the pulse of the election. Similar to the debates from 2014, the persona of the leaders meant more than their positions. Nigel Farage paid attention to leadership favorability ratings, and quite brilliantly hit all the right marks in describing the negative leadership qualities of David Cameron, Nick Clegg, and Ed Miliband. According to Farage, these men embodied the Blairite politicking of New Labour, focusing on and representing the young, university educated, middle class city dwellers. Nigel Farage capitalized on these characteristics and spoke to the left-behind, or old Labour, which represented the older, white working-class who were already Eurosceptic, and had strong feelings about immigration, free trade agreements and traditional British culture. However, due to the election system and constituency boundaries, UKIP did not manage to win any new seats despite having double digit support nationwide. Additionally, the Conservatives won because UKIP was not just eating into their vote share, but UKIP also ate slightly

¹⁷ Typically, junior coalition partners suffer heavy losses in elections after entering government. From the BBC debate, Farage won according to a YouGov poll with 57%. See results: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-26737934>

into the vote share of people who traditionally voted Labour. The Conservatives emerged from this election with a majority government and an opportunity to conduct the referendum on European Union membership that David Cameron had promised at his famous Bloomberg speech in 2013.¹⁸

The Brexit referendum has been characterized as the third gamble Prime Minister David Cameron made in his string of gambles with referenda.¹⁹ He had emerged politically victorious by the end of his coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. Two referendums, the 2011 Alternative Vote Referendum and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, had both worked to his favor by failing to pass.²⁰ Cameron was going to use the momentum he had gained from the referendums, and the 2015 general election to make the case for supporting the United Kingdom remaining in the EU. Unfortunately for him, this momentum did not match the intensity of the EU issue that predated his tenure as leader of the Conservatives and his recent electoral victories.

Welch focuses on the cognitive dimension of democracy to explain hyperdemocracy. Brexit did not happen in a vacuum. There were several factors driving the vote to leave.²¹ The zeitgeist of the moment pointed toward a result that directed the United Kingdom to leave the EU. Immigration and issues of sovereignty defined the campaign. For example, the concurrent European Migrant-Refugee Crisis only *intensified* the already divisive immigration issue. Even though the United Kingdom was not part

¹⁸ David Cameron, "EU speech at Bloomberg," *Government of the United Kingdom* (speech, Prime Minister's Office, 2013).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg>.

¹⁹ Harold D. Clarke, Matthew J. Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley. *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2-3.

²⁰ The Alternative Vote referendum was conducted as part of the agreement made for the coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. It would change the electoral system for electing Parliament from the first-past-the-post system to an instant-runoff system.

²¹ Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, *Brexit*, 153-170.

of the Schengen Area, media portrayal of migrants and refugees had an impact on the campaign. As an institution founded on the freedom of movement, the EU's perceived inability to control external borders was attacked by the Leave campaign. Any observer of the campaign cannot forget the controversial 'Breaking Point' poster launched by UKIP.²²

Adding more analysis to the cognitive element promoted by Welch, the Brexit referendum occurred at such a specific moment in British politics and history of Europe, that it is quite conceivable that the concentration and *meshing* of the conversation in elections between 2014 and 2016 engendered an eternal campaign. A campaign that never ends with complex baggage unable to be dropped by a single vote or referendum. There is not much tangible evidence to support this claim, but theoretically in a hyperdemocracy the political campaign never ends, nor does the intensity or risk. Perhaps this might be due to the media's role as a permanent institution of democracy, and that only in a hyperdemocracy would such an eternal campaign exist.

The Media: A New Constituency?

Inversion and distortion are significant traits of hyperdemocracy. Welch refers to several areas of liberal democracy where this appears to be the case. The most notable feature of a healthy liberal democracy is an objective and honest media culture.²³ There appears to be a crisis of objectivity in the British media. Welch used the controversy of the MMR vaccine in the 1990s to support his case.²⁴ The intersection of science, politics, and media stimulated a hyperdemocratic moment. The media's involvement in the controversy chipped away not only at their own objectivity,

²² Josh Lowe, "Brexit: UKIP Launches 'Breaking Point' Immigration Poster," *Newsweek*, last modified June 16, 2016.

²³ Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22-35.

²⁴ Welch, *Hyperdemocracy*, 124-130.

but also the objectivity of medical science. The distortion from this controversy came from the inability to distinguish between honestly reported facts and mere sensationalism. Journalists do not all have the privilege of being qualified judges of scientific fact. Conversely, one scientist or even a tiny cabal of scientists, are not the sole arbiters of truth. The politicization of science is a key indicator of hyperdemocracy. The role the media played in the referendum campaign on EU membership mimicked the role it played in the interference of scientific inquiry.

The media played a large role in the Brexit referendum. It is quite common, but problematic in terms of objectivity, for editorial boards of newspapers and publications to endorse politicians or political parties in elections. This trend took on a unique role in the 2016 referendum where endorsement was for bigger and riskier implications, namely the fate of the country itself. Statements such as, “The Guardian will make no apology, between now and 23 June, for making the case for Britain in Europe as clearly, as honestly and as insistently as possible,”²⁵ and, “In supporting a vote to leave, we [The Daily Telegraph] are not harking back to a Britannic golden age lost in the mists of time but looking forward to a new beginning for our country. We are told it is a choice between fear and hope. If that is the case, then we choose hope,”²⁶ serve as examples of the media bias taking place at the time.

Media outlets for either side of the referendum campaign sought to persuade as many as they could. Instead of endorsing a party in a “normal” election, the media endorsed a specific action or inaction with large consequences to follow, regardless of the outcome. While the referendum on EU membership was

²⁵ “The Guardian view on the EU debate: David Cameron makes a serious case,” *The Guardian*, last modified May 9, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/09/the-guardian-view-on-the-eu-debate-david-cameron-makes-a-serious-case>

²⁶ “Vote leave to benefit from a world of opportunity,” *The Daily Telegraph*, last modified June 20, 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2016/06/20/vote-leave-to-benefit-from-a-world-of-opportunity/>

unbinding, it answered an important question about the British electorate's willingness to divorce from the EU. The media participated in the referendum campaign not as objective correspondents, but as disguised intermediaries of divergent opinions. In this respect, the media mirrored and fed into the divided electorate. The democratic process infiltrated the British media and *intensified* the referendum campaign.²⁷

Social Media and Hyperdemocracy

It would be a disservice to the theory of hyperdemocracy to not include analysis of the social media phenomenon. While it might be useful in political science-oriented research to conduct content analysis or surveys on internet behaviors, this research explores the implications of social media. The internet is a treasure trove of evidence for historians and social scientists alike. However, instead of finding the hypothetical needle(s) in the haystack that would provide insight on the specific issue in this paper, it is more conducive to analyze the meaning of the haystack itself.

In many respects, social media has replaced much of the political discussion that used to take place in "traditional forums." This has occurred in such a significant manner that it has almost become the new norm in political communication. Social media allows for the average person with an internet connection, almost always within arms-reach with the prevalence of cellphones, to be instantly and simultaneously informed at the same time as the rest of their fellow citizens about anything of interest or concern. Manuel Castells theorized this new information age with networks, stating that "a network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance. Networks are appropriate instruments... for a polity geared

²⁷ Banks, businesses, international organizations, public figures, etc. joined in on the endorsement front of the campaign – further intensifying the campaign and heightening the *risk* factor. Boris Johnson dubbed the scaremongering and large swath of endorsements on the 'Remain' side as "Project Fear," borrowing the term from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign.

toward the instant processing of new values and public moods.”²⁸ Social media matured in the mid-2010s, and took on a life of its own. The Brexit referendum had a serious social media element as nearly anyone could disseminate their own political opinions and reactions to the day-to-day politics of the campaign. The concept of “following” someone on a social media platform was built into a stream of information customized to confirm each person’s own biases.²⁹ An individual on these platforms is instantaneously and *intensely* informed about politics. As a consequence, social media allows a person to perceive themselves as empowered within the democratic process.

Conclusion

This paper has applied a specific theory about the state of liberal democracy to a specific instance in British political history. While the theory of hyperdemocracy can be applied in practical forms, such as in the study of quick and successive elections or pressure from radical movements like UKIP on established political parties. In this environment of political accelerationism, it has become apparent that the traditional media establishment has done their best to polarize themselves and mirror the divided electorate they fail to objectively inform. The collapse in trust of traditional media allowed the vacuum to be filled by social media, where reliable reporting is hard to come by as tailored information is rapidly presented and recycled by users, and political identities can easily be advertised.

²⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

²⁹ Perhaps the darker side of social media revealed after Brexit was the unveiling of foreign interference on social media platforms. Bots and hackers can manipulate the algorithmic inner workings of a social media platform to commit malicious, opinion-modifying campaigns. Whether or not these “troll” campaigns are effective is not the issue, but the mere fact that these platforms are being targeted by foreign entities poses a challenge for governments and tech companies.

However, where does liberal democracy in the United Kingdom go from here? The British government thus far has proved incapable of delivering a promise that it did not support itself, but half its voting population did. The 2017 general election saw the Conservatives and the fresh leadership of Theresa May lose a majority government, despite explicitly promising to implement Brexit. The inclusion of the so-called “Irish backstop,” or an indefinite soft border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, has particularly complicated the negotiations to leave. A deal that can satisfy a majority in Parliament and be received well among the public remains to be seen. The uncompromising negotiation style of the European Union has shown itself to be an issue once again, with precedent from the painful Greek bailout setting an example. Surely by the time this piece is published a clearer picture will have emerged, but for the long-term health of British politics, the damage has already been done. The political realignment that has been occurring for the better part of a decade will not only have to find the right footing in a post-EU United Kingdom, it will also have to reconcile the two halves of society that voted differently in the 2016 referendum. Perhaps this will be a test for the Union itself, an issue with the potential to be even larger than Brexit.

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Edward Reminiskey is a graduate student in the CSUSB Social Sciences and Globalization MA program. He received a BA in History from CSUSB in 2016. His research interests concentrate on the history and politics of European integration with an emphasis on Euroscepticism and European political parties. Following the completion of his MA in 2019, he will continue to write and focus on his studies in pursuit of a PhD. He would like to thank his family for their encouragement and extend a special thanks to Dr. Timothy Pytell for his guidance over the years.

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