

A Paroxysm of Dissent: Partisan Political Advertising During the Brexit Campaign

On June 23rd, 2016 a referendum was held to advise the United Kingdom (UK) government of the opinion of the electorate in relation to the future relationship between the UK and the European Union (EU). The result was a narrow victory for leave with 51.89% of the participating UK electorate voted for the UK to leave the EU, against 48.11% who voted for remain, on a turnout of 72.21%. Debate around the referendum, both prior to the event, during and since, has been vigorous, disharmonious and contentious. Accusations of poor standards of argumentation and debate began prior to the referendum and have continued even as the UK government "prepares" to leave. The infamous Bus Campaign is one such example in which a slogan that appeared to indicate that the National Health Service would be the recipient of EU budget contributions was painted upon a bus that featured prominently in the leave campaign. The veracity of the claim was contested at the time, yet appears to have been persuasive to the electorate even though those associated with it rapidly disassociated themselves.

During the intervening years since the vote a number of findings have cast doubt upon the veracity of the result. The electoral commission of the UK, an independent body that regulates party and election finance, and defines the standards for elections and referenda, has twice found against campaign groups supporting the leave position. More recently, a Select Committee of the House of Commons Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published an interim report on the subject of "Disinformation and 'fake news'" which found that leading campaign donors involved in the leave campaign may have been financed by the Russian government. Advertisements on social media are one method that the various leave supporting campaign groups exploited. An advertisement is generally regarded to be a notice or announcement that promotes or recommends something. In the case of political advertising, the individual advertisements can be deemed to have a persuasive goal. They are designed to persuade the target to adopt a given belief that the advertiser desires the target to possess.

One of the datasets published by the DCMS was submitted by Facebook and consists of hundreds of examples of paid advertisements used by leave-supporting campaign groups seeking to persuade targeted Facebook users to vote to leave. Various groups that operated beneath the wider umbrella of the Leave campaign, including BrexitCentral/BeLeave, Vote Leave, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, all used paid adverts on social media to target specific groups of UK voters via FaceBook in order to influence their vote.

This paper presents the results of a reconstruction and analysis of the aforementioned Brexit campaign adverts, identifying a number of rhetorical devices and argumentative strategies that have been deployed to persuasive effect in this most divisive of events.