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Beyond the meadows and uplands: The Leave campaign's vision of the post-Brexit future

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Abstract

The vote for Brexit in 2016 represented more than a rejection of the European Union (EU). In this article, I focus on the alternate future Leave presented during the referendum campaign. I analyse visions of the post-Brexit future outlined by Vote Leave and Grassroots Out/Leave.EU. I classify their policy proposals using the themes: economics, European Union relations, immigration, a Remain future, and the legal-political future. I use the framework of Rhetorical Political Analysis to examine how Leave campaigners endeavoured to persuade on the merit of their vision using rhetorical appeals in their speeches and texts. I argue Leave grounded their future vision in the status quo, presenting Brexit as a paradoxical instance of rupture and continuity. I find Leave primarily employed emotion-based rhetoric (pathos) to sell their alternative policy programme. The findings also reveal the centrality of ostensibly progressive, though overall exclusionary, policy proposals to Leave's post-Brexit vision.

Keywords

Brexit, Brexit referendum campaign, emotion, Leave.EU, political rhetoric, Rhetorical Political Analysis, the future, Vote Leave

Leave's victory in the 2016 European Union (EU) referendum came as a surprise to analysts (Ruzza and Pejovic, 2019: 432–433; Virdee and McGeever, 2018: 1803). After the referendum, the UK government struggled to populate Brexit with meaning amid significant difficulty in agreeing on the terms of withdrawal and establishing a reimagined economic and political relationship with the EU. Questions over Brexit were answered by Boris Johnson's administration following the UK's exit on 1 January 2021 (Eeckhout, 2022). Brexit ultimately entailed withdrawal from the European Economic Area (EEA), the single market, and extrication from the body of EU law and the European Court of Justice's (ECJ) jurisdiction (Eeckhout, 2022). A UK-EU trade deal, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), was also agreed. The TCA provides zero tariffs and zero quotas on goods traded between parties (Spisak, 2020). The agreement has been deemed

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'shallow' (Eeckhout, 2022: 99) and 'thin' (Spisak, 2020), with the revised UK-EU relationship characterised as a 'sovereignty-first relationship' (Laffan, 2021). There have been subsequent efforts to refine the TCA through the Windsor Framework (Garcia, 2023; Usherwood, 2023).

Previous Brexit analyses foreground the processes, economic ideologies, and actors Leave voters were voting against in 2016. The referendum result is variously interpreted as a vote against globalisation and neoliberalism (Finlayson, 2016; Hopkin, 2020; Rosamond, 2019: 413; Watson, 2018) or politicians and political elites (Hall et al., 2018; Marsh, 2018). This literature is primarily concerned with understanding the '"negative" vote to leave' the EU (Wellings, 2019: 168). A further strand of the Brexit literature, meanwhile, converges on the visions of the future delineated in the post-referendum period, specifically: Global Britain (Daddow, 2019; Oppermann et al., 2019; Parnell, 2022, 2024; Zappettini, 2019b). The temporal focus of this scholarship means the future Leave outlined during the campaign itself is under-explored.

Existing scholarship alluding to Leave's plans for a post-EU Britain often describes them as vague (Gamble, 2018: 1218; Marsh, 2018: 85) or utopian (Spencer and Oppermann, 2019: 14), with, at times, relatively limited discussion of Leave's specific proposals.[1] Vote Leave (VL) are typically associated with a global vision consisting of a deregulated, low tax, free trading nation (Gamble, 2018: 1218; also Melhuish, 2023; Sykes, 2018). Leave.EU (LEU), on the other hand, are connected to a nativist vision involving very low levels of immigration and the return of manufacturing jobs (Gamble, 2018: 1218).

In the paper, I analyse Leave's alternate future and its discursive appeal. I tackle the following lines of enquiry: Which policies comprised Leave's future policy programme? And how did they persuade voters on the merit of their vision and the demerit of the status quo? These questions serve as the research questions tackled in the subsequent analysis.

Here, I argue Leave firmly embedded their future vision within the status quo, contradictorily depicting Brexit as a break with the past in which little would change (see also Hawkins, 2022). Presenting Brexit as an exciting, forward-looking, and innovative opportunity was advantageous for Leave as "a cultural and political premium is placed on novelty, modernity and timeliness . . .' (Robinson, 2012: 14), and, as such, was conducive to the discursive success of their campaign. That said, political innovations also face challenges of legitimacy (Lazar, 2019). As I will show, the future delineated by the Leave campaign exhibits features of both rupture and continuity, with the continuities between the present and the Leave future heavily accentuated. Overall, Leave's supply of a desirable alternative to the EU was crucial in de-risking the Brexit decision (Atikcan et al., 2020).

This article speaks to an expanding body of recent scholarship investigating the politics of the future, the future as an idea, and the future's democratic importance (White, 2024, 2025). The concern in this paper with the political mobilisation of the future by the Leave campaign underpins this affinity. In this research, I examine and trace the emotional appeal, plus political utility, of the forward-looking visions delineated by the Leave campaign, further building on research by Robinson (2012), plus Lazar (2019). I find Leave primarily utilised emotion-based rhetoric (pathos) to persuade on the desirability of their alternate future.

The article advances the literatures on Brexit and the referendum campaign through several empirical contributions. The collation of, and focus on, the specific policies that make up what Wellings (2019: 168) terms: the 'aspirational' dimension of Brexit set this

research apart from previous scholarship. This aspirational side to the Brexit vote concerns what voters were voting *for* in 2016. In addition, the emphasis on LEU here, alongside VL, results in a further empirical contribution as this group has been overlooked, to a certain extent, in some of the extant literature. Moreover, my finding that Leave concertedly targeted low and lower waged workers in their discourse and policy programme represents a novel conclusion and additional contribution. I suggest VL carefully cultivated an outwardly progressive, but ultimately exclusionary, narrative, geared towards low and lower waged workers.

Moreover, this paper makes a methodological contribution as the first analysis to employ Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) to conduct an in-depth study of Brexit campaign discourse (see Grube, 2017 for a limited discussion). This methodological approach is particularly well suited to the study of alternative policies or visions offered in political speech.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, I explore the related literature in further depth. Next, I provide further detail on the method (RPA) employed and dataset analysed. Then, I conduct the empirical analysis. I explore VL's economic vision, proposed EU relations, immigration proposals, a Remain future, and the legal-political future. I then mirror this structure while analysing LEU. I subsequently discuss the core findings before then concluding.

Discourses of Brexit, the referendum campaign, and the future

Previous studies on Brexit and the discourse of the campaign employ critical discourse methodologies (Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022; Hawkins, 2022; Koller et al., 2019; Zappettini, 2019a). Further studies utilise a linguistics-based approach (Buckledee, 2018) as well as the notion of framing and frames (Atikcan et al., 2020; Copeland, 2022; Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022). The utilisation of RPA here facilitates a novel contribution and distinguishes it from comparable, language-oriented Brexit literature.

Analyses emphasise the strengths of Leave's strategy and use of language, and, conversely, the shortcomings of Remain's (Atikcan et al., 2020; Buckledee, 2018; Copeland, 2022). Buckledee (2018: 21) argues Leave advanced their arguments with greater certainty than Remain, stating that the future can and will unfold in such a way, whereas Remain significantly hedged their arguments. The consistency of Leave's campaign and the beneficial effects of this are noted elsewhere (Copeland, 2022; Spencer and Oppermann, 2019). Copeland (2022) finds that VL determinedly used one core frame centred on the benefits of Leave. Similarly, Spencer and Oppermann (2019: 10) argue Leave consistently used the romantic narrative genre to tell a 'story about an exciting and emotional quest to exit the EU'.

On Leave's future-oriented vision and discursive strategy, existing studies note their portrayal of an undesirable future inside the EU, with increased integration, less autonomy, and additional risk, in contrast to the glorious alternative outside (Atikcan et al., 2020: 46; Barzachka, 2024: 1315; Hawkins, 2022: 165–166). A Remain future typified by increased integration and additional risks concerning 'immigration, the NHS, and sovereignty' effectively 'put different kinds of risk on the table' as part of Leave's Two Futures strategy (Atikcan et al., 2020: 46). Leave's alternate future envisaged a realignment of the British political system, 'which had [previously] prioritised 'others' . . . to serve the interests of . . . the (leave) people' (Hawkins, 2022: 166; also Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022).

Additional research on the imagined post-EU future focuses on alternative political groupings such as the Anglosphere, the Commonwealth (Baxendale and Wellings, 2019; Murray-Evans, 2018), and CANZUK (Bell and Vucetic, 2019). This research stresses the ideational and discursive importance of the Anglosphere and Commonwealth for Brexiteers and Eurosceptics in providing an alternative to continued participation in the European project (Baxendale and Wellings, 2019; Kenny and Pearce, 2015, 2018; Wellings and Baxendale, 2015). This article stands apart from this literature due to a focus on Leave's specific post-Brexit policy proposals.

Data and approach

An inherent focus on the future represents a hallmark of political discourse inquiries (Dunmire, 2005: 483). Dunmire suggests the 'functions of political discourse to project and shape conceptions of the future and their ideological implications have long been recognized in scholarship of political and cultural theorists and critics' (Dunmire, 2005: 483). Scholars within the rhetorical tradition similarly emphasise the significance of the future (Finlayson, 2007: 549–550). Classical rhetoricians identified three genres of rhetoric oriented towards different moments in time. This typology has subsequently been adopted by contemporary rhetoric scholars (Atkins, 2018; Atkins and Finlayson, 2016; Crines and Heppell, 2017; Hatzisavvidou, 2015). The forensic genre of rhetoric is concerned with the past; epideictic, the present, and deliberative, the future (Martin, 2014: 52–53). Deliberative rhetoric 'is concerned to exhort to, or deter from, a course of action, to show its potential advantage or harm. It is concerned with things that could happen and that we could make happen' (Finlayson, 2007: 556). The nature of a political campaign where rivals engage in contests over 'what is and what should be' underscores their temporal dimension (Suckert, 2022: 17) and resonates with the deliberative branch.

The deliberative genre's concern with the future is tied to the emphasis on persuasion within the rhetorical tradition and understandings of rhetoric as a vehicle to achieve this (Martin, 2015: 28). This emphasis connects back to conceptions of politics as instances of decision-making which play out against backdrops of uncertainty (Finlayson, 2007: 549–550). Scholars employing RPA emphasise the contestability of politics. Finlayson (2007: 552) characterises politics as 'the "arena" within which we see expressed the irreducible and contested plurality of public life'. Martin (2014: 1), similarly, suggests 'politics requires choices to be formulated, options to be weighed and decisions to be made'. Rhetoric serves as a key medium available to politicians to formulate choices and persuade the public on their merit.

Drawing on classical rhetorical scholarship, RPA provides a framework for analysing the rhetoric and arguments advanced by speakers. The appeals framework, outlined by Aristotle (2012: 9–10), identifies three types of appeal or proof speakers can utilise to persuade: ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethotic appeals concern the character of a speaker (Finlayson, 2007: 558). Logos emphasises logic and the moves made to guide an audience through a series of logical steps to reach a preferred conclusion (Martin, 2014: 58). This appeal is especially important in debates over policy options and decision-making (Martin, 2014: 58). Pathos, meanwhile, describes overtures to 'the emotions and feelings within an audience' (Finlayson and Martin, 2014: 7). Crucially, the different modes are not 'effective in isolation, rather they are interdependent' (Crines, 2013: 210). The appeals framework underpins the subsequent analysis. The framework can illuminate how Leave campaigners sought to persuade on their future vision by mobilising the three modes of

persuasion, demonstrating its utility in tackling the research questions. I utilise insight from International Relations (IR) scholarship on emotion to augment the rhetorical analysis, given the intersect with RPA's concern with pathos (see Hall, 2016; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014; Koschut, 2018; Koschut et al., 2017). The analysis of Leave's discursive efforts to persuade others of their future vision sits alongside my intent to collate their sometimes disjointed and contradictory vision (Gamble, 2018: 1218; Marsh, 2018: 85; Spencer and Oppermann, 2019: 14; Suckert, 2022: 23).

The dataset consists of a series of speeches, statements, and opinion pieces from the Leave campaigns in the first half of 2016, up to 23 June. The unofficial campaign began in mid-February, following the announcement of the referendum date. The official campaign period began on 15 April 2016, after the conclusion of the designation contest on 13 April. I have elongated the period studied here to incorporate material delivered before the designation announcement. This was imperative to include Grassroots Out (GO) data as they were less conspicuous in the latter stages. The timeframe for the VL data covers 15 April to 23 June. The GO/LEU dataset encompasses the period between 1 February to 23 June.

I obtained the data sources online. A repository of major VL speeches, statements, and opinion pieces is available on their website.[2] Transcripts of speeches by GO/LEU campaigners were less accessible, there is no equivalent repository, and they were harder to locate elsewhere online; however, recordings of their campaign events were often available on YouTube. I subsequently transcribed these speeches. I sought to include major speeches for the selected speakers. Not every speech by each speaker was included in the corpus.[3] I compiled the dataset with the intent to include a range of Leave voices, facilitating a broader and richer analysis. Data selection was further influenced by when speeches were delivered, with, for instance, speeches selected from VL's launch event (Johnson, 2016b) and a major GO event (Hoey, 2016). Selection was also guided by the topics a speech addressed: each speech included content concerning the post-Brexit future. The utilisation of a data archive VL curated perhaps cedes some control over the analysis of their campaign. Its use could result in the omission of lines of argumentation pursued in data not included in the archive, potentially inadvertently contributing to the detoxification of their campaign (see Melhuish, 2023). Employing a critical perspective when examining the data, as adopted here, is one way of looking to mitigate against this process. The emphasis on speeches and opinion pieces may also mean discourse advanced exclusively in other mediums (such as social media) is omitted from this research. Despite the limitations noted here, Bonnet (2024a: 705) suggests the continued availability of VL's archive implies it can arguably be 'considered as representative literature'. VL campaigners often delivered speeches at VL's London office, among other locations. Recordings show speakers appearing alongside extensive VL branding, including a branded backdrop and lectern.[4] This suggests speakers were, to some extent, representing the group's positions. Speeches given at the VL office mainly appeared to be for media distribution and for the journalists present. GO/LEU speeches, meanwhile, were delivered to public audiences beyond the capital, plus London, and displayed GO or UK Independence Party (UKIP) branding.

The speech data was supplemented by written interventions; also sourced online. Opinion pieces published in national publications were obtained from Nexis or newspapers' own websites. The dataset includes op-eds published in The Sun, The Independent, The Express, and The Telegraph (see Hawkins, 2022 on Leave's print media interventions). RPA has a foundational interest in verbal speech, though it has also been utilised

in studies of written material (Hatzisavvidou, 2020a, 2020b). The analysis of written sources using RPA is justified as they fulfil functions of 'framing, complementing, and substantiating the content of public addresses' (Hatzisavvidou, 2020a: 104–105). After assembling the corpus, I completed a close reading of the material before compiling written summaries to record recurring themes, arguments, and content. During this, I applied the appeals framework to determine how speakers sought to persuade on the merits of their vision and the demerit of Remain. In total, the corpus consisted of 22 sources (see Table A1 in Appendix 1). Text copies of speeches were analysed to enable efficient searches for key terms and themes. I will now go onto explore the post-referendum future set out by VL.

Vote Leave

VL represented the official campaign vehicle campaigning to exit the EU. The cross-party group was home to several high-profile Tory MPs (Ford and Goodwin, 2017: 23) and six Tory cabinet ministers, including Boris Johnson and Michael Gove (Bale, 2022: 488). The group also included Labour figures among its numbers, such as Gisela Stuart (Pencheva and Maronitis, 2018: 528). Though at heart, the organisation was dominated by the Conservative Party (Wellings, 2017: 7). VL secured the designation from the Electoral Commission following a tough contest. Winning the designation meant VL secured the associated financial and communications advantages, including a £7 million spending limit, free TV broadcasts, a publicly funded mail shot, and £600,000 in public funding (Ford and Goodwin, 2017: 23). Their official status provided both prominence and communications exposure, meaning they 'had the power to influence public opinion on the meaning of Brexit. . .' (Zappettini, 2019a: 404). The VL covering allowed campaigners to employ arguments counter to their party's usual positions and alliances, with Conservative figures notably adopting anti-business arguments (Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022: 190–191). VL's support included long-standing Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, whose Euroscepticism dates to the Maastricht debates (Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1147; Hawkins, 2022: 6). The political seniority of the group's leadership team (noted above), their official standing, and ties to a particular Eurosceptic heritage plausibly influenced the nature of their discourse, at least to begin with. VL discourse primarily concerned economics initially, before later shifting to immigration and free movement in the campaign's final weeks (Clarke et al., 2017: 53; Zappettini, 2019a: 408). This saw an apparent convergence with Leave.EU in a reversal of VL's earlier attempts to draw a firm line between them (Bonnet, 2024a: 707).

VL's post-referendum vision addressed Britain's economic future, relations with the EU, immigration policy, an imagined Remain future, and the legal-political future (see Table 2). Below, I explore these areas to assemble their post-referendum vision and tackle the research questions.

Economics

VL's campaign stressed the continuities between a Leave future and the status quo (EU membership), particularly economically, contributing to efforts to de-risk Leave through overtures to emotion (pathos). Lazar (2019: 63) suggests political innovations face legitimation challenges and the 'more an innovation is cast . . . as a new iteration of the old order or as a novel restoration of what was or what ought to have been, the more that . . .

challenge is mitigated', explicating the utility of VL's approach. Emphasising the continuity between the present and a Leave future also inspires a calming effect (see Atikcan et al., 2020: Chapter 2 for similar efforts observed in comparable case studies). This strategy was also conceivably an attempt to counter accusations that voting Leave was dangerous, disruptive, and risky. Notably, VL argued that following Brexit, the UK would maintain access to a pan-European free trade zone:

> The core of our new arrangement . . . is clear. There is a free trade zone . . . from Iceland to Turkey that all European nations have access to . . . whether they are in or out of the euro or EU . . . we will remain in this zone. (Gove, 2016a, also 2016b)

The prospect of staying in a pan-European trade zone establishes continuity; despite the apparent vagueness of this proposal (see Curwen, 2016). It provides comfort to those wary of leaving and downplays perceived risks. The vaunted economic benefit of EU membership is diminished as non-EU and non-Eurozone states can access the zone. This matters as economic advantage has historically served as the primary rationale for British membership (Oliver, 2015: 413; also Xu and Lu, 2022: 280).

VL needed to present an alternative to fill the economic void in a post-EU world and its protagonists looked to the Commonwealth, plus the Anglosphere, to this end. Andrea Leadsom stressed the nascent economic potential of the Commonwealth and alluded to 'huge opportunities' for British trade, subtly evoking historic imperial ties within rhetoric adopting a nostalgic and forward-looking orientation (Leadsom, 2016). Murray-Evans (2018: 197) highlights the important role played by such ideas in Eurosceptic discourse prior to and post-2016. The Commonwealth's dormant economic potential later played a key role in the 'Global Britain' discourse and project (Daddow, 2019: 7; Murray-Evans, 2018: 199; Parnell, 2022; Zappettini, 2019b).

The group alluded to potential trade deals with Commonwealth states and emerging economic powers (Howard, 2016; Johnson, 2016a). Johnson (2016a) argued it was 'absurd' that Britain, 'historically a great free trading nation', had been 'unable for 42 years to do a free trade deal with Australia, New Zealand, China, India and America'. He employed pathos and logos to depict EU membership as an unreasonable barrier to the attainment of almost natural trade and economic relations between Britain and its former dominions. The EU is rendered an 'obstacle' (Browning, 2019: 231) in the Johnson quotation. Browning (2019: 231) suggests 'fantasy narratives' maintain their attractiveness as 'they include an "if only" element, typically an obstacle to be overcome'. In this example, the UK could have trade deals with these countries – were it not for the EU. Moreover, the invocation of Britain's global free trading tradition (Suckert, 2022: 22; Zappettini, 2019b) reinforces the likelihood of new trade deals. The past can provide lessons, legitimacy, and demonstrate continuity (Robinson, 2012: 4). The free trade tradition confers legitimacy on VL plans for new trade deals. The global trading nation narrative constitutes an 'emotionally provocative discourse', intended to elicit an emotional reaction through particular 'symbols, themes, and narratives' (Hall, 2017: 487). Allusions to romanticised collective memory are 'emotionally loaded' and therefore potentially appealing (Gellwitzki and Houde, 2022: 1480). The potential for new deals also contributes to de-risking Leave by foregrounding alternate opportunities.

VL's economic vision also spoke to voters' own finances through plans for cheaper food, cheaper energy bills, and higher wages, as part of a broader, ostensibly progressive pro-Leave narrative. Progressivism can be distinguished from conservatism by 'a belief

in social improvement, a desire to shape history and a left or centre-left political orientation' (Robinson, 2012: 21). Here, I predominantly use the term 'progressive' in the sense of 'a left or centre-left political orientation' (Robinson, 2012: 21). Significant aspects of VL's economic vision appeared to speak to the 'below median income voter [which] has for some time fascinated Britain's political elite' (Cooper and Cooper, 2020: 758). These voters have variously been described as 'the squeezed middle', 'hard working families' and the 'just about managing' by assorted politicians (Cooper and Cooper, 2020: 758). Notably, VL intimated that food would be cheaper in the future, building on long-standing Eurosceptic arguments regarding integration and food prices (Bolt, 2023; Ludlow, 2015; Saunders, 2018: 10; Suckert, 2022). Duncan Smith (2016) criticised the 'higher grocery prices' produced by the EU Common Agricultural Policy and implied that prices would fall post-Brexit. He used a witness in his speech (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013: 163), the House of Commons library, to reinforce this argument. Duncan Smith's argument potentially possessed extra credence because of his social reformer ethos (Hayton and Heppell, 2010).

VL pledged that energy bills would be cheaper post-Brexit following the removal of the 5% VAT applied to them, with this paid for with savings from the UK's EU budget contribution (Gove et al., 2016a; VL, 2016). They argued this would be especially beneficial for the least wealthy in society, as the poorest households spend three times more of their income on energy than the richest (Gove et al., 2016a; VL, 2016). This argument utilises pathos, invoking themes of justice and fairness, to persuade on the advantages of Brexit and augment their seemingly progressive narrative. Though the policy's progressive credentials can be questioned given all bill payers would benefit. The pledge featured in VL's 'A framework for taking back control' manifesto (VL, 2016), conceivably strengthening perceptions of delivery.

A VL future also included higher wages. EU immigration had allegedly increased labour market competition and depressed wages, meaning that after Brexit, wages would increase (Gove et al., 2016a; Gove et al., 2016b). Duncan Smith (2016) highlighted the development of the London 2012 Olympic sites as an example where EU workers 'hugely underbid' British workers. This represents a further overture to low and lower waged workers, although a problematic one given the implied exclusion of certain individuals from the labour market. The topic of immigration will be discussed in greater detail below given its crucial position in Leave's campaign (Zappettini, 2019a).

EU relations

VL proposed that the future UK-EU relationship would be positive, yet fundamentally different. Interestingly, they also imagined a continued leadership role for the UK in Europe after withdrawal. Boris Johnson (2016a) stressed that leaving the EU would not mean leaving Europe. Rhetorically, this was designed to bolster claims concerning continued UK-EU cooperation after Brexit.

Following Britain's withdrawal, VL proposed that UK-EU relations would be conducted through intergovernmental rather than supranational means. A continued British leadership role was postulated, exhibiting enduring ideas of British exceptionalism which had long permeated EU discourse (Daddow, 2015; Gifford, 2010: 329; Islentyeva and Dunkel, 2022). Boris Johnson claimed:

> we can still provide leadership in so many areas. We can help lead the discussions on security, on counter-terrorism, on foreign and defence policy, as we always have. But . . . within an intergovernmental framework, and without the need for legal instruments enforced by the European Court of Justice. (Johnson, 2016a)

Relations between both parties would be conducted between governments, with a steadfast return to intergovernmentalism (Johnson, 2016a) in contrast with the EU's predominant mode of operation. Above, Johnson emphasises the continuity between the past, present, and future. Britain would not only remain a part of security and foreign policy conversations, it would lead them, as it always has. This contention has a reassuring effect, speaking to the audience's emotions (pathos). Koschut (2018: 508) suggests perceived risks to the higher social status of a social group's place within an international community can cause a loss of confidence in the future among its members. Above, Johnson strived to negate such concerns regarding Britain's potentially diminished status in relation to EU members, post-Brexit. His rhetoric assuages potential security concerns and strategically minimises differences between the status quo and the future. Johnson's claim that the post-Brexit relationship may be more positive, outside the confines of the ECJ's rules (Johnson, 2016a, 2016b), represented a further advantage of Leave.

Immigration

The commitment to introduce an Australian-style immigration system was one of VL's most conspicuous and repeated claims (Gove, 2016b; Gove et al., 2016b; Stuart, 2016; VL, 2016). VL pledged to swiftly implement a new immigration policy and points-based system by the next general election (Gove et al., 2016b). They stated there would be no change for Irish or EU citizens that already lived in the UK, as they would receive automatic indefinite leave to remain (Gove et al., 2016b). VL leadership figures emphasised the feasibility of their plan:

> I think we would benefit . . . if we had a more effective and humane immigration policy, allowing us to take the people who would benefit us economically, offering refuge to those genuinely in need, and saying no to others. And my ambition is not a Utopian ideal – it's an Australian reality. (Gove, 2016a)

The new system promised greater control, an enduring VL theme (Maccaferri, 2019: 394), while retaining the economic advantages of immigration. Selectivity is foregrounded through the emphasis on the ability to 'say . . . no to others' (Gove, 2016a). The claim the policy is feasible, not utopian, is underpinned by logos, with the exemplar of the Australian system reinforcing Gove's argument.

VL relied on notions of fairness, indicative of pathos, plus logos, to rationalise and persuade on their immigration proposals. Gove (2016a) alluded to the supposedly misplaced prioritisation of EU citizens over non-EU citizens. He used logos to fashion the immigration status quo as irrational. The apparent irrationality of prioritising EU citizens over those with familial ties to Britain or leading experts – lacking EU citizenship – underscores the need for change.

Claims that the revamped immigration system would be safer bolstered the calls for its implementation. The emphasis on selectivity and control was contrasted with a 'European open-door migration policy', where Britain could not adjudicate on the economic and

social benefits of migration or effectively screen for past criminal behaviour (Gove, 2016a). Arguments predicated on safety and the suspected criminal background of migrants employ emotion (pathos), through emotional categories such as fear, to amplify the risk from the status quo. Cranmer (2015: 287) suggests fear can produce heightened attention and interest during campaigns, which can cause individuals to succumb to persuasion and break with long-held beliefs as they seek means of coping with a particular threat.

VL immigration discourse targeted low and lower waged income workers, and those sympathetic to them, and hinted Leave would improve their plight:

> Free movement without consent is dangerous and a risk to stability . . . the impact is felt above all by those on the lowest incomes . . . They are the ones who have to worry most if they can get a doctor's appointment, a school place or a home . . . While we remain the EU [sic], they can only look forward to more of the same. Or worse. (Stuart, 2016)

Here, the pressures created by free movement are widened to include difficulties accessing health provision (see Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022), school places, and housing (see also Duncan Smith, 2016), in a further seemingly progressive argument. Adopting a critical perspective reveals the inherent welfare chauvinism present in such arguments, due to the delineation of a '"pure people" and their birthright to the nation-state's welfare structure from those undeserving others' (Kinnvall, 2018: 527). VL looked to redraw the boundaries of social citizenship, and, relatedly, access to welfare provision and services (Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022). Stuart suggests this situation will not improve while in the EU, downgrading the appeal of the status quo. Pathos is invoked by framing free movement as 'dangerous' and destabilising (Stuart, 2016). The above quotation referenced a potential Remain future, which I expand on below.

The Remain future

VL presented a future following a Remain victory, as well as their vision of life outside the EU. The group stated that the EU would soon expand its membership, competences, and move towards full political union (see Table 1), supporting their contention that the organisation was in flux. This narrative is termed the 'hard remain' discourse elsewhere (Hawkins, 2022: 122). Atikcan et al. (2020: Chap. 3) suggest the explication of the Remain future was part of Leave's 'Two Futures' strategy, which endeavoured to make Remain appear risky.

The group warned of an imminent membership increase, with a Remain outcome resulting in membership of an enlarged union. Several prospective EU members were highlighted, including: Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey (Gove, 2016a; Grayling, 2016). Senior VL figures claimed their membership was pending, but did not comment on when they would join or the likelihood of this (Gove, 2016a). The implication was Remain would result in further economic migration from new members due to free movement requirements (Gove, 2016a, also Stuart, 2016), consequently putting 'immense pressure' on 'ailing UK social services' (Bonnet, 2024a: 710). As demonstrated elsewhere, the prospect of Turkish membership retained a key position in VL campaign materials including reports, posters, leaflets, and social media graphics (Ker-Lindsay, 2018; Melhuish, 2023).

Table 1. Summary of the Remain future envisioned by Leave.

The Remain future envisioned by Vote Leave	The Remain future envisioned by Leave.EU
Additional EU members (Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey) and extra social competences	Additional EU members (Turkey)
Political union	Political union
N/A	An EU army

VL also anticipated an expansion in the EU's competences. Chris Grayling (2016) stressed that Remain is not a vote for the EU as it is, but for what it must become 'over the next decade' exemplifying the 'Two Futures' strategy (Atikcan et al., 2020). He argued the EU was increasing its scope via moves towards a social pillar, including social and cultural affairs: 'So when there are new EU rules on pensions, skills and health, they will apply to us too' (Grayling, 2016). It is presented with certainty that there will be additional rules applicable to Britain. The argument rests on the logos that unless a policy area includes bespoke exclusions it applies to all members, with the implication that only Leave can prevent this.

VL claimed there would be an unstoppable push towards a political union as an inevitable consequence of the euro's flawed foundations and the severe crises experienced by its members (Grayling, 2016). Grayling uses logos to present political union as the logical solution to the EU's problems. Progress towards political union would allegedly diminish Britain's influence, sovereignty, and ability to pursue its national interest (Grayling, 2016).

In the imagined Remain future, the UK would have 'no control' over the impacts of monetary union or the migration crisis (Leadsom, 2016). The notion of control resurfaces, with logos employed to contrast Leave and Remain, characterised as a vote in favour of – or opposition to – to control (read, freedom). In the next section, I highlight the importance of control to VL's legal-political future.

Legal-political future

VL outlined a legal-political future free from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The group claimed the ECJ made Britain more unsafe than it could be (Howard, 2016) and that exiting it would allow the UK to regain control over the deportation of individuals perceived as national security threats (Gove et al., 2016b; Johnson, 2016a). Reclaiming this capacity casts a Leave future as a safer one, invoking pathos. This point connects back to the matter of control, plus debates regarding immigration and who is or is not welcome and who can or cannot be deported. As noted elsewhere, arguments related to border vulnerability helped legitimise 'the leave choice as the ability to stop criminals entering Britain' (Zappettini, 2019a: 415).

The group's post-Brexit legal-political future envisaged exclusive, domestic only, law-making (Patel, 2016). Priti Patel (2016) claimed that:

> The only way we can liberate ourselves . . . is to . . . take control over our laws . . . we can have a strong and positive future as an independent, free and sovereign country . . . we can begin the process of auditing and untangling our laws from the Brussels red tape . . .

The use of emotive language here enhances the desirability of the Leave future. References to a liberation struggle, freedom, independence, and a positive future use pathos to persuade by invoking ideals and values with positive emotional connotations. Abstract concepts and goals such as freedom are often associated with potentially emotionally appealing fantasies (Browning, 2019: 230). Spencer and Oppermann (2019: 13) contend that such narratives embed 'the Brexit campaign in a struggle for the ideals of democracy and freedom'. Above, Patel draws on Eurosceptic tropes regarding red tape and excessive regulation (Hawkins, 2022: 23; Parnell, 2024: 37) and pledges a future featuring less of them. The potential to develop a less regulated, more agile, orientation after Brexit was a recurring VL theme (Gove, 2016a; Patel, 2016).

VL anticipated Brexit to be beneficial for British democracy and result in democratic renewal. Howard (2016) hinted that the ties between voters and politicians would be restored post-Brexit, as the government would be uninhibited in its decision-making by EU institutions, enhancing accountability and counteracting alienation. Powerful rhetoric on the risks posed by the disconnect between citizens and representatives use pathos to bolster VL's democratic case. Having examined the contours of VL's post-Brexit vision, I now turn to Leave.EU.

Leave.EU

The parallel Leave campaigns include GO, which battled VL for the designation, and LEU, which emerged in the wake of GO's unsuccessful designation bid (Banks, 2016; Bennett, 2016; Shipman, 2016). GO included the Tory MPs Peter Bone and Tom Pursglove, Labour's Kate Hoey, and UKIP's Nigel Farage (Bennett, 2016: 171; Shipman, 2016: 220). LEU had close links to UKIP (Browning, 2019: 231; Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1146–1147), with its membership, most prominently Farage, drawn from the party.[5] The group appeared heavily influenced by UKIP's thinking; itself influenced by the Eurosceptic, conservative and populist traditions (Tournier-Sol, 2015). LEU borrowed UKIP's strategy of fusing immigration and the EU (Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1147). Their campaign has sometimes been perceived as the more 'transgressive' campaign compared to VL's (Browning, 2019: 231), although recent research underscores the similarities between them, challenging this interpretation (Bonnet, 2024a; Melhuish, 2023). LEU's position as an unofficial outlet appeared to have a freeing effect on their discourse as they were unbound from any conventions implied by designation (Usherwood and Wright, 2017: 385). Their position beyond the Eurosceptic mainstream saw LEU draw on 'the populist rhetoric cultivated by UKIP' (Smith et al., 2021: 27). The group pinpointed immigration from the outset, adopting 'a more assertive, shriller tone' (Hawkins, 2022: 7) and an 'an insular, nationalist line' (Smith et al., 2021: 27). In this section, I mirror the structure above to collate LEU's post-referendum future and draw comparisons with VL's vision and argumentation.

Economics

LEU's economic vision has several parallels with VL's. They also claimed EU free trade would continue after withdrawal (Davis, 2016b), conceivably to underline connections to the status quo and de-risk Leave. LEU's attempts to de-risk imagined threats to EU trade seemingly went further than VL's. They claimed Britain would be well placed for a future trade deal due to its trade deficit with the EU: 'They need us, far more than we need them' (Farage, 2016c).

The group envisaged increased non-EU trade after Brexit (Davis, 2016a). The Commonwealth and the Anglosphere were identified as key future trading partners. LEU's efforts to adopt a global economic orientation echoed VL. Davis argued the Commonwealth is:

> . . . growing faster than Europe. We share history, culture and language. We have family ties. We even share similar legal systems. The usual barriers to trade are largely absent. (Davis, 2016a)

The combination of logos and pathos enhances the persuasiveness of this proposition. Pivoting to the Commonwealth is deemed logical given the significant growth rates and minimal trade barriers. It is presented as a natural and commonsense trading partner, in contrast with presentations of the EU as unnatural, alien, and incompatible (see Spiering, 2015; Wellings and Baxendale, 2015: 125). Above, Davis speaks to emotion and sentimental connections (pathos) through allusions to a shared history and familial ties in a further effort to persuade.

LEU's economic vision was supplemented by plans for cheaper food (Davis, 2016a; Farage, 2016a) and higher wages (Farage, 2016d). LEU shared VL's contention concerning higher wages after Brexit due to the cessation of 'open door immigration' and its depressive effects on wages (Farage, 2016c). Nigel Farage (2016d) evoked pathos in arguments concerning the suppression of wages in the 'unskilled labour market', which had caused falling living standards and meant 'life has become a lot tougher for so many in our country'. He further aligned himself with working people through claims that 'ordinary British workers' mattered more to him than GDP figures (Farage, 2016d). In addition, LEU claimed that cars would be cheaper post-Brexit (Davis, 2016a; Farage, 2016a), augmenting their economic vision.

EU relations

Like VL, LEU outlined an intergovernmental future UK-EU relationship (Farage, 2016b, 2016c). Farage envisioned a collection of independent states, cooperating on a positive basis:

> . . . I want to live and cooperate in a Europe of sovereign independent states that are friends, and mates, and neighbours . . . Who would not want to live and be part of that Europe? But it's not this Europe. (Farage, 2016c)

Farage was resolute in his desire to see European states cooperate and maintain close relations, perhaps to counter claims of being anti-European (Tournier-Sol, 2015: 144). The terms 'friends', 'mates', and 'neighbours' (Farage, 2016c) emphasise the aspiration for a close and friendly relationship. The imagined relationship is, however, distinguished from its previous manifestation. Farage draws on logos to lead his audience to the conclusion that Leave is the means to resetting UK-EU relations.

Immigration

Immigration was undoubtedly a key LEU concern (Browning, 2019: 231; Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1146–1147). Like VL, the group proposed a targeted and restrictive system modelled on Australia's (Farage, 2016a, 2016c). This would purportedly be fairer and less

discriminatory as it would not preference individuals according to nationality (Farage, 2016a). The same rationale was likewise provided by VL (Gove, 2016a). LEU's plan featured additional criteria, including requirements for individuals to pay for medical insurance for 5 years, to possess skills and trades, to be younger than 45 years old, and to lack a criminal record (Farage, 2016c). According to Farage (2016a), the points-system would see '. . . good people . . . come to our country . . . in sensible numbers'.

These proposals were justified through arguments premised upon safety and fairness, echoing VL. The existing 'open-door' (Farage, 2016a) migration policy was connected to crime and terrorism. For instance, the EU's decision in 2015 to welcome refugees was related to terrorism: '. . . Europol say, there are up to 5000 jihadis who've come into Europe in the last 18 months posing as migrants through the Greek islands' (Farage, 2016a). The EU's decision was also associated with the risk of criminality amid concerns that potentially threatening 'young males' could subsequently obtain EU passports and come to Britain (Farage, 2016a). Farage appeals to his audience's emotions (pathos) by rousing fears over potential clandestine terrorists, plus cultural and social dangers arising from EU negligence. Discourse concerning the alleged cultural and social dangers from immigration taps into notions of ontological security, understood as: 'a person's security in their sense of self, a feeling of being in control of one's environment, which leads to the ability to make good life choices and live a fulfilling life' (Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022:181, also Mitzen, 2006). Such rhetoric appropriates the ontological insecurities that people experience, with populist discourse promising the alleviation of these (Kinnvall, 2018: 529). Donoghue and Kuisma (2022: 181) note that Brexit is likely to increase, rather than ease, ontological insecurity for many because of uncertainty in trade, the labour market, and housing, among others.

LEU further justified their immigration plans through the threat posed to Britain's liberal values and traditions (Farage, 2016a), invoking pathos. The status quo is ultimately imbued with risk. The EU itself, via its approach to immigration and asylum, is connected to risks of terrorism, criminality, and re-worked into a threat to British values. Perceptions of cultural loss represent one process, alongside additional processes of economic and political change, that potentially generate higher levels of insecurity among the population (Kinnvall, 2018: 527), explaining the potential power of this rhetoric.

The Remain future

LEU's vision of a Remain outcome diverged slightly from their Leave rival, as illustrated by Table 1. LEU similarly stressed the inevitability of further political integration in a Remain future and claimed the EU 'is hell bent on further, deeper centralisation' (Farage, 2016d). They argued the EU could not be reformed and would seek to achieve political integration, a 'United States of Europe', with open borders (Farage, 2016e). LEU claimed open borders would render Britain less safe (Farage, 2016d), using pathos to underscore the danger of Remain.

Leave.EU anticipated increased migration with Remain, resulting in additional pressure on public services – 'pushed to the point of failure' (Farage, 2016d) – as the EU border expands (see Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022). Notably, LEU warned about additional members, mimicking VL, to strengthen their call to voters to consider what the EU 'will look like in 10 years' (Farage, 2016d). LEU stressed the imminence of Turkish membership, with its accession framed as an inevitable driver of further migration (Farage, 2016d). VL alluded to additional prospective members alongside Turkey at times (Gove,

2016a), though like LEU, they readily deployed the deceptive narrative concerning EU-facilitated membership for Turkey, termed: 'the Turkey story' by Bonnet (2024b).

The narrative that the EU is changing (more members, more competences) negates the idea Remain embodies the status quo. It insinuates there is no such thing, re-calibrating the debate. Depictions of a changing EU bolstered efforts to 'recast remaining . . . as the step into the unknown' to overcome the incumbency bias; whereby risk averse voters ultimately opt for the status quo (Hawkins, 2022: 140).

A significant difference between the groups was LEU's prediction of increased military integration in a Remain future:

> . . . the EU nationalists are biding their time, waiting for . . . Remain . . . before they hike up the EU's budget that we will have to contribute more towards and . . . reveal their full military ambitions. (Farage, 2016d)

Intensified military integration exemplifies a further expansion of the EU's competences. The quotation draws on the narrative that EU membership is expensive and ever increasing. The immediacy of the EU's military plan is emphasised within claims that 'plans for a full EU army' were merely paused until after the vote (Farage, 2016d). This creates a sense of urgency and evokes pathos through suggestions the EU is nefarious and power-mad, concealing plans for further integration in a domain traditionally belonging to nation-states; where integration has historically lagged (see Howorth, 2014: 1).

Legal-political future

LEU tabled a positive, legal-political future consisting of democratic renewal and control over the nation's own destiny, echoing VL (Davis, 2016a; Farage, 2016e). Post-Brexit, Britain would regain control of its laws, borders, and passports, again (Farage, 2016a, 2016d).

Farage (2016e) claimed that leaving 'would revitalise our democracy and mean . . . the big decisions were made by us instead of for us'. Britain's elected representatives would make its laws, rather than 'unelected old men in Brussels'; unknown to the public and safe from de-selection (Farage, 2016e). Both Leave campaigns claimed the link between voters and electors would be restored, with voters' capacity to remove their representatives 'reflecting the British understanding of democracy' (Hawkins, 2022: 163).

The group drew on emotive rhetoric (pathos) while outlining their legal-political vision, which hinged on control of the border and settlement decisions (Farage, 2016a). These functions were deemed those of a 'normal country' (Farage, 2016a), with the inference that Britain was abnormal inside the EU, evoking narratives of humiliation deployed by radical right populists (see Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021). The referendum was framed as Britain's 'Independence Day' within rousing calls to arms (Farage, 2016a, 2016d, 2016e). The reconfiguration of the referendum as an independence battle, with the EU depicted as a coloniser or colonial power, draws on historic and ironic Eurosceptic discourses (Hawkins, 2022: 67–68; also Parnell, 2024: 29). Rhetoric framing the vote as the last chance to become 'a normal country once again' (Farage, 2016a) accentuates its importance, utilising notions of national humiliation to contrast the past and the humiliated present self (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021). The example further draws on emotion (pathos) within notions of patriotism to persuade on the desirability of the alternate future.

Like VL, LEU proposed a future with less red tape. The group pledged 'effective, rather than burdensome, regulation' once 'free of EU government and bureaucracy' (Davis, 2016a). Farage (2016a) noted that only 15% of the British economy was involved with European exports but as a single market member, EU regulation and law applied to 100% of businesses. Here, appeals to logos construe membership as irrational as EU regulations apply to all firms, irrespective of whether they export to the EU, enhancing the appeal of the alternative.

Discussion

Conceptions of the future played a vital role for Leave. The future's importance arguably increased as the campaign progressed and VL effectively adopted a position as an alternative government (Oliver, 2016: 264), as evidenced by their framework document (see Vote Leave, 2016). I find that core components of Leave's economic future include: continued EU trade; additional trade with emerging powers and the Commonwealth/Anglosphere; higher wages; cheaper energy; and cheaper food (see Table 2). A positive, intergovernmental relationship with the EU supplemented their vision, alongside a points-based immigration system. Their post-Brexit legal-political future entailed ending the jurisdiction of the ECJ, less regulation, and the restoration and renewal of democracy. Unique LEU proposals also included cheaper cars and extra migration stipulations (Table 2).

In line with previous research, I have demonstrated the importance of emotion to Leave discourse (Atikcan et al., 2020: 66; Barzachka, 2024: 1315; Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022: 192; Spencer and Oppermann, 2019: 10). The use of the appeals framework adds value by demonstrating *how* Leave utilised emotion (pathos) to persuade on the desirability of their future policies and emphasise the alleged issues with prevailing conditions inside the EU. The framework is supplemented by insight from the IR literature to further explicate the emotional impact of certain discourse. Emotion underpinned arguments intended to calm (for instance, those emphasising continuities with the status quo), encourage empathy (for those doing less well from EU membership), or stimulate fear or concern (security risks and threats to British values and traditions).

Overall, I observed greater use of pathos, with fewer appeals to logos or ethos. There were exceptions to this however, such as Farage's efforts to depict single market membership as irrational. This finding reiterates previous conclusions regarding Leave's emphasis on emotion over rationality and facts (Browning, 2019: 232). Moreover, the data largely contained few ethotic appeals. This was perhaps an effort, at least by VL, to maintain a focus on the EU and minimise attention on themselves, perhaps to partially obscure their inclusion in the political establishment they, at times, rallied against. On occasion, Farage established an ethos as a trader, drawing upon his time as a city trader, while Johnson constructed an ethos as a cosmopolitan citizen of Europe (Farage, 2016c; Johnson, 2016a).

Leave stressed the continuity to their policy programme, particularly single market access and continued EU free trade (Hawkins, 2022: 135–136), rendering Brexit a paradoxical instance of rupture and continuity. Hawkins (2022: 168) suggests Leave contradictorily portrayed Brexit as 'being both an essential rupture with an unsatisfactory status quo while reassuring voters that nothing would change'. Accentuating continuities between the present and the post-Brexit future serves to bridge the gap between them and minimise the risk and disruption of leaving. These moves ultimately bolster the

Table 2. Summary of Leave's alternative policy programme.

Future theme	Scenario as EU member – according to Leave	Vote Leave future	Leave.EU future
Economics	Free trade with the EU	Continued free trade with the EU	Option to trade with the EU and conduct greater trade with the Commonwealth/ Anglosphere
Economics	Trade with the EU	Greater trade with world powers, emerging markets, and the Commonwealth	Greater trade with the Commonwealth/Anglosphere
Economics	Expensive energy bills and cost of living	Cheaper food and energy	Cheaper food, energy, and cars
Economics	UK wages depressed (consequence of EU immigration)	Higher wages	Higher wages
EU relations	EU supranationalism	Constructive, intergovernmental relationship	Constructive, intergovernmental relationship
Immigration	EU free movement	Restrictive, points-based immigration system	Restrictive, points-based immigration system
Immigration	Open border	Regain control of the border	Regain control of the border
Immigration	EU free movement	No free movement	No free movement
Immigration	EU free movement	N/A	Prioritisation of migrants with skills and trades
Immigration	EU free movement	N/A	Migrants pay for own medical insurance for min. 5 years
Legal-political	EU law-making	Laws made exclusively in the UK by domestically elected representatives	Laws made exclusively in the UK by domestically elected representatives
Legal-political	EU legal oversight	No role for the ECJ and the Commission	No role for the ECJ and the Commission (implied by their rejection of the single market and preference for a WTO- style/hard Brexit)
Legal-political	Heavy regulatory burden for business	Lighter regulatory burden for business	Lighter regulatory burden for business

legitimacy of a Leave future, as anchoring the alternate future in the present helps tackle the legitimacy challenges faced by political innovations (Lazar, 2019: 63). This portrayal counterintuitively constructs a Leave future in terms not dissimilar from the status quo. Crucially, the pre-existing facets of the UK-EU relationship to be retained were those the public mostly liked or were comfortable with (trade), enhancing efforts to sell Brexit. The delineation of a positive future outside featuring cheaper bills, among others, likewise enhances Leave's desirability. Proposals for cheaper bills and so forth, while available to all, rest upon near-term, individualised future benefits of Brexit, resonating with White's claims concerning the shortening and individualisation of the future (White, 2024: Chapter 6). Meanwhile, efforts to neutralise the status quo through suggestions the EU was changing also furthered Leave's cause.

The tension characterising Leave's vision is revealed upon closer examination. My findings reinforce claims concerning the tension and inconsistencies plaguing Brexit (Noys, 2018; Suckert, 2022). Leave's ostensibly progressive, yet ultimately exclusionary, narrative, underwritten by claims that Brexit will increase wages for the low waged, reduce pressure on public services, and provide cheaper groceries and energy bills has previously been under-emphasised. As demonstrated above, the promise of beneficial, material outcomes for ordinary, working people played a considerable role in Leave's rhetoric and future. There seems to be an uneasiness between this narrative and the hyper-global, free trade ideals at Brexit's core. This tension plausibly reflects the need to appeal to a wide constituency (see Finlayson, 2016; Rosamond, 2019: 414 on this idea). Tension similarly exists between the proposed restrictive immigration system and the openness implied by free trade aspirations and the Singapore-on-Thames model favoured by some Brexiteers (Gamble, 2018: 1220).

In this analysis, I collated the policy programme outlined by the Leave campaigns. Although aspects of the programme were vague, as others have argued, I suggest the broad policy orientation is discernible. The Leave groups' capacity to deliver their programme was lacking as temporary, cross-party, vehicles contesting a referendum (Gamble, 2018: 1228). Their programme still mattered, however, given its possible influence on voters. Leave's partial ambiguity on the future plausibly helped deliver their victory, although this caused subsequent problems for the UK government. This was especially the case for Theresa May's administration; tasked with extricating Britain from the EU and populating Brexit with specific meaning (Kettell and Kerr, 2019). The imprints of Leave's proposals can be seen in the eventual Brexit settlement reached by Boris Johnson's administration (see above). For instance, a revised points-based immigration system was introduced in 2021 (Mckinney et al., 2022; Sumption and Walsh, 2023), while free trade agreements were agreed with Australia and New Zealand (Garcia, 2023). It is not my intent here to compare Leave's 2016 vision with the eventual policy outcomes, that said, several hallmarks appear present.

Conclusion

In this article, I analysed Leave discourse from the 2016 EU referendum campaign. This article makes several empirical contributions to the literature on the campaign and Brexit. The collation and analysis of the future policy programmes set out by Leave, the 'aspirational' component (Wellings, 2019), constitutes one of the empirical contributions made. The emphasis on LEU, in addition to VL, in this research results in a further empirical contribution. In addition, the finding that VL developed a superficially progressive

narrative geared towards low and lower waged workers represents another contribution. Moreover, the application of RPA to Brexit campaign discourse results in a methodological contribution, as the first in-depth study in this mould.

Above, I paid particular attention to Leave's vision of the future if Britain left the EU and the policy options which could be pursued. I collated their policy programme by analysing a range of verbal and written data sources, providing further insight into Leave's mobilisation of the future. In answer to the first research question regarding the make-up of Leave's future policy programme, I find that this featured a diverse array of policies (see Table 2). Several of Leave's economic policies targeted low and lower waged workers, exhibiting an additional facet to their campaign. The collation of the Leave future also reveals the inconsistency inherent to it. This inconsistency seemingly benefitted Leave's cause by widening its appeal, enabling Brexit to 'be all things to all people' (Hawkins, 2022: 159).

Regarding the second research question, I find that Leave primarily used emotional rhetorical appeals (pathos) to persuade on the merit of their alternate future. They also used appeals to logic, though less frequently. In their efforts to discredit a Remain future, the Leave campaign emphasised significant, impending changes to the EU concerning its membership and competences.

Leave's diligent efforts to stress connections between their proposed future and core features of the status quo (as part of the EU) demonstrates how their discourse rendered Brexit as both rupture and continuity. Leave connected their vision of the future outside the EU to prevailing conditions inside. This showcases the potential advantages for campaigns seeking drastic change of downplaying the radicalness of their offering by stressing continuities with pre-existing conditions, using temporal framing to navigate challenges of legitimacy (Lazar, 2019: 63).

The apparent leftist flavour to VL's programme and the emphasis on public services was arguably a precursor to the Conservatives' 2019 general election offer. In 2019, pledges to level up Britain, invest, and depart from austerity 'all formed part of an unconventional, "leftist" Tory campaign strategy' (Cooper and Cooper, 2020: 756). VL rhetoric and proposals concerning lower living costs, higher wages, and public service provision illustrate the potential power of a seemingly leftist campaign delivered by (predominantly) Conservative voices. In this article, I focused on the future set out by political actors in a particular moment: the EU referendum. Additional research might explore how actors involved in the referendum used notions of the future within subsequent electoral contests, such as the 2019 general election.

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Notes

1. I use the term Leave to collectively refer to the overarching movement or campaign seeking the UK's exit from the EU, as well as in reference to both Leave campaign groups.
2. VL's speech repository remained available online as of October 2024.
3. See appendix for full details.
4. See footage of Michael Gove's speech on 19 April 2016, available at: https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/video/referendum-campaign-michael-gove-speech-michael-gove-news-footage/658163472.
5. I use LEU interchangeably when referring to speeches delivered at GO or LEU events.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Dataset analysed, sorted by date.

Name	Campaign group	Date	Intervention type	Outlet
David Davis	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	04 February 2016	Speech	N/A
Kate Hoey	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	19 February 2016	Speech	N/A
Boris Johnson	Vote Leave	15 April 2016	Speech	N/A
Michael Gove	Vote Leave	19 April 2016	Speech	N/A
Michael Gove	Vote Leave	19 April 2016	Speech	N/A
James Cleverly	Vote Leave	27 April 2016	Speech	N/A
Priti Patel	Vote Leave	28 April 2016	Speech	N/A
Nigel Farage	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	29 April 2016	Speech	N/A
Boris Johnson	Vote Leave	09 May 2016	Speech	N/A
Iain Duncan Smith	Vote Leave	10 May 2016	Speech	N/A
Andrea Leadsom	Vote Leave	17 May 2016	Speech	N/A
Michael Howard	Vote Leave	18 May 2016	Speech	N/A
David Davis	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	27 May 2016	Written	The Telegraph
Chris Grayling	Vote Leave	31 May 2016	Speech	N/A
Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, and Gisela Stuart	Vote Leave	31 May 2016	Written	The Sun
Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Priti Patel, and Gisela Stuart	Vote Leave	01 June 2016	Written	Statement[a]
Nigel Farage	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	04 June 2016	Speech	N/A
Gisela Stuart	Vote Leave	06 June 2016	Speech	N/A
Nigel Farage	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	15 June 2016	Speech	N/A
Vote Leave	Vote Leave	15 June 2016	Written	Statement[a]
Nigel Farage	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	20 June 2016	Written	The Independent
Nigel Farage	Grassroots Out/ Leave.EU	21 June 2016	Written	The Express

[a]Published on Vote Leave's website: www.voteleavetakecontrol.org.