

## **Sticks and stones: Comparing Twitter campaigning strategies in the EU referendum**

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### **Abstract:**

Both camps made extensive use of social media during the referendum, both to mobilise existing supporters and to convert new ones. However, the three main groups – Stronger In, Vote Leave and Leave.EU – each took differing strategies within this. Drawing on tweets published by the groups, the paper compares the use of different positive and negative frames, as well the thematic content. While reinforcing other work that shows differentials in focus on specific themes – economics for Stronger In, politics and immigration for the Leave groups – the analysis also highlights the use on both sides of “sticks” (capitalisation on the other side’s errors) and “stones” (new issues and framings that the group brings to the debate). If the latter constituted the pre-game plan, then the former became a substantial part of the practical application during the campaign, a development reinforced by the nature of the medium itself.

Keywords: EU referendum; social media; campaigning; Twitter; European Union; voter mobilisation

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union (EU) had a substantial element of social media activity. This was due not only to the increased pervasiveness of such platforms in social and political interaction, but also to the particular nature of the European debate in the UK: for the past two decades, eurosceptics have found, and made much use, of online spaces to build contacts and community, as well as to refine lines of argument. The relatively unexpected opportunity to make use of this digital space presents an important and interesting element in our understanding of the referendum’s conduct and outcome.

To this is coupled the comparative novelty of the referendum itself. While there have been increasing numbers of votes on EU-related topics across the Union in the post-Maastricht period, this is only the second to deal explicitly with the question of membership, the first being the UK’s 1975 vote: thus there is a question-mark over whether the dynamics of such votes apply in this current case (see Qvortrup 2016). Moreover, while there has been a progressive increase in the use of referendums in the British political system since the late 1990s (Reidy & Suiter 2015), the EU vote is only the third national instance and the first since 1975 to involve a relatively high level of engagement by political actors. As a result, both the format and the content are relatively novel, allowing for the potential emergence of unusual forms of campaigning.

This paper considers the basic question of how and why the campaigns on the two sides differed in their content and framing. We understand a frame as the emphasis of one particular aspect of a topic over another, providing a means to understand an issue through the way it is constructed and the mobilisation of certain values (Semetko and Vreese 2004:

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92). As political activists around the world endeavour to make the most of this new digital space, the lessons to be learnt from the EU referendum have wide interest. Similarly, the increasing use of referendums as devices for taking major public policy decisions creates a very different space, as compared to elections: the choice is typically binary and the composition and arrangement of political voices does not necessarily map onto political parties. Thus the EU referendum allows us to reflect on whether more historical assumptions about behaviour in referendums still holds true in the digital age: do new social media reinforce or subvert the logics of campaigning that existed beforehand?

To answer this, the paper analyses the Twitter campaigns of the two official referendum campaign groups – Vote Leave and Britain Stronger In Europe (‘Stronger In’) – as well as the other notable online campaigning group, Leave.EU, drawing on a dataset covering the six months prior to the date of the vote, the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016. After establishing some hypotheses on the basis of other referendums, the paper analyses the three groups’ output across a variety of factors, including content, frame and engagement with audiences, before concluding with some observations on the particularities and wider lessons of the EU referendum.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND REFERENDUMS**

Twitter has become one of the most popular social media sites in the political arena (Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams 2013: 479) and ranks as the eleventh most popular website in the UK and third most popular social media platform, after Facebook (first) and YouTube (second), as measured by the user-base (SimilarWeb 2016). The campaigns’ use of social media, and

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Twitter in particular, in the run up to the EU Referendum warrants examination. The success of Twitter as a social media platform can in part be attributed to the way it models key aspects of human relationships, notably the asymmetry of dyadic bonds, setting it apart from other social networks (Porter 2009). Although Facebook has adapted its platform to emulate this ‘human centric’ approach it nonetheless remains somewhat of a one-way broadcast medium during political campaigns (Larsson 2016; Williamson et al. 2010). This is reflected in politicians’ different perceptions of the two platforms, with Twitter perceived as attracting ‘political junkies’ and Facebook a more diverse community (Ross and Burger 2014: 204): One marker of this is the extent to which Twitter has become a key part of ‘old media’ journalists’ activities, providing a gateway for setting news agendas and frame (Parmelee 2013). The open nature of Twitter leads to the ‘asymmetric’ modelling of human relationships, a user can ‘follow’ another user without reciprocation (Porter 2009). Moreover, by looking at official accounts, it is possible to establish a benchmark of authorship between political actors, which has become more complex in a multi-media environment (e.g. Overdorf & Greenstadt 2016). This has the potential to make Twitter an excellent platform for political interaction (Grant et al. 2010: 580).

### *Role and purpose of social media for political campaigning*

The other issue to examine is the value of social media for political campaigning or, perhaps more pertinently, its perceived value. There is a growing body of literature on the use of Twitter in the political arena and for political campaigning specifically, however, it is fragmented among the disciplines of political science, computer science and communication studies (Jungherr 2014). In addition, most existing studies on Twitter and politics are data centred, focusing on the description of empirics, with only a minority seeking to situate their

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research within wider theoretical debates (Jungherr 2014: 4). This paper seeks to provide not only a novel dataset, but also contextualisation within a specific political milieu. In doing so, it contributes to the existing literature on social media and politics which has addressed the use of social media by politicians seeking (re)election (Graham et al. 2013; Vergeer and Hermans 2013), by political parties (Baxter and Marcella 2012) and in referendums (Baxter and Marcella 2013).

At first glance, social media appears to provide an opportunity to move to a more interactive form of campaigning and away from the mere transmission of a message to engagement with followers. However, so far this has not proved to be the case, for example, in respect of the use of the platform by political parties in elections campaigns.(Graham et al, 2013).Moreover, in the run up to the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2011 not only was there little two-way engagement or dialogue on social media but the accounts frequently lacked any real policy comment (Baxter and Marcella 2013). The majority of the tweets by candidates, or just over a third (31.6%), were in ‘primary broadcast’ mode, where the accounts provided their own personal views on a range of issues or were related to campaign activities (11.3%). This supports the broader finding that outside of campaign periods politicians have also not used social media to interact with ‘normal’ Twitter users (Kim and Park 2012). The value of social media for ‘converting’ voters is therefore questionable.

The value of social media, and Twitter specifically, for political campaigning is not as a ‘conversion tool’ but rather as part of a broader promotional strategy. For example, during the 2010 UK general election, Scottish candidates dedicated a significant proportion of their tweets (15%) to campaign related activities or promotion (Baxter and Marcella 2012: 115).

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This was even more striking for the official party Twitter accounts, with over a quarter focused on campaign activities (Baxter and Marcella 2012: 118). Across the parties candidates were keen to use Twitter to present a good impression of themselves, for example, by highlighting the volume of emails they received and in this respect the online campaign mirrored the impression management seen offline (Baxter and Marcella 2012: 116). They also found only a small percentage (6.3%) of tweets dedicated to interacting with followers, and an even smaller amount responding to personal attacks on the candidate (1.4%) or the party (0.7%) (Baxter and Marcella 2012: 116). Both of these factors indicate an attempt to remove the campaign from the personal level. They found that candidates were keen to make themselves look busy and engaged in supporting their potential constituents, for example, by highlighting the number of emails they received, even in reality this is not what they were doing (Baxter and Marcella 2012: 116). This finding is supported in the 2010 UK general election campaign, where candidates primarily used Twitter as a broadcast medium (68% of content), either through their own tweets, retweets or retweets with comments (Graham et al. 2016: 774). It is therefore evident that Twitter has served as a public relations tool for candidates rather than primarily as a means to enhance democratic processes. Thus far the use of Twitter by various actors during political campaigns has left unrealised its potential as an interactive platform, the lack of engagement by candidates and parties. This leads to a first hypothesis:

All groups will use Twitter more to mobilise existing supporters, rather than to convert new ones (H1).

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### *Social media use by political ‘outsiders’*

Social media offers smaller parties a considerably more level playing field in comparison to the use of website campaigning (Southern 2014: 13; Gibson and McAllister 2015: 530). The use of social media has also been found to differ across the political spectrum and by party type. For instance, a study by Vergeer et al. (2013: 488) of the European elections, found that smaller and younger parties, those which might benefit from Twitter the most, utilised it the least. The study also identified that parties situated towards the centre of the political spectrum used Twitter much more extensively than those on the right who were least likely to utilise the platform. In the UK context, UKIP and British National Party (BNP) candidates have been the slowest to set up Twitter accounts, with Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates being early adopters, while Green party candidates engaged more with Twitter than Conservatives (Southern 2014: 13). The comparative disengagement of UKIP candidates with Twitter could be explained by the composition and structure of the parties. UKIP, for example, has a comparatively top-down party structure (Abedi & Lungberg 2009). There is also variation among politicians who do use Twitter along party lines in terms of their engagement with the platform, with Labour the most interactive and the Conservatives the least (Graham et al. 2016: 774). The results of Graham et al’s (2016) study support previous findings but are limited by the fact that only the three main parties Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats were included in the sample.

Aside from the particularities of UKIP candidates’ Twitter presence, the party’s presence as a populist right-wing party, rather than part of the establishment, can account for its use of Twitter. Twitter provides significant benefits for parties such as UKIP, allowing them to broadcast their message and bypass the traditional media which they see as distorting their

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aims (Gibson and McAllister 2015: 531). And while relatively few users follow politicians or political parties on Twitter directly, tweets can also influence more widely consumed media coverage (Larsson and Moe 2012). It therefore offers an opportunity for influence incommensurate with status. For example, there are communities of eurosceptics on Twitter, which UKIP have actively sought to engage with, such as the #NO2EU community and indicating that the party has experience of cultivating social media to support its own message (O’Callaghan et al. 2013: 100). This community also engages actively with British current affairs programmes including BBC Question Time (#BBCQT) and BBC Newsnight (#newsnight) (O’Callaghan et al. 2013: 100). Television debates have previously been identified as driving a significant increase in traffic on Twitter and by political candidates during election periods (Baxter and Marcella 2012: 118; Graham et al. 2016: 773).

### *Referendum campaigns in perspective: frames, tropes and personalisation*

In comparative perspective it is evident that certain patterns emerge in referendum campaigns across temporalities. Two points are of particular relevance here, first, it is the campaign that captures the centre ground through successfully appealing to the median voter which is likely to win. Second, and relatedly, citizens are likely to decide on the basis of cues (for example, ‘who’s behind it’) rather than on analysis of the issues, meaning that voters apply heuristics in coming to their decision. As a result, groups challenging the status quo have an incentive to use more negative and emotional claims, to counterbalance the factual existence of that status quo (e.g. Garry 2013, Bolsen et al 2014). Atikcan persuasively argues that there has been a series of successful re-framings of referendum campaigns across the EU by those challenging the status quo, through use of “negative, concrete and immediate” themes (2015: 8). The 2011 Alternative Vote (AV) referendum is a case in point and resonates with the EU

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Referendum campaign. In 2011, the ‘no’ campaign invented (by their later admission) a claim that the introduction of AV would cost over £250 million, while the ‘yes’ side compared the Conservative Chairman Baroness Sayeeda Warsi to Dr Josef Goebbels, despite also calling for a ‘mature debate’ (Qvortrup 2012: 111). The parallels to the EU Referendum are obvious where the tone of the debate was criticised, particularly after the murder of MP Jo Cox with (largely unrealised) calls for introspection on what London Mayor, Sadiq Khan called the ‘climate of hatred, of poison, of negativity, of cynicism’ generated by the campaigns (*Guardian* 17 June 2016). Both campaigns also engaged in a high level of personal attacks. The most striking similarity is the Leave campaign’s assertion that leaving the EU would provide an additional £350 million a week for the NHS, a claim discredited and quickly removed from Vote Leave’s website after the result (*Independent* 27 June 2016). This claim contributed to the elevation of the NHS as a key campaign issue, despite the very limited role of the EU in public health policy (Hervey 2016). This suggests a second hypothesis:

Leave groups will be more negative in their framing (H2)

The third hypothesis is that the Leave groups will make more use of emotional language and frames (H3). This is suggested by wider findings that the discourse of the EU Referendum was shaped on both sides by campaigners using messages intended to engage the electorate on an emotional level. This saw the benefits of European unity and consequences of Brexit put up against sovereignty issues and patriotism, with a strand of xenophobia (Farrell 2016). This effectiveness of the latter was reinforced by the coining of several key slogans - most notably ‘take back control’ - which served to shape the debate. Affect also had a role in previous referendum campaigns, with the 2014 Scottish independence referendum a case in

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point, with David Cameron making reference to his heartbreak ‘if this family of nations was torn apart’ (*Reuters* 10 September 2014).

The EU Referendum debate was deeply personalised, with Prime Minister David Cameron speaking for Remain and former Mayor of London Boris Johnson most prominent on the Leave side. The centrality of two Conservatives to the debate coupled with the (self-)side-lining of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour (Higgins 2016, Shipman 2016) and contributed to the framing of the arguments as pro/anti-establishment. This left Remain with the task of defending a status quo which many felt distanced from (Martin 2016) and which weakened the capacity to deliver effective cues (Marsh 2015). Thus in the battle for the centre ground it was Leave that framed its campaign primarily as an emotional appeal to ‘take back control’, while Remain chose to deploy a more utilitarian, cost-benefit approach.

Our final two hypotheses build on and bring together the literature discussed here, on the conduct of referendum campaigns and the use of social media by political actors. We do this through the use of two concepts ‘sticks’ and ‘stones’. Sticks are mistakes made by the other side, which are then used to question that side’s competence and credibility. This concept builds on the literature on negative campaigning and emotive language. In contrast stones are identified as the use of core arguments – both substantive and emotional – in an attempt to anchor debate and set agendas. In order to examine the use of these two concepts in the EU referendum campaigns on social media we identify the following hypotheses:

Leave groups will make more use of ‘sticks’ than Remain (H4)

Remain groups will make more use of ‘stones’ than Leave (H5).

## **METHODOLOGY AND DATA SET**

Data is drawn from the primary official Twitter accounts of the three main groups in the EU referendum: Stronger In, Vote Leave and Leave.EU. In contrast to other social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter allows far more comprehensive access to its data through the Twitter application programming interface (API). This makes the quantity and quality of the extractable data better suited to meaningful analysis. Tweet content and metadata were extracted directly from Twitter using our own Python script as this was deemed preferable to using a third party software in terms of transparency and replicability, with our code hosted on the GitHub site and available for others to use (<https://github.com/23KAM>).

The Python script was run weekly, collecting tweets for the previous seven days, between 11<sup>th</sup> February and 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2016. Data collected included the tweet text, timestamps of the tweet, number of retweets and favourites at the time of collection, and number of followers at that point in time. While this means that those tweets produced closer to the weekly collection time (midnight on Wednesday) will have slightly lower retweet and favourite figures than the rest, this is a minimal effect, as volumes were very low at this time, and it is clear that the very large majority of such interactions happen within an hour of production (Sysomos 2010). Since data was consistently collected on Thursday mornings, this means there was no discernible effect on the retweet data reported below.

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More consequentially, the methodology used only captures Tweets still on the accounts at the time of collection, so does not get any tweets that have been deleted before the script was run.

We are only aware of one instance where this was an issue: Leave.EU’s ‘Orlando’ tweet linked shootings in Florida with EU free movement on 13 June (*BBC* 13/6/16). This received much criticism at the time and was quickly removed, although similar messages were posted in the following days. Thus, while we do not have a totally complete collection of all Twitter output during the survey period, we do have all of the output that the relevant group saw fit to stand by, and thus we take it as a reliable gauge of the group’s intent and messaging.

The analysis here covers three groups that took part in the EU referendum campaign, while the Electoral Commission lists 122 individuals and groups that registered their participation (Electoral Commission 2016). The restricted coverage is based on a two-fold logic. Firstly, the officially designated groups occupy a legally and politically distinct status, under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA 2000), with access to larger financial resources and spending limits, privileged access for their own broadcasts and to media coverage, plus an umbrella position that integrates the main elements within each side’s campaign. On the Remain side, it was long clear that Stronger In would be the vehicle for bringing together campaigners, not least as it placed that responsibility at arm’s length from the government.

For Leave, matters were complicated by the early emergence of two main contenders for the designation. While Vote Leave was ultimately successful in this in April, by that time Leave.EU had established an extensive network of campaigners and activity, making good use of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) party rolls, to which it had access. Leave.EU thus

represents the only mass-membership organisation on either side of the debate, as evidenced by the size of its social media footprint. Together, these three groups make up the key actors among those groups established for the purpose of fighting the referendum – although Leave.EU has subsequently moved to build a more permanent structure – and were the only three with a broad-based approach to the campaign. Table 1 summarises the evolution of Twitter followers for the groups across the survey period: by way of comparison, these volumes were consistently one order of magnitude smaller than the number of Facebook followers.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The total dataset comprises approximately 18,000 tweets, sharing equally among the three groups (Stronger In,  $n = 6,076$ ; Vote Leave,  $n = 5,818$ , Leave.EU,  $n = 6,395$ ). As Figure 1 shows, the two official groups followed a very similar pattern on weekly volumes, with a very marked rise in the final three weeks of campaigning: Leave.EU maintained a much more steady volume throughout the survey period. Note that the final week’s data includes the 36 hours when none of the groups produced any content, after the murder of Jo Cox MP, as part of the broader suspension of campaigning.

#### FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Coding of tweets was done manually, to record theme and framing, in addition to supplementary computer-aided (NVivo) word frequency analysis and text searches, to measure sentiment and for additional content analysis. The first part of our analysis had two

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layers. First, we coded tweets according to key themes, which we identified as: business, benefits of EU, criticism of the EU, celebrity or public figure, domestic issues, external views, immigration, the other campaign, politics, public opinion, role in the world, security, social security and practical campaign-related. While some tweets contained more than one category, the primary subject of the tweet was deemed to be the tweet’s theme. These categories were developed using an inductive approach, driven by the research question. Second and drawing on Aalberg et al’s (2012) notions of strategic and game frames, we coded each tweet according to its positive or negative presentation of a substantive argument or of the group or its opponents: on the substantive arguments, ‘positive’ refers to benefits of the group’s preferred outcome, while ‘negative’ presents costs of not following that preferred outcome. This produced a four-way matrix, with tweets being assigned all relevant codes. The sentiment analysis was conducted using a list of positive and negative words imported into NVivo. We also used NVivo to conduct word frequency analysis for the groups and to conduct text searches for particular words. These two layers of manual and computer-aided analysis provide for a sophisticated understanding of the content of each tweet.

Finally, measures of follower engagement were developed. While the number of followers is a basic proxy for this, it is also useful to note how much those followers go beyond simply reading the content, as this would suggest it has an increased value for those individuals and scope to become viral, spreading out to an ever-wider set of users and thus creating opportunities to inform or sway voters. Therefore, as well as absolute volume of retweets, we present data on the mean number of retweets per tweet per follower, which gives an index of the relative efficiency of each group in achieving this engagement. As Figures 2 and 3 highlight, Vote Leave consistently out-performed Stronger In throughout the campaign on

absolute numbers of retweets and on our engagement index too. Leave.EU generally outperformed Stronger In on absolutes, but not generally on the engagement index. We note here that in comparison with other groups tracked during the survey, engagement rates for these three groups were consistently among the lowest, possibly reflecting their more diverse audiences and the larger number of followers with only a marginal interest in the referendum.

### FIGURES 2 & 3 ABOUT HERE

## ANALYSIS

The survey corpus reveals a number of patterns on the question of how much the medium is used to mobilise versus to convert. All three groups demonstrate a similar distribution of framing, with “positive mentions of own group” always being the most common and with approximately half of all content containing substantive arguments, with negative arguments always outweighing positive ones (Table 2). In addition, when looking at themes (Table 3), we find that ‘campaign’ - made up of tweets dealing with process issues – is by far the most common theme for the two Leave groups and second most common for Stronger In: when combined with the ‘opposing campaign’ theme – the other process-related theme – we find approximately one-third of all tweets are covered.

This suggests that there is a substantial focus on mobilisation of existing supporters, rather than converting new ones: while the former can be used to engage the latter, this was only made explicit on rare occasions, most obviously with Stronger In’s brief #Votin hashtag in

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May. This is reflected in the ‘campaign’ theme, where all groups would retweet local campaigners’ campaigning and canvassing activity, as well as in the ‘external views’, ‘celebrity/public figure’ and ‘public opinion’ themes, all of which were presented as evidence of wider support for the relevant groups’ objectives. While Leave made much in general of questioning expertise, there is a clear divergence between the two Leave groups’ approaches on this latter point, with Vote Leave much less likely to invoke other voices.

The mixture of positive and negative arguments also merits mention. That all three groups were more likely to use the latter (“don’t choose the alternative because...”) highlights to a considerable degree the nature of Twitter as a space of instantaneous reaction. The platform lends itself well to rebuttal and questioning, connecting to other media through the use of hashtags, but with the consequence that content is more likely to be negatively-framed (see Ceron & d’Abba 2015). This reached its high-point in the campaign when both Vote Leave and Stronger In produced very substantial volumes of content during the various TV debates (discussed below).

#### TABLES 2 & 3 ABOUT HERE

Despite this tendency, we find that there is an overall majority of content with a positive frame, when looking at the survey period as a whole. However, this masks a clear trend over time towards less positive framing (Figure 4): While there were no evident development during the time before the official campaign, once this began in mid-April there was a growth in the volume of negatively-framed content, especially negative comments about other groups (Figure 5). As noted above, this ties in with the advent of the TV debates, where much more

content was devoted to attacking opponents than to supporting one’s own side. While this effect was seen in all three groups, the decline in positive framing was smallest for Stronger In, while Leave.EU was consistently less positive than Vote Leave, possibly because it felt less constrained, due to its lack of official designation (the gap between the two became clearer after the April decision by the Electoral Commission). However, as Figure 5 shows, Stronger In was more likely to make negative comments about their opponents than were Vote Leave, although in the final weeks there was little to differentiate all three groups: given that this frame reflects a strategy of *ad hominem* attacks, this calls into question how far Stronger In were able to run a campaign that concentrated on the substantive arguments for EU membership. Indeed, when themes are matched against the frames, there is very little difference across the three groups, with the exceptions that Stronger In was much more positive about ‘politics’ than either Leave group and (more obviously) on the ‘positive to EU’ and ‘criticism of EU’ themes.

#### FIGURES 4 & 5 ABOUT HERE

When we consider the relative use of emotion by groups, there is clear and consistent evidence that points to Stronger In as the more likely user. As noted above, the group is the most frequent user of negative comments about other groups, notwithstanding its high overall positive framing. However, then considering the presence of affective words, Stronger In is the most common user of overall positive affect and overall affect, but the least frequent user of overall negative affect. This holds true whether we consider the percentage of words that are affective or when controlling for the volume of tweets, which suggests that the group is more likely to use more than one affective word per tweet (Table 4). The difference between

the groups is found consistently across the survey period, when looking at weekly totals for affect.

#### TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Finally, we analyse the corpus for word frequencies: Table 5 lists the 20 most common word-stems for each group. This reinforces the similarities and differences between the three groups that have been noted above, especially in terms of how Twitter usage fits into a broader package of social media campaigning.

Most obviously, all three groups make frequent references to themselves, with their username being the first or second most common word stem. In very large part, this comes from the re-tweeting of other users’ content that mentions the group itself. The only two other usernames to make the top-20 are Stronger In’s press account and Grassroots Out!, a cross-party grouping set up to run public debates, with which Leave.EU had a relatively close relationship. A comparison of the word frequency analysis also draws attention to the disparities between the different campaigns’ approaches and is particularly revealing given the comparable number of tweets across the three campaigns. Both the official campaigns, Stronger In and Vote Leave, have a more consistent approach to their tweeting, with Leave.EU an outlier. This is demonstrated by the cumulative total of the weighted percentage of their 20 most frequently tweeted word-stems, with Stronger In’s most frequently occurring words accounting for 16.11% of their total tweets and Vote Leave’s a comparable 15.11%. In contrast, Leave.EU took a far less considered approach to its use of social media with these

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word-stems accounting for only 10.97% of their total volume. This suggests less coordination on key messages and a more reactive use of Twitter.

All groups also make much use of campaigning and mobilisation language (“voting”, “campaign”, “support”, etc.), substantiating the first hypothesis that priority lies on mobilisation rather than converting new supporters: links to fund-raising and enrolment as an activist were common throughout the period, as groups tried to deepen their connection with users. This is also evident in the extensive use of debate hashtags by Vote Leave and Stronger In, to tie themselves into the key points of public debate. Despite their duration of only a couple of hours at a time, both groups produced massive spikes in output (c. 4-5 tweets per minute) on each occasion, with a mixture of links through to supporting material for their speakers, rebuttals of opponents and re-tweets of positive messaging about their performance. Tellingly, Leave.EU did not engage in such behaviour at all, instead taking their own line through the campaign, not least to differentiate themselves from Vote Leave.

#### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

A different cleavage appears in relation to the mention of individuals by each group. While Stronger In has no one in their top 20, both Leave groups contain more than one. The usage of Messers Gove, Farage and Johnson by their respective groups was uniformly positive and sought to reinforce their images as figureheads and leaders in the public debate. By contrast, the high volume of mentions of David Cameron was a clear instance of Leave making use of a ‘stick’, with the Prime Minister’s words and actions being repeatedly turned against him, both to call into question his competence and ability and to remind non-Tory voters that a

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Leave vote would also hurt this government. This latter argument is further reinforced by Cameron’s absence from the Stronger In list and his own desire not to become the ‘face’ of Remain (Oliver 2016).

As Table 3 demonstrates, groups also took varying approaches to policy points, when they did so at all. Stronger In focused on economic points, while Vote Leave devoted much more space to control and immigration: these reflect the perceived strengths of each side from polling (Curtice 2016). Leave.EU had much less on policy, with only “trading” appearing in their most frequent words, typically as part of content about the myriad opportunities awaiting the UK post-membership. This breakdown suggests again that groups were playing to their strengths, rather than seeking to (re-)claim issues from the other side: Stronger In’s greater use of policy points also reflects on their efforts to make more use of evidence-based arguments, as compared to Leave.

However, the most striking observation of Table 5 is the extent to which Leave set the rhetorical framing and language. Stronger In’s most common word was “leaving”, well in excess of its use by either Leave group. Similarly, “Brexit” was more used by Stronger In than Vote Leave, if still well behind Leave.EU. By contrast, “remain” was used half as much as “leave” by all three groups. As much as this pattern might be understood as part of Remain’s broader effort to discredit and problematize Leave’s position, it does also expose the extent to which there was not a commensurate effort to articulate a positive vision of what EU membership could be.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The EU referendum was an atypical political campaign in many ways. The profound uncertainty over its timing and its content, coupled with the relative lack of experience of such structures in British political culture, all contributed to an unusual set of circumstances which appeared to necessitate the various actors to adapt their previous strategies and approaches to political campaigning. Thus, as much as they were able to draw on a stock of techniques and discourse, this underwent a process of adjustment and modification to the exigencies of the campaign. As a high-tempo, highly-adaptable and highly-responsive mode of campaigning, the Twitter activity of the groups offers a window into that adjustment.

This is reflected in the evaluation of the hypotheses set out above. While Hypothesis 1 was supported - with all groups using the platform primarily for mobilisation and organisation of a pre-existing base – all of the other hypotheses present a more mixed picture. All sides made roughly equal use of negative frames and content (H2), suggesting that Stronger In’s use of ‘Project Fear’ was being pursued forcefully, drawing on its success in the 2014 Scottish referendum. Indeed, Stronger In was also the most likely to use emotional language and framing, in contradiction to expectations (H3), just as it made as much use of ‘sticks’ as its Leave opponents (H4). Most consequentially, it was the Leave groups that appeared to make most use of agenda-setting ‘stones’, shaping the debate (H5).

These findings reflect those found by others (e.g. Crines 2016, Parker 2016), with Leave making much better use of the opportunities afforded by the structure of the referendum debate and campaign: moreover, Leave’s choice of frames fits with Atikcan’s (2015) wider

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findings from other referendums on EU issues. Perhaps, in this light one of the Leave side’s most successful moves was to discredit experts as ‘self-interested’ (Parker 2016) and as such appealing to voters’ desire for shortcuts, rather than substantive engagement with issues. Leave also acted as the agenda setters, casting Remain as ‘Project Fear’ and the phrase ‘Brexit’ became common parlance, even on the Remain side. This tactic of changing the debate to capture the middle ground has characterised successful referendum campaigns across the globe, requiring the other side to react and respond and reinforcing the centrality of a particular issue (Qvortrup 2012: 111-112). Twitter, with its propensity to support reactive commentary and to perpetuate negative arguments, proved a testing ground for the campaigns, with the Leave strategies ultimately translating better to this medium.

In more practical terms, Leave was able to benefit from a much larger footprint in the Twittersphere (and online more generally), building on the medium-term work of eurosceptic movements in aggregating and connecting previously disparate individuals and themes into a broad coalition of opposition to the EU. Importantly, the existence of two large Leave groups – Vote Leave and Leave.EU – played to their advantage, as each was able to speak to a different audience, with the latter able to take a line that was not bound by the conventions of official designation within which the former operated. Both were able to draw on a long history of eurosceptic arguments and frames that had been extensively field-tested in the period since the Maastricht treaty, which gave them a clear head-start in establishing both the lines and ownership of key issues, including finance and free movement. The combination of two very different approaches from Vote Leave and Leave.EU proved challenging for the Stronger In campaign to counter and adapt to. Vote Leave’s use of Twitter demonstrated a much more strategic, focused and bespoke approach to their campaign, while Leave.EU drew

on their existing support base, with an emphasis on a high volume of tweets across the course of the campaign but in a more reactive, less focused way.

Overall Stronger In presented a much less confident and flexible strategy, both online and off. Partly this was due to the need to await for the re-negotiation to conclude before government figures could openly join the campaign, but also it was a result of the profound lack of experience in articulating positive arguments about the value of EU membership. The evidence from the Twitter campaign suggests a more scattergun approach, trying to make a lot of small arguments to diverse groups, rather than taking the more concise and focused approach of Vote Leave and Leave.EU. This ultimately translated into a reliance on reacting to Leave’s initiatives and to placing much effort on discrediting Leave’s competence, ultimately playing into Leave’s hands with its questioning of elite authority.

Beyond the referendum, the lessons from the online campaigning carry continued relevance, both for the UK and elsewhere. As the UK moves towards leaving the EU, the arguments and frames developed during the campaign continue to carry much weight, especially as they remain a key reference point to many voters. Leave.EU continues to operate as a pressure group, with its large follower base, and the scrutiny of UK-EU negotiations will continue, with Twitter acting as a key site for ‘hot takes’ that can have considerable impact on old media framing (e.g. DeLuca 2012). Stronger In has sought to do the same and has become Open Britain.

More generically, the findings underline the adaptability of social media to new political spaces. In an age where populist rhetoric appears to be making considerable headway, the

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ability to connect previously-atomised individuals and to give (at least the appearance of) direct access to politicians reinforces the characterisation of politics as just another arena of social life. Online spaces offer echo chambers that potentially reinforce divisive political agendas and undermine democratic logics of interaction, compromise and consensus (see Colleoni et al. 2014). By better understanding how political agents use social media and the opportunities such platforms provide, the more opportunity there will be for democracies to find ways to incorporate and defuse these tensions, in the service of the long-term maintenance of the political system.

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**TABLE 1: Twitter follower growth**

	11 February	13 April	1 June	22 June
Stronger In	10,496	22,447	32,487	48,314
Vote Leave	17,455	33,813	49,140	68,791
Leave.EU	61,546	84,065	89,466	94,437

**Table 2: Groups’ tweets containing frames, Percentage**

	<b>Stronger In</b>	<b>Vote Leave</b>	<b>Leave.EU</b>
Positive Arguments	27.34	16.07	16.48
Negative Arguments	27.78	35.82	33.78
Positive Mentions of Own Group	33.53	39.88	38.20
Negative mentions of Other Groups	19.45	18.63	13.68

**Table 3: Groups’ tweets by theme, Percentage**

	<b>Stronger In</b>	<b>Vote Leave</b>	<b>Leave.EU</b>
Positive on EU	5.67	0.00	0.00
Criticism of EU	0.00	13.56	15.96
Politics	6.05	12.60	15.91
Domestic	10.35	6.29	5.22
Business/Trade	26.37	7.46	12.76
Security	3.99	2.85	2.78
Role in the world	3.60	0.73	1.79
Immigration	1.20	11.18	6.55
External Views	3.53	0.59	4.13
Celebrity/Public figures	2.70	0.40	1.08
Public opinion	0.20	0.43	1.87
Campaign	20.25	20.90	24.26
Opposing campaigns	19.09	13.04	6.68

**Table 4: Groups’ use of affect**

	<b>Stronger In</b>		<b>Vote Leave</b>		<b>Leave.EU</b>	
	<i>By tweet</i>	<i>By words</i>	<i>By tweet</i>	<i>By words</i>	<i>By tweet</i>	<i>By words</i>
Negative Affect	0.36	1.99%	0.37	2.07%	0.42	2.43%
Positive Affect	0.65	3.62%	0.55	3.04%	0.46	2.63%
<b>Total Affect</b>	1.01	5.61%	0.92	5.11%	0.88	5.06%

**Table 5: 20 most frequent word-stems, by group**

<b>Stronger In</b>		<b>Vote Leave</b>		<b>Leave.EU</b>	
<i>Word</i>	<i>Weighted %</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Weighted %</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Weighted %</i>
leaving	2.26	@voteleave	2.99	Brexit	1.51
@strongerin	2.18	voting	1.56	@leaveeu	1.44
Europe	1.49	#takecontrol	1.23	leaving	1.07
voting	1.15	leaving	1.23	voting	0.78
campaign	1.09	Gove	0.68	grassroots	0.73
remain	0.91	campaign	0.65	#euref	0.53
Britain	0.8	control	0.59	remain	0.46
jobs	0.79	#itveuref	0.58	trading	0.41
#bbcdebate	0.55	immigration	0.57	campaign	0.41
Brexit	0.54	#bbcqt	0.56	Farage	0.38
#itveuref	0.53	Cameron	0.55	Britain	0.37
@strongerinpress	0.48	#Inorout	0.5	Nigel	0.37
better	0.44	#bbcdebate	0.48	Cameron	0.36
rights	0.44	remain	0.45	back	0.34
economy	0.42	Brexit	0.43	people	0.33
means	0.41	lets	0.42	Going	0.33
today	0.41	Boris	0.42	European	0.3
clearly	0.41	join	0.41	referendum	0.29
busy	0.41	today	0.41	support	0.28
trading	0.4	back	0.4	June	0.28





