

Taking back control as ontological repair: A qualitative content analysis in elite Leave campaign communication

Farima Nazari Safarzadeh, Mohammad Reza Saeidabadi*

Department of European Studies, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran,
 Tehran, Iran.

Article Info	Abstract
Original Article	This article examines how the Brexit slogan "Take Back Control" was constructed as a narrative of ontological repair in elite Leave campaign communication. While existing explanations of Brexit have emphasized economic inequality, institutional tensions, Euroscepticism, and cultural backlash, they do not fully explain why the language of control became so emotionally and politically resonant. Drawing on social constructivism, ontological security theory, and populism, the article argues that "Take Back Control" functioned as a connecting frame that linked identity insecurity, loss of control, elite betrayal, and popular sovereignty. Methodologically, the study uses theory-guided qualitative content analysis of 45 public political texts produced by prominent Leave campaigners between 2012 and 2016. The findings show that control was not framed merely as a legal or administrative demand, but as a condition of democratic agency, national continuity, and collective self-government. Economic claims were present in the campaign, but they gained persuasive force mainly when embedded within broader narratives of fairness, sovereignty, and democratic ownership. The article contributes to Brexit scholarship by showing how Brexit was made meaningful as a restorative political project rather than a narrowly economic or constitutional choice.
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* Corresponding author: ✉ sabadi@ut.ac.ir,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3950-7939>

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

This article examines how the Brexit slogan “Take Back Control” was constructed as a narrative of ontological repair in elite Leave campaign communication. The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union has generated extensive academic debate, with existing explanations often emphasizing economic inequality, regional decline, austerity, globalization, immigration, Euroscepticism, party politics, and cultural backlash. These explanations remain essential for understanding the broader conditions that shaped the referendum. However, they do not fully explain why the language of “control” became so emotionally powerful and politically persuasive during the Leave campaign. The slogan did not operate merely as a technical demand for legal sovereignty or as a simple expression of economic dissatisfaction. Rather, it condensed multiple grievances into a broader narrative of loss, recovery, and democratic restoration.

2. Aims

The central argument of the article is that “Take Back Control” functioned as a narrative of ontological repair. In this sense, the slogan promised to repair a perceived disruption in Britain’s political identity, democratic agency, and national continuity. It linked identity insecurity, loss of control, elite betrayal, popular sovereignty, and democratic self-government into a coherent political story. Brexit was therefore made meaningful not simply as withdrawal from an international institution, but as a restorative project through which Britain could recover its capacity to act, decide, and recognize itself as a self-governing political community. This interpretation does not claim that such repair was actually achieved after Brexit. Instead, it examines how Leave campaign communication represented Brexit as a solution to perceived uncertainty, displacement, and democratic loss.

3. Methodology

The article develops an integrated theoretical framework combining social constructivism, ontological security theory, and populism. Social constructivism provides the foundation for understanding sovereignty, control, and democracy as politically constructed meanings rather than fixed or self-evident concepts. From this perspective, sovereignty is not treated only as a formal legal condition, but as a claim whose meaning is produced through public language and shared interpretation. Ontological security theory explains why narratives of loss, uncertainty, and restoration can become emotionally resonant, especially when they are tied to collective identity and national continuity. Populism adds a further dimension by showing how these meanings are moralized through the opposition between “the people” and distant, unaccountable, or corrupt elites. Together, these theoretical lenses

make it possible to understand “Take Back Control” as a symbolic frame that joined constitutional, economic, cultural, and emotional concerns into a single narrative of national recovery.

Methodologically, the study uses theory-guided qualitative content analysis. The empirical material consists of 45 public political texts produced between 2012 and 2016 by prominent Leave campaigners, including speeches, interviews, and public statements. The selected texts were produced by key figures associated with the Conservative Party, UKIP, and Labour Leave. The corpus was selected purposively because the study aims to examine recurring meaning patterns rather than produce a statistically representative sample. The texts were chosen because they directly engaged with themes of sovereignty, control, identity, immigration, democratic accountability, and Britain’s relationship with the European Union.

The coding frame was developed deductively from the article’s theoretical framework and refined through close reading of the texts. The main analytical categories included identity insecurity, loss of control, popular sovereignty, elite betrayal, sovereignty and control framing, economic grievance, and restorative narratives. Codes were applied to meaningful text segments, and overlapping codes were allowed where a segment performed more than one interpretive function. The article does not use discourse analysis as a formal methodological approach. Although it examines political language and meaning-making, its analytical procedure is based on systematic qualitative content analysis, coded themes, and recurring interpretive patterns across the selected texts.

4. Findings

The findings show that “Take Back Control” operated as a connecting frame within Leave campaign communication. First, EU membership was repeatedly framed as a condition of lost control. Control was linked to borders, law-making, immigration, public money, regulation, and democratic accountability. This framing turned institutional criticism into a broader anxiety about political agency and national self-direction. Britain was represented as unable to act fully as a self-governing political community while authority remained tied to EU institutions.

Second, sovereignty was moralized through populist framing. Leave campaigners repeatedly represented sovereignty as something that properly belonged to “the people” but had been taken away, surrendered, or ignored by distant elites. EU institutions, domestic political leaders, experts, and bureaucratic authorities were often positioned as obstacles to democratic self-government. This people–elite opposition transformed sovereignty loss into a narrative of betrayal and democratic exclusion. Brexit was therefore framed not merely as a policy change, but as the correction of an injustice and the restoration of rightful popular authority.

Third, the slogan linked insecurity, sovereignty, identity, and betrayal into a restorative narrative. Economic claims were present in Leave campaign communication, but they gained persuasive force when embedded within wider meanings of fairness, democratic ownership, and national recovery. Money was not only about spending; it became a symbol of democratic control. Borders were not only about immigration policy; they became symbols of security and national agency. Laws were not only legal instruments; they became indicators of whether the British people truly governed themselves.

5. Conclusion

The article contributes to Brexit scholarship by showing how economic, institutional, cultural, and populist explanations can be connected rather than treated as separate or competing accounts. Its main contribution is to explain how “Take Back Control” resonated beyond economics by condensing material grievances, identity concerns, democratic claims, and emotional anxieties into a single political symbol. The slogan made Brexit appear as restoration rather than rupture, recovery rather than risk, and democratic self-repair rather than simple withdrawal from the European Union. In doing so, the article also contributes to broader debates on political communication, populist mobilization, and the emotional politics of sovereignty.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence. In the final writing of the article, ChatGPT Plus was used only for linguistic enhancement and editing and to assist in the translation of parts of the text. The scientific responsibility, data analysis, accuracy of references, and final content of the article rests with the authors.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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