

An Institutional Decay Analysis of European Integration and the Case of Brexit

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Abstract

This research examines the challenges that the European integration project presently faces and discusses the theoretical and empirical factors that have influenced the context of Britain's vote to exit the European Union (EU), known as Brexit. Accordingly, the research argues that the EU is empowered by clout related to authority, laws, and democracy, alongside the established counterpart institutions of member states, but the polity is contested due to a persistently uncharacteristic structural identity, problematic democratic legitimacy, and questioned relevance and efficacy. Consequently, the EU is challenged by Euroskepticism and distressed relations with member states, and it appears vulnerable to the influences emanating from the domestic politics of member states. This analysis posits that the Brexit referendum was the outcome of the interaction between the theoretical and empirical milieu of the EU and national events pertaining to the British party system and electoral politics due to institutional decay at the supranational and national levels. While this research does not predict the imminent collapse of the EU any time soon, the advent of Brexit, the conditions that triggered it, and the discourse used by its proponents are also present in several member states that warrant concern for the future of the EU.

Keywords: European Union, European integration, supranationalism, inter-governmentalism, Euroskepticism, Brexit, institutional decay

Introduction

The creation and development of the European Union (EU) have been more like an evolving journey than a confirmed destination. The EU's member states have departed from the familiar legal and political settings of the nation-state on their uncharted road to regional integration and have therefore encountered uncertainties, taken risks, and captured opportunities. Over the nearly seven decades of its existence, the EU has grown in terms of the number of member states and expanding areas of common policies, and along the way, it has accumulated an impressive, albeit mixed, overall performance record. The advent of Brexit is symptomatic of the open fissures of discontent that have simmered over the years across member states, which could trigger a domino effect if not addressed.

French statesman Robert Schuman is credited for envisioning economic cooperation among European countries through the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in preparation for the creation of a united Europe. In a milestone speech he delivered in Strasbourg on May 16, 1949, Schuman described the century of supranational communities as Europe's duty to save humanity from the devastation caused by selfish nationalism and gave the

proposed supranational governance structure its name, the European Community (Price, n.d(a)). In his subsequent forward-looking declaration on May 9, 1950, he reasoned that Europe would be transformed and that building peaceful relations between France and Germany was a fundamental requirement for securing peace and prosperity on the continent. By specifying that the proposed joint Franco-German production of coal and steel be placed “under one High Authority in an organization open to the participation of other countries of Europe,” Schuman argued that the project would “bring to reality the first solid groundwork for a European Federation vital for the preservation of world peace” (Price, n.d(b)). The French diplomat Jean Monnet is considered to be the founder of European federalism through his promotion of supranationalism, and his aspirations went beyond the domain of economic integration to include political and military areas, as well as the application of a gradual and functional approach to constructing federal Europe (Sliwinski, 2009: 31–36).

Research Problem

The June 26, 2016, referendum vote in Britain to leave the EU (Brexit) represents a serious setback for European integration, and the supranational structure is presently going through rough times because of the potentially disturbing ramifications of the prospect of Britain’s departure. Specifically, the withdrawal of Britain introduces the risk of triggering a process in which additional member states may exit the EU, in effect unraveling the world’s most elaborate example of a supranational structure. European supranationalism has significantly contributed to creating peace and prosperity on the continent since the Second World War but currently faces serious challenges. Therefore, this paper focuses on the theoretical and empirical aspects of the EU within which the issue of Brexit can be analyzed using the “institutional decay” concept as an analytical tool.

Research Objectives

This paper investigates Brexit by addressing the theoretical challenges inherent in the institutionalization of European integration and discussing relevant empirical aspects of the performance of the EU as an institution responsible for regional integration. The argument assumes that an analysis that encompasses the theoretical and empirical considerations of the EU provides a meaningful perspective for understanding Brexit. Succinctly stated, this paper endeavors to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify the sources/reasons of institutional decay in the European Union
2. Explain the case of Brexit within the theoretical and empirical contexts of the EU and institutional decay.

The contribution of this research lies in the fact that it is the first to apply the concept of “institutional decay” in the study of an international organization such as the EU. The concept, which was pioneered by Samuel P. Huntington (1965) and furthered by his protégé Francis Fukuyama (2011 and 2013), was meant to explain institutional decay at the national level, as evidenced in their respective works on institutional decay in developing countries and the United States.

Theoretical Framework: Explaining the European Union under Stress

The task of fitting theoretical frameworks and analytical tools to study the EU is not easy. Competing theoretical perspectives, such as realist interests, liberal institutional

imperatives, and the constructivist commitment to values, can prove useful for explaining various aspects of the EU's policies. Characterizations of EU institutions in terms of functionalism, supranationalism, and intra-governmentalism, as well as the differential effects of Europeanization policies through top-down as opposed to bottom-up approaches, provide various understandings of the politics of the EU. Furthermore, the domestic and international levels of analysis are relevant for understanding the politics of the EU by looking at issues of governance among member and non-member states, as well as inside member and non-member states. In examining the EU, this research uses Huntington's definition of an institution as "stable valued and recurring patterns of behavior" and institutionalization as "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability" (Huntington, 1965: 394). In addition, the level of institutionalization of any organization or procedure can be measured along the dimensions of adaptability–rigidity, complexity–simplicity, autonomy–subordination, and coherence–disunity (Huntington, 1965).

This research makes the case that Brexit reflects a case of institutional decay both at the institutional level of the EU and in the politics of England. According to Barany (2008: 585), institutional decay is a "process marked by the erosion and breakdown of previously accepted and observed rules and norms governing organizational behavior" (Barany, 2008: 585). Usually, the decay is caused by a breakdown or erosion of norms beginning with the weakening of once strong informal institutions due to destabilizing forces that seek to trigger degenerative changes to the status quo. Under such a scenario, norms that were once deemed unacceptable attain acceptability or accommodation under modified legal regulations (Barany, 2008: 585).

Buttressing the point above, Fukuyama (2011: 139) also argued that political or institutional decay arises when social and economic transformations challenge an established political order that reflects a dated equilibrium among the competing forces within a society until existing actors act to remedy the decaying institutions by introducing a new set of rules and institutions. Over the years, the EU has grappled with major vexing issues, such as developing common foreign and defense policies, battling economic recessions, tackling terrorism, and dealing with the wave of immigration from Africa, the Middle East, and so forth. The inaction of the EU in the face of the aforementioned challenges can also be traced to institutional decay in member countries due to rising nationalism and the emergence of populist far-right parties that have harnessed domestic discontent via domestic mobilization. This trend has made it politically difficult for politicians to make the necessary concessions needed for effective solutions by the EU to deal with the mounting supranational challenges.

Hence, "It would appear that the EU, in expanding its size, under the impulse of geopolitical forces and economies of scale, has decreased its autonomy and coherence while enhancing their complexity and adaptability" (Carey and White, 2017: 11). While the expansion of the EU from its humble beginnings with six countries in 1951 to its current membership of 28 could be viewed as an affirmation of its values and importance in Europe, it has created an unintended consequence of being too large to please all members, as evidenced by Brexit and the latent discontent in other member states, such as Italy, Spain, Germany, and so forth. In addition, as the EU has expanded over the years, it has failed in meeting the basic litmus test of Huntington's effective institutionalization, which include adaptability–rigidity, complexity–simplicity, autonomy–subordination, and coherence–disunity. This failure happened because, while the EU's scope of operations has expanded far beyond its original mandate, this change has not occurred with the corresponding institutional flexibility and agility to deal with the increased responsibilities.

Problematic Aspects of the European Union and Institutional Decay

The law-making capacity of the EU's supranationalism poses a serious difficulty for legal theory, in that it challenges the conventional close connection between state and law, makes it difficult to ascertain where sovereignty is placed, results in creating competing legal systems, and thus threatens to produce a legal system in crisis (Bańkowski and Christodoulidis, 1998). Related to this issue is the difficulty in assessing the democratic legitimacy of the law-making capacity of supranational institutions since moving beyond the nation-state level weakens or disrupts the connection between sovereignty and law and effectively unsettles the moral justification of the laws produced by the supranational structures of the EU (Kadelbach, 2011). Thus, member states and their citizens often cite this democratic legitimacy argument to resist attempts by the EU to assert its legislative powers. This undermines the effectiveness of the EU in the face of mounting challenges which further lead to institutional decay.

At a normative level, some have even argued that, despite its growth in terms of institutional consolidation and acquired competencies, the EU continues to suffer from underdeveloped policy legitimacy, essentially because the mythical foundation of the concept of legitimacy (broadly understood as a symbolic value shared by all European people) is lacking in the EU project, and therefore achieving its policy legitimacy is theoretically difficult (Obradovic, 1996). This situation does not augur well for effective institutional coherence and efficacy among member states due to competing policy claims between member states and the EU, which can be protracted and require time to resolve, thereby leading to institutional paralysis and decay. Although the governing system within the EU has, to some extent, moved away from the bureaucratic stereotype of policymaking and implementation, the new devices it incorporates to grant social actors increased roles in a more participatory form of governance are not sufficiently open or democratic (Peters, 2004). In general normative terms, however, the existence of a supranational institution such as the EU is justified based on its contribution to helping nation-states "improve the lives of individuals within and without their borders," especially in a globalized world that makes it difficult for states to "protect and promote the rights and welfare of their citizens by operating alone" (Walton, 2013: 18).

In addition, the application of the concept of supranationalism involves empirical challenges. An examination of the sentiment of European supranationalism, as opposed to national/regional allegiances, reveals that supranational identifications are lower than pre-established allegiances among national civil servants who attend EU committees, and only national government officials who participate intensively in EU committees tend to express supranational allegiances (Trondal, 2002). Furthermore, an analysis of the distribution of decision making over various policies indicates that European people prefer that policies pertaining to international issues, such as interstate conflicts, migration, and the environment, be addressed at the supranational level, while issues of immediate relevance to the lives of the people, such as taxation, health care, and education, be addressed at the national level (Thomassen and Schmitt, 2004). This dichotomy has created a conflict over EU citizens' desire for national autonomy versus European bureaucrats' and supranationalists' desire for nationalistic subordination, further eroding the institutional coherence and unity of the EU.

Moreover, EU officials operate within multiple contexts ranging from national, professional, departmental, and inter-governmental levels; therefore, the ability of these

individuals to assume supranational identities and preferences conducive to the integration roles of the EU is an important issue. Organizational socialization is defined as a process that enables individuals to learn and adjust in order to assume roles befitting individual needs and organizational requirements (Chao, 2012); thus, the importance of socializing EU bureaucrats who come from various previously established backgrounds into supranational roles cannot be exaggerated.

For example, regarding the Council of Ministers, in which delegates represent respective national governments, at least three competing perspectives are provided to explain the delegates' negotiating behaviors in working groups: officials as agents of the member states, discretionary actors based on their own political values and attitudes, and actors as being exposed to a sustained process of socialization that helps reduce the gap between national and transnational definitions of interests (Beyers, 1998). In addition, scholars have shown that national experts seconded the European Commission's efforts to undergo a process of socialization in which they would adopt a supranational role perception as opposed to departmental and inter-governmental role perceptions, and this socialization is primarily associated with the length of their stay within the European Commission (Trondal, 2007). A more comprehensive study of the process of socialization that covers various types of employment in a number of EU agencies indicates that only permanent staff with strong levels of pre-socialization in supranationalism show a strong tendency to internalize supranational allegiance, while temporary staff only adopt supranational norms, and seconded staff show half supranational loyalty and tend to shift their allegiance back to their ministries upon returning home (Suvarierol, Busuios, and Groenleer, 2013).

Moreover, the EU has had important impacts on the national politics of its member states. For example, researchers found that senior member states of the EU (those which joined the institution in the 1950s through the 1970s) tended to have lower voter turnout rates at national parliamentary elections compared with member states that joined later (in the 1980s through the 1990s), suggesting that continued membership in the increasingly integrating EU might impact Europeans' connection to their respective national politics (Peterson and Rasmussen, 2004). Nonetheless, the fact remains that citizens of the EU member states generally have limited influence on the allocation of decision-making competencies between national governments and supranational institutions, and the level of supranational attachment varies among Europeans along many variables, such as the degree of trust regarding national government, age, and education (Coromina and Saris, 2012).

Empirical Implications for the European Union

The bloc of countries recognized as "the EU" refers to a regime of regional integration that embodies the underlying theorization and functioning institutions. As the preceding discussion implies, it is possible to discern two conflicting perspectives on the EU.

First, the EU represents an empowered polity: Embedded in the EU are three interrelated layers of conceptual underpinnings that make it appear as an enabled institution, as explained below.

- First, there is a layer of authority akin to sovereignty, in which the EU acquires powers relinquished by member states, exercises exclusive competences, seems poised to

introduce the notion of European citizenship, and therefore appears to act as a pseudo-sovereign polity.

- Second, there is a layer of laws collectively akin to a constitution, expressed in the existence of constituent treaties, such as the Treaty of Paris (1951), the Treaty of Rome (1957), the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), and the Lisbon Treaty (2007). These treaties collectively institutionalize the EU, provide the fundamental laws that establish its structures and functions, and deal with vital issues that influence important aspects of Europeans' lives.
- Third, there is a layer of democracy, in which the EU encompasses an elected transnational European Parliament composed of representatives from member states and participates in the policymaking process.

The EU's three layers of authority, laws, and democracy function simultaneously with their national counterparts that already exist in individual European member states. These layers contribute to ascribing important aspects of sophistication to European politics and provide the essential ingredients necessary to carry out the European integration project.

Second, the EU exists as a contested entity: The EU manifests a peculiar character that defies customary institutional concepts and practices. Conspicuous problematic characteristics are detailed below.

- The inter-state association within the EU is stronger than that found in a typical international governmental organization, but it clearly does not embody a nation-state structure. Within the uneasy coexistence between the supranational system of governance and the national governments of member states, the EU appears as a quasi-federal entity at best. This situation has created a tenuous relationship between the EU and members regarding autonomy–subordination claims.
- Concerns over the democratic deficiency and policy legitimacy of the EU exist. These are due to the difficulty of justifying the mandate of the EU's supranational structures and the legitimacy of the laws and policies it produces in ways similar to those of conventional nation-states.
- The European people have not fully internalized the concept of European citizenship, and their influence in determining the allocation of decision-making authority between national and supranational levels of governance remains limited. EU bureaucrats have varying degrees of supranational allegiances as opposed to established national and regional identifications. The lack of internalization of the desired norm of European citizenship is a contributing factor to the ongoing institutional decay in the EU, as this characteristic undermines the EU's coherence and unity.

These three challenging aspects are structural and therefore persistent, and they have been disadvantageous to the EU's novel supranational institutions in comparison with more familiar and established national political systems. The disputed character and apparatus of the EU introduce doubts regarding its validity and relevance to the European context, thus priming the region for institutional decay due to the failure to find the right balance in the continua of adaptability–rigidity, complexity–simplicity, autonomy–subordination, and coherence–disunity in dealing with member states.

Overall, the two perspectives of the EU as an empowered polity and as a contested entity present theoretical and substantive issues for the disciplines of political science and law, and they constitute the background that has profound implications for European governments and people.

Distressed Relations between the European Union and Member States

The supranational basis of European integration contributes to the creation of a two-fold setting composed of the national sphere of sovereignty, laws, and democracy of individual member states on one hand and the EU's clout in terms of authority, laws, and democracy on the other. Accordingly, both the EU and member states have justifiable entitlements to exercise real political influence in creating and implementing policies. Although a distinction between the competencies of the EU and those of member states exists, this unique duality creates a structural context in which disputes between the EU institutions and national polities can take place recurrently. However, there is a permanent schism in the relations between national sovereignty and the EU's supranational integration, in which the "EU institutions tend to generate their own agendas, which often go against the national strategies of some member states. As a result, the clash between national and supranational interests is often unavoidable" (Bosoni, 2013). Institutional decay deepens as disputes between member states and the EU institutions in Brussels (the headquarters of the EU) become more intense during times of crisis, thus revealing the inherent conflict between national interests and supranational imperatives.

At the national level, voters appear powerless in this conflict, as they are unable to influence the policies that govern them. Voters appear hapless as they watch life-altering decisions taken in Brussels with little input from the constituents. Citing the Eurozone crisis in general and the case of Greece in particular, the former governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, posited that the "monetary union has created a conflict between a centralized elite on the one hand and the forces of democracy at the national level on the other. This is extraordinarily dangerous" (Pollard, 2016). Such a situation breeds institutional decay, as the citizens who are supposed to nurture an institution such as the EU actually view it as problematic. This finding parallels the observation of Fukuyama (2013) about Americans' negative attitudes toward their institutions, which he attributes to a crisis of representation in which ordinary citizens feel that their government does not reflect their interests but instead serves the interests of mysterious elites.

To help address conflicts regarding areas of competencies shared by the EU, national governments, and local governments, the Treaty on European Union includes the "principle of subsidiarity." According to this principle, EU institutions may only intervene in the policymaking process if they are capable of acting more effectively at national and local levels than member states (EUR-Lex, 2015). This principle is in conjunction with two other principles that govern the EU's involvement in decision-making processes: the "principle of conferral," which states that "the EU can only act within the limits of competences that have been conferred upon it by the EU treaties," (EUR-Lex, N.D(a)) and the "principle of proportionality," which limits the actions taken by the EU in terms of what is necessary for achieving the objectives of its treaties (EUR-Lex, N.D (b)).

In judicial areas, however, according to the European Court of Justice's interpretation of the "Primacy of the European Union Law," whenever there is a conflict between EU and national laws, European laws retain supremacy (Ravluševičius, 2011). This aspect resembles the primacy of federal laws over local laws in federal nation-states but appears unsettling for the jurisprudence of courts in European member states, hence the brewing antipathy toward the EU project, as evidenced by Brexit, which has deepened institutional decay.

Euroskepticism

Despite its success in terms of increasing the number of member states and widening the scope of its integration competencies, the EU is challenged by adverse attitudes in member states toward the very idea of uniting Europe through integration (Euroskepticism), as well as unfavorable stances in European countries that are candidates seeking membership in this regional supranational institution (EU- skepticism). Euroskepticism involves resenting the default acceptance of expanding integration policies and calls instead for slowing down or even freezing the process of integration within the EU. Euroskeptics view the EU as a threat to national sovereignty, denunciate its bureaucratic character, and accuse it of lacking democratic legitimacy (Gülmez, 2013). In essence, Euroskepticism captures the hostile relations between the recognized national attributes of sovereignty, laws, and democracy on one hand and the EU's acquired supranational influence on the other—all of which precipitate institutional decay.

The low public support for European integration is indicative of widespread Euroskepticism. In a poll conducted by the Pew Survey Center on June 7, 2016, in 10 European countries, only 51% of those surveyed expressed favorable views of the European Union, while 42% desired that some of the EU powers be returned to national governments, 27% were happy with the existing powers of the EU, and only 19% preferred granting it increased powers. The poll results show that support for the EU has dwindled by 17% in France, 16% in Spain, 8% in Germany, 7% in the UK, and 6% in Italy compared with the previous year. In six of the 10 countries surveyed, older people (aged over 50) were less supportive of the integration project compared with the younger generation (aged 18 to 34) (Stokes, 2016). Such low public support makes it difficult for national leaders to readily support much-needed supranational decisions that may have a national impact for fear of electoral consequences. This situation does not augur well for institutional effectiveness but contributes to institutional decay.

Euroskeptics call for exercising caution before taking further integration steps and demand that the functioning of EU institutions and contributions of integration policies be examined to assess their performance. Specifically, Euroskeptics fear that the original plans to establish European supranationalism would result in the dominance of France and Germany; instead, they prefer to evaluate the importance of the EU and decide how to engage with its institutions based on the utility of its integration policies for member states (Leconte, 2010).

Attempts to identify the sources of Euroskepticism vary from pointing to opposition to the increased and visible competencies of the EU to saying that Euroskeptics are not critical of EU institutions but rather criticize domestic politicians and policy choices. Additional explanations include European citizens' misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of the EU. The politics of party systems and general opposition to the established political order are also posited to contribute to Euroskepticism (Sutcliffe, 2010). Indeed, within the context of democratic countries, the politically loaded issue of Euroskepticism is relevant to party politics, electoral competition, and parliamentary politics. While extreme right political parties generally oppose the EU, a distinction can be made among these parties along three stances. The first consists of parties that reject the existence of the EU in principle, as well as its present practices and its future growth. Second, some parties accept the EU in principle but oppose its present practices and future increased integration. Third, other parties do not oppose the EU in principle or practice but reject further deepening of integration (Vasilopoulos, 2009). All the scenarios above do not augur well for institutional effectiveness but promote institutional decay.

The Eurozone crisis has had negative effects on the idea of a united Europe in recent years by reducing public interest in European integration, thus intensifying “disappointment and disinterest in the EU” and causing about half of the citizens in member states to express pessimism regarding its future as an institution, and over two-thirds express their complete lack of confidence in the institution. The lackluster status of the EU, however, is not hopeless, and what is needed to reinvigorate it is to have “leaders who are able to persuade voters that a grand and vigorous Europe is possible. The best antidote to the region’s depression may very well be a strong dose of integration” (Naím, 2013). Using Huntington’s (1965) criteria for measuring the development of institutions, Fukuyama (2011) asserted that the more adaptable, complex, autonomous, and coherent an institution is, the more developed it will be. An adaptable organization can evaluate a changing external environment and modify its own internal procedures in response. Adaptable institutions are the ones that survive since environments always change. (Fukuyama, 2011: 450)

Britain’s Exit from the European Union (Brexit): A Case of Domestic Institutional Decay

The UK remained ambivalent about the European integration project throughout the 1950s but embraced the idea of joining the project in the 1960s, becoming a full member of the European Economic Council in 1973. The Britain Exit (Brexit) initiative was first mooted in 1975 when the British public voted to stay in the European Economic Community (EEC). Therefore, the UK’s engagement in European integration is considered both belated and hesitant. Over the years, this historic ambivalence has created apathy towards the EU project among a sizable percentage of the British population, which saw successive British governments being beholden to Brussels, as evidenced by the 2013 promise of David Cameron to hold an in–out EU referendum in 2013.

Fukuyama (2013) observed that many political institutions in the United States are decaying and have therefore become dysfunctional. He explained that three essential characteristics of American culture have become problematic and presently constitute intertwined causes of institutional decay. First, the legislature and judiciary play enormous roles in the U.S. government, at the expense of the executive bureaucracy. Second, the tremendous growth of interest groups and the influence of lobbyists distort democratic processes and erode the effectiveness of government. Third, the system of “checks and balances” has created numerous actors who have the power to obstruct public-policy adjustments (Fukuyama, 2013).

These same factors of institutional decay are also prevalent in the domestic politics of England and ultimately led to a vote for Brexit in 2016. First, the supremacy of parliament and the fractured nature of British parliamentary democracy severely incentivize political leaders to play to their bases or the gallery at the expense of the national interest or supranational commitments. This phenomenon was evident in the manner in which David Cameron openly campaigned in 2015 on the promise of offering a referendum on Brexit if elected, even though he wanted Britain to remain in the EU. He clearly saw an electoral advantage in such a promise, but it ultimately backfired on him, leading to his resignation in 2016. Second, the British populace, politicians, and institutions such as Parliament are not impervious to the influence of interest groups. As such, all the stakeholders in the referendum were heavily lobbied and pressured with targeted messages in order to support Brexit. Third, while Fukuyama (2013) lamented that the existence of a system of checks and balances in U.S. politics has contributed to institutional decay due to the frequent obstruction of policies by numerous actors, the opposite is the case in the UK but with similar outcomes. Unlike the United States, the

supremacy of Parliament is paramount in the UK, as other state institutions or actors cannot easily challenge parliamentary decisions. However, when one party dominates Parliament, the majority can take actions that can undermine the UK's supranational commitments or even initiate a withdrawal, as most of the Tory MPs did by triggering the Brexit referendum. The debate that preceded the vote for the referendum in Parliament (House of Commons) was rancorous and devoid of the bi-partisanship that ushered in Britain's membership of the EU in the 1960s. The lack of consensus among members of the British political establishment in a major foreign-policy decision such as membership of the EU is symptomatic of institutional decay in British politics, which was not always this way.

The argument in support of Brexit can be summarized in five payoff assertions. Proponents of Brexit contended that leaving the EU would help Britain secure strong borders and control immigration, restore national pride, act against centralized European politics and reject the authority of bureaucrats in Brussels, reject the authority of the establishment by doing the opposite of what incumbent leaders and existing institutions want, and offer British consumers lower prices by leaving the EU's customs areas and quota systems (Reklaitis, 2016). The arguments presented by Brexit supporters vary from appealing to nostalgic sentiments, normative principles, and substantive reasoning, but they are evidently related to the issues of state sovereignty, national autonomy and jurisprudence, rational interest, and democratic legitimacy. All these domestic sentiments contributed to chipping away British institutional support for the EU project, leading to Brexit.

Brexit's opponents rebuffed claims depicting the EU as a foreign superpower ruled by an alien dictatorship and argued instead that the closest EU structures resembling a government were the European Commission and European Council, in which Britain was a major player anyway. While the EU appears to compromise the parliamentary sovereignty that any proud nation should uphold, Britain can still influence the law-making processes in the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament. Additionally, Britons can file their complaints against their own government at the European Court of Human Rights if they feel that their rights have been violated—proof that Britain's membership in the EU has not limited the freedom of its citizens. Moreover, contrary to what supporters of Brexit claim, Britain's membership in the EU does not limit its ability to freely trade with non-EU countries, and leaving the EU would not put Britain in a stronger trading position. Furthermore, leaving the EU would curtail the ability of British professionals to move freely around the EU countries but would not fully enable the British government to stop migrants from EU countries from settling in Britain (Buruma, 2016).

The overall theoretical context of the EU (including supranationalism, inter-governmentalism, comitology, deliberative supranationalism, and emerging parliamentarism) has created the perspectives of the EU as an empowered polity and as a contested entity. These two perspectives influence the EU's empirical realities (including widespread Euroskepticism and uneasy relations between the EU and national governments), and Brexit is one case within this context. Therefore, the political controversies and events that the case of Brexit involves reflect the interaction between British politics on one hand and the EU's combined posture as an empowered polity and contested entity on the other. The background of Brexit is Euroskepticism's hostility to European integration and the contentious relations between the EU and its member states. Political events in British domestic politics leading to the Brexit referendum reveal an amalgamation of supportive and opposing perceptions of the supranational institution within British politics. The failure of consensus building among British political elites is symptomatic of institutional decay and thus served as a trigger for Brexit.

Another source of institutional decay that brought about Brexit is the contentious party system and electoral political considerations that influenced events that led to the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership in the EU. Integrated institutions and common policies have become more forceful since the Maastricht Treaty created the EU in 1992. Subsequently, calls to revisit Britain's membership in the EU emerged, describing the amount of power transferred from the Parliament to Brussels as unacceptable. Nevertheless, nearly two decades of economic prosperity provided justification for continuing membership in the EU until the financial crisis affected people's standards of living in 2008. When David Cameron became prime minister in 2010, he did not want to allow internal Conservative Party pressures over Britain's membership in the European integration project to hinder his tenure in office and therefore decided that the participation of the Liberal Democrats in his ruling coalition would mitigate anti-European influence on his own backbenches. However, he underestimated the level of his own party's antipathy towards the EU and the zeal with which they would campaign for an exit outcome in the referendum, leading to his eventual political downfall. The uncompromising stand exhibited by the two major parties in the lead-up to the referendum is emblematic of the level of institutional decay in British politics. According to Fukuyama (2013), the absence of major disruptions of the political order, intellectual rigidity, and increased power of entrenched political actors will continue to hamper the reform of political institutions.

In addition, the failure of the British political establishment to effectively develop publicly acceptable solutions to the problem of the influx of Eastern European migrants since 2000, combined with the economic hardships of the financial crisis in 2008, increased public resentment toward European integration and greatly contributed to Brexit. A further sign of institutional decay in British politics is the fact that three major British political parties failed to recognize or respond to the growing opposition to the EU. That failure enabled the UK Independent Party (UKIP) to increase its share by up to 15% of the electorate in 2012, which appeared to threaten taking a share of the Conservatives' votes and deliver victory to the Labour Party. The Conservatives believed that the Brexit referendum would allow them to go into the 2015 general elections to assure anti-European supporters that their only chance to determine Britain's future in the EU was voting for the Conservatives. Accordingly, in January 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to hold a Brexit referendum if the Conservatives won the 2015 elections. When the Conservatives won in 2015, Mr. Cameron had to honor his pledge and set June 23, 2016, for the Leave/Remain referendum (Wright and Cooper, 2016).

In essence, the theoretical and empirical milieu of the EU interacted with events pertaining to the party system and electoral politics in Britain, and the Brexit referendum was the outcome of those interactions. The narrow majority vote in favor of leaving the EU constitutes a considerable setback for the European integration project, but it is explicable in terms of the imperatives of the EU's structural background and Britain's contextual politics—which this research has argued are in decay because of their lack of responsiveness to pressing issues affecting EU citizens.

Whether the referendum used for the Brexit vote is binding, democratic, or “a victory for self-determination or a spectacular act of national harm” (Wismayer, 2016) is debatable. However, the referendum vote appears to be a rudimentary tool for determining the future of the EU, especially when compared with the sophisticated efforts expended over seven decades in conceiving, designing, and implementing the institutions and policies of the European integration project. While Britain's reluctant membership in the EU might have suggested that it might one day cease to participate in the journey of European integration, it is unfortunate that the elaborate institution in which five modes of interstate collaboration (i.e.,

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supranationalism, intergovernmentalism, comitology, deliberative supranationalism, and parliamentarism) operate should have concerns over losing additional member states, let alone fear falling apart. Without addressing the creeping institutional decay in the institutional architecture of both the EU and those of member states, history could repeat itself, and more future Brexits could loom in the future.

Conclusions

This research has analyzed the underlying challenges facing European integration, which led to Brexit through the prism of institutional decay. Theoretically, the resulting EU is depicted as a polity (convincingly reminiscent of a typical political system), with the acquired influence of authority, laws, and democracy that function alongside those of member states, but the institution has a contested character that casts doubts over its legitimacy and efficacy. Empirically, therefore, the relationship between the EU's supranational institutions and member states is characterized by inherent tension, and European integration is confronted by widespread Euroskepticism that ranges from rejecting the very existence of the EU to opposing further integration. The combination of these theoretical and empirical considerations constitutes the background that shapes our understanding of the dynamics of the EU.

The European integration project and the ensuing EU polity are theoretically significant and empirically relevant. Europeans have been influenced by the common policies shared by member states within this supranational bloc. However, the European integration project has recently been disturbed by Britain's decision to leave the EU. Brexit is explicable through the joint effects of decay in Britain's domestic party system and electoral politics on one hand and the realities pertaining to EU institutional decay on the other. It is plausible to maintain that, while the background of the EU involves a number of theoretical and empirical problematic issues that challenge the acceptability of the EU, national political leaders' electoral calculations have been crucial in triggering Britain's exit referendum. These dynamics serves as cautionary tale for other EU members states vis-à-vis the sustainability of the EU project.

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