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Book Section:

Saul, J. (2018) Immigration in the Brexit campaign : Protean dogwhistles and political manipulation. In: Fox, C. and Saunders, J., (eds.) Media Ethics, Free Speech, and the Requirements of Democracy. Routledge. ISBN: 9781138571921.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203702444-2>

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Immigration in the Brexit Campaign: protean dogwhistles and political manipulation.¹

In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, there has been much discussion of whether the vote was caused by anti-immigrant sentiment or by economic factors, or some combination of these. Often, the anti-immigrant sentiment is referred to as ‘racism’, and quite often ‘anti-immigrant’ and ‘racist’ seem to be used interchangeably. It’s a notable feature of these discussions—though not one that is actually much noted—that the immigrants against whom prejudice is directed shift from discussion to discussion: some discussions focus on prejudice against all foreigners, some against all Europeans, others against Eastern Europeans, and still others against refugees, dark-skinned foreigners, or Muslims. A key contention of mine here is that the variety of possible targets for anti-immigrant sentiment (call this ‘target uncertainty’) has made this form of prejudice a particularly difficult one to effectively fight. And key to this target uncertainty is the invocation of ever-shifting associated groups that are the target of negative sentiment about immigrants—different groups for different speakers and audiences.

I use the term ‘protean dogwhistle’ for the way that invocations of *immigration* shift in terms of the groups that are associated with them. This is not just because of the fact that a change is taking place. The term ‘protean’ comes from the story of Proteus, a water god who shape-shifts. Crucially, this is his technique for avoiding revealing the truth: one can only get the truth from Proteus if one manages to catch and hold him through all his shape-shifting. And the shape-shifting makes him nearly impossible to keep hold of in order to get to the truth. This is, I suggest, a nice

metaphor for the way that the groups associated with *immigration*¹ shift from context to context, making it difficult to effectively call attention to and criticize the prejudice involved when *immigration* is invoked as a threat.²

In this paper, I begin with a bit of background about dogwhistles, which (broadly speaking) allow politicians to communicate (or at least prime) views that might alienate some voters while maintaining deniability. In the context most discussed in this literature (white prejudice against black people in the US), we do not have the target uncertainty that occurs with the invocation of *immigration* in the UK. The protean dogwhistle *immigration* poses special difficulties which I explore in detail. In so doing, I shed light not just on the factors that led to the Brexit vote, but also on a previously unexplored complexity of dogwhistles.

Dogwhistles, as I understand them, work in two ways: either via ambiguity, communicating a hidden message to a subset of their audience; or via largely unconscious processes of activating associations without an audience's awareness. Attention to dogwhistles has so far focused primarily on dogwhistles that communicate at most two messages. However, some dogwhistles function in a much more complex way, activating different associations or communicating different messages for different audiences. These are what I call protean dogwhistles. This paper takes as its focus the protean dogwhistles related to *immigration* in the UK's Leave campaign, arguing that they are likely to activate different associations for different audience members, and that this makes it far more complicated to respond to the invocation of *immigration* effectively.

1. Dogwhistles—the background

The term 'dogwhistle' comes from US politics, and most studies of dogwhistles have been US-based. Moreover, most of the attention in this small literature has been on dogwhistles targeted at racist sentiments of white Americans toward black Americans.

¹ I am italicizing 'immigrant' and 'immigration' in order to maintain neutrality about whether the term is actually used or the concept is more broadly invoked. For my purposes here, the differences between these two ways of invoking *immigration* or *immigrant* do not matter.

² Homer/Wilson 2017.

One key thing we will see in this paper is the complexities of applying what we know about dogwhistles outside this context. But first, some distinctions.

1.1 Overt and Covert (intentional) Dogwhistles

There are two kinds of intentional dogwhistles, which work in very different ways. What they have in common is that they are communicative acts that, for their success, require the speaker to conceal something from at least part of her audience. Usually, this will be because there are some (either local or culture-wide) norms against a part of what the speaker is up to. In this section, I will be writing only about intentional dogwhistles, so I will drop the word ‘intentional’ for simplicity’s sake.

In an overt dogwhistle, a speaker has a message that they want to convey to one audience while concealing it from another audience. An artificial case of this would be a speaker who exploits the ambiguity of ‘bank’ to tell her fellow bank robbers that now is the moment to act: “Let’s go to the bank and have a picnic”, she says, knowing that only her co-conspirators will think she is talking about a financial institution. But ambiguous words are not needed: politicians can insert this sort of dogwhistle by using a phrase which one group will recognize as a religious reference and another will not. George W. Bush did this when he talked about the “wonder-working power” of the American people. (Noah 2004) This phrase just sounds like political hyperbole to a voter without a fundamentalist Christian background. But to one with that background it signifies the power of Christ, and its use serves to indicate that Bush is a fellow fundamentalist Christian. I call this kind of dogwhistle ‘overt’ because for the target group there is nothing concealed—they are meant to fully and consciously recognize the message being transmitted to them.

A covert dogwhistle is less straightforward. In a covert dogwhistle, the speaker seeks to activate particular attitudes of the audience and bring them to bear on the topic at issue. The most-discussed covert dogwhistles in the American context are racial ones, like the phrase “inner city” or the infamous Willie Horton advertisement, both of which cause white racially resentful voters to make

decisions on the basis of their racial resentments (that is, resentment of black people), without realizing this (Mendelberg 2001; Horwitz and Peffley 2004; Saul forthcoming a). The Willie Horton advertisement was used by GHW Bush's 1988 campaign against Michael Dukakis. Its official subject matter was a policy of Massachusetts when Dukakis was governor, which allowed convicted felons to have weekend furloughs. During one of these furloughs, William Horton (he never went by 'Willie' though this was the name given in the ad) committed rape and murder. The ad described this, and its sole visual was a grainy photograph of a scowling Horton, who was black. Race was never mentioned in the ad. Tali Mendelberg's studies (Mendelberg 2001) found that exposure to the Willie Horton ad had no effect on white voters' levels of racial resentment. However, she found that exposure *did* increase the correlation between white voter's racial resentment levels and their intentions to vote for Bush. (The more racially resentful voters became more likely to vote for Bush.) Mendelberg found, though, that it was crucial to the dogwhistle's effectiveness that race remain unmentioned, enabling the message to act on voters' intentions without their awareness. (More on what led her to this conclusion shortly.)

The reason that covert racial dogwhistles like this are needed was widespread acceptance of what Tali Mendelberg calls "The Norm of Racial Equality". The Norm of Racial Equality has been in force in the United States since the Civil Rights movement, and I have argued elsewhere (Saul 2017) that it is best understood as having the form "don't be racist", with the judgments about what is racist left up to individuals. White Americans tend to set a very high bar for what counts as racist, such a high bar that (as Mendelberg notes), claims like (1) are not seen as violating the Norm of Racial Equality.

(1) Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favours.³

Those who accept statements like (1) are said to harbor high levels of Racial Resentment. But this resentment is nonetheless compatible with endorsing the Norm

³ Tesler and Sears 2010: 19.

of Racial Equality. And a large number of white Americans display just this combination—an endorsement of Racial Equality, alongside high levels of Racial Resentment. People like this will not engage in any behaviour that they see as racist, since they accept that this is wrong. They are likely to think, for example, that their voting decisions should not be based on racial attitudes. And this is why covert dogwhistles are an effective political technique: they allow politicians to tap into this racial resentment without voters’ awareness. An overt racial appeal would not do this. So, for example, Horwitz and Peffley (2004) found that white subjects’ attitudes toward prison building correlated with their levels of racial resentment when the prisons were described as for *inner city* criminals. When the phrase ‘inner city’ was dropped, there was no such correlation. And if they asked about ‘black criminals’, we would also expect to see a lack of correlation—because this would be too obviously about race.⁴

1.2 Combatting overt and covert intentional dogwhistles

Both sorts of dogwhistles have been seen as rather nefarious ways of manipulating a voting public. Unsurprisingly, then, there has been attention to how to undermine a dogwhistle’s effectiveness.

Defusing an overt dogwhistle is straightforward. Its success depends upon transmitting different messages to different groups—keeping both happy, even though one (call them the As) would not be happy if they knew what was being communicated to the other (the Bs). The way to defuse this is to make both messages explicit. The speaker is potentially able to deny it (“I really did just mean the riverbank!” or “I just thought ‘wonder-working power’ was a poetic way to express my admiration”), but sometimes there will be good evidence to undermine this denial (“Then why the collection of masks and guns in your car?” or “Here’s a well-researched study showing that phrase is often used by fundamentalist Christians with the following meaning....”) The effect of this, if effective, will be to alienate the As—whose support was conditional upon not knowing about the message for the Bs. That ‘if effective’, however, is important. If the As do not believe that the other message

⁴ Horwitz and Peffley did not actually test this version. But this prediction is what the literature would lead us to expect.

was intended, this may backfire. In such a case, the politician may well retain support of both As and Bs, and indeed the willingness of As to listen to critics may have been undermined.

Now to covert dogwhistles. The classic discussion of covert dogwhistles comes from Mendelberg's study of the Willie Horton ad used by George HW Bush against Michael Dukakis in 1988, described above. (Mendelberg, however, does not use the term 'dogwhistle', which has become popular since she wrote about this. She refers to 'implicit political messages'.) She found that the ad initially brought about a correlation between white voters' racial resentment and their intentions to vote for George HW Bush. However, once Jesse Jackson raised the issue of racism—even though he was widely dismissed as wrong—this correlation began dropping away. I have, following Mendelberg, suggested this as a general strategy for dealing with a covert dogwhistle (Saul forthcoming). However, there are plausibly special features of the Willie Horton case that will not be present in all cases. Indeed, I will suggest below that the invocation of *immigration* by the Leave campaign in the UK presents a case where this strategy is likely to fail.

According to Mendelberg, a covert dogwhistle works by raising pre-existing racial attitudes (whatever they are) to salience, so that they bring them to bear on whatever decision they are making—in this case, a voting decision. But it does so, crucially, without the audience's awareness of it. Jackson's suggestion that the ad might be racist, combined with (much of) the audience's acceptance of the Norm of Racial Equality, led (much of) the audience to engage in self-monitoring. (This self-monitoring may not be conscious, and it is in no way dependent on the voters thinking that Jackson was right, which they generally didn't.) This self-monitoring began to block their racial attitudes from influencing their vote—even though, for the most part, they combined it with a conscious dismissal of Jackson's suggestion that racism might be important to the ad. In order for this sort of self-monitoring to take place, it needs to be the case that the audience takes racism to be unacceptable, and this will be so for those who adhere to the Norm of Racial Equality (the target audience). A form of bigotry which does not violate a norm that the audience accepts will not trigger self-monitoring. There are many people, for example, who would not be moved by the suggestion that something displays anti-atheist prejudice, for example, because

they do not think it is problematic to oppose atheists.⁵ We would expect, then, that discussing anti-atheist prejudice would not trigger self-monitoring in such people. I call this necessary condition Norm Acceptance.

But more is also required. It need not be the case that the audience accepts or even finds it plausible that there is racism involved.⁶ Self-monitoring is triggered anyway if the audience takes racism to be unacceptable. However—crucially—they will only self-monitor for the sort of racism that they take to be at issue. What I will call Target Match must be present between the norm invoked and the group targeted by the dogwhistle. Here is what Jesse Jackson said:

“There have been a number of rather blatantly race-conscious signals that have had the impact of instilling ungrounded fear in whites and alienation from Blacks,” Jackson told reporters after the 90-minute breakfast with Dukakis.

“The use of the Willie Horton example is designed to create the most horrible psycho-sexual fears,” Jackson said.

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1988/10/24/bentsen-jackson-criticize-bush-ads-pdemocratic/>

Jesse Jackson made it clear in this quotation that the racism at issue was that of white people toward black people. And self-monitoring for this form of racism then began to take place. This self-monitoring meant that anti-black attitudes could not rise to salience without the audience’s awareness. It was crucial to this that the self-monitoring was of a sort that could block the dogwhistle’s content—this point will become crucial as we turn to the ‘immigration’ example. To take an imaginary case, suppose that someone had criticized the Willie Horton advertisement for anti-Chinese racism. What this would trigger is monitoring for anti-Chinese racism. This monitoring, we can suppose, would not be effective at blocking the influence of anti-black racism.

So, in order for the strategy of defusing the dogwhistle to work, we need two conditions to be met:

⁵ Currently, 42% of Americans would not vote for an atheist for president, which is actually the lowest level of anti-atheist prejudice ever found in such polls. (See Fidalgo 2015.)

⁶ Recall the Willie Horton case, in which a strong consensus held race to be irrelevant, but in which nonetheless self-monitoring was triggered.

Norm Acceptance: The audience accepts the norm invoked by the would-be defusing utterance; and

Target Match: The target of the norm matches the target of the dogwhistle.

In this paper, I will suggest that both of these necessary conditions for a defusing to succeed are likely to fail in the ‘immigration’-Brexit cases.

2. Immigration as a protean dogwhistle in the Brexit campaign

Now let’s turn to the recent UK referendum on the EU. It is widely agreed that immigration was the most important issue for Leave voters, who triumphed in a narrow victory. And ‘immigration’ is commonly thought to be a term that dogwhistles racism (Lopez 2013; Goodin 2008: 226). My own experience as a white American immigrant (with clear American accent) seems to confirm this: people do not hesitate to complain to me about immigrants; and when I point out that I am one, they say that I am not what they mean.⁷

The Brexit campaign clearly included dogwhistle racism, and inspired and emboldened those who were explicitly racist. One week before the vote, a campaign poster was revealed which featured a huge crowd of dark-skinned people and the words “breaking point”. This so closely resembled Nazi propaganda that it was reported as racial hate speech, which is illegal in the UK (<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>).⁸ That same day, a white supremacist murdered a member of parliament, Jo Cox who had been a prominent

⁷ The most obvious interpretation of this is that my whiteness is what makes me not the sort of immigrant they mean. But it could be my American-ness, my non-European-ness, my class position, my non-Muslim-ness, and so on.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of anti-immigrant visuals in the campaign, see Drainville 2016.

spokesperson for refugees and for remaining in the UK. In the week immediately following the referendum, racial hatred complaints quintupled.⁹

So far, so straightforward, one might think: *immigration* is a racist dogwhistle, and invoking it raises racial attitudes to salience. The standard recipe for combatting this is to point out the racism. If there is a Norm of Racial Equality in force, people will want to avoid anything that they see as racist. This will cause them to engage in self-monitoring, and the dogwhistles won't work any more. But the thing is this: the racism *was* pointed out. The role of racial hatred was given great prominence after the murder of Jo Cox, but it was regularly in the news before that. (See, e.g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-vote-leave-racist-brexid-khalid-mahmood-labour-mp-a7049381.html>)

We do not yet know what effect this had. It may be that it did reduce the tendency to base one's vote on racism, but that this still was not enough—perhaps the discussion of racism was not given media prominence in the right places; perhaps it was too late in the campaign. Hopefully political scientists will help us to understand this in the years to come (if they are able to fund their research). However, it seems to me that *immigration*—at least as it functioned in the context of the UK referendum—brings with it many complications that are absent from the Willie Horton ad or the American use of 'inner city'.

The complications are these:

1. *Immigration* is protean in its associations, leading to contextual variation regarding the target of the dogwhistle: Different audiences will have different groups raised to salience by invocations of *immigration*. (Speakers will also vary in what groups they intend to communicate about.)
2. For some of these targets, there is a lack of widely accepted anti-bigotry norms.
3. For the widely accepted Norm of Racial Equality, there is uncertainty about what groups are targets of the norm.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/police-report-fivefold-increase-race-hate-crimes-since-brexid-result>

2.1 Target variation (Protean associations of *immigrant*)

It was very clear that African Americans are being dogwhistled about in the Willie Horton ad. The same goes (generally) for ‘inner city’.¹⁰ But in the context of the UK referendum, there is no one group that is consistently being dogwhistled about in immigration discussions. There is evidence of a relationship between the Leave vote and a variety of different group-based prejudices.

A case *can* be made for understanding *immigration* as dogwhistling about dark-skinned people. The creator of the Breaking Point poster, for example, carefully placed a text box over the lone white person in the original photo (Drainville 2016). In so far as some voters have their attitudes toward dark-skinned people activated without their awareness, *immigration* is functioning as a dog-whistle for dark-skinned people.

Immigration may also function as a dogwhistle about either Muslims, refugees, or Syrians. The natural reading of the Breaking Point poster described above is as one depicting refugees. These refugees will probably be taken as Muslim and, most likely, Syrian. Some spectacularly deceptive literature (Drainville 2016) sent out by the Leave campaign was clearly designed to insinuate that staying in the EU would lead to an influx of people from Syria and Iraq (and these would probably be taken also to be both Muslim and Syrian/Iraqi). Given this context, it is not unreasonable to take invocations of *immigration* to be dogwhistling about Muslims/refugees/Syrians & Iraqis.¹¹

¹⁰ I say ‘generally’, because there are sometimes, for example, discussions of inner city Latinos. Crucially, however, these tend to involve explicitly adding the word ‘Latino’, because otherwise it will be assumed that African Americans are under discussion.

¹¹ Again, there’s no good argument available to connect Brexit to changing figures on Muslim/refugee/Syrian&Iraqi immigrants. But this is not important to dogwhistle politics. Also, the maps shown above, heavily imply the remarkable falsehood that Syria and Iraq are “set to join the EU”.

Another common target of anti-immigrant sentiment in the campaign was Eastern Europeans. In recent years, Eastern Europeans like Romanians, Bulgarians, and Poles have gained the right to work in the UK without restriction. There is substantial prejudice against these groups, and a plausible case can be made that this was a very important factor fuelling the success of the Leave campaign. Certainly, the papers that supported the Leave campaign have been stoking these views for years, and were jubilantly reflecting them after the victory. The Sun, for example, jubilantly ran the headline “Where the Brex was won: streets full of Polish shops, kids not speaking English” (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1342831/streets-full-of-polish-shops-kids-not-speaking-english-but-union-jacks-now-flying-high-again/>). An exceptionally good case can be made that invocations of *immigration* were, on many occasions, dogwhistling about Eastern European immigrants. And this is also plausible to link to the EU, since the EU required free movement of people from European countries.

But the most obvious target of anti-immigration sentiment in an anti-EU campaign would surely be Europeans—the group whose immigration has been most facilitated by the EU. And there is empirical evidence that anti-European sentiments did serve as a motivator of pro-Brexit votes. Meleady et. al. 2017 found that negative attitudes toward EU immigrants were a better predictor of voting Leave than demographic factors. (They did not compare the predictive powers these attitudes with those of other negative attitudes.)

Finally, *immigration* may sometimes function as a xenophobic dogwhistle. It may, at first, seem somewhat strange to suggest this— simply because the xenophobia seems explicit in the opposition to immigration. But this is not quite right. A xenophobe—one who fears foreigners—may also fear foreigners with no intention at all of coming to their country (like “Brussels bureaucrats”); or people who are not themselves immigrants, but who are nonetheless seen as foreigners (like children of immigrants). And there is also some evidence that this was the basis for some people’s votes—we see this in various explicit behaviours, like outpourings of nationally-tinged hostility against EU bureaucrats. So xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments come apart in terms of their targets.

Importantly, though, it is also possible to be anti-immigrant without being xenophobic—and indeed it is *possible* to be anti-immigrant in a way that is not motivated by any prejudice. One might be anti-immigrant based on rationally well-founded reasoning from false premises. Voters who believed what the Tory party and right-wing press had been telling them may have thought that David Cameron’s government supported public services like the NHS well. Well aware that waiting lists were too long and that staff were inadequate, they also believed the falsehood that strains on public services were due not to austerity cuts but to an excess of immigrants. This led them to think that the UK was simply full. One does not need to be prejudiced against any group of people wanting to come to the UK in order to think that there are already too many people here. Crucial beliefs motivating this group of voters were false. However, there need not be any dogwhistle affecting them. (I do not know how many voters actually fit this description, and it would be difficult, and perhaps impossible to find out. But it is important to acknowledge the possibility. And after hearing a friend’s tale of her anti-immigrant, leave-voting refugee father, I suspect this is not just a theoretical possibility.)

In short, for different portions of the audience, *immigration* will function differently: for some, it may not be a dogwhistle at all. For others, it may be a dogwhistle about any or all of the following: foreigners, Eastern Europeans, refugees, Muslims, Syrians, or dark-skinned people. Already, we see that *immigration*’s protean associations make things much more complex than with the Willie Horton ad.

2.2 Inadequacy of Norm of Racial Equality

Pointing out racism very commonly causes significant anger in the person accused, and often in others. Because of the Norm of Racial Equality, people are defensive, and some even consider the accusation to be almost taboo in all but the very clearest cases (e.g. slavery, KKK). Second, and relatedly, there is often an exceptionally high standard for what counts as racism. As Hill (2008) notes, it is standard for white people to believe in very strong necessary conditions for racism—ones that conveniently allow a denial of their own racism in almost all circumstances. Commonly, the standard for being a racist is thought to require clearly-expressed

conscious intentional discrimination on the basis of biological group-based superiority. Racism that meets this standard is comparatively rare, so there is a great deal of room to view allegations of racism as unjust and hyperbolic—thus further fuelling the anger. In the Willie Horton case, we saw both of these negative aspects to a racism allegation: it was treated as patently absurd, and Jackson was angrily accused of “playing the race card”. However—and this is crucial—the self-monitoring that was nonetheless triggered made it worthwhile to make the allegation.

There is (still) a widely accepted Norm of Racial Equality.¹² People *do* (for the most part) want to avoid racism, so self-monitoring is often triggered by an allegation of racism. Compare this, for example, with an allegation of anti-atheist prejudice. Since we lack a widespread norm against this prejudice, we cannot mobilise the force of such a norm to trigger self-monitoring. An allegation of racism, then, *can* defuse a dogwhistle—even if it is not well-received in other ways.

In messier contexts, however, there are further problems that come with allegations of racism. The Willie Horton context was in many ways quite simple. The ad’s dogwhistle was directed exclusively at white voters. ‘Racism’ is in the US interpreted by default as about white-on-black racism, and anyway Jackson made it clear that this is what he was discussing. The case of the UK referendum is far more complex.

A key disadvantage of the term ‘racism’ in contexts like this one is that disagreements over what counts as racism can make it an ineffective term to use. The Norm of Racial Egalitarianism does seem to hold in the UK. And, similarly to the US (though not identically) the paradigm case of racism is generally understood to be prejudice of whites against darker-skinned people. But, as noted above, this is only one of the things that might be dogwhistled by the Leave campaign’s invocation of the protean notion *immigration*. For other audiences, what is dogwhistled is about other groups—Eastern Europeans, foreigners, Syrians, Muslims, or refugees. And each of these strays importantly from the paradigm case of prejudice against the dark-skinned.

¹² One might be inclined to think this is no longer true, in the Trump era. I address this thought in detail in my (2017), arguing that (a) there is good evidence that the norm is still in force, but (b) Trump is using what I call ‘figleaves’ to circumvent it.

Eastern Europeans are generally white, and it is a widespread view that one cannot be racist against white people, or at least that white people cannot be racist against white people. Foreigners come in all skin colours. Syrian is a nationality. Islam is a religion not a race. And ‘refugee’ refers to anyone (of whatever skin colour) escaping persecution.

Suppose now that an advertisement about immigration is accused of dogwhistle racism. Focus on the portion of the audience that (a) accepts the Norm of Racial Equality; and (b) has their attitudes against Muslims raised to salience without their awareness. If they take the Norm of Racial Equality to preclude prejudice against Muslims, then the monitoring may well be effective in defusing the ad. (And, just as in the Willie Horton case, this may happen even if they do not consciously believe that the ad is anti-Muslim.) But if they do not take the Norm of Racial Equality to preclude prejudice against Muslims—say, because they take Muslims not to be a racial group—then the Target Match condition will not be met and the monitoring will not be effective. Compelling arguments can be made that religious prejudice *should* be understood as a form of racism (see for example Topolski 2018). But these arguments are irrelevant to the blocking of dogwhistle effects. Even if religious prejudice *should* be understood as racism, the fact that many do not understand it this way means that, for these people, raising the possibility of racism will not block the dogwhistle effect, due to a lack of Target Match.

And things get worse from here. One who is opposed to Muslim immigration but considers this to be about religion rather than race will feel misunderstood by those who make allegations of racism. Their prejudice will be left intact, it will still be brought to bear on their decisions, they will be angry at being accused of racism, and they will feel that their concerns—about religion, not race (as they see it) are not being understood.

One solution would be to attempt to address the various different ways the protean dogwhistle might function: to invoke norms matching each target, in order to meet the Target Match condition. Ideally, one would call attention to Islamophobia for some audiences, to anti-Eastern European prejudice for others, etc. But this just isn’t possible. These are mass media dogwhistles, with massive and internally complex

audiences. To do this, one would have to list off all the possible prejudices tapped into. It may be completely accurate to say that an advertisement taps into “xenophobia, racism, anti-Eastern European prejudice, and Islamophobia”, and that “for some people it taps into false beliefs but not any of these prejudices”, but there are rhetorical difficulties with attempting a commentary of this complexity. One key difference is that the various audiences are likely to find other audiences’ understandings of the target of the dogwhistle implausible, which will tend to lower the credibility of a bigotry claim that explicitly references all of them.

An alternative would be to use a more general term like ‘bigotry’. There are widespread norms against bigotry—few, if any, would self-identify as ‘a bigot’. And ‘bigotry’ is a general term that can cover all the forms of prejudice that use of ‘immigrant’ may tap into. However, it is genuinely uncertain whether it would trigger the needed self-monitoring. This would require a Target Match between whatever groups are taken to be targets of bigotry and the dogwhistle, and it’s just not clear that the targets of an anti-bigotry norm will extend in the right way. Those who think that Muslims are dangerous will not take this to be bigotry; those who think that Eastern Europeans drink too much will not take this to be bigotry. It *may* be that their self-monitoring will still be triggered in the right way. But this is a matter which requires empirical study, and it is far from obvious what that study will indicate.

2.3 Lack of widely accepted norms

As noted in the previous section, there are very widespread norms against racism. The other prejudices one might tap into with an invocation of *immigration*, however, are very different, so it is unclear that the Norm Acceptance condition will be met. I’ll take just a few examples here.

Nationalistic pride is far more acceptable than white pride, and criticisms and mockery of other nations far more socially acceptable than criticisms and mockery of other races. Being called ‘nationalist’ is not always a criticism in the way that being called ‘racist’ is, and it is much more common (and socially acceptable) for someone to claim ‘nationalist’ as a part of their identity than for them to claim ‘racist’ in this

way. Note, for example, that mainstream political parties (e.g. the Scottish Nationalist Party) use ‘nationalist’ in their names, but that few use ‘racist’. (And if they did, they would—I hope—not secure a strong majority in a country like Scotland.)

Religious prejudice is also more acceptable than racist prejudice—as we can see from the efforts made by those insisting that Islamophobia is not racism. Even a poll which carefully distinguished “Islam” from “fundamentalist groups” found that more than 50% of UK citizens took the religion to pose a threat to Western democracy (Dore 2015). Those people who are willing to admit explicit attitudes like these to pollsters, it is highly likely that they do not think it is at all bad to dislike Muslims, or that they fear Muslim immigration. There is no norm against Islamophobia that enjoys such wide acceptance as the Norm of Racial Equality.

Dislike of people from Eastern Europe is, similarly, not widely seen as problematic. While racism is considered taboo, prejudice against members of particular white nations is not seen as racism. It is often linked to generalisations about culture (for example, drinking culture¹³), or to willingness to work for low wages. When thought of in this way, it seems to many to be perfectly reasonable rather than a manifestation of prejudice. I strongly suspect that there are no norms at all forbidding prejudice against Europeans more generally, but I have not been able to find any studies of this.

4. Other causes of the Brexit vote

There were a wide variety of factors that caused people in the UK to vote “Leave”, some of which were not linked at all to immigration. Some people genuinely believed the promise of the Leave campaigners that the NHS would receive an additional 350 million pounds each week. Some voted Leave out of dislike for David Cameron, the Tory Prime Minister, who was seen as the face of the Remain campaign. Very much relatedly, the Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn’s support for Remain was so lackluster that Labour voters were not sure of the party’s position, and saw the vote as “an

¹³ < <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/boston-how-a-lincolnshire-town-became-the-most-divided-place-in-england-a6838041.html> >.

opportunity to stick it to David Cameron” in the words of one Labour supporter a friend spoke to.¹⁴ Some voters wrongly blamed the EU for austerity policies, and the loss of manufacturing jobs.¹⁵ There were also a (relatively small) number of Lexit voters, who opposed the EU as a racist, neoliberal, pro-free-trade institution; or opposed it on the basis of e.g. its treatment of the Greek financial crisis or refugees.¹⁶ The fact that some voters based their decision on factors like these becomes important in the next section of this paper.

5. Further effects of “racism” narrative regarding immigration

So far, my focus has been on (a) ways that labeling Brexit discussions of immigration as ‘racist’ may fail to defuse any dogwhistles at work; and (b) ways that other attempts to defuse the dogwhistles may fail. Now I turn to further effects that these failed efforts may have, which are even more worrying and dangerous.

Since the referendum vote, a large number of articles have equated anti-immigration sentiment and racism. Moreover, they have tended to focus on very explicit racist behaviours. Take, for example, the articles entitled “Brexit: Increase in Racist Attacks After EU Referendum”¹⁷, and “Racist Incidents Feared to be Linked to Brexit Result”¹⁸, both of which focused almost exclusively on anti-Polish sentiment. Indeed, this has been a dominant narrative in the press. As I have already noted, there are indeed connections between these sentiments, but the reality is much more complex. It has become a commonplace that the Leave vote was due to anti-immigration views,

¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36574526>

¹⁵ <https://vimeo.com/172932182>

¹⁶ See, for example < <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/why-i-am-voting-for-lexit-eu-brexite-out-a7093151.html>>. Or see the Socialist Worker’s Endorsement of Leave: < <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/42434/Six+myths+about+the+European+Union>>.

¹⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/brexit-increase-racist-attacks-eu-referendum-160628045317215.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/26/racist-incidents-feared-to-be-linked-to-brexite-result-reported-in-england-and-wales>

where these are understood as racism, and there has been a slide from this claim to discussing incidents of explicit violent racism. This gives the impression that 52% of voters are explicit (perhaps even latently violent) racists.

This would be a devastatingly important truth to grasp, if it were true. But we do not actually have sufficient evidence for its truth, and in fact there is substantial evidence that Leave votes had quite a variety of causes. These causes included false financial claims and promises from Leave campaigners, distrust of David Cameron, and weak campaigning by Labour.¹⁹ Propagating the unsubstantiated claim that 52% of voters are overt and latently violent racists, however, arguably has very damaging effects.

According to Social Norm Theory, “descriptive norms provide a standard from which people do not want to deviate”(Schultz et. al. 2007: 430). Efforts to reduce an undesirable behavior by telling people about actual prevalence of the behavior only succeed where the prevalence is low. Where the prevalence is high, these efforts have a tendency to backfire, causing those who did not formerly engage in the behavior to think it is acceptable and start engaging in it (Schultz).²⁰ Indeed, research has shown that this is one way in which implicit bias training can backfire. On its own, the information that most people harbor racist biases makes subjects *more* likely to act on racist biases (Duiguid and Thomas-Hill).²¹

Now consider what the effect would be of propagating inflated statistics—say, overstating the number of people who drive while drunk. Social norm theory would predict that this would lead to an increase in drunk driving. If the complicated picture suggested here is right, then only some Leave voters were motivated by something that they themselves—if fully aware of it—would recognize as racism. Recall that some of them were influenced by factors having nothing at all to do with immigration. But after the vote, a widespread narrative took hold: that (explicit) racism caused the Brexit vote. Since 52% of voters voted Leave, this amounts to the claim that 52% of the population is (explicitly) racist. Now think what social norm

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36574526>

²⁰ <https://www.jsmf.org/meetings/2008/july/social%20norms%20Cialdini.pdf>

²¹ Importantly, this effect is fully counteracted by telling subjects that most people struggle to overcome their racist biases.

theory would predict as a result of this information being propagated: racism will come to seem far more acceptable. Just as people are more willing to litter or drive drunk if they think it is common, so also people will be more willing to express and act on their racism if they think it is common.

And this appears to be precisely what has happened since the referendum vote. In the week following this vote, there was, as noted above, racist²² hate crime increased fivefold. It is difficult to see what could explain the timing of this increase other than a legitimisation effect. Frustration can be a cause of crime, but these are people whose side has just won. Similarly, the crime could be seen as a kind of protest, but this again conflicts with the timing. A spike in crime *after* victory in the referendum is best explainable by a result of legitimisation of racist sentiments, which made people more willing to act. And the most obvious explanation for this is the widespread reporting that the referendum victory was due to racism—which led people to believe that overt racists were in the majority.

This presents us with a seriously difficult situation. Racism, however, one understands the concept, *did* play an important role in the referendum vote. But so did various other prejudices; and, most likely, various sentiments and beliefs that were not prejudices at all. It is vitally important to find a way to draw attention to prejudice without at the same time legitimating it. The study cited earlier gives us a hint of a way forward for this: we must emphasise not just widespread racism, but also widespread explicit *rejection* of racism, and a widespread desire to overcome unconscious racism. But we must also be careful not to fall back on oversimple, monolithic explanations. Difficult as it is to explain complex phenomena, it seems to me very important to tease apart the many different sentiments and false beliefs that were involved in a complex phenomenon like the Leave vote. Simple narratives like “it was racism” obscure our understanding, and are very likely to backfire.

This paper has argued for a recognition of complexity in thinking about both the causes of the Brexit vote, and the role of *immigration* as a protean dogwhistle in pro-

²² This crime is called ‘racist’, but—significantly for this paper—it includes crime against white Eastern Europeans, like Poles.

Brexit campaigning. Immigration may be associated with different groups in the minds of different voters, and this shiftiness makes it more difficult to defuse *immigration*-related dogwhistles. This difficulty is magnified by the absence of widely accepted anti-prejudice norms with regard to some of these groups. When assessing overall causes of the Brexit vote, moreover, things are complicated yet further by the need to acknowledge both the role that prejudice, particularly racism, played; and the need not to overstate this role. Identifying a way out of these difficulties is a large and difficult task for the future. The goal of this paper was simply to clarify the difficulties and complexities that face us.

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ⁱ I am very grateful to many people for discussion of these issues, including especially Ray Drainville, Carl Fox, Chris Hookway, Frank and Julie Saul, Joe Saunders, and Anya Topolski; and audiences at Leeds, Nottingham, Reykjavik, University of Connecticut and Umea.