Brexit Behaviourally: What Behavioural Lessons Can be Learned from the 2016 EU Referendum?

Tessa Fras

Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science

"Test, Learn, Adapt" is the lesson for Government communicators after a study into what behavioural factors affected the referendum, involving over 450 Leave voters.

Using the MINDSPACE framework, a survey finds:

- Messenger: Leave voters find Boris Johnson more likeable, similar and authoritative than David Cameron; two-thirds don't recognise the IMF; and most trust a "local businessman" more than a minister.

- Incentives: Leave voters find the loss-framed slogan "Take Back Control" 4x more effective than "Take Control". Most thought £4,300 per household per year was less than £350m per week (it is 6x greater).

- Norms: Family and friends mattered more to Leave voters than colleagues.

- Default: "Status quo bias" didn't prevail. Voters were angry and misinformed. 56 per cent weren't confident what "the single market" meant.

- Salience may explain why 63 per cent of Leave voters over-estimate the UK's migrant population.

- Priming: Were Leave voters affected by sub-conscious cues? 34 per cent thought the red Vote Leave bus represented Labour, and 12 per cent thought a Hollywood poster represented UKIP.

- Commitment/Consistency: 71 per cent of Leave voters didn't believe Cameron only decided how to vote in February 2016.

- Ego effects may explain why Leave voters told pollsters "sovereignty" mattered. Now, they say immigration is 3x more important.

Finally, the results of a randomised controlled trial challenge the idea that views on immigration are fixed. Almost twice as many Leave voters will contribute to a pro-migrant charity when asked with an emotionally-framed narrative (Affect) rather than a fact (50 per cent v 28 per cent).