Britain, the United States, and Isolationism

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For several decades, Britain and United States have been assuming the leadership in the global stage. Looking back into the past, nobody would ever expect this coming -- Britain and United States, the representatives of the most developed countries, both show signs of retreat from the stage. The trend is coming and it comes much more quickly than anyone could possibly imagine. This is shown in Britain’s exit from European Union, known as Brexit, and United State’s popular vote for Trump’s presidency. The happening of these two events only serve to bring the isolationism trend in both countries to the peak. In order to find out what are the possible factors that contribute to the trend of isolationism in both countries, several aspects of Brexit and Trump presidency are compared, and the result shows similarities on the voting pattern and the shift of party power in the two countries. However, when it comes to the underlying factors that lead to current situation, Britain and United States show some degree of divergence. While America’s xenophobia mainly generates from the ineffective foreign policy and security system, Britain gets its fear from immigration and economic problems, and these factors remain to be critical in leading both countries into an era of isolationism.

In Britain referendum on the issue of Brexit and America’s election of Trump presidency, the voting displayed a distinct pattern that correlates with voters’ level of education, income, age, and ethnicity. Based on the result of polls, populations with higher qualifications in Britain were significantly more likely to vote Remain while people with higher education in America, for example, college graduates and people who continue postgraduate study, tend to vote for Hillary Clinton instead of Donald Trump. Following the strongest correlation displayed by education level, age plays the second most important role in determining the voting pattern. According to Guardian data, younger residents tend to vote for Remain while older citizens have higher leave
vote (Barr). At the same time, the data of America election shows people within the age group of 45-64 and 65 & over have a larger portion that accounts for the support of Trump (How Donald Trump). Finally, ethnicity serves as another factor in the voting demographic as both Britain and United States are becoming more heterogeneous. In general, white populations are more likely to support Leave and Trump while the ethnic minorities tend to back Remain and Clinton.

Based on the voting demographic result, United States and Britain have majorly similar voting pattern on the events of Trump presidency and Brexit respectively with only minor differences. The data confirms the indications that the voting results in both events were strongly associated with the educational attainment of voters--populations with lower qualifications were significantly more likely to vote Leave and Trump presidency (Rosenbaum). Increasing immigrants and foreigners are moving to America for education and jobs. The same trend is also taking place in Britain. Such trend triggers people’s anxiety about the loss of opportunities and jobs because of the increasing competition brought by the immigrants and foreigners. Therefore, people who have lower qualifications and were less competitive became scared and held onto what Brexit and Trump seemed to stand for: isolationism. The age of the voters is the second most important factor, with older voters more likely to vote Leave and Trump presidency. The fact that older people have a tendency to vote for Brexit and Trump presidency reflects the conservative characteristic that exists in that certain age group, indicating people within the group are more fearful of the change and less acceptable of new ideas. With almost same pattern in terms of education and age distribution, the voting, however, differs slightly on the factor of ethnicity in two countries. In Britain, ethnicity appears to be a smaller factor as it only accounts for 3% of variation in explaining the voting pattern. Furthermore, although in general more white
populations are pro-Leave, there are still exceptional results that are related with the local circumstances. For example, in Ealing and Hounslow, west London boroughs with many voters of Asian origin, a higher number of Asian voters was associated with a higher Leave vote. On the other hand, in America, ethnicity vote accounts for a bigger portion due to greater heterogeneity as well as hostility between white populations and ethnicity. A poll was conducted to show that most of the Trump supporters have unfavorable views towards the ethnic minority as “a great majority of Trump supporters support a policy that bans Muslims from entering the US. Most of them support proposals that stifle immigration from Mexico… and many say that black people are less intelligent and more violent than their white peers” (Lopez).

One of the major reasons for such voting pattern in both countries is the alienation of the white working class voters from the two dominant parties in United States and Britain. For America, a great portion of dissatisfaction towards Democratic Party is generated from Obama administration. It is undeniable that, under Obama administration, America’s economy recovered fast from the world economic crisis since the Great Depression and civil rights were greatly spreading across the nation. However, when it comes to foreign policy, Obama administration largely proves to be a tragedy because of the failure of strategic liberal hegemony. Therefore, when Donald Trump stood out as a Republican candidate with his inclination of withdrawing United States from all kinds of unsuccessful foreign policy, the white working class, who have been holding grudges towards the results of failed foreign policy, surged forward to him. However, after Trump achieved the presidency, he only exacerbated the situation “by poking its fingers deep into the eyes of trusted allies, withdrawing from fulcrum agreements such as the Paris climate accord, failing to recognize the threat to democracy by Russia, and gutting the State
Department” (2018 Camden Conference). As a result, the white working class is gradually alienating from both Democratic and Republican parties due to their failure of providing effective policies. For Britain, the same trend is also displayed as increasing people are becoming doubting the sovereignty of the government and European Union. According to Matthew Goodwin, Britain is now in a period of “fractured parliaments, unstable coalitions and governments, and record levels of volatility” (2018 Camden Conference). The party loyalty is greatly reduced and it is more likely to switch between parties and candidates. This is largely because of the government’s ineffective policy management that brings out citizens’ distrust towards the immigration, terrorism, and declining economy. Consequently, Britain is undergoing the same trend as America, with people that could hardly be brought together due to the varying opinion alienating from both dominant parties in the nation.

So far, the similar voting pattern and citizens’ alienation from parties show that Britain and United States’s path of isolationism and populist movement overlapped with each other to a great extent. However, when it comes to the top voting issues in United States and Britain, there is some degree of divergence. While America has economy, terrorism, and foreign policy as the top three voting issues (Fingerhut), Britain has terrorism, National Health Service, and immigration as the top three concerns (Fieldhouse & Prosser). Having only terrorism in common, it is not without any evidence to claim that even though the two countries display a great similarity in the isolationism trend, the intrinsic factors that lead to such trend differ, and therefore the ultimate solution for each country would differ as well.

In America, beside its common factor of terrorism with Britain, the other two issues are most possibly the issues left from Obama administration. In spite of Obama’s achievement in
expanding job opportunities and lowering down the unemployment rate, Obama’s labor-market record is not completely spotless. According to International Banker “worker-pay growth remained subdued for the majority of the time. Many believe this anaemic growth to be a pivotal factor in US voters opting for Trump during the recent election, particularly those in the ‘Rust Belt’ areas of the country” (The Economic Impact). Furthermore, Obama administration’s mishandling on the the war in Afghanistan, Arab Spring, and Israel-Palestine not only just gained United States minimal interest, but also proves to be a waste of energy and time. America has been persistent on the strategy of liberal hegemony since the end of Cold War even though “The crisis of 2008-2009 was the ideal moment to abandon the failed strategy of liberal hegemony... in the end Obama never broke with that familiar but failed approach” (Walt) and that serves as the most significant reason for making foreign policy one of the top concerns in America.

Britain’s issues, however, are more focused on the spending of National Health Service and the increasing immigration. As Britain is undergoing the same issue as most of the western countries -- increasing aging population -- citizens are asking for more spending on the health care and services. The fact that hospitals are becoming overcrowded and thousands of operations are delayed and suspended demonstrates the struggling of the health service system. Because of that, people are voicing for more spending on the National Health Service, but “policy makers say the solution requires more than just additional funds: Public-health spending in the U.K. is already at its highest level in history, at 7.4% of gross domestic product last year compared with 4.7% two decades ago” (Gross). National Health Service system has been one of Britain’s foundations and principles for several decades and the concern about the system’s current struggle is well reflected in citizens’ top voting issues. In addition, immigration has been one of
the most important problems in Britain. With the pouring of both EU and non-EU immigrants, a lot of concerns are rising, such as the increasingly competitive job market and the safety issue. As a result, immigration is unpopular among British citizens with the majority favoring a reduced level of immigrants (UK Public Opinion). Such concern about the influx of migrants is also reflected in the top voting issues.

In conclusion, the United States and Britain are displaying similar trend towards isolationism. Such trend is especially obvious based on the pattern of voting and the shift of party power in both countries. However, when delving deeply, the underlying reasons for the populist movement and isolationism trend in the United States and Britain diverge in some degree. Beside the common concern about terrorism, America is more focused on the issues of economy and foreign policy while Britain places much emphasis on National Health Service and immigration. The rise of Trump presidency and Brexit is the representation of both countries undergoing the consequences and impacts generated from the top issues. Since such trend is an accumulation of years of unsolved issues, what resulted from it, the era of isolationism, would not be a short-term trend as long as the issues still exist.
Works Cited


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