

Tackling Brexit

An idea analysis on the similarities of the 2016 Brexit debate
and the debate on foreign players in the Premier League



Abstract

Through an idea analysis, arguments for and against two different policy changes regulating foreign labor in the Premier League will be dissected in order to reveal the nationalist and liberal qualities within them. Arguments made by the Remain and Leave-campaigns during the 2016 Brexit debate, prior to the referendum are also reviewed. The analysis of the empirical material revealed that the two debates, concerning two completely different spheres of society, are almost identical in their ideological features and rhetoric emphasis. However, an analytical discussion utilizing sociological media theory could neither prove nor disprove a causal relationship between the exposure to political arguments made in the foreign player debate and the public's susceptibility to nationalist arguments during the 2016 Brexit debate, leaving room for future studies.

Key Words: Premier League, Brexit, Foreign Labor, Public Opinion, Liberalism, Nationalism, Cultivation theory, Economic interests, National identity

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1. Introduction

“...Just as the government's ideological insistence on mass immigration is a recipe for the long-term destruction of our nation, so the football clubs' attachment to foreigners is certain to cause a further decline in our national side's fortunes.”

- Leo McKinstry on Arsene Wenger's historic decision to exclusively select foreign players for a Premier League match squad. (Manhire, 2005)

In 2005, Arsene Wenger became the first Premier League manager ever to compose a 16-man squad consisting entirely of foreign players. He met loud criticism towards his preference of recruiting and fielding foreign players, claiming that he was compromising English football. (Ibid.) The arguments that were used against his decision to pick out an entirely foreign squad have resurfaced multiple times as the Premier League has repeatedly enforced policy changes regulating the possibility to recruit foreign players, the latest taking effect following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. The arguments for and against regulations to foreign players in the Premier League have had striking similarities to the arguments on whether to remain in or leave the EU during the 2016 Brexit debate, prior to the referendum.

This study will investigate what political arguments were used during the implementation of different policy changes to foreign labor within the Premier League and compare them to political arguments used by the two main campaigns during the 2016 Brexit debate. Furthermore, it will be discussed whether the debate on foreign players has influenced the public's susceptibility to nationalist arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Premier League

The Premier League has become a global phenomenon. Out of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations, the Premier League was broadcast in 188 of those during the 2018/2019 campaign, reaching a global audience of approximately 3.2 billion in 2019. (Premier League, 2019) It has become an integral part of English culture and was watched by 40% of the United Kingdom's population (26,8m people) during the 2020/2021 campaign. (Premier League, 2021)

The Premier League was formed in 1992 due to concerns amongst the top flight clubs of the English football system that broadcasting revenue was not fairly distributed. Prior to 1992, First Division clubs had to share its broadcasting revenue with all the other leagues within the English League system. In order to maximize broadcasting revenue amongst the top clubs, Premier League, a breakaway league with the backing of the English football association (the FA), was created. The league was to become a private company, solely consisting of its member clubs. The list of clubs changes every season, with three clubs being relegated based on results on the pitch every season and consequently replaced by three promoted Championship clubs. Broadcasting income from top flight football was now to be distributed exclusively and evenly to the Premier League, which in turn increased the top clubs bargaining power when negotiating domestic and international broadcasting rights. (Ludvigsen, 2021)

The Premier League has since become the most watched football league worldwide, expanding into almost every corner of the world. Broadcasting revenue has increased dramatically since 1992, as Premier League clubs have been able to expand into new international markets and negotiate increasingly lucrative broadcasting contracts on their own terms. (Ibid.) Unparalleled streams of broadcasting revenues compared to the rest of Europe's football leagues has made it possible for Premier League teams to be extremely aggressive on the transfer market, attracting top players with big transfer fees and salaries. (Elliott,

2022:413) The global expansion of the Premier League has also had impacts beyond the new streams of revenue. A survey conducted by Populus in 2018 showed that almost 70% of those surveyed say the Premier League makes them think better of the UK, making the Premier League the highest ranking brand/organization in Populus' British Icons Index. (Ludvigsen, 2021; Populus, 2018) Ludvigsen (2021) applies Joseph Nye's (2004) theory of soft power on the results, arguing that the Premier League has become one of the UK's main channels of soft power as it continues to awe and influence viewers worldwide.

1.1.2 Foreign Players and the Premier League

The large influx of foreign labor into the Premier League during the 21st century was unheard of in English football prior to the reconstruction of top flight football in 1992. During the first set of fixtures in the 1992/1993 Premier League campaign, only eleven players from outside the British Isles were featured in the starting elevens of the first round of fixtures. (Atkinson, 2002) Twelve years later the tide had turned and in 2004/2005 about 45% of PL players consisted of foreign players. (Football Reference, 2022) There are several economic incentives for the aggressive recruitment of foreign labor within the Premier League. The most apparent is that foreign labor offers competences that may not be easily sourced from the local population, consequently strengthening the product. (Elliott, 2022:414) Recruitment of foreign labor is also an important tool for Premier League clubs when establishing new relationships and accessing international markets. The recruitment of any foreign player will garner the attention of thousands or millions of overseas fans which makes the transfer of high profile foreign players from emerging markets similar to a form of football foreign direct investment (FDI). (Ibid.) The transfer/investment would eventually lead to a new stream of income through sponsors, shirt sales and renewed interest in the club. (Elliott, 2022:415) Manchester United were accused of employing such a tactic in order to sell shirts in Asia, after acquiring South Korean midfielder Park Ji Sung in 2005. A notion the player himself later dismissed. (Mirror, 2014)

However, for the 2010/2011 season, the Premier League introduced a rule that stated that every 25 man squad needs to have at least 8 “home-grown” players. (Conn, 2010) This decision was made due to growing concerns that domestic talents were going to be overlooked due to the rising influx of foreign talents. (Ibid.) In 2015, the Home Office and FA tightened the possibility for non-EU players to attain work permits. The new rules made it increasingly difficult for clubs to sign foreign talents, since the new requirements stated that a player needed to have represented a certain number of games for a top 50 nation on the FIFA ranking instead of a top 70 nation. (FA, 2015) Furthermore, the FA communicated that exceptions to the visa requirements would become rarer. (Ibid.) There have also been suggestions from former FA chairman Greg Dyke that the number of home-grown players within a Premier League squad should increase from eight to twelve. (The Guardian, 2015)

Prior to the 2020/2021 Premier League season, the Football Association implemented a series of policy changes regarding work permits within the English football league system. (FA, 2020) These policy changes had been in the works ever since the results from the Brexit referendum made it clear that the UK would no longer be part of the European Union. Therefore, EU’s labor laws were no longer applicable to the UK, making the Bosman ruling from 1995 invalid for the UK’s footballing operations. The Bosman ruling banned restrictions on foreign players within national football leagues in order to increase freedom of movement and association. (Brand, 2015) This prohibited football leagues within the EU from imposing quotas on foreign players from the EU, whereas the new rules state that a player needs to have represented the national team of a top 50 FIFA nation in a substantial number of games in order to attain a visa, with possibility of exceptions depending on the transfer fee proposed and the amount of games played in a top flight league. (Brand, 2015; FA, 2020) This will make it increasingly difficult for foreign talents to establish themselves in the Premier League. In contrast, it is probable that the new labor policies will benefit the investment and development of domestic talents. (Sky Sports, 2020)

1.2.3 Brexit

The Brexit referendum took place on the 23rd of June 2016 and resulted in 52% of the voters being in favor of leaving the EU. (De Vries, 2017) It was the culmination of decades of internal conflict within the Conservative Party. (Hobolt, 2016) This conflict stems from two different developments, one being the emerging euroscepticism within the party after the 2008 eurozone debt crisis. (Bennett, 2019) The other being the rise of the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), a populist eurosceptic right wing party led by Nigel Farage. (Ibid.) In order to lessen the divide of the party, which stemmed from Eurosceptic voices growing louder, a referendum on whether the UK should remain or leave the EU was pledged in the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto. (Hobolt, 2016) This was a drastic effort to hinder a flight of voters to UKIP. UKIP is often seen as a reaction to the changes within the UK's economic and social orders that made a whole class of voters feel "left-out", generally white, older, working-class voters who feel disadvantaged and disoriented in the new economic and social landscape. (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Ford and Goodwin, 2014) Following the Conservative Party's win in the 2015 general election, granting them outright majority, David Cameron started negotiating with the EU for a "new settlement" that would benefit Britain if they were to remain in the EU. The settlement, which included a limit to the in-work benefits of EU migrants and also provided a set of guarantees that would secure the interests of the City of London and British businesses, was criticized by the press for not providing enough concessions from Brussels. (Hobolt, 2016) Subsequently, the Leave-side of the Brexit debate was boosted in the polls following the announcement of the settlement. (Ibid.)

During the lead up to the Brexit referendum in 2016, there were two official campaign organizations. These were "Britain Stronger in Europe" and "Vote Leave". These polarizing campaigns enabled the Remain/Leave-debate to mainly focus on two issues, the economy and immigration. The Remain-side pressed on the economic uncertainty of Brexit, that an exit would harm the British economy and lead to a forthcoming crisis ("A leap in the dark"), whereas the Leave side

accentuated the need to restrict immigration and evoking fear by depicting the EU-membership as an ongoing crisis (“Take back control”). (Ibid., Bennett, 2019) This made the debate look like a simple choice between economy and immigration, between a liberal choice of maintaining the economic status quo and a nationalist choice of regaining control over the borders and justice system, something that will be touched upon repeatedly in this paper - especially when dissecting arguments in order to disclose what liberal and nationalist qualities can be found within.

1.2 Aim of Study and Research Question

The research questions are as follows:

- *In what ways have the political arguments for and against foreign player regulations in the Premier League mirrored the main arguments of the 2016 Brexit debate?*
- *Has the debate on foreign players in the Premier League increased the British publics’ susceptibility to nationalist arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate?*

The aim of the study is to examine what political arguments were at work during two different policy changes regarding foreign labor within the Premier League. By studying two political ideologies in the context of the Premier League, liberalism and nationalism, I strive to answer whether the Premier League has preceded and mirrored a polarizing power struggle between political arguments also seen in English society in 2016, prior to the Brexit referendum. Furthermore, the ambition is to not only provide evidence on how the Premier League has mirrored the ideological conflict in English society during the 2016 Brexit debate, but also present arguments on how the Premier League and Premier League coverage might have influenced attitudes in English society that consequently contributed to the public’s susceptibility of nationalist arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate, ultimately affecting the results of the referendum.

The questions differ both in character and approach. The first question is binary in its form and provides an opportunity to deduce what similarities of political arguments can be found in two different debates whereas the latter has the ambition to lay the foundation for new conceptions of theories and research methods on sports and public opinion. Therefore, the study contains both deductive and inductive elements. (Grönmo, 2006:45)

2. Previous Research

When doing research, it became apparent that there was a scarcity of texts that link the politics of the Premier League with the Brexit-referendum. Instead, there were plenty of texts concerning the potential effects Brexit would have on the Premier League. The latest labor policy change garnered the most attention due to it being a direct consequence of Brexit whereas the earlier labor policy changes were generally not spoken of. There was, however, plenty of research that inspired some of the core ideas presented in this paper, especially the ones concerning football's influence on society. What follows is a collection of research that was the most relevant for this paper and it gives the reader insight on the research process as a whole:

The main article used for segments regarding public opinion and Brexit is *Benchmarking Brexit: How the British Decision to Leave Shapes EU Public Opinion* by Catherine De Vries (2017). This article discusses the consequences Brexit will have on the public support for the EU in other EU-countries. Albeit not directly relevant for the topic of this study, it is still of great theoretical and methodological importance since it highlights three key concepts of Hooghe and Mark's text *Calculation, community and cues public opinion on European integration (2005)* and consequently links them to the public opinion of the EU within the UK around the Brexit referendum. Those three concepts are integral to this paper, in order to prove similarities between arguments and actors within the Premier League in the 2010's with political ideas and actors in the UK right around the Brexit referendum in 2016.

One article whose subject matter does not feature in this thesis but nonetheless influenced the approach and contents of this paper is *Can exposure to celebrities reduce prejudice? The effect of Mohamed Salah on islamophobic behaviors and attitudes* by Alrababah et al (2021). The study examines the effects exposure to footballing media can have on society. The study applies the parasocial contact hypothesis whose premise is that exposure to positive portrayals of ethnic minorities through mass media has a correlative effect that reduces prejudice towards those minorities. The study argues that Mohamed Salah's (an outspoken muslim) success in Liverpool FC led to a decline of hate crimes reported in the Merseyside area and that islamophobic tweets by Liverpool supporters halved. The direct effect that exposure to football and footballing media can have on its consumers inspired this thesis to find out whether Premier League viewers had been exposed to political arguments through the 2010's foreign players debate that were similar to the concepts that influenced the UK's public opinion towards the EU in 2016.

The communications theory most suited for such an ambition was cultivation theory. Cultivation theory states that a long exposure to media will eventually lead to the consumer perceiving the world and its social realities similar to how the media perceives them. Studies that incorporate sports and cultivation theory tend to focus on whether the sports media influences its consumers to agree on the importance of having a active and healthy lifestyle whereas Jacco van Sterkenburg in his chapter *Sports Media in Europe* (2016) describes how exposure to sports on television in Europe can affect its viewers perception on black athletes and communities in a harmful way. The text has been a source of inspiration to apply cultivation theory on the foreign players debate in order to argue that the viewers/readers perception of foreign labor has been affected.

Karen Perry and Madison Steenson's article *A Post Brexit Impact: A Case Study on the English Premier League* (2019) discusses the eventual long term effects Brexit will have on the Premier League. It depicts the hazards of the new labor policy that was to be implemented for the 2020/2021 season, mainly focusing on the new economic realities for Premier League clubs on the transfer market. This

article is one of many that are all but completely preoccupied with the economic consequences of post Brexit labor policies within the Premier League. Any discussion regarding the effects the new labor policies might have on player demographics and in turn its effects on English society is conspicuous by their absence, which has been a trend for most articles regarding post-Brexit impact on Premier League. Another common denominator amongst articles concerning Brexit and Premier League is that the labor policy change is seen as a singular event followed by Brexit, and not part of a series of policy changes all headed towards the same direction.

3. Theoretical Framework

To prove a subject as the case of something is to make a connection between theory and the empirical. (Teorell och Svensson, 2007:47) However, to reduce human actions or reality to general scientific theories is by no means sufficient in itself when examining and describing the real world. (Ibid) This does not mean that all attempts to describe things and events are futile wastes of time, but one needs to be wary of the impossibility of explaining all of life's complexities through theories. (Ibid.) The theoretical framework presented below consists of two political philosophies, one theory on public opinion and one sociological media theory. The main qualities of liberalism and nationalism as political philosophies will be presented shortly in order to draw parallels between arguments during both the past decade of foreign players debate within the Premier League but also the Remain/Stay debate around the 2016 Brexit referendum. The theory on public opinion chosen is needed to provide a framework with which popular support for the two stances in both debates can be understood. The sociological theory presented, Cultivation theory, is necessary in order to grasp the implications the foreigner debate within the Premier League can have on its viewers. The inclusion of cultivation theory within the study is a way to bridge the gap between the media studied (Premier League) and the political event studied (Brexit).

3.1 Liberalism

Liberalism as a political philosophy argues for the rights of the individual, liberty and equality. (Freedon, 2015:15) The interpretation and implementation of said philosophy varies which has amounted in different branches of liberalism. Social liberalism, in contrast to classical liberalism, emphasizes the need for state intervention in order to ensure that all individuals are given equal opportunities in society. (Ibid:2) Classical liberalists believe that the state is needed to ensure security between individuals and minimize the risk of conflict. (Ibid:2) However, any interference with the free market by the state can be seen as a transgression on individual freedom and an obstruction to maximal economic performance. (Murphy, 2022)

Liberalism as a political theory is useful when examining how the Premier League operates and what its ambitions are. Since competition on the free market is seen as the greatest force to instigate innovation and progress by liberal scholars, liberalism is of great value when examining the politics of sport. To be successful in competition is one of the most important features to athletes. It is also what drives investment and sponsorship in the league. The more successful a league or a club is, the more attention and investment it will garner from sponsors. There are concrete utilitarian incentives for leagues and clubs to increase the pool of players to pick from, since it increases the chance of finding great talents that can give them a competitive edge, leading to success and further economic growth/investment. (Elliott, 2022:414)

3.2 Nationalism

In the 1980's, a lot of scholars started to preoccupy themselves with studies on globalization. A landslide of technological progress had made it possible for information to spread faster than ever. In the 1990's the world was becoming digital, something that made advocates of globalization believe would lead to an increase in global interdependence and therefore lead to the erosion of national borders and identities. This would diminish nationalism's influence in the modern world since nationalism is based on the idea that individual's and group's interests

should be secondary to the nation's. However, this has not been the case. Nationalism is holding its own in the age of globalization. Instead, globalization has become a successful tool for nationalist rhetoric, with nationalist parties attracting workers who felt left behind by globalization. Workers' class identities have disintegrated as social democratic parties have swerved further to the right on economic issues. This has paved the way for modern nationalist populists such as Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen to use immigration and political elites as scapegoats for the failures of globalization in the 21st century. (Cox, 2021)

Nationalism is the second political theory that will be utilized during this case study. It is needed to understand recent developments within the English league system and to decide whether certain rules are based on nationalist interests which surpass others, such as monetary or humanitarian ones. One of the FAs most prominent figures in media during the 21st century, Greg Dyke, has often accentuated the necessity of policy change in order ensure that national interests such as the English national team are prioritized by the Premier League. An increase in opportunities for English players at the expense of foreign players is often motivated by the desire of a successful national team. (The Guardian, 2015)

3.3 Theories of Public Opinion

The UK's withdrawal from the European Union, more known as Brexit, was the result of a variety of issues prior to the 2016 referendum. De Vries (2017) draws upon Hooghe and Mark's (2005) idea that three key approaches to public opinion stand out when examining attitudes to the EU and applies them to the euroscepticism seen in the UK in 2016, prior to the Brexit referendum. These are: economic interest, national identity and party or media elite cues. Studies on economic interests stress the following: high income earners and the well educated are inclined to have more positive views on the EU project since they are more probable to take advantage of larger and shared markets. Low income earners in turn, feel marginalized and left out by globalization. National identity is highly important when examining attitudes towards the EU, citizens with exclusive emotional ties to their national identity are less likely to identify

themselves with the European project. Furthermore, negative views on foreigners and multiculturalism makes European integration even more challenging. (Hooghe and Mark, 2005) The third approach to public opinion is media elite cues. Since most citizens are not well versed with the workings of the EU, they rely on party or media cues when gathering information and forming opinion on the matter. (Ibid.)

3.4 Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, a communications theory created by George Grebner, is the theory of how long term exposure to media, especially television, can unconsciously change the viewers perception of reality. George Grebner describes cultivation as part of a “continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction amongst messages and contexts.” (Grebner, 1998) The theory of cultivation has been applied to sports broadcasting before. One example is the way sports broadcasters and commentators speak on black athletes, exaggerating their athletic prowess and using terms that are more suited for animals than people, which in turn has increased stereotyping and incorrect perceptions of black people amongst its viewers. (Sterkenburg, 2016) Another relevant case, albeit not related to sports media, is a study that saw that viewers exposed to fictional television narratives that project positive attitudes towards the justice system had a bigger trust in the real world justice system and vice versa for the ones exposed to fictional television that project negative attitudes towards the justice system. (Mutz and Nir, 2010) This is a noteworthy example of cultivation, since it shows that even though the justice system has been abstracted through a TV-show, it still has real world implications on the viewers' attitudes. This is an important precedent when arguing for the implementation of cultivation theory on the Premier League's complicated relationship with foreign labor, since it might have affected real world attitudes towards foreign labor in other spheres of society.

4. Method and material

4.1 Research Design

The study is a describing case study, since its ambitions is to describe what political arguments were at work during different instances of policy making through idea analysis. The aim is to explain what would not otherwise be apparent to the reader. This case study will be looking at two cases through an idea analysis of what was communicated by different actors during those cases.

The case study will focus on the following changes to foreign labor policy within the Premier League:

- The introduction of the “home-grown” players quota in 2010
- The 2015 work permit changes

When studying these foreign labor policy changes, the main focus will be what different actors governing or working within the top flight of football in England, such as FA and Premier League associates, have communicated during the implementation of said quotas and policies. This will be the empirical material studied and analyzed. The material selected will be analyzed in order to hopefully depict a clear picture of what the main actors' stances and arguments for or against policy changes regulating foreign labor in the Premier League are. The arguments of the 2016 Brexit debate are presented during the study's background section, since there is an abundance of Brexit research that present the main arguments from said debate, making a new idea analysis in Brexit texts and documents superfluous for the approach of this study.

Arguments will be analyzed through the theoretical framework in order to identify the political arguments at work around the implementation of said policy changes. Different arguments within the foreign players debate will be compared to academic articles on the political arguments at work in the UK in 2016, prior to the Brexit referendum. The political theories that will be used when distinguishing

and categorizing arguments are the theories of nationalism and liberalism, whereas Hooghe and Marks' three key approaches to public opinion will provide theoretical understanding on why certain arguments and ideas are more prominent in certain political discussions, creating a theoretical link between arguments made in the foreign player debate and the 2016 Brexit debate.

By both being an idea analysis and a theory consuming study, the study's ambition is to present new ways of incorporating research methods and theories in order to provide new and unique insights on the topics at hand whilst also answering the questions posed in an adequate way.

The results, which lay bare the arguments at work during the three different policy changes to foreign labor policy, will not only be compared to liberal and nationalist arguments made during the Brexit debate in 2016 and contextualized via theories on public opinion, but also reviewed through cultivation theory. If the arguments found within the two different debates and spheres of society are deemed similar enough, cultivation theory will also be utilized during the discussion of the results in order to argue whether arguments found in the foreign players debate might have increased the public's susceptibility to nationalist arguments observed during the 2016 Brexit debate

When utilizing idea analysis as a scientific method, one has to be wary of a couple of the risks. For example, there are always dangers of bias when conducting an idea analysis. When examining empirical material, one should not only look for the answer one hopes to find. (Teorell & Svensson, 2007:100) This can jeopardize the legitimacy of the whole study, since important material that may not follow one's own ideas and preconceptions might be overlooked. (Ibid.)

The cases that I've chosen to examine through idea analysis are few, as the focus has been on examining cases that are of a high relevance and provide a significant degree of representativeness. Focusing on relevant cases (tunga fall) was the most viable option for this study, since there has only been three major changes to labor policy in the last decade of the Premier League whereas only two of them took place prior to the Brexit referendum. What is noteworthy however, is that these

changes have all followed the same trend, as they all share the ambition of limiting the influx of foreign players. The generalizing qualities that a relevant case study provides is therefore even more accentuated. (Teorell & Svensson, 2007:151-152) Cases regarding foreign player regulations in the Premier League that took place before the 2010's have also been deselected for the idea analysis, because of their lack of temporal proximity to the 2016 Brexit debate.

There are two different schools of idea analysis, content idea analysis and functional idea analysis. (Beckman, 2005:12-13) Content text analysis views political messages as a collection of arguments, where its purpose is to examine and test different arguments' validity. (Ibid.) This branch of idea analysis incorporates normative qualities, since it gives the researcher a possibility to develop arguments for its own views. (Ibid.) Such an analysis would not be beneficial to the scientific questions posed. A functional text analysis treats political arguments as part of a larger causal system. This makes a functional text analysis more viable in this study, since it also highlights the importance of linkages between political messages and motives. (Ibid.)

Even though the deductive purpose of this study is not to prove an empiric causation between policy making in football and policy making on the highest domestic and international level, it is still of scientific relevance how political arguments can work similarly in, at face value, completely different spheres of society. Through a novel research method and a unique mix of theories, the study aims to have a cumulative quality to its research, which by default strengthens its scientific relevance. (Teorell & Svensson, 2007:18)

The practical relevance needs to be grounded in some sort of relevance not exclusive to the academic field, but also of interest for the general public to some degree (Teorell & Svensson, 18). One instance of practical relevance is that there has been an increase of incidents in English football which mirror some of the problematic attitudes that featured on the "leave" side of the Brexit debate. (Bassam, 2020; Opinium, 2019; Guerra et. al, 2017)

4.2 Data and Operationalization

When examining the political ideas at work within the English footballing system, arguments which have been communicated prior and during policy implementation will be discussed. An operationalisation of liberal qualities and nationalist qualities of arguments in the context of football will be needed.

- Liberalism - Increase of competition, economic incentives, global reach, freedom of movement
- Nationalism - Protectionism, national team prioritization, isolation

These operationalisations are intended to distinguish liberal and nationalist arguments both in the foreign players debate as well as the Brexit debate in 2016, with the exception of national team prioritization which is exclusively suited for arguments regarding the foreign players debate.

Arguments made prior to, and during the implementation of the 2010 homegrown players quota will be drawn from newspaper articles, quotes and secondary sources whereas arguments made prior to, and during the implementation of the 2015 work permit changes will be by large collected from the *2014 FA Chairman's England report*. This is a slight shortcoming of the study, since there is a risk of bias and subjectivity when presenting and retelling the arguments made during the implementation of the 2010 homegrown players quota as the sources are not nearly as detailed and elaborate as the 2014 FA Chairman's England report.

4.3 Methodological Reflections

When conducting a descriptive idea analysis, it is not merely sufficient to retell the political messages and arguments. Instead, the ambition of any scholar who utilizes descriptive idea analysis is to add something new to the material studied. (Beckman, 2007:49) When applying theories and contexts to a text that have not been considered before, new insights about said text have the opportunity to

reveal themselves. (Ibid.) One risk of conducting a study which aims to depict the similarities in arguments of debates taking place in different spheres of society is that the resemblance of arguments are mere coincidences. Therefore, it is the scholar's responsibility to present viable theories, reasonings and arguments that support the scholar's interpretation of the texts. (Ibid.) On the other hand, if a text lends no room to be interpreted differently to what has been presented at face value, utilization of any descriptive idea analysis would not have been worthwhile. (Beckman, 2007:50)

The lens that arguments will be viewed through consists of two political theories, liberalism and nationalism. Although such a method is fairly common when dissecting texts concerning political events, it is rarer when examining arguments and statements regarding sports. Another great challenge will be to provide strong arguments for the use of Hooghe and Marks' theory on public opinion and cultivation theory. A theory which both aims to bridge the gap between two different debates and also attempts to justify a possible thesis that would suggest some degree of causality between the two. One could argue that a content analysis would be more suitable when utilizing cultivation theory on the Premier League foreigner debate, since it would reveal to what degree certain arguments and ideas have prevailed during Premier League broadcasts in order to strengthen the validity of any claim that the foreign players debate might have influenced the public's susceptibility to nationalist arguments made during 2016 Brexit debate prior to the referendum. However, the research process for such a content analysis would be far too extensive, since a scan of thousands of hours of broadcasting would be impossible to manage within the desired timeframe.

Conducting an idea analysis on two different cases is a challenge, since the material gathered for dissection varies in its presentation, form and content. For example, when examining arguments made during the implementation of the homegrown players quota in 2010 one had to rely on newspaper articles and secondary sources whereas the arguments made prior to and during the implementation of the work permit changes in 2015 were available in a detailed commission report made by the English FA. The results concerning the 2015 work permit changes are therefore likely to be more accurate, since the main source

comes directly from the instigators of said change and features an extensive overview of all concerns, motives and arguments. No such document exists for the 2010 homegrown player quota.

5. Results

5.1 Homegrown player quota (2010)

In 2009, a majority of Premier League clubs voted in favor of a homegrown quota system, meaning that every Premier League squad needs to feature at least eight homegrown players. (Conn, 2009) The new rules were to be implemented for the 2010/2011 season, giving Premier League teams enough time to readjust their squads in order to fulfill the new quota. The voting results of Premier League clubs are noteworthy in their own right, since the Premier League was originally opposed to player quotas, when first introduced in a lesser form by UEFA prior to the 2005/2006 season. (Ibid.)

To qualify as a homegrown player, the player should have belonged to a club in the English football league system for three years before turning 21. (Ibid.) The quota could not be based on nationality alone, since it would clash with the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU which in Article 18 prohibits any discrimination on the grounds of nationality. (Henderson, 2011:273) However, the quota is still closely tied to nationality since an overwhelming majority of the players that qualify as home grown are English. In 2014, 65% of all home grown players were English. (FA, 2014:72) Concerns have been raised that the quota still is discriminatory and protectionist in its nature, even though it abided EU law. (Henderson, 2011:260-261)

The arguments for the implementation of a home grown quota are mainly based on the notion that the English national team's failures require an intervention within the domestic league. The policy change, limiting the amount of non-homegrown players in the squad, was introduced with the hopes of

strengthening clubs' academies and promoting the development of English players.

Furthermore, the arguments against the homegrown players quota are mainly focused on what effects it will have on the Premier League as a commercial product, since guaranteed spots for homegrown players might harm the competitiveness of the league which could potentially damage its quality and lucrativeness.

Harry Redknapp, former manager of Tottenham Hotspur, stressed the need for meritocracy within the league. In his view, managers should not be forced to include players in their squads just because they are young and English. If players that gain their place in the squad through a quota are not good enough, the league will not improve. (Hytner, 2010)

Ged Roddy, director of academies for the Premier League in 2010, acknowledges the notion that club owners are primarily concerned in the potential consequences to the league as a product but stresses the fact that they also sanctioned the new quota. (Ibid.)

5.2 Work Permit Changes (2015)

In the 2014 FA Chairman's England report, concerns were raised over the lack of English players eligible to play for the national team, as only 32% of the starters in the 2012/2013 could play for the English national team. (FA, 2014:21) The influx of foreign players since the 1995 Bosman ruling is described as a problem, since it diminishes the chances of domestic talents to prevail. (Ibid:13)

Earlier attempts at addressing the shortage of English talents within the Premier League are deemed insufficient, such as the 2010 homegrown player quota. (Ibid:13;29;47) The EU protected right of freedom of labor and the economic incentives of importing foreign talents are described as what is keeping the initiatives such as the 2010 homegrown player quota from having any substantial effect on English football. (Ibid:13)

One of the three measurements suggested in the 2014 report was implemented in 2015, as the FA together with the Home Office tightened the requirements for non-EEA (European Economic Area) players trying to attain work permits. (FA, 2014:45;FA, 2015)

There are two reasons mentioned in the report when arguing why increasing the opportunities for English players matter. Firstly, a successful national team is described as something that goes beyond sports, a spectacle that unites people through a shared identity and purpose. Secondly, creating pathways for young English players to develop within the highest level of the sport is described as a responsibility shared by the FA and Premier League. (FA, 2014:12)

“This issue matters because we have a duty of care for English football and not just to football played in England.” (Ibid:12)

6. Analysis

The arguments made by the proponents of foreign player regulations in the Premier League are strikingly similar to the ones made by the Leave-side of the Brexit debate in 2016. The goal of the 2010 foreign player quota was to limit the spots available in the Premier League squads in order to promote investment in English youth academies which subsequently would benefit English players and English football. Foreign players' contributions to the league's great commercial success are barely mentioned, instead the English national team's failures in international competitions get all the spotlight. Regulations and quotas are described as necessary in order to pave the way for any future success for the English national team.

Much like the Leave-campaign, an existential threat is presented, which can only be defeated through protectionism and isolation. The conveyed notions that foreign players are depicted as an obstruction to the national team's competitive success are clear examples of nationalist arguments, where foreigners are blamed

for hurting the interests of the nation. The nationalists require action and decisiveness from domestic institutions in order to go back to an older, more homogenous, status quo. The Leave-side utilized strikingly similar arguments during the 2016 Brexit campaign, as the campaign's slogan "Take back control" alluded to European integration having gone too far and that leaving the EU was the necessary measure in order to take control over its own borders and institutions.

National identity, the second of Hooghe and Marks' key approaches to public opinion, has evidently been utilized by both proponents of foreign players regulations in the Premier League but also the Leave-side of the 2016 Brexit debate as a tool when arguing for measures they deem necessary. In the foreign player debate, the national team is repeatedly used as a symbol for the English game gone awry. Even though the national team only competes in major tournaments every two years and the difference between a successful or failed campaign can be determined by the randomness of a penalty shootout, its performance is still presented by proponents of foreign player regulations as a valid indicator on where all of English football is headed.

The 2014 FA Chairman's Commission Report deemed that the 2010 homegrown players rule was not sufficient enough in providing opportunities for young English players. When describing the "problem" the FA touches upon what is believed to be the hindering policies aiming to decrease the amount of opportunities for foreign players and increase the amount for English players. The EU laws that guarantee freedom of labor within the union are mentioned as an obstacle for the introduction of any substantial policy change that would safeguard roster spots for English players. It is evident from the report that the FA views the EU in similar ways to the Leave-side of the Brexit debate, that it hinders the FA's and Premier League's ability to control and regulate their own institutions in any way they deem reasonable.

Another obstacle to regulating the influx of foreign players mentioned in the report are the economic incentives that already exist in the league. Economic interests, the first key approach to public opinion mentioned by Hooghe and

Marks, can affect actors' attitude to the EU. De Vries argues that the ones who have not profited as much by the freedom of movement of labor, services, capital and the erosion of borders will be more inclined to view the EU negatively. Furthermore, the FA's stance on foreign labor in the 2014 report has probably been formed in a similar way. Since the clubs are the ones that have profited massively from a large influx of foreign labor, they are less likely to be advocating for regulations of foreign labor. The FA however, do not share the same economic incentives. Instead, there could be political incentives for chief commissioners and executives to be the ones that laid the foundation for a future world cup medal, by prioritizing and protecting both English youth players and the English national team.

The implementation of the 2015 work permit changes are, just like the implementation of the 2010 homegrown player quota, motivated by a necessity to tend nationalist interests. It is described as a duty to care for English football and not only football being played in England, calling for an increased priority of English youth players in order to ensure that they reach the height of their potential. These protectionist ideas are not exclusive to the foreign player debate, but also persistently present in the Leave-side 2016 Brexit debate, which stresses the prioritization of English interests over the ones of the EU.

The liberal arguments made by opponents of policy changes regulating the influx of foreign players are, just like the Remain-side of the 2016 Brexit debate, concerned about the economic realities that would follow radical change. For example, one fear is that less spots available for foreign players in the Premier League would lessen the quality of the league, since it would decrease competition within squads and increase the risk of the league missing out on exceptional talents. This could harm the Premier League as a product and subsequently hurt income flows in terms of sponsor deals, merchandise sales and viewership rates. There are clear economic incentives for Premier League clubs to keep the player pool available to recruit from as big as possible, since it makes it likelier that clubs find exceptional talents without overpaying, which can both increase the competitiveness of the squad but also increase the interest in the club from sponsors and fans.

Harry Redknapp, former manager of Tottenham Hotspur, expressed views that are strikingly similar to modern liberalism when he disapproved of the idea of a homegrown player quota in 2010. He emphasized that players should only be judged upon their footballing skills, not their nationality, when being scouted and recruited. If they have the desired skills, they fit the job. The modern liberal idea that everyone should be provided the equal possibility to work at a high standard is prominent in his reasoning. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the 2010 homegrown player quota and the 2015 work permit changes actually are compatible with the modern liberal idea of equality of opportunity. Those policy changes could be viewed as necessary interventions in order to provide equal opportunity for English youth players, who risk being overlooked by clubs opting for foreign players in order to increase their reach into new emerging international markets. However, English players are not remotely close to being discriminated against in their own top flight league. Even in 2014 when the FA reported an alarming low percentage of players eligible for the English national team in the Premier League, they still represented 32% of the starters in the league. Furthermore, the proximity of domestic talents makes it cost effective to invest in English players, decreasing the risk of clubs solely sourcing talents from foreign markets.

The most striking similarity between the arguments made in the foreign player debate and the 2016 Brexit debate is the polarization and accentuation of two competing ideologies. It can be easily illustrated by applying the slogans of the Remain- and Leave-side during the Brexit debate on the main concerns of the proponents and opponents of foreign player regulations in the foreign players debate. Proponents of foreign player regulations stress the necessity to “Take back control” over influx of foreign players in order to protect the English game whereas opponents of player regulations are hesitant of “Taking a leap in the dark”, fearing the economic consequences of weakened competition and reduced accessibility to international markets.

However, to boggle down large and complicated debates into a matter of economics versus immigration is a gross simplification. Political issues,

arguments and motives are never binary, as they are the result of a never ending chain of variables. Nonetheless, it is apparent that arguments and debates are often presented in such a way that it creates an illusion of dichotomy in order for them to gain public traction. For example, arguments mentioned in this paper which feature nationalist ideas are inclined to incorporate an antagonizing rhetoric towards more liberal ideas such as freedom of movement of labor and large shared markets, since stark opposition and polarization in itself is a great tool when amassing support from the public. It strengthens political mobilization through divergence, forcing undecided voters to pick a side.

Hooghe and Marks' theory on public opinion states that public opinion varies depending on economic interests, national identity and elite media cues. Even though there are some groups that would benefit economically from a reduction of shared markets followed by regulations on foreign players or a withdrawal from the EU, both debates are marked by opponents of said changes warning of the looming negative economic consequences. Arguments pressing on national identities are exclusively utilized by proponents of such changes, as a large influx of foreign players to the Premier League and the prospect of continued EU membership are both argued as threats to English interests and its national identity. The two debates both feature two polarizing sides, whose arguments are drawn from one each of Hooghe and Marks' key approaches, emphasizing the key approach with the highest probability of amassing public support. This might have been a deliberate and organized tactic by both the Remain and Leave-side of the 2016 Brexit debate in an attempt to garner as many votes as possible during the 2016 referendum. The same can however not be said of the foreign labor debate, where the actors proposing and opposing foreign player regulations are far less defined. However, this gives fruit to the idea that arguments naturally evolve into coercing ideas and attitudes that resonate with the public's interests and which subsequently leads them to primarily concern topics covered by Hooghe and Marks' first two key approaches to public opinion, even when the actors promoting them are interchanging.

Whether the arguments made during the foreign player debate have had any effect on the public's reception of the arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate is

hard to empirically prove. However, through the use of cultivation theory, it can be argued that it is entirely possible that the politicization of foreign players in the Premier League has contributed to its viewers' attitudes towards political issues such as immigration. The Premier League has always had a complicated relationship with foreign players. Even though the exposure generated by great foreign players has paved the way for enormous streams of revenue and a world wide interest in the league, there have been a lot of voices calling for regulation in order to protect the English identity of the league. Those calling for a regulation of foreign players have both been from top executives in the English FA and the Premier League.

Mutz and Nir's (2010) study shows how cultivation theory is applicable even when the media that the viewer has been exposed to has been abstracted to a degree, compared to the real world social issues it alludes to. Their study unveiled that viewers who had been substantially exposed to TV-series that feature positive portrayals of the justice system will actually have more positive views on the real life justice system. In the case of the Premier League, its consumers have been exposed to arguments and attitudes through broadcasts, radio, tabloids and social media concerning foreign players for a long time.

There is a possibility, that through a long enough exposure, these arguments have survived a similar abstraction to that of Mutz and Nir's study, making them applicable to social issues in real life and therefore influencing Premier League viewers' attitudes toward them. Such an abstraction would be long exposure to arguments against foreign labor in the Premier League influencing Premier League consumers' views on foreign labor and immigrants in English society. With the Premier League having an enormous domestic fan base, it could consequently have effects on the public opinion towards immigrants and its susceptibility towards protectionist and nationalist arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate, subsequently influencing the results of the 2016 Brexit referendum. This would also serve as an example of Hooghe and Marks' third key approach to public opinion, namely media elite cues, that distinguished sports media personalities such as sports pundits could influence its audience who has not formed an opinion of their own beforehand.

However, applying cultivation theory towards the foreign players debate in the Premier League is complicated, since it requires a measurement of what arguments and ideas have had the most impact. For instance, if arguments made against the regulation of foreign players which celebrate inclusion and promote liberal ideas on competition and freedom of movement are more prominent in Premier League media, it is likely that the cultivation of its viewers will make them more susceptible towards liberal arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate.

7. Conclusions

As the study progressed it became apparent that the two research questions would not only differ in their respective approaches, but also in their conclusions. The first, which investigated what political arguments were used during the implementation of different policy changes to foreign labor within the Premier League and compared them to political arguments used by the two main campaigns during the 2016 Brexit debate, found that the arguments of the two debates were similar in both rhetoric and ideological emphasis. The claim was furthermore supported by the application of a public opinion theory which underpinned the notion that the arguments from both debates had remarkably similar strategies to amass public support.

The second question, which aimed to disclose whether the debate on foreign players has influenced the public's susceptibility to nationalist arguments made during the 2016 Brexit debate, contained larger elements of induction. This resulted in a more ambiguous discussion whereas no concise and empiric answer to the question was to be found. However, by utilizing a mix of fields and theories, some progress was made on what a possible scientific approach to the question could look like. Hopefully, the analysis can serve as a pilot study paving way for future, more extensive, studies and subsequently add to the academic field.

A glaring weakness of the study is the lack of documents that depict a clearer picture of the ideas behind the 2010 homegrown player quota. Instead, the study had to rely on sparse second hand sources, which increased the risk of misinterpretation and overanalysis. Since there was a scarcity of material written on the subject of foreign player regulations in the Premier League other than brief tabloid articles, idea analysis on said policy change proved difficult.

An alternative approach to assessing what ideas and arguments were the most prominent during Premier League policy changes regarding foreign players would be to conduct a survey in which different representatives within the FA and the Premier League had to answer how they have formed their opinions on the matter. Through such an approach, frequencies of arguments could serve as an indicator of their impact.

There is always a risk of subjectivity when conducting an idea analysis, that the interpretation of a text strays away from the actual content or meaning of the text studied. This risk decreases when there is a large amount of material available, since political arguments and motives become more apparent to the reader which subsequently increases validity to the reader's interpretation of ideas present in the texts. An alternative explanation to the results which found that arguments made during the foreign player debate in the Premier League and the Brexit debate prior to the referendum in 2016 is that these results are purely coincidental. That the similarity of political arguments between the two debates is not explainable through a public opinion theory. There is also the risk of a more fitting theory having been overlooked during research, which would be more adequate in explaining why the political arguments between the two debates are so similar in their ideological features and rhetoric emphasis.

For future studies, it would be interesting to conduct an extensive content analysis that would accurately measure the frequency of different arguments regarding foreign labor in Premier League media in order to accurately describe which arguments that have been the most prominent during the decades long coverage of the Premier League and what kind of effect they might have had on its viewers.

Albeit enticing, it was never a possibility to design this study in such a way, since it would require an amount of time and resources far beyond the realistic scope of this study. Such a study would give a greater understanding on how political arguments have changed over time and when at what times they are the most present.

Another suggestion for future studies would be to investigate the long term effects the cumulation of all policy changes regulating foreign labor in the Premier League can have on society at large. As touched upon earlier, most studies concerned both with the Premier League and Brexit focus on the economic and organizational effects Britain leaving the EU will have on the Premier League. There is great room for scientific contribution on what effects the policy changes on foreign labor in the Premier League post Brexit will have on English society. For example, one could aim to study whether there is a risk of xenophobia increasing amongst English football fans as exposure to foreign players within the league decreases as a result of post Brexit policies which have tightened the regulations for the recruitment of foreign players even further.

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