

## **DIVINING THE UK'S NATIONAL INTEREST: MPs' PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE AND THE BREXIT WITHDRAWAL PROCESS**

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### **Abstract**

*This article tracks, investigates and explains the discursive deployment of 'national interest' by UK MPs in parliamentary debates during the Brexit withdrawal process. Whilst the concept of 'national interest' has variously been dismissed as meaningless or devoid of substantive content, the discursive practices and deliberative contestations as to its meaning have been central to the historic role and purpose of the national legislature. Yet, the 2016 Brexit referendum, with its avowed intent of delegating the determination of the UK's national interest to the electorate, in many respects short-circuited this historic role. Through a qualitative content analysis of the text of 122 distinct parliamentary deliberative occurrences over the period from June 2016 to January 2020 this article examines how MPs sought to reconstitute and recycle the notion of 'national interest' during the Brexit withdrawal process. It does so by examining discursive competition over 'national interest' in the issue arenas of constitutional process, representational mode, inter-institutional mode, and substantive policy. 'National interest' was invoked 640 times in Brexit-related debates with the expression of positive or negative sentiment found to be associated significantly with: the personal voting pattern of major party MPs in the 2016 referendum; party differences in the articulation of individualistic or party representational modes to reach Brexit decisions; differences between frontbench ministers and non-ministers; and party differences in assessment of the UK government's iterated withdrawal negotiations with the EU.*

### **Introduction**

[The House of Commons] is a wonderful place, filled overwhelmingly by people who are motivated by their notion of the national interest, by their perception of the public good and by their duty – not as delegates, but as representatives – to do what they believe is right for our country. (Bercow, HC Debates 9 September 2019: col. 497)

This simple declaration was made by John Bercow in September 2019 in his resignation statement as Speaker of the House of Commons. It was made after some of the most tumultuous and chaotic parliamentary sessions in recent history, which had exposed starkly the contestability of the motivations, perceptions and beliefs of Members of Parliament (MPs)

as to what constituted 'the national interest' in relation to Brexit. Yet, although offered without qualification, Bercow's straightforward declaration was underpinned by profound questions about the institutional centrality of parliament in UK public life, about parliamentary capacity to determine and define the national interest, and the processes – representative processes – by which such a determination could be made. This article takes as its problématique, therefore, the matrix of interrelated normative and empirical questions arising from Bercow's bald statement.

These questions are examined within the historical-political frame of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. As a process, from the referendum of 23 June 2016 to the eventual formal withdrawal of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020, Brexit proved to be the 'great disruptor' of UK politics, society and economy. This distinctive frame provides a unique opportunity to analyse the representational stances of MPs in relation to 'the national interest': to examine their identification of the modes and processes by which 'the national interest' could be discovered, and their claims as to how this interest could be defined and deployed. As a general proposition, 'if Brexit is one of the greatest political challenges the UK has faced since the second World War, then we need to know what was going on in Parliament at the time' (Woollen 2022:98). As a specific proposition, examining what was said in Parliament provides a means of understanding 'what was going on'.

The following discussion is structured in three sections. The first section explores conceptualisations of how 'the national interest' is defined and how it is deemed possible for national legislatures to discover this interest. It does so, first, by outlining the significance of the notion of national interest in theories of individualistic representation – as a focal coordinate of representation, as a prescription for effecting national unity, and as a positive outcome of parliamentary deliberation. Second, and in potential contrast, collectivist theories of representation are examined to reveal the conceptual ramifications of a refraction of national interest through partisan lenses. Third, the encompassing institutional claims of statal representative assemblies in the deliberation and legitimation of conceptions of national interest are considered before, fourth, the consequential representational challenges to these claims posed by the 2016 referendum are explained. This broad conceptual exploration prompts, in turn, a range of research questions clustered around i) constitutional process issues; ii) representational modal issues; iii) inter-institutional issues; and iv) substantive policy issues (see Section 1 below).

The second section explains the choice of data and the analytical design underpinning the analysis of these questions. The data source is parliamentary debates in the House of

Commons. In recent years there has been 'an explosion of scholarly interest on legislative debates' (Fernandes et al. 2021:1) with attendant advances in conceptualisation, modelling and empirical analysis of those debates (for an overview see Bäck et al. 2021). The importance of legislative speech for present purpose is that it enables legislators to 'take calculated positions and communicate them strategically to others within and outside legislatures' (Umit and Auel 2020:205). Plenary speech is public, both in the sense of being publicly audible and publicly recorded in the official reports of legislatures. In the specific case of the UK House of Commons, while the executive, official opposition and their party managers largely control the agenda and scheduling of plenary debate, the decision to speak in plenary rests primarily with individual MPs themselves (Umit and Auel 2020:209), with the Speaker adjudicating which members participate and for how long (Besly and Goldsmith 2019:280-1).

The third section provides the results of a qualitative content analysis of 640 deliberative instances of the deployment of 'national interest' in the text of 122 identified parliamentary debates and statements in *Hansard Online* between 27 June 2016 and 23 January 2020. This data provides the empirical base from which answers to the identified clustered research questions can be sought.

Mirroring this sectional structure, the significance of this article is threefold. First, conceptualisations within representation theories – as to the centrality of processes of deliberation, interpretation and evaluation within the national legislature – provide the analytical pivot with which to examine the discovery and deployment of 'national interest' during the process of withdrawal from the EU. Second, a unique comprehensive dataset, of 122 distinct discursive occurrences and 640 deliberative instances where national interest is recorded in *Online Hansard* in the time-period June 2016 to January 2020, provides the empirical foundations for subsequent qualitative and quantitative analysis. Third, this analysis reveals how the discursive deployment by MPs of the concept of 'national interest' – to assert often diametrically opposed process and policy preferences – was, in essence, a claim to change the dimensionality of argumentation from individual, sectional, factional, partisan or even institutional planes to that of a collective, 'one-for-all', national dimensionality. These discursive claims and contestations are the focus of the following discussion.

### **1. Conceptualising the national interest and its discovery**

In the search for clarification of the concept of 'the national interest' there is widespread recognition that the term may be difficult to define in terms of substantive meaning and content (this is particularly so among international relations scholars, see, for example, Kratochwil 1982:1; Saunders 2014:159; Burchill 2005:206; Nye 2002:233; Camilleri 2003:434). Yet, while

analytical fuzziness might prompt rapid dismissal of the concept as essentially meaningless, nonetheless, it has proved to be of crucial political importance in serving as 'a discursive means to unify and mobilize otherwise differentiated political forces under the roof of "one nation"' (Wangen 2019:136). Key to an understanding of national interest, therefore, is the notion of discursiveness.

Certainly, among leading contemporary theorists of representation, there is – despite varied conceptual starting points – a fair degree of consensus that representative democracy, as a process of adjudicating amongst, and reconciling, conflicting claims, assumes the articulation of some common interest; and provides, through electoral processes and a representative assembly, a capacity for communal judgement of that articulation (Manin 1997:192). Hanna Pitkin, in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation*, maintains that the most important institutional feature of representative government is that 'within a state, representation most commonly is ascribed to the legislature' (Pitkin 1967, 227); and that it is within statal representative assemblies that the 'national interest is often formulated out of the rival claims of interests and localities within the state' (Pitkin 1967, 218). In this sense, parliaments enjoy a special status, as they embody 'the idea of joint self-determination in that an elected body of responsible citizens is there to legislate in the name of all' (Eriksen and Fossum 2011:5). This contemporary assessment has long antecedents in the views – for example of Edmund Burke in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and John Stuart Mill in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – that the collective role of parliamentary representatives in parliament was to identify the national interest. Burke and Mill both maintained that only through deliberation and the consideration, respectively, of the broad range of interests or opinions could consensus be reached upon the national interest in the House of Commons (Burke [1774] 180, vol 3:20, Mill ([1861] 1910:239-40; for an overview see Judge 1999:51-6). In this manner, through complex processes of parliamentary discussion – of speaking, listening and *interpreting* – elected representatives, acting independently of constituency mandates, could both determine and promote the common good and the national interest.

The conceptual residues of these arguments can still be observed in contemporary notions that elected parliamentary representatives in representative democracies act 'not simply as facilitators of collective decision-making. Their decisions are taken in the name of the collective, and on its behalf' (Runciman 2007:105). Nonetheless, while representatives 'represent the entire nation', representation is itself 'a process of unification, not an act of unity' (Urbinalti 2006:132-3). Indeed, Rehfeld (2005:148-9) goes as far as to suggest that 'the function of any large nation's national legislature is to pursue its national interest. That is, the very reason that a legislature is established is to pursue the good of the whole ... whatever

the good of all may turn out to entail'. The important point here is that the national interest is seen to be constructed and not pre-given. Claims to articulate the national interest are subject to scrutiny and 'trial by discussion' in representative institutions (Manin 1997:191). In which case, conceptions of the national interest are 'fundamentally political and contested or at least contestable ... [w]hile there might be one interpretation of the national interest that ends up informing a specific policy decision, we should not ignore that it only does so by winning a discursive contest against competing interpretations' (Wangen 2019:11-12). If the political significance of the term derives, therefore, from its 'vagueness and ideological malleability' then an analytical account of how 'national interest' is used requires an examination of 'the discursive practices to understand what conceptions of the national interest are present and compete with each other in a given historical and political context' (Wangen 2019:42).

If this discursive competition is framed exclusively in terms of 'autonomous deliberation' and independence from extra-parliamentary mandates and from extra-parliamentary control of parliamentary representatives, then in the context of organised political parties it might, as Rozenberg (2018:149) points out, appear 'at best naïve'. Indeed, this raises the issue of whether party representation is inimical to the articulation of a cohesive national interest. In its starkest formulation the allegation may be made that political parties 'corrupt parliamentary and legislative reasoning when [they] pursue factional party interests instead of national interests' (Walter 2017:303). In contemporary circumstances when political parties appear to be incentivised to make social divisions explicit with a view to motivating and mobilising actual and potential supporters, their interpretations of the national interest may come to be refracted through their own 'vision of divisions' (Müller 2021:272). Debates in parliament may 'aim at provoking a confrontation of opposing views ... by putting political divisions into words' (Rozenberg 2018:161). At its extreme this provocation may result in a position whereby, generally, deliberation in its broadest sense is undermined and, specifically, deliberation in legislatures comes to be marked by party representatives settling for 'activating their base' rather than offering a comprehensive account of the common good (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020:107). In these circumstances, when the concept of national interest is deployed it may well be used as 'a rhetorical resource in political interaction to question the legitimacy of an opponent's motives' (Kurz et al. 2010:609).

It should also be noted that discursive practices, in the form of public discourse, invariably involve a variety of societal and political institutions and actors beyond parliament, including state institutions, social movements, political parties, civil society organisations, and the news media and social media. Although the following discussion focuses upon parliamentary discourse it should be remembered that 'parliamentary debate is itself only a sub-set of all

other forms of public debate: in the media and in the electoral arena' (Deville and Lord 2020:467). In addition, it is worth also noting here that public discourse is not the same thing as public opinion, and that this distinction is particularly of relevance in the context of Brexit (see below). With these caveats in mind, the focus of the following discussion is upon debate in the House of Commons. The starting general premise is that 'it is implausible that there could be democracy without any role for parliamentary deliberation and debate' (Deville and Lord 2020:468). From this follows the specific premise that the UK parliament as 'a place for speaking, discussion, and parley' sustains a particular claim, to be 'at the heart of British democracy' (Finlayson 2017:11), despite many contemporary critiques and challenges to this assertion. The task of this article, therefore, is to track, investigate and explain the discursive deployment of 'national interest' by MPs in the wake of the Brexit referendum; and, in so doing, to address the following clustered research questions:

### *1. Constitutional process issues*

How was national interest defined by MPs in relation to the 2016 Brexit referendum?

- i. Was national interest deemed to be coterminous with parliament's constitutional capacity to determine whether the result of the referendum should, or should not, be accepted?
- ii. Was national interest rooted in the acknowledgement of MPs that the referendum result foreclosed their capacity to treat the result as simply advisory?

### *2. Representational modal issues:*

How was national interest articulated in relation to parliamentary representational processes?

- i) To what extent was the expression of positive national interest sentiment (in the national interest) by MPs associated with individualistic, or 'autonomous', notions of representation and the promotion of compromise?
- ii) Alternatively, how far was the expression of negative national interest sentiment (not in the national interest) linked to the identification of partisan representational claims and modes of adversarial factional deliberation?

### *3. Inter-institutional modal issues:*

Given the manifest procedural conflicts between the executive and legislature during the Brexit withdrawal process, how far was national interest sentiment related to holding/not holding of frontbench government office?

### *4. Substantive policy issues*

How far was the expression of national interest sentiment on substantive policy preferences (most particularly on the issues of the single market and immigration) nested in broader process and modal preferences?

## 2. Data and Methods

The data for the study were extracted from the online version of the *Commons Hansard*. Hansard is the official report of proceedings in the UK parliament, and as such provides a 'substantially verbatim report of what is said in Parliament' (UK Parliament 2021). The primary data consist of distinct *discursive occurrences* captured in the written text of Hansard. A discursive occurrence for the purposes of this study is a parliamentary procedure that provides for deliberative interaction among MPs. These occurrences include oral ministerial statements; general debates; legislative debates; emergency debates; urgent question debates; and debates on business of the House. Occurrences pertaining to the process of exiting the EU were identified from the listing of relevant statements and debates in the House of Commons Library's Briefing Paper *Brexit Timeline* (Walker 2020). The time-period covered for the study was from 27 June 2016 to 23 January 2020. In total 122 distinct occurrences (statements and debates) were identified and analysed.<sup>1</sup>

Having identified relevant discursive occurrences, a qualitative content analysis of the text in *Hansard Online* for each statement or debate was undertaken using the search term 'national interest'. This search identified 640 *deliberative instances* (the number of discrete cases of the use of 'national interest' recorded in statements or debates) during the 43-month time-period of this study. A cascade strategy was adopted to identify the *stance* (speech sentiment and position preference) displayed by each MP in each use of the term national interest. The starting point of this strategy was to nest the phrase 'national interest' in its encompassing sentence. If the stance of an MP was unclear within a sentence, further analysis of the text was cascaded to the level of the proximate surrounding sentences, or, where necessary, to the wider paragraph. At this embedment stage, a dataset was generated using Microsoft Word (with a total of 54137 words, indicating that on average each usage of 'national interest' was embedded in 85 other words, or approximately five lines of text in *Hansard Online*). Where the stance of an individual MP remained uncertain from the dataset, further analysis was undertaken of the member's full speech in *Hansard Online*.

A coding frame was produced for 11 variables: (1) name of MP; (2) date of deliberative instance; (3) type of parliamentary procedure; (4) date of instance within the Brexit timeline; (5) political party of MP; (6) ministerial position vs non-ministerial position; (7) percentage constituency vote 2016 (leave/remain); (8) individual MP vote 2016 (leave/remain); (9)

national interest stance ('in the national interest' vs 'not in national interest'); (10) general focus of national interest stance (political, economic, societal); and (11) specific focus of stance (32 substantive categories of interest). A preliminary phase of manual coding was undertaken for 20 deliberative instances/cases with coding undertaken independently by two researchers. Refinement of the coding frame resulted from this exercise and modifications to the coding frame were made. An SPSS data file was then created for the 640 individual-level deliberative instances of MPs. Researcher #1 initially coded each instance manually. Researcher #2 then conducted an inter-coder reliability test for 70 randomly selected cases (above the minimum 10 per cent of the full sample recommended in the literature (see Neuendorf 2017)). Cohen's Kappa was used as the agreement measure, which corrects for the possibility of agreement by chance (see Warrens 2015). The Kappa scores showed substantial levels of inter-coder agreement (see Banerjee et al. 1999): ranging from 0.94 for national interest stance; to 0.92 for general focus of national interest stance; and 0.77 for specific focus of national interest stance.

### **3. Results and analysis**

The primary objective of this paper is simple: to discover how, during the Brexit process from June 2016 to January 2020, the notion of national interest was deployed by MPs in their formal deliberative contributions on the floor of the House of Commons. In this sense the initial research questions posed here are qualitative in nature and descriptive in intent. Yet, they also prompt further questions, which are inferential and seek to identify and understand relationships, comparisons, and categorisations within the data. A mixed methods frame is used below, therefore, to enable these qualitative and quantitative dimensions to be considered in parallel (Creswell and Creswell 2018). In essence, questions prompting descriptive outcomes are answered by summarising the results of frequency tables (see Appendix 1), whereas the more salient relational questions are answered through textual citation in combination with contingency tables with significance tests (sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4).

#### **3.1 Constitutional process issues**

*The 2016 Brexit Referendum: the short-circuiting of parliamentary determination of the national interest?*

Processes of discursiveness, and the special deliberative status of legislatures in these processes, are, as noted above, held to be key to an understanding of the determination of the national interest in representative democracies. The first cluster of research questions investigate, therefore, the relationship between an MP's stance on the national interest and the result of the 2016 referendum. A starting proposition is that, in the absence of a legal



requirement in the EU Referendum Act 2015 that the result of the 2016 referendum should be treated as binding, it remained the constitutional preserve of MPs to determine collectively whether acceptance of the result was in the national interest. The counter proposition is that the categorical political commitments made by the Cameron government to abide by the result of the Brexit referendum effectively foreclosed the capacity of MPs to treat the result as simply advisory. In essence, in accordance with these contrasting propositions MPs might be expected in their parliamentary deliberations either to express a positive sentiment (it was in the national interest to accept the 2016 result), or a negative sentiment (it was not in the national interest to accept the 2016 result).

#### Positive sentiment

The expectation that MPs would express positive sentiment as to the outcome of the 2016 referendum was prefigured in 2013. David Cameron, as prime minister, announced in that year his intention to hold an 'in-out referendum' on the UK's continuing membership of the EU, and made the categorical statement:

I say to the British people: this will be your decision ... you will have an important choice to make about our country's destiny. ... to weigh carefully where our true national interest lies. (Cameron 2013)

In delegating the determination of the UK's national interest to the electorate in this manner Cameron not only used the 'procedural shortcut' of the referendum to address the seemingly irresolvable disagreements within the Conservative party over EU membership (Landwehr 2021:63; on the conceptualisation of procedural shortcuts see Lafont 2019:54-5), but also empowered voters, as equal citizens, to decide where their 'true national interest lies'. Although devised as advisory and non-binding, the 2016 referendum metamorphized immediately upon its result into being politically, if not legally, binding – at least in the opinion of the UK government (Russell 2021:448). From the outset, Theresa May – who acceded to the office of prime minister in the wake of the referendum result – made clear that having 'put the decision to leave or remain inside the EU in the hands of the people ... it was up to the Government [and by implication Parliament] not to question, quibble or backslide on what we have been instructed to do' (May 2016). The referendum result was thus taken by May as an expression of the 'will of the people' (Weale 2018:ix; Byrne et al. 2021:8).

This positive sentiment towards acceptance of the 2016 result was evident in the subsequent parliamentary discourse of Mrs May as PM, and of her first Brexit Secretary, David Davis. Some 73 deliberative instances were focused specifically on the 2016 referendum result (just over 10 per cent of the 640 deliberative instances analysed in this study) (see Figure 1). 70 per cent (n=51) of which committed to the view that it was in the national interest to accept the

result; with May and Davis expressing positive sentiment in 21 instances between them (13 and 8 respectively). There was, however, a notable divergence in the respective timings of the expression of positive sentiment by Davis and May – with the former peppering his initial ministerial statements in 2016 with pledges to accept the referendum, but with the latter deploying such pledges much later in autumn 2018 and spring 2019 during parliamentary deliberations associated with the Withdrawal Agreement.

### Figure 1: about here

From the outset Davis emphasised the positive sentiment that:

'Our instructions from the British people are clear. Britain is leaving the European Union. The mandate for that course is overwhelming. The referendum of 23 June delivered a bigger vote for Brexit than that won by any UK Government in history. It is a national mandate, and this Government are determined to deliver it in the national interest. (HC Debates 5 September 2016: col. 38)

Similarly, in his ministerial statement on the process for invoking Article 50 Davis repeatedly pronounced that 'the aim of the government is to carry out the national instruction [of the referendum], because that is what it was, in the national interest' (HC Debates 7 November 2016: col. 1271; see also cols. 1257, 1266, 1279, 1284).

If Davis deployed positive sentiment to forestall parliamentary contestation of the referendum result in the immediate period after the referendum, some 26 months later Mrs May deployed the same sentiment seemingly as a rear-guard defence of her actions:

Every decision that I have taken, I have taken because I believe that it is right in the national interest. I genuinely believe that we should, as a Government and as a Parliament, deliver on the result of the referendum in 2016. I think that is our duty – it is very simple. (HC Debates 21 January 2019: col. 45)

Indeed, during the protracted Commons' debates on the EU Withdrawal Agreement and the 'meaningful votes' in autumn 2018 and spring 2019, Mrs May used various formulations to remind MPs that:

Parliament decided to put the question of our membership of the European Union to the people. Parliament promised to abide by the result. Parliament invoked article 50 to trigger the process. And now Parliament must finish the job [in the national interest]. (HC Debates 16 January 2019: col. 1178)

### Negative sentiment

If acceptance of the 2016 referendum result was a simple matter for Mrs May – as it was treated as a direct expression of 'the will of the people' – exactly what the people had 'willed' still required interpretation (Gamble 2018:12). Whereas the 2016 referendum had been

promoted by Cameron as a decision-making exercise for the UK citizenry to determine 'where our true national interest lies', nonetheless, that exercise could be viewed as deficient for two basic reasons. First, generally, if deliberation is a mode of opinion formation and justification in decision-making – in essence some form of public reasoning which entails hearing the other side and giving reasons to the other side – then referendums 'do not require voters to deliberate their choices' (Eisenberg 2004:6; see also Lord 2021:37; Parkinson 2020:496). Second, specifically, in the case of the Brexit referendum a meaningful deliberative infrastructure was not in place to facilitate citizens' decision-making. As Landwehr (2021:63) points out: 'neither before nor after the referendum was announced ... did large-scale macro-deliberation about the UK's role and future in the EU take place'. Certainly, some deliberative initiatives prompted public reasoning at a micro-level, but at the macro-level discussion was 'characterized by simplifications, polemic ... opportunism and lies' (Landwehr 2021:63). Moreover, Chambers (2021:149) highlights how debate during the Brexit campaign often featured information that was intentionally misleading, false and fabricated. As a result, UK citizens in 2016 were broadly left 'to make political decisions on the basis of snap judgements and prejudices untested by broad discursive justification' (Milstein 2021:574; Jäske and Setälä 2020:476).

Concern with the outcome of the referendum was apparent, if limited, in 22 deliberative instances where MPs argued that the 2016 result should not be held to be binding (either because remaining in the EU was in the best interests of the UK, and/or because a second referendum was required to gauge opinion on the negotiated withdrawal deal). This concern could be formulated in two distinct ways: first, it was *in the national interest* to remain in the EU and so treat the result as non-binding (in 14 instances); or, second, it was *not in the national interest* to accept the referendum result (in 8 instances).

Such negative sentiment was expressed most forcibly by an inveterate Europhile, Ken Clarke, who was a member of Mrs May's own party. In contradistinction to the PM, Clarke not only made the positive assertion that it was 'in the national interest for the United Kingdom to be a member of the European Union' but he also made clear that he had 'made no commitment to accept a referendum, and particularly this referendum' (HC Debates 31 January 2017: col. 829). He also used the negative linguistic formulation to emphasise that it would not be in the national interest 'to take broad guidance from a plebiscite which has produced a small majority on a broad question after a bad-tempered and ill-informed debate' (Clarke, HC Debates 27 June 2016: col. 27). Another senior Conservative, Dominic Grieve, provided a more nuanced, and changing, approach to the referendum result. Having initially indicated that he would 'honour the decision that the electorate made' (HC Debates 31 January 2017: col. 861) he

later proposed, in light of the convolutions and complexities of the proposed Withdrawal Agreement, that the PM should 'put her deal to the people of this country and to offer them the alternative of remaining' (HC Debates 22 November 2018: col. 1109). Whilst opposed to 'unilateral revocation' of the Withdrawal Agreement he argued that the national interest was, in early 2019, 'to go back and ask the public whether they want the Prime Minister's deal, with the alternative being remain? That would show respect for the 2016 referendum result' (HC Debates 25 March 2019: col. 64). The majority of Conservative colleagues, however, did not share the same sentiment as Clarke and Grieve (see Figure 1), and although, in their recorded instances, Labour MPs were more likely to align with the views of Clarke and Grieve their number was notably small overall.

When the scope of the analysis is expanded, to consider the relationship between constituency vote in 2016 (leave versus remain) and the expressed sentiment of their MP (in the national interest to accept the referendum result versus not in the national interest to accept the result) then the cross-tabulation produces a chi-square statistic that was not significant ( $p < 0.07$ ). In contrast, the chi-square statistic was significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) when the personal voting pattern of major party MPs in the 2016 referendum was cross-tabulated with their recorded positive or negative national interest sentiment (Table 1). Moreover, when observed counts are compared with expected counts in Table 1, it can be seen that those MPs who voted leave in 2016 were disproportionately more likely to argue that it was in the national interest to accept the referendum result and to leave the EU, while MPs who voted remain were disproportionately more likely to argue that the referendum result should not be accepted outright and that the UK should remain in the EU, or that a second referendum should be held.

**Table 1: about here**

### ***3.2 Representational modal issues***

The second cluster of research questions pivot around the relationship between representational processes and the articulation of 'national interest'. This cluster draws upon conceptual mapping (see section 1), where, on the one side, individualistic, or quasi-individualistic, notions of representation, and a sphere of autonomous action for elected representatives, were identified as being conducive to reaching compromise and consensus in the determination and pursuit of the national interest. The first question, therefore, is to ask to what extent did such sentiment find expression in parliamentary deliberations on Brexit. A second question, again linked to the conceptual discussion above, is to ask how far, on the other side, are individualistic notions counter-posed by partisan representational claims

focused upon the pursuit of 'factional party interests'; and to what extent would such claims serve to undermine the process of consensual deliberation and, hence, would not be in the national interest. These questions are clearly interlinked: the first as a positive formulation, the second as a negative formulation.

The issue of 'representational mode' was observable in a quarter of all deliberative instances (n=160), with roughly an equal split of sentiment. The view that consensus and cooperation was in the national interest featured in 54 per cent (n=86) of instances; whereas the view that party interest and adversarial partisan politics were not in the national interest was observable in 46 per cent (n=74) of instances.

The positive view was articulated by Conservative and Labour MPs alike. On the Conservative backbenches Dominic Grieve, for example, argued:

one of the reasons why we are sent to this place is to pursue the national interest by looking at the widest considerations. ... the national interest is that we should all try to work together to achieve the best possible outcome for our country. (HC Debates, 31 January 2017: col. 861)

On the Labour benches Stephen Kinnock contended:

Our constituents are crying out for us to ... compromise in the national interest, and it is only by compromising that we will get ourselves out of this mess. It is only by doing this that we can reunite our deeply divided country. (Kinnock, HC Debates 6 December 2018: col. 1192-3)

Other positive formulations of this view also peppered the speeches of MPs across the political spectrum – of rowing together (Robert Jenrick, HC Debates 31 January 2017); coming together (Anna Soubry, HC Debates 26 June 2017: col. 397; Andrew Bowie, 26 June 2017: col 403; Caroline Spelman, HC Debates 29 January 2019: col. 721; Jack Dromey, 14 February 2019: col. 1126;); working together (David Jones, HC Debates 1 February 2017: col. 1132; Derek Twigg, HC Debates 15 January 2019: col. 1075); pulling together (David Davis, HC Debates 26 June 2017: col. 375); or bringing parliament together in the national interest (John Redwood, HC Debates 14 November 2017: col. 244). Belatedly towards the end of her premiership, and somewhat ironically, even Mrs May came to acknowledge the value of cooperation:

we must now press on at pace with our efforts to reach a consensus on a deal that is in the national interest. ... it will require both sides to make compromises. But however challenging it may be politically, ... it is incumbent ... to seek to work together to deliver what the British people voted for, and I think that the British people expect their politicians to do just that when the national interest demands it. (HC Debates 11 April 2019: col. 511)

The irony was that Mrs May's earlier strategic decision to placate Eurosceptics within her own party by drawing 'red lines' in negotiating with the EU, had made a bipartisan approach in parliament 'all but impossible' (Russell 2021:450). Moreover, it also made the maintenance of unity within her own party increasingly arduous (see Kettell and Kerr 202:599-606). Certainly, the irony of the PM's call for compromise and cross-party consensus was not lost on those MPs who had long argued that Mrs May's pursuit of party interest at Westminster had not been in the national interest.

This leads directly towards consideration of the second question: how far the pursuit of 'factional party interests' was seen by MPs as inimical to the national interest – as being 'not in the national interest'. Repeatedly during the Brexit withdrawal process, all three Conservative PMs were accused of privileging party interest above national interest. David Cameron was described, unfavourably, as 'a man who put himself and his party before the national interest, and who gambled our country's safety, future prosperity and long-standing European and wider international relationships to save his party and his premiership from imploding' (Jo Stevens, Labour, HC Debates 31 January 2017: col.895). Boris Johnson was accused of seeking to get 'Brexit done, on his terms and in his party's interests, not in all our national interests' (Ian Blackford, SNP, HC Debates 28 October 2019: col.64). But it was Theresa May who bore the brunt of criticisms for framing her Brexit decisions by reference to party interest rather than to the national interest. She was persistently castigated for 'putting internal party management before the national interest' (Paul Blomfield, Labour, HC Debates 14 November 2017: col.213); for 'repeatedly invok[ing] her own partisan definition of "the national interest" when, in truth, she has acted at all times in the narrow sectional interest of her own deeply divided party' (Angela Eagle, Labour, HC Debates 6 December 2018: col.1122), and for choosing 'from the beginning ... to put the interests of keeping the Conservative party together over the national interest. She chose ... to kow-tow to the Brextremists in her own party' (Angela Eagle, Labour, HC Debates 14 February 2019: col.1114).

Manifestly, however, negative sentiment was not the sole preserve of opposition MPs (see Table 2). Conservative MPs, frontbenchers and backbenchers alike, willingly invoked arguments that the national interest was undermined by the partisan stances adopted by their political opponents. Mrs May was quick to accuse Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of the Opposition, of wanting 'to play party politics; [while] I am working in the national interest' (HC Debates 22 November 2018: col.1101); and, more generally, to accuse 'the Opposition [of] putting their party interest first' (HC Debates 17 December 2018: col.550). She was backed by some of her colleagues, such as Jack Brereton (HC Debates 16 January 2019: col.1261) who

expressed the belief that 'the Labour leadership would rather play party politics than put the national interest and our country first', and Chris Philp (HC Debates 16 January 2019: col.1171) who argued that the Leader of the Opposition had engaged in 'shameless political opportunism, putting party interests ahead of national interests'. Other Conservative MPs, however, expressed the view at various stages that a halt should be called to 'playing party politics and the ideological games ... As national politicians, all of us should mean it when we say that we are here to act in the national interest' (Simon Hoare HC Debates 7 January 2019: col.39); or that 'it falls to this House to act on the nation's behalf, setting aside narrow party interests and focusing on what is in the national interest of our United Kingdom' (Philip Hammond HC Debates 6 December 2018: Col.1095); or even that 'We in this House have to prove that occasionally our tribalism can subside and that we are capable of putting the national interest above the short-term knockabout of discredited party politics' (Ken Clarke HC Debates 21 June 2017: col.83).

### **Table 2: about here**

While positive and negative sentiment towards representational mode was observable across all parliamentary parties, nonetheless, there was a significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ ) in the deliberative instances of members of the two major parties (Table 2). On the one hand, Conservative MPs were disproportionately more likely to stress positive sentiment and to argue that it was in the national interest for consensual working in Westminster. On the other, the deliberative instances of Labour MPs were disproportionately more likely to advance accusatory representational claims that the pursuit of 'factional party interests' by their Conservative opponents was inimical to cooperative endeavour in the national interest.

Moreover, when representational mode (consensus versus party interest) is cross-tabulated with constituency vote in 2016 (leave or remain) there is no significant difference between the sentiment expressed in the deliberative instances of MPs from remain-voting or Brexit-voting constituencies ( $p < 0.18$ ). There is, however, a limited association between the way MPs voted in the 2016 referendum and positive or negative representational sentiment ( $p < 0.05$ ) (see Table 3). Interestingly, when the observed count is contrasted with the expected count, the deliberative instances of MPs who voted for Brexit in 2016 were disproportionately more likely to record the need for consensus and compromise than they were to point out the follies of following party interest. In terms of sheer incidence, however, MPs who voted to remain in the EU in 2016 provided most instances of both positive and negative modal sentiment; with these MPs also disproportionately making accusatory representational claims to the effect that the pursuit of factional party interests by their opponents was not in the national interest.

**Table 3 about here****3.3 Inter-institutional modal issues**

The third cluster of research questions focus upon the relationship between members of the executive, primarily frontbench ministers, and non-ministerial MPs. In the Brexit process this relationship was exceptionally fraught as the executive and legislature battled over, variously, responsibility for determining the immediate response to the referendum result; the use of executive prerogative powers to trigger Article 50 (resulting in the *Miller* case before the Supreme Court); the extensive use of secondary legislation in Brexit Acts; the extraordinary parliamentary defeats inflicted during the passage of the EU(Withdrawal) Bill; the creative use of parliamentary procedures to exert agenda control and force legally binding outcomes on the government; the 2019 prorogation of parliament (leading to a successful challenge of the government's decision in the Supreme Court); and the enforced extensions of Article 50 resulting from the guerrilla incursions of MPs' against a 'no-deal Brexit' (for details see, for example, Russell 2021; Blick and Salter 2021; Fleming 2021; Martill 2021a).

When the activity of frontbench ministers is compared to other MPs, not only did ministers generally adopt a positive formulation of national interest more than non-ministers ( $p < 0.01$ ) but also, unlike non-ministers, their deliberative instances recorded unanimous agreement that the national interest was best served by honouring the result of the 2016 referendum ( $p < 0.01$ ). All frontbench ministers shared the sentiment of Mrs May and David Davis (noted above) that the first duty of the government was to deliver on the 'instruction' of the electorate provided in the Brexit referendum.<sup>2</sup>

From the Labour opposition frontbench there was a shared sentiment that the result of the referendum should be honoured, but there was also a warning, from the outset, that the government should abandon its 'furtive Executive approach' and commit instead 'to a course of action that respects the role of Parliament and provides for proper scrutiny and challenge' (Keir Starmer, HC Debates 7 November 2016: cols.1258-9). Of particular concern in the early days was the insistence of the executive that its negotiating position with the EU should be shielded from parliament. In the words of David Davis as Brexit Secretary: 'to reveal our position in detail [to parliament] or prejudge the negotiations cannot be in the national interest' (HC Debates 7 December 2016: col 239; see also HC Debates 10 October 2016: col. 45; 7 November 2016: col. 1271; 31 January 2017: col. 822). Later, Steve Davis, as the third Brexit Secretary, sought to remind MPs that it was 'long-standing practice that Heads of Government can enter into international agreements without preconditions set by the House that would



constrain their ability to negotiate in the national interest' (HC Debates 3 April 2019: col. 1145). That he did so in the unique context of the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) (no 5) Bill designed to avert 'no deal Brexit' revealed the extent to which effective deliberation between executive and legislature and joint determination of the national interest had atrophied during the Brexit process (for overviews see Cygan 2022; Fleming and James 2022; Menon and Wager 2021). Far from seeking consensus within parliament, and negotiating a settlement on the basis of a collective determination of the national interest, the strategy of the May government was adjudged, by Keir Starmer, as Shadow Secretary for Exiting the EU, to have not been in the national interest:

What is not in the national interest are the red lines that the Prime Minister agreed not with ... this House, but with a group of three or four people in the autumn of 2016. ... It was not in the national interest to push Parliament away at the beginning of the process ... It was not in the national interest to take as long as until June 2018 to come up with the Chequers proposal. ... It was not in the national interest to resist the meaningful vote. It was not in the national interest to resist any disclosure of impact assessments, which had to be forced. It was not in the national interest not to disclose legal advice that was relevant but not, in truth, confidential. And it was not in the national interest to pull the vote and prevent what needs to happen next. (HC Debates 19 December 2018: cols. 904-6)

In addition, whilst the default position of most Westminster parliamentarians, both ministers and non-ministers alike, was to conceive of 'the national interest' as a singular 'United Kingdom national interest', there were constant reminders to UK ministers, especially by nationalist MPs, that within the UK there were plural 'national interests' that should be acknowledged in the Brexit process. Ian Blackford, as parliamentary leader of the Scottish National Party at Westminster, made this point repeatedly in the Commons: 'It is the duty of the Prime Minister, and of the Government, to act in all our national interests' (HC Debates 12 March 2019: col. 297); 'I implore the House to consider that we are talking about the family of nations. We are seeking to effect a compromise that respects the position of England ... in turn, we are asking this House to respect our [Scottish] position' (HC Debates 31 January 2017: col. 992). Similarly, Liz Savil Roberts of Plaid Cymru made clear: 'My party will always work in the national interest of Wales' and that the 'Government have failed to ensure Wales's national best interests' in the Brexit process (HC Debates 1 February 2017: col.1119). In response to such accusations Mrs May advanced the counter, positive, proposition that: 'The Brexit talks are about acting in the national interest ... As Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, I have a responsibility to people in every part of our country, and I intend to honour that promise' (HC Debates 15 November 2018: col.432). Later, in the final stages of the passage of the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, Boris Johnson's government was also keen to stress that it had 'always taken the interests of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland very seriously in this [Brexit] process' (HC Debates 8 January 2020: col.435).

### **3.4 Substantive policy issues**

Overwhelmingly, as noted above, the focus of recorded deliberative instances was upon the constitutional issues arising from, and the political processes associated with, withdrawal from the EU. Only one in five deliberative instances (n=129) were coded as having a direct focus upon the economic and societal implications of Brexit.<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that policy issues and process issues were rigidly demarcated in practice, as the promotion of divergent policy preferences relating to the single market or to the free movement of citizens were closely connected to process and modal issues as to how to operationalise those preferences.

This nesting of policy preferences within broader process and modal preferences was particularly notable in the recorded instances of Theresa May as PM and David Davis as Brexit Secretary. Together they accounted for some 46 per cent (n=30) of the 65 positive instances which directly linked the UK's national interest to withdrawal from the EU's single market and national control of immigration. On the issue of immigration, from the outset, Davis insisted that: 'it is clear to me that the policies for controlling migration after our exit will be designed to further our national interest' (HC Debates 2 February 2017: col. 1221). Notably in making the case that 'my job is ... to bring back control of immigration policy to the UK ... [and to] interpret that immigration policy in the UK's national interests', he also stressed, in the same debate, that 'the Government has been given a national instruction ... [and it] will abide by the instruction given to them by the British people' (HC Debates 17 January 2017: cols. 807; 796, 800). This nesting of policy preferences on immigration, and trade policy, within wider process and modal preferences was also made apparent in Davis's statement that:

in the referendum, we received a national instruction, which we will undertake in a way that serves the national interest. The instruction from the British people was for us to take back control of our borders, our money and our laws. ... ending the free movement of people means leaving the single market. (HC Debates 26 June 2017: col. 370)

A similar nesting of policy preferences within the process frame of the referendum was also apparent in May's specification of the UK's initial negotiating objectives for exiting the EU. The 2016 referendum was adjudged to have been a 'vote for change ... and it is the job of this government to deliver it. ... the referendum campaign made it clear that a vote to leave the EU would be a vote to leave the single market, [and that] Brexit must mean control of the number of people who come to Britain from Europe' (May 2017). Mrs May was insistent from the outset that 'as we go through these negotiations ... we are very clear about what is in the British national interest' (HC Debates 18 December 2017: col. 764). She was equally adamant that '[w]e have to prepare for all contingencies and continue to include among them the possibility of no deal' (HC Debates 18 December 2017: col. 768).

As a negotiating strategy May's approach was elementally flawed in setting 'high expectations at home which could not be delivered from Brussels' and in 'exacerbating Eurosceptic sentiment domestically [while] undermining [her] own ability to promote cooperation with Brussels' (Martill 2021b:11,13; see also Martill and Staiger 2020:263; Biermann and Jagdhuber 2022:809). The result of this 'failed negotiating strategy' (Martill 2021b:13) was the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement Bill and a significant retreat from the 'red-lines' and no deal potentialities of the initial negotiation objectives. By 2019 Mrs May was still arguing that 'we need to see Brexit through to honour the result of the referendum' but by then she was expressing a 'genuine belief' that 'it is the national interest for us to leave the European Union with a deal' (HC Debates 22 May 2019: cols. 731, 749). At this stage May still sought to deploy the 'national interest' to elevate discursively her policy preferences above antithetical factional or partisan preferences, despite the transmogrification of her own preferences over time.

Not surprisingly, opponents of May's negotiation strategy and critics of its outcomes were assiduous in expressing the negative sentiment that the terms of withdrawal were not in the national interest. Internal opponents within the Conservative party voiced the negative sentiment that it was not in the national interest variously to threaten economic disruption through threatening a no deal outcome (see for example Clarke and Soubry HC Debates 14 February 2019: col. 1089, col. 1104; Spelman 27 February 2019 HC Debates col.396), or that the deal proposed at any one time was 'not good for the future of our country' (see for example Grieve HC Debates 4 December 2017: col. 809; Villiers HC Debates 9 January 2019: col. 444; Mills HC Debates 14 January 2019 cols. 943-4). The expression of negative policy sentiment was, however, largely the preserve of Labour MPs (see Table 4).

#### **Table 4 about here**

At an early stage of negotiations Labour MP Owen Smith identified a sentiment that became a persistent theme throughout the withdrawal process:

Brexit is a mistake that will damage the future of our children, and that is not in the national interest ... we have a duty to scrutinise the Government's management of this process and to give clarity to the people about what it is really going to mean for them ... in pounds, shillings and pence for my children and for all our children. (HC Debates 7 February 2017: col. 309)

The expression of such negative sentiment by opposition MPs continued to haunt parliamentary deliberations on successive iterations of Mrs May's negotiated withdrawal agreement. Some two years after Smith's statement, Mrs May's reformulated position was still adjudged to be 'not in the national interest. ... it will make the country poorer and more divided

and it will not protect jobs and the economy' (Starmer HC Debates 9 January 2019: col. 421; see also Tom Brake Lib Dem, and Luciana Berger, Labour, respectively at, HC Debates 15 November 2018: cols.452,453).

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout the Brexit withdrawal process the phrase 'Brexit means Brexit' was variously characterised as a marker of 'ambiguity and vagueness', as an expression of 'political generalities that no one could disagree with', and a slogan that was 'over-simplistic and devoid of substance' (Brusenbauch Meislova 2019:684). Similarly, the phrase 'the national interest means the national interest', although never actually used in Brexit debates, would have captured neatly the ambiguity and vagueness of the term 'national interest'. Well into the Brexit process MPs were bemoaning, for instance, that 'the Prime Minister has not explained what "in the national interest" actually means' (Kirsty Blackman, SNP, HC Debates 15 November 2018: col.474; see also Barry Sheerman, Labour, HC Debates 1 April 2019: col.859).

Yet, the fact that the notion of 'national interest' was invoked 640 times in identified debates related to the Brexit withdrawal process suggests that it had some meaning for MPs. An examination of 122 debates and ministerial statements revealed how MPs sought to decipher the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum which, de facto, had empowered citizens to decide where their 'true national interest lies'. This result gave rise to issues of process – across constitutional, representational, and inter-institutional dimensions – as well as issues of policy substance. This article has identified significant differences in the expression of positive or negative national interest sentiment across these issues in relation to: personal voting patterns of major party MPs in the 2016 referendum; party differences in the articulation of individualistic or party representational modes to reach Brexit decisions; differences between frontbench ministers and non-ministers; and party differences in assessment of the UK government's iterated withdrawal agreements with the EU.

What this investigation also confirms, however, is that 'national interest' is a contested concept: contested both as to the representational mode of discovery of meaning as well as to its substantive meaning. Indeed, contestation rather than constancy – the subjecting of national interest claims to 'trial by discussion' and to interpretation in parliament – has long been recognised as the essence for the substantiation of those claims. The distinctiveness of parliamentary deliberation 'is not any supposed superior quality, but rather the institutionalised, judgemental nature of deliberation and the constant testing of the claim that decisions made by elected representatives (invariably, in practice, the decisions taken by government) represent "the national interest"' (Judge 2013:402). The processes for

formulating and assessing national interest claims are thus as much of importance as the making of substantive claims themselves.

Contestation did not render the concept meaningless, but instead indicated both the extent of different meanings and of disputation over those meanings. More particularly, it highlighted the perceived discursive power of the deployment of national interest to 'elevate', to 'upgrade', the dimensionality of preferred decisional processes or policy choices to a level above purported antithetical individual, sectional, factional, party or even institutional planes. Deployment of 'national interest' in parliamentary debates marked the search for positional resonance beyond, and above, other focal interest claims made in other discursive contributions. In this sense, it wasn't meaningless; but rather it was meaningful in discursive intent.

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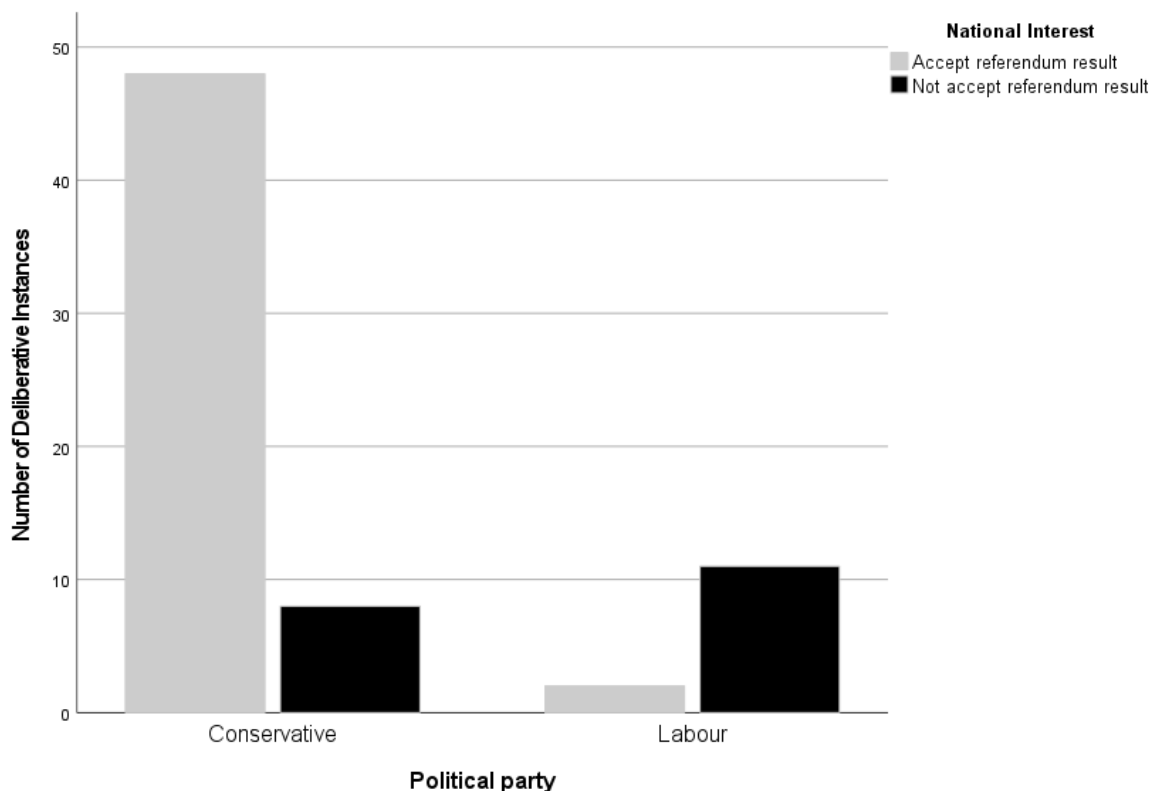
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### Figure and Tables

**Figure 1: Political Party (Conservative/Labour) and Deliberative Instance Sentiment (Accept/Not Accept 2016 Result)**



**Table 1: Deliberative Instance Sentiment and MPs personal vote 2016 Referendum**

		NATIONAL INTEREST	
		<i>Accept 2016 result (Leave EU)</i>	<i>Not Accept Result (Remain or 2<sup>nd</sup> Referendum)</i>
MP EU VOTE 2016	<i>Remain</i>	30 (35.6)	21 (15.4)
	<i>Leave</i>	21 (15.4)	1 (6.6)

Figures are counts, figures in parentheses are expected counts (Pearson Chi-Square  $p < 0.01$ ).

Note: Expected counts are the frequencies that are to be expected if the two variables are independent of each other and are calculated for each cell by multiplying the row total by the column total and then dividing by the total N.

**Table 2: Political Party (Conservative/Labour) and Representational Mode**

		REPRESENTATIONAL MODE	
		<i>In national interest to work consensually</i>	<i>Not in national interest to pursue party interest</i>
POLITICAL PARTY	<i>Conservative</i>	53 (44.3)	23 (31.7)
	<i>Labour</i>	31 (39.7)	37 (28.3)

Figures are counts, figures in parentheses are expected counts (Pearson Chi-Square  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 3: MPs personal vote 2016 Referendum and Representational Mode**

		REPRESENTATIONAL MODE	
		<i>In national interest to work consensually</i>	<i>Not in national interest to pursue party interest</i>
MP EU VOTE 2016	<i>Remain</i>	69 (74.2)	69 (63.8)
	<i>Leave</i>	17 (11.8)	5 (10.2)

Figures are counts, figures in parentheses are expected counts (Pearson Chi-Square  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4: Conservative versus Labour MPs and national interest sentiment on government's negotiating position at time 'x'**

		NATIONAL INTEREST	
		<i>In national interest to support the government's position at time 'x'</i>	<i>Not in national interest to the government's position at time 'x'</i>
MP PARTY	<i>Conservative</i>	38 (28.1)	7 (16.9)
	<i>Labour</i>	2 (11.9)	17 (7.1)

Figures are counts, figures in parentheses are expected counts (Pearson Chi-Square  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Appendix 1

### Descriptive Overview

- The term 'national interest' was referenced by 178 different MPs in 640 deliberative instances during the period under study.
- Positive sentiment ('in the national interest') was recorded in 436 (68 per cent) of deliberative instances, and negative sentiment ('not in the national interest') was recorded in 204 (32 per cent) of instances.
- Nearly 80 per cent (n=511) of deliberative instances were focused upon the constitutional issues arising from, and the political processes associated with, the Brexit withdrawal process.
- Only 20 per cent (n=129) of deliberative instances were coded as being primarily focused on the economic and societal/immigration ramifications of Brexit. In large part this reflects the delimited focus of the deliberative occasions coded in this study which were primarily concerned with the process of withdrawal, rather than with specific implementing legislation dealing with trade policy, agriculture, and customs and taxation etc.

Frequencies were produced for the deliberative instances of MPs when categorised by:

- *Political party*: national interest was referred to in 377 deliberative instances recorded for Conservative MPs (59 per cent of total instances), 204 (32 per cent) for Labour MPs, and 59 (9.2 per cent) for 'Other' MPs.
- *Executive position* (frontbench government minister or not): 178 references to national interest (28 per cent of total instances) were made by frontbench government ministers, with 81 instances recorded for Theresa May as PM (some 46 per cent of the frontbench total) followed by David Davis as her first Brexit Secretary with 43 instances (some 24 per cent of the frontbench total).
- *MP's vote in the 2016 referendum* (remain or leave): 485 deliberative instances of national interest (76 per cent of total instances) were recorded for MPs who voted remain and 152 (24 per cent) instances were recorded for leave voting MPs. This broadly reflected the split between the overall percentages of MPs declaring a remain vote (75 per cent) and those declaring a vote to leave (25 per cent).
- *Estimated or known percentage of the leave vote within an MP's constituency*: 329 instances of national interest were recorded for MPs representing a 'leave constituency' (51 per cent of total instances), and 311 were recorded for MPs representing a 'remain constituency' (49 per cent of total instances).
- *Periodisation*: For the purposes of analysis the period from 27 June 2016 until 23 January 2020 was divided into six sub-periods. These correspond broadly to the parliamentary

phases of the Brexit process identified by the Library Research Service of the House of Commons (for details see Walker 2020). In total 426 (82 per cent) of all deliberative instances were to be found in just three of the six identified periods. Period four (July 2018 to mid-January 2019) accounted for 269 (42 per cent) of deliberative instances. The compressed time frame of period five (21 January 2019 to 23 July 2019) accounted for a further 146 (23 per cent) deliberative instances. And period one witnessed 111 instances (17 per cent).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Where a debate extends across multiple days each daily Hansard record is treated as a discrete deliberative occurrence.

<sup>2</sup> Boris Johnson as prime minister shared the same sentiment in arguing that the 'starting point' in seeking 'a new agreement with our European friends' was that 'the referendum must be respected' (HC Debates 3 October 2019: col. 1383). Notably, however, in the period from July 2019 to January 2020, Johnson only referred to the 'national interest' on two occasions. The first was when he attempted to call an early general election 'to serve the national interest by giving whoever is Prime Minister the strongest possible mandate to negotiate for our country' and, when denied the opportunity to hold that election, to pledge that he would 'strive to get an agreement in the national interest' in negotiations with Brussels 'no matter how many devices this Parliament invents to tie my hands' (HC Debates 9 September 2019: cols. 616; 639). The second, during subsequent Brexit negotiations, was to express the hope that 'the House can now come together in the national interest behind this new deal' (HC Debates 3 October 2019: col. 1384).

<sup>3</sup> A secondary analysis of four major sectoral bills in the 2017-2019 parliament revealed only a further 15 deliberative instances referencing the national interest. Debates were examined at second reading, report stage and third reading (where completed) for the Agriculture Bill; Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill; Trade Bill; and the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.