

# **Xenophobia strongly linked to Brexit, regardless of voter age, gender or education**

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As concerns increase about Russian influence on the UK's Brexit referendum, new research provides evidence that British citizens who agreed that immigrants threaten their values and way of life were more likely to have voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. The study, published today in open access journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, shows that this xenophobia, or a fear of other groups, was a strong predictor of a Brexit vote regardless of people's age, gender or education.

In June 2016, almost 52% of British citizens who participated in a referendum on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, commonly known as Brexit, voted to leave. Following this largely unexpected result, some explanations pointed to the role of a voter's age, gender or education in their voting behavior while others wondered whether the "Leave campaign" might have mobilized xenophobic attitudes by emphasizing a fear of foreigners.

To investigate these questions further, researchers from the UK, Poland and Portugal measured the effect of xenophobia—or the belief that immigrants to the UK threaten the country - on [voting behavior](#). They found that this belief was strongly related to the tendency to vote in favor of Brexit and to be happy with the referendum's outcome, regardless of age, gender or education.

Led by Dr Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, at the Goldsmiths, University of London, the researchers then tried to establish what kind of people

believe that immigrants threaten the UK. They found three distinct groups: authoritarians, who fear other groups will threaten the traditional status quo in their country; people high in social dominance orientation, who compete for their [group](#)'s dominance over immigrants; and collective narcissists, who believe the UK is so great it is entitled to privileged treatment but complain this 'true importance and value' is not recognized by other countries. Importantly, the research also found that people who just thought it was great to be British or just valued their British identity were not more likely to reject immigrants or vote for Brexit.

Although other studies have implicated right wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation in voting for radical right-wing parties because of the perceived threat of immigrants, collective narcissism has almost never been examined in the context of political behaviors such as voting.

Dr Golec de Zavala says this research introduces collective narcissism as a new variable to consider when making predictions for political behavior. "From Brexit, Trump and support for Vladimir Putin in Russia to the nationalist, ultra- conservative government in Poland, studies from our and other labs show that collective narcissism systematically predicts prejudice, aggression and a tendency to interpret innocent behaviors as provocation to the national group," she says.

The researchers caution that as the study was conducted after the Brexit referendum, it may be that the 'yes' vote increased people's xenophobia. It is clear from the research that the vote was associated with prejudice, but this relationship might have been strengthened by the outcome of the referendum because people felt more empowered to express xenophobic attitudes.

Nevertheless, Dr Golec de Zavala sees important value in the research

for our political leaders. "Collective narcissism is not a good attitude to have," she says. "We should study how this becomes a group norm and find ways of preventing it from happening and spreading. We should vet our leaders more carefully in this respect because leaders have the power to make such attitudes normative in their groups."

**More information:** *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02023](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02023)

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