

# 'Cognitive flexibility' associated with voting attitudes in EU Referendum, study finds

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Credit: University of Cambridge

Latest research combining social and political surveys with objective cognitive testing suggests that "cognitive flexibility" contributes to formation of ideology. The study finds correlations between cognitive thinking styles and support for Brexit.

A new study suggests that the way our brains process everyday information helps to shape our ideological beliefs and political decision-

making – including attitudes towards the UK's 2016 EU Referendum.

Scientists from the University of Cambridge combined objective cognitive tests with questionnaires designed to gauge social and [political attitudes](#) in a sample of over 300 UK citizens, to investigate the psychological underpinnings of nationalistic attitudes.

The study examined differences in "cold cognition": emotionally-neutral decision making based on attention and recall (as opposed to "hot cognition", which is influenced by emotion).

Researchers measured the extent to which an individual displays a more "flexible" or more "persistent" cognitive style. Cognitive flexibility is characterised by adapting with greater ease to change, while cognitive persistence reflects a preference for stability through adherence to more defined information categories.

The findings demonstrate that those who displayed higher [cognitive flexibility](#) were less likely to [support](#) authoritarian and nationalistic ideological stances. They were also more likely to support remaining in the EU as well as immigration and free movement of labour. Cognitive persistence was associated with more conservative and nationalistic attitudes, which in turn predicted support for leaving the EU.

The research was conducted by scientists from the University's Department of Psychology and is published today in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"Voting is often thought to be an emotional decision. People describe 'voting with their heart' or having a gut reaction to particular politicians," said Leor Zmigrod, lead researcher and Gates Cambridge Scholar.

"While emotion is clearly integral to political decision-making, our

research suggests that non-emotional cognitive information processing styles, such as adaptability to change, also play a key role in shaping ideological behavior and identity."

"By connecting the realm of cognition with that of ideology, we find that flexibility of thought may have far-reaching consequences for social and political attitudes," she said.

All the study's 332 participants were cognitively healthy adults who completed two classic evaluations of cognitive flexibility: a card-sorting task involving shifting categorisation by shape and colour, and a neutral word association task.

Participants also consented to providing responses to standardized questions on topics such as attitudes towards immigration and citizenship, and personal attachment to the UK. All data were anonymised and controlled for a number of factors including age and education.

With her Cambridge colleagues Dr. Jason Rentfrow and Prof Trevor Robbins, Zmigrod constructed rigorous statistical models that revealed a tendency towards cognitive flexibility in the tests predicted ideological orientations that were less authoritarian, nationalistic, and conservative. This in turn predicted reduced support for Brexit.

"Our findings suggest that persistent adherence to a set of rules in a basic card-sorting game is associated with support for traditional social values and conservative political attitudes," said Rentfrow.

The researchers also found that participants who reported greater reliance on routines and traditions in their daily lives, and who strongly favored certainty over uncertainty, were more likely to prefer the traditionalism and perceived stability offered by nationalistic,

authoritarian, and conservative ideologies. Increased dependence on daily routines was also related to greater support for Brexit and immigration control.

Participants were asked about their agreement with post-Referendum political attitudes. Those who supported the statement "a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere" and opposed the statement "the Government has a right to remain in the EU if the costs are too high" exhibited a tendency towards cognitive persistence.

"The results suggest that psychological preferences for stability and consistency may translate into attitudes that favour uniformity and a more defined national identity," said Zmigrod.

The researchers point out that the sample size is limited, and the correlations – while strong – are on general trends in the data.

"Ideologies such as nationalism are highly complex constructs, and there are many reasons people believe what they do and vote the way they do," added Zmigrod.

"In today's politically-polarised climate, it is important to understand more about the psychological processes behind nationalistic and [social attitudes](#) if we are to build bridges between communities."

**More information:** *PNAS*, 2018. [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1708960115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708960115)

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