

# 'Remainers' suffered mental distress equivalent to migraine after Brexit vote

August 6 2019, by Warren Manger

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Warwick Business School research has found evidence that "Remainers" suffered "mental distress" in the aftermath of the UK's vote to leave the European Union—equivalent to a chronic migraine.

Using the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), which produced more than 38,000 [data points](#) before and after the June 2016 referendum, researchers found that those who voted leave saw their wellbeing—as measured by life [satisfaction](#)—improve after the [vote](#), but those who voted to remain in the EU saw their average mental distress rise, which continued a year after the referendum.

And yet a year before the referendum the study finds little evidence that life satisfaction and mental distress levels were any different between those preferring to leave and those wanting to remain.

The research by Nick Powdthavee, of Warwick Business School, Anke Plagnol, of City University London, Andrew Clark, of Paris School of Economics, and Paul Frijters, of the London School of Economics, also found that reporting low life satisfaction a year ahead of the vote was a strong predictor for people going on to vote leave in the 2016 referendum.

Dr. Powdthavee said: "Every year the UKHLS surveys a representative sample of the UK population's wellbeing, with around 40,000 now interviewed since it started in 2008, and we wanted to use its findings to see if the news of Brexit had an effect on the nation's wellbeing.

"The UKHLS has several relevant questions around people's wellbeing, mental stress and life satisfaction, so we looked at the results before and after the referendum. Interestingly in 2016 it also asked for people's voting intention in the referendum.

"There was an immediate worsening for those who preferred to remain in the EU post-Referendum in terms of mental stress. Plus, the heightening of Remainers' average mental stress appears to be long-lasting and increases over time. The increase in mental distress associated with Brexit is roughly similar in magnitude as the negative

effect of having a chronic migraine.

"Also, we were able to see that it was mainly men and the over-40s who preferred to leave the EU who derived the most satisfaction from the Brexit vote. While we also found that women and the over-40s who preferred to remain in the EU reported a significant increase in the usual level of mental stress following the EU referendum.

"It is also worth noting that significantly fewer respondents reported to have no preference after the referendum, which may reveal that admitting pro-Brexit preferences was more socially acceptable after the vote."

The UKHLS asked people between January and December 2016:  
"Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?"

It saw 51.9 percent of respondents express a preference for remaining in the EU, while 39.4 percent favored Leave, 4.3 percent selected "Don't know" and 4.4 percent refused to answer the question. Although the UKHLS constitutes a representative sample of the UK population, these percentages do not match the actual referendum outcome of 51.9 percent Leave versus 48.1 percent Remain.

The researchers found that those who were married, co-habiting or divorced were more likely to be pro-Brexit than those who had never married; the same was true for retirees, people with poor health and those with lower education. Men were also more likely than women to prefer leaving the EU.

There was also evidence that those with higher long-term income, as measured by their average monthly household income in the first six years of the UKHLS, were significantly less likely to want to leave the

EU.

Dr. Powdthavee added: "It would be interesting to follow the subjective wellbeing of both Remainers and Leavers over a number of years to assess the potential long-term consequences of this historic referendum.

"Despite huge disappointment on the side of Remainers and elation on the side of Leavers, it is likely that the Brexit vote itself, in the end, will not permanently affect life satisfaction as this really captures individuals' evaluations of many different domains in their lives such as their health, family, and financial situation—many of which have not yet been affected by the [referendum](#) result.

"However, with the date for EU withdrawal approaching fast, [life satisfaction](#) and [mental distress](#) may soon be affected by the real economic and social consequences that it will bring about."

Provided by University of Warwick

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