

# Brexit positions drive voter attention at least as much as party loyalties, study shows

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Voters find information from politicians more "interesting" if they have the same views on Brexit—even if they don't represent the party they normally support, a study shows.

The research suggests people are more willing to back different politicians based on just whether they agree with them about whether the country should Leave or Remain.

Academics have also found people are willing to discriminate against others if they share a different view on Brexit, and the public would forgive bad behaviour from campaigners for Leave or Remain, as long as they have the same opinion on the EU.

Academics also found voters do not approve of critical media coverage about their own Brexit views, but approve of it when it says damaging things about those with opposing opinions.

People were asked to rate statements from different MPs, including those from Labour and the Conservatives, who supported Leave and Remain. They were asked how interesting they found them. They were also asked if they would want to hear more from the respective MPs. The results show people were in some instances up to ten percent more positive about information from a politician who shares their views on Brexit, even if that MP was not a member of the political party they support.

Dr. Florian Stoeckel and Max Talman, from the University of Exeter, surveyed more than 900 people online as part of ongoing research to see how views on the EU are affecting their attitudes and party preferences.

Dr. Stoeckel said: "We found what people think about Brexit is just a strong indication of the extent to which they support a politician as their affiliation to a political party. Brexit identities cut across party lines, and have become a [strong force](#) that reshuffles voting in Britain. This creates more fluidity in voting behaviour and a likely fragmentation of the Westminster party system, which is otherwise known for its clear majorities."

Those involved in the research were also told they were about to play an intellectual puzzle game, and had to choose a team of made-up people who assist them in solving a task. The study found more than a quarter of respondents discriminated based on the views the people available for them to choose for their team had on Brexit: they selected candidates who shared their position at the expense of candidates who would have been more qualified for the task.

People were also asked to read two real news comment pieces which were critical of either Leavers or Remainers, and decide if it should be published online. When presented with text that criticises their own Brexit position only 13 percent of respondents supported its publication. When the text criticised those with an opposite view to theirs, 49 percent of respondents supported the publication of the text.

Those involved in the survey, conducted in April, were also asked to read real newspaper articles which described both Leave and Remain campaigners breaking campaign laws. Half of respondents supported a fine that was issued, but this rose to 77 percent if the fine was given to those who had the opposite views to them regarding Brexit.

Dr. Stoeckel said: "The Brexit referendum created identities that shape voter behaviour as much as party affiliations, or even more so. However we would still not expect all voters with conflicted views to select a party only based on its Brexit position. Decisions in elections are driven also by other policy issues, by the appeal of the lead candidates, and tactical considerations related to the first-past-the-post electoral system of the UK.

"Voters seem to be more lenient when those on "their" Brexit side misbehave. Yet, [liberal democracies](#) rely on everyone following the same rules, and being penalised equally if they break them. Dealing with the rift in society between Leavers and Remainers will be a challenge for any new government."

Provided by University of Exeter

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