Brexit changed people's perception of immigrants for the better

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New research by academics from four Universities including the University of Birmingham has found that anti-immigrant attitudes in the UK softened immediately following the Brexit referendum of 2016,

among both Leave and Remain supporters.

The report, "A Populist Paradox? How Brexit Softened Anti-Immigrant Attitudes," concludes that attitudes towards anti-immigration and anti-refugees were significantly softer even several months after the referendum.

This was due to two main reasons. On the one hand, some voters who supported leave reduced their anti-immigrant attitudes because they felt a greater sense of control after the referendum.

On the other hand, many people sought to distance themselves from widespread accusations of xenophobia and racism, and consequently became less anti-immigrant in the process. This mechanism was significant across both Leave and Remain supporters.

The project, published in the *British Journal of Political Science*, was led by Dr. Cassilde Schwartz from the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, Professor David Hudson from the University of Birmingham, Dr. Miranda Simon, from the Department of Government at University of Essex, and Jennifer van-Heerde Hudson at University College London.

Professor David Hudson commented, "Many people have noted the softening of attitudes since the EU Referendum, but no one could explain why attitudes changed for Remainers and Leavers. The idea that Leavers were reassured by the government 'taking back control' just doesn't explain the wider trend. Our findings does. The fact that people wish to distance themselves from accusations of xenophobia and racism is not only reassuring but suggests a more general phenomenon of society seeking to protect itself. Which is just as relevant in a time of COVID, border closures, and fears of a 'foreign' virus as it is to Brexit."

The authors call this decline in [anti-immigrant sentiment](link) following a populist victory a 'populist paradox'.

The researchers designed an experiment around the timing of the Brexit referendum, which was embedded into a panel survey of UK public opinion.

In order to measure anti-immigrant attitudes respondents were asked if they agreed with six key statements: refugees overwhelm services, refugees threaten culture, refugees do not improve the UK image, reduce number of migrants, migrants take jobs, and migrants bring terror.

The design randomly allocated half of respondents—the control group—to participate in the survey two weeks before the vote and the other half two weeks after the Brexit referendum.

Respondents were sampled and weighted according to regionally specific demographics by age and gender, social grade, region, party affiliation, and newspaper readership, making the data representative of the adult population of the country as a whole.

Key findings included:

- Anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments among UK citizens softened after the referendum.
- Remainers were 9% less inclined to believe that migrants take jobs after the Brexit outcome, relative to the baseline for this group established before the referendum. Leavers' attitudes softened by 4% - about half of the amount.
- Those supporting Remain were 12% and 7% less likely to believe that migrants bring terror and that refugees overwhelm services, respectively, relative to their baseline. While, Leavers' attitudes softened by 5% and 2% respectively.

Dr. Cassilde Schwartz from Royal Holloway, said: "It seems counter-intuitive to a lot people that anti-immigrant attitudes actually decreased after the referendum, while at the same time there was a frightening increase in reported hate crimes.

"However, these two things don't actually contradict each other. We think the referendum result did encourage a small minority of people to express their anti-immigrant hostility, while they otherwise would have kept it private. But at the same time, the vast majority of people took stock of the referendum result, rejected those who were hostile to migrants, and sought to distance themselves from that sentiment as much as possible."

Provided by University of Birmingham