

Higher cognitive ability linked to higher chance of having voted against Brexit

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The analysis revealed a strong statistical link between higher cognitive ability and having voted "Remain". Credit: TheDigitalArtist, Pixabay, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

A new analysis suggests that a person with higher cognitive ability may

have been more likely to vote "Remain" in the 2016 Brexit referendum, and that a spouse's cognitive skills may also be linked to Brexit voting decisions. Chris Dawson and Paul Baker of the University of Bath, U.K., present these [findings](#) in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on November 22, 2023.

Having higher cognitive ability has previously been associated with a greater tendency to recognize and resist [misinformation](#). Studies have also shown that the U.K. public received a large volume of misinformation about the referendum prior to voting for the U.K. to withdraw from the EU ("Brexit"). However, while a growing body of research has investigated potential links between people's Brexit votes and socioeconomic, sociodemographic, and [psychological factors](#), less research has addressed the potential role of cognitive ability in their decisions.

Dawson and Baker analyzed data on 3,183 heterosexual U.K. couples collected as part of a large survey study called Understanding Society. They examined whether there were any links between participants' reporting that they had voted "Leave" or "Remain" and their cognitive ability—as measured by their performance on a variety of tasks. The researchers statistically accounted for other factors that could also be linked to voting decisions, such as socioeconomic and sociodemographic traits, [political preferences](#), and a widely studied set of personality traits known as the Big Five.

The analysis revealed a strong statistical link between higher cognitive ability and having voted "Remain." In addition, people whose spouse had higher cognitive ability were significantly more likely to vote "Remain." In cases where one spouse voted "Remain" and the other "Leave," having significantly higher cognitive ability than one's spouse was associated with an even higher chance of voting to Remain.

The researchers note possible underlying explanations for their findings. For instance, misinformation about the referendum could have complicated decision making for people with low cognitive ability. They also suggest the need for ways to avoid such complications in the face of increasing amounts of misinformation.

The authors add, "This study adds to existing academic evidence showing that low cognitive ability makes people more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. People with lower cognitive ability and analytical thinking skills find it harder to detect and discount this type of information."

More information: Cognitive ability and voting behaviour in the 2016 UK referendum on European Union membership, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0289312](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0289312). [journals.plos.org/plosone/arti ... journal.pone.0289312](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0289312)

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