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Still dividing the electorate? Brexit and voter evaluation of candidates

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ABSTRACT

Voters use various cues to make their decision. We examine the impact of the cue of candidate position on Brexit. Brexit is still on the agenda and we explore how this topic continues to divide the electorate. We test this by assessing the general preference of candidates among respondents in a series of surveys providing variation in the information regarding candidates' positions on Brexit and party identification. In contrast to existing literature, we find strong evidence that candidates can utilise either their own previous voting behaviour or that of their opponent to provide an electoral advantage. Leave supporting candidates are highly rated by leave voters and poorly rated by remain voters, and vice versa for remain candidates, although it is dependent on the party label of the candidate. The issue of Brexit has a strong impact, but partisanship is mostly of equal importance for the respondents.

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The vote on 23rd June 2016 set in motion Britain's exit from the European Union – Brexit. This decision has naturally seen a growing body of research emerge investigating the factors that led to Brexit and shaped the choice of the British voters (e.g. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017; Goodwin, Hix, and Pickup 2018; Heath and Goodwin 2017; Hobolt 2016; Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2018; Shaw, Smith, and Scully 2017). Despite the focus on understanding why Brexit came about, there has been little work on the wider impact of Brexit on voters' choices and opinions (though see Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2018; Mellon et al. 2017). In addition, there is an ongoing discussion on whether Brexit is simply the outcome of what could be seen as a new electoral cleavage in British politics (e.g. Evans and Menon 2017;

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Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2018), or even wider in European politics (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2018).

The question examined in this article is whether Brexit is still important for voter preferences and for voter decision-making. It is well-known that voters may value certain characteristics over others for these serve as heuristic cues from which additional conclusions about candidates can be drawn (e.g. Adorno et al. 1950; Popkin 1991), most notably the party label attached to a candidate (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Mondak 2003). Understanding voter preferences for particular candidates is a well-established area of focus in the United States (e.g. Sanbonmatsu 2002), although not something that has seen much exploration in the UK (though see Campbell and Cowley 2014). We argue that voters will take a heuristic cue from a candidate's stance on the Brexit referendum and let this information influence their overall preference for candidates regardless of what party label is attached to the candidates.

We take inspiration from the work of Campbell and Cowley (2014) who tested voter views of candidates across several distinct characteristics. In this article, we focus solely on respondents' general candidate preferences. To establish whether a candidate Brexit effect exists, we have run three sets of surveys in a low-information context in Britain to test the impact of changing the information pertaining to a candidate's 2016 EU Referendum voting and campaigning habits and their party identification. We use a similar approach to that of Campbell and Cowley (2014), although limited to Brexit alone. Respondents were given two hypothetical candidates with short profiles to evaluate their general overall candidate preference. We should expect to see a strong impact of changing the candidates' Brexit positions on the overall preference if Brexit is still a strongly salient issue dividing the British population. Moreover, we expect this impact to be present regardless of the introduction of the Conservative party label into the profile of the candidate.

We find a clear effect of leave voters strongly supporting the candidate that supports leave and negatively rating the candidate supporting remain. For remain voters, the picture is slightly less clear, although there are still some aspects of a similar effect, in the opposite direction, as for leave voters. We also find that the effect is variant when the Conservative party label is attached to the candidates. Overall, the results suggest that in a hypothetical scenario, Brexit has an effect on the decision-making of the electorate even two years after the referendum. Consequently, in contrast to existing studies, it is possible for candidates to gain from highlighting their own or their opponent's position on Brexit dependent on their party, and while the issue of Brexit has become a dominant issue we also find that partisanship still plays a role, and perhaps, surprisingly, has not lost as much importance as could have been expected.

Why should Brexit still matter?

It is not possible to discuss the issue of Britain's relationship with Europe without focusing some part of the discussion on the issue of Brexit and referendums. Whether voters use referendums to signal their attitudes towards Europe or use the opportunity to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their national government is a debate which dominates the field (e.g. Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009). Similar to the previous European referendum in 1975, the governing party did not take a united stance on the issue in 2016. While a majority of the Conservative Cabinet backed remain, prominent members of the party campaigned for the contrary. The main opposition party, Labour, had the official position of supporting remain, but several MPs, including some high-profile MPs, campaigned for the opposite and were allowed to do so. Of the national parties, only the Liberal Democrats took an unequivocal remain position.¹

Some literature talk of second-order considerations as powerful determinants of voting behaviour in lower salience referenda (e.g. Hobolt 2005; Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005). Yet, it is also the case that the 2016 EU Referendum was not one of lower saliency. Consequently, we will assume that Brexit was not a second-order referendum (see Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005), but an expression of people's genuine views of the merits of European integration and it is these that are being presented when examining their views on Brexit. Thus, where individual voters have formed real opinions on the issue, it is all the more likely that such opinions will impact on their evaluation of candidates running for elections at later points in time, if the Brexit issue is still salient for voters' decision-making.

Issue-based voting is well-established in most electorates (e.g. Särilvik and Crewe 1983; Franklin 1985a, 1985b; Franklin, Mackie, and Valen 1992; Dalton 1996), though naturally there is variation as to what issues are important and when. The issue of Europe in the UK is, in the popular mind, seen as extremely important, though surveying its importance over time suggests there has been some variation in its level of importance (Clements and Bartle 2009; Stevens 2013). Recent comparative studies show a strong impact of the Euro crisis on EU salience (Braun and Tausendpfund 2014), and additionally, the European issue to be salient for partisan politics (Braun, Hutter, and Kersch 2016). In the British context the issue of Europe, and particularly Brexit, was at the forefront of voters' minds during the 2017 General Election, with more than one in three citing it the single most important issue facing the country at the time (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2017). This is a stark increase to the 2015 British General Election where only about 10% mentioned Europe as an important issue (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2018).

While our focus remains on voters' preferences for candidates, there are good reasons for exploring the relationship between attitudes towards

European integration and national vote choice. If EU issue voting, as De Vries (2007, 2009) prefers, does exist, it would be reasonable to presume that attitudes towards European integration may influence other related aspects of voter decision-making; such as those that are of interest to this paper. Present indicators of EU issue voting are positive (Evans 1998, 2002; Gabel 2000; Tillman 2004). Where the potential for EU issue voting is greater owing to recent events, we can likewise presume the potential for EU attitudes to influence voters' ratings of candidates to be greater.

If voters have been sufficiently influenced by their attitudes towards Europe to switch parties – as Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2018) and Mellon et al. (2017) document – it is certainly possible that voters would switch candidates to suit their EU preferences, here assuming that voter stance on Brexit is equal to their EU issue preference. Brexit has come to establish itself as a key source of division in British politics; indeed, we have witnessed substantial shifts in party support along referendum lines, leaving scholars labelling the 2017 election, the “Brexit Election” (Mellon et al. 2017). In their study of the importance of Brexit position versus partisanship, Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2018) show that affective polarization in Britain has increased and Brexit as a topic cuts across the traditional party lines and impacts voter decision-making.

However, a caveat should be mentioned in that existing research in Britain does not show strong evidence of voters making judgements on candidates based on previous behaviour. In their study of the impact of the British expenses scandal, Vivyan, Wagner, and Tarlov (2012) find a limited impact of voters punishing a hypothetical candidate's involvement in the expenses scandal. This is also in line with previous findings that voters are not necessarily strongly informed about their MP and their actions (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Pattie and Johnston 2004), and this will play a limited role for voter decision-making, where partisan cues are instead the important factor. This creates an added emphasis on the present study that Brexit would have to be an extremely strong issue for it to trump the impact of partisanship and overcome the relatively limited importance of previous actions.

Where issue voting requires an issue to be salient before taking hold, likewise, we would expect an issue to be salient before it influences voters' ratings of candidates. Consequently, for those voters who hold the European issue salient, we should expect a difference in how they evaluate the candidates relative to other voters. Where remain voters in the referendum may take a dislike to the leave candidate, something similar may happen between leave voters and the remain candidate. Though given the recognised importance of the party label as a cue for voters, we should expect some degree of impact of partisanship on vote choice in addition to a candidate's Brexit position.

Data

Following Campbell and Cowley's (2014) lead, we wish to model hypothetical candidate races, making a survey experiment the obvious research design choice. Within the political science field, the usage of survey experiments has increased substantially in recent years (e.g. Sanbonmatsu 2002; Coffé and Theiss-Morse 2016; Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto 2018; Wüest and Pontusson 2017). Through providing the opportunity to manipulate certain conditions within a survey instrument, we can gain insight into voters' responses to political cues otherwise impossible in a real-world electoral contest. We ran three sets of surveys to test the relative impact of changing candidate information on their Brexit position and their party affiliation. Creating a low-information environment, we asked respondents to compare two hypothetical candidates, answering a question concerning their overall candidate preference. Two of the three were split-sample surveys. The first two surveys were run in January 2018 and the final one in September 2018, all three by the research company YouGov on their political omnibus. This service utilises a method known as quota sampling, which actively targets respondents based on their demographic breakdown to produce a sample representative of the overall population. The sample, as well as being nationally representative, is made to be politically representative. This additional level of weighting is required for questions of a political nature as responses are likely to be influenced by a respondent's party affiliation.

The first survey is a simple comparison between two candidate profiles. Respondents are tasked with reading two candidate profiles before answering the question, "Which would you prefer as your MP?" with three possible responses, Peter, David or Neither. The second survey is a split-sample survey with a respondent being randomly assigned to one of two groups upon entering the survey, with the first of these two groups being told that a candidate supports remain and the other group, that they support leave. Crucially, nothing else about the profiles is different, and the other candidate's profile will remain the same.

The basis for our two candidates, Peter and David, is some simple biographical information. For the candidate named Peter we use the following information:

Peter Edwards is 46 years old, and was born and raised in your local area before going to University to study English. Peter is a solicitor, and runs his own local practice. He is passionate about the NHS and education, with a wife who is a physiotherapist and two children in local primary schools.

and similar for the candidate named David:

David Brown is 47 years old and lives in your constituency. David studied Chemistry at University, before training as an engineer and setting up his own

business ten years ago. He is passionate about infrastructure, local business and the environment, and is married with two children.

For the second survey on Brexit we keep the information on candidate Peter as above, but vary the information for candidate David. In the first split of the sample we use a remain profile for David:

David Brown is 47 years old; he is married with two children and lives in your constituency. David studied Chemistry at University, before training as an engineer and setting up his own business ten years ago. He is passionate about infrastructure, local business and the environment, and campaigned and voted for Britain to remain in the European Union in the EU Referendum.

while in the second split of the sample David is presented with a leave profile:

David Brown is 47 years old; he is married with two children and lives in your constituency. David studied Chemistry at University, before training as an engineer and setting up his own business ten years ago. He is passionate about infrastructure, local business and the environment, and campaigned and voted for Britain to leave the European Union in the EU Referendum.

In our third survey, we keep the information on Peter as before and keep the exact same information for David with additional information on his party belonging. This means that instead of having two groups we have four, one where David is a Conservative candidate and supports remain, one where David is a Conservative candidate and supports leave, one where David is a Labour candidate and supports remain, and a final group where David is a Labour candidate supporting leave. The candidate Peter is not given a party affiliation as we are specifically interested in how respondents rate the combination of partisan belonging and Brexit position, not how they view an opposite party. It does mean that we do not make it clear to the respondents what party Peter belongs to or what his Brexit position is, we assume that the respondent will believe it is the party they see as the opposite to the one assigned to David and similarly with the Brexit position, although we do not have a measure for whether this is actually the case. Given the results, we do believe that this question does capture quite well the impact of partisanship versus Brexit, and although we cannot rule out that there were respondents not following our assumption, the results, for both Labour and Conservative candidates and remain and leave candidates, do suggest that this issue has not biased our results.

The independent variable of interest measures what position the respondent took at the 2016 Brexit referendum. We have removed anyone who did not vote, could not remember, or refused to answer. This leaves a dichotomous variable taking the value 1 if the respondent reported that they voted for "leave" at the referendum and the value 0 if the respondent reported that they voted for "remain". We do not include any control variables measured

post-treatment but do utilise variables for which YouGov hold respondent data, i.e. independent of the question regarding the respondent's overall candidate preference. This is, in the analysis, limited to five control variables. First, we create a dichotomous variable for whether a respondent voted for the Conservatives or not at the 2017 General Election.² This was not asked at the time of our surveys, but rather, was gathered immediately after the election to prevent things such as false recall. Given our surveys were run in January and September 2018 we have checked to see how large a percentage of voters would still vote for the Conservatives at these later points in time. In January and September 2018, this was 33.5% and 32.2%, respectively, so down from the 42.4% the party got at the 2017 General Election. We have further checked to see where the Conservative voters have gone (where they are retaining 77.7% and 73.2% support in January and September, respectively). Interestingly, few of the other parties have gained from this loss of voters, with up to 20% of those voting Conservative in 2017 responding with "don't know" when prompted for a party choice. Nevertheless, the variable for the 2017 General Election vote allows us to control for the effect of partisanship in our surveys. While it does not entirely remove the concerns about lack of partisan prompting in the first two of our surveys, it is a move towards ensuring that any results are taking this issue into account. We have removed all respondents who did not provide an answer to the question of which party they voted for in 2017. While we have deliberately kept the number of control variables to a minimum, four more are included; age, gender, education and geographical region. In their analysis of which factors influenced Brexit, Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) find some significant effect of age, prompting its inclusion as a control variable here. While Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) do not find any effect of gender, it is important to keep in mind that especially gender and ethnicity are among the most studied topics in examining candidate characteristics using survey data (see also Sanbonmatsu 2002). We include it here, not least to ensure that any effect we might find from our main variable of interest is present when controlling for these factors. Recent comparative evidence suggests the increasing importance of a cultural dimension for voter choice (see Hooghe and Marks 2018), which is strongly linked to education. In that respect and in line with other recent studies of Brexit we include a variable measuring a respondent's education level (again, not asked at the time of our surveys, but gathered when a respondent joins the YouGov panel). We used a recoded version measuring the education as low, medium or high (with low being the reference category), to ensure consistency with the weighting scheme used by YouGov. Recent studies have already suggested geographical factors as a possible explanation with Ford and Goodwin (2017) and Harris and Charlton (2016) arguing for a strong impact of

geographical location as explanations for Brexit vote, while Johnston et al. (2018) find limited evidence for this relationship apart from some parts of London. Our aim is not to settle this debate, but given the differing views, we have included a control variable for eleven regions provided by the YouGov panel. We have set London as the reference category.

Impact of Brexit on voter rating of candidates

To examine the extent to which Brexit actually has an impact on voters' evaluations of candidates we need to establish a priori whether there is a difference between the two candidates "Peter", who throughout the article will be the comparator and "David" who we vary in terms of Brexit and party affiliation. In Table 1 below we show the simple comparison between the two candidates with no Brexit information and no party label information. The comparison shows a difference between remain and leave respondents, where remain respondents favour Peter slightly more than the leave respondents, while leave respondents have a stronger preference for David than remain respondents do. However when splitting the remain and leave respondents on which party they supported, Conservative or not Conservative at the 2017 election, the difference between remain and leave respondents disappears (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

In our second survey, we provided respondents with different information for the candidate David. One split of the sample received the information that he supported and campaigned for remain at the 2016 referendum and the other that he had supported and campaigned for leave in the same referendum. In Table 2 we show the comparison between the two samples where the respondents are divided according to their position on Brexit.

The results support our hypothesis that the candidate position on Brexit matters for overall candidate preference. Amongst remain voters, there is an almost equal split between the three outcomes when the candidate David is said to have supported remain. Yet to make David a leaver is to make over half prefer Peter to David. We witness effects of a similar magnitude amongst leave voters, where the differences when David is supporting

Table 1. Overall preference – no Brexit, no party information.

	Remain respondents	Leave respondents
Peter	43.1 (308)	37.8 (271)
David	25.4 (181)	33.5 (241)
Neither	31.5 (225)	28.8 (207)
χ^2	11.63 ($p = .003$)	
N	1433	

Table 2. Overall preference – Brexit information, no party information.

	David votes remain		David votes leave	
	Remain respondents	Leave respondents	Remain respondents	Leave respondents
Peter	32.3 (117)	45.7 (168)	56.0 (201)	21.9 (71)
David	35.1 (127)	17.7 (65)	13.4 (48)	54.6 (177)
Neither	32.6 (118)	36.7 (135)	30.6 (110)	23.5 (76)
χ^2	30.24 ($p = .000$)		140.88 ($p = .000$)	
N	730		683	

remain are relatively small compared to what is observed when he is set to support leave. When presented with remainder David, only less than 20% of leave respondents support him with 45% supporting Peter. As a reminder, no information about Peter’s Brexit position was provided to the respondents. Making David a leave supporting candidate reverses this effect, making David the preferred candidate by over half, with Peter trailing at 20%. Overall, this suggests that taking a leave position is a more divisive signal than taking a remain position, although leave respondents do additionally react strongly to a candidate with a remain position. Examining the results in relation to respondents’ party choice at the 2017 General Election does not change the picture, as evidenced in [Table 3](#) below. When David’s referendum vote matches that of remain respondents he is preferred to Peter, in the same way that David is preferred to Peter by leave respondents when David is a leave supporter. The only non-significant difference between remain and leave respondents concerns those supporting the Conservatives at the 2017 General Election and when provided with the information that David votes remain.

These results can be summarised in a slightly different fashion by estimating three multinomial logistic regressions. The choice of multinomial logistic regression is due to the nature of the dependent variable which can take three outcomes: Peter, David or Neither. This method allows us to estimate the impact of our independent variables on the choice of candidate Peter versus Neither Candidate and the choice of candidate David versus Neither Candidate. The benefit of this analysis is that we can present the effects after taking into account respondents’ positions on Brexit, their party choice, their gender, age, education and geographical region. The choice of Neither Candidate as the base category is in line with the choice of a neutral category as the base category by Sanbonmatsu (2002) which uses a similar methodological approach to estimating the preferences over two distinct alternatives in relation to a reference category. The results of the analysis in tabular form can be seen in the [Appendix](#). While here we present the results in graphical form in [Figure 1](#) below, which simply confirms the results presented in the cross-tabulations thus far.³ The stronger differences are

Table 3. Overall preference – Brexit information, no party information, party vote.

	David votes Remain				David votes Leave			
	Non-Conservative voting		Conservative voting		Non-Conservative voting		Conservative voting	
	Remain Respondent	Leave Respondent	Remain Respondent	Leave Respondent	Remain Respondent	Leave Respondent	Remain Respondent	Leave Respondent
Peter	31.9 (80)	44.8 (65)	38.6 (27)	46.2 (97)	60.0 (159)	29.4 (37)	44.3 (39)	16.6 (32)
David	36.9 (103)	12.4 (18)	25.7 (18)	21.9 (46)	7.6 (20)	42.1 (53)	28.4 (25)	63.2 (122)
Neither	31.2 (87)	45.8 (62)	35.7 (25)	31.9 (67)	32.5 (86)	28.6 (36)	27.3 (24)	20.2 (39)
χ^2	28.10 ($p = .000$)		1.25 ($p = .534$)		70.89 ($p = .000$)		33.75 ($p = .000$)	
N	424		280		391		281	

Overall Candidate Preference

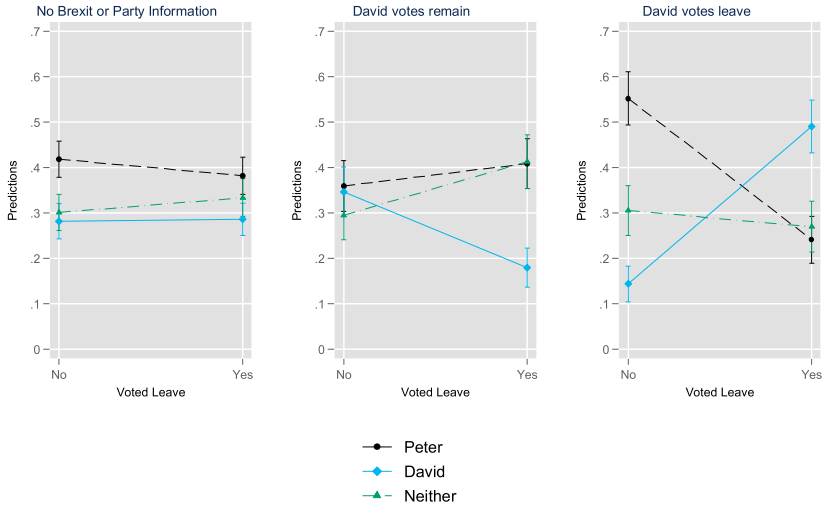


Figure 1. Multinomial logistic regression results.

witnessed when David votes leave across both leave and remain respondents. When David votes remain only leave voters have a significantly different view towards him, while the difference is virtually indistinguishable when no information is given regarding Brexit or party.

However, any analysis of this is only partial without also considering the effect of the party label attached to a candidate. Party affiliation is the strongest heuristic cue a candidate can use (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Mondak 2003). This has clear consequences for our analysis and leads us to introduce the results from our third set of surveys. Here we split our sample into four groups; one where David is the Conservative party candidate and supports remain, one where David is the Conservative party candidate and supports leave, one where David is the Labour party candidate and supports remain, and one where David is the Labour party candidate and supports leave. The information regarding Peter remains consistent throughout and no information about Peter’s Brexit view or party label is presented to respondents. The results of this final set of surveys can be seen in Table 4 below. As before, results are split based on the respondents’ positions on Brexit.

Similar percentages of remain and leave voters (26 and 28%, respectively) favour David when he is representing the Conservative party and supportive of remain (although Peter does come out on top amongst remain respondents and neither for leavers). This picture changes dramatically when David is set to support leave but remains a Conservative. In those circumstances over 60% of remain respondents support Peter and only 15% David. Among leave voters, the preference is reversed: 58% support David

Table 4. Overall preference – Brexit information AND party information.

	David is conservative and supports remain		David is conservative and supports leave		David is labour and supports remain		David is labour and supports leave	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
Peter	42.2 (153)	34.0 (123)	63.8 (243)	18.4 (61)	20.1 (78)	53.7 (182)	37.1 (127)	36.1 (130)
David	26.2 (95)	27.9 (101)	15.0 (57)	57.5 (191)	56.4 (219)	13.9 (47)	22.8 (78)	30.0 (108)
Neither	31.7 (115)	38.1 (138)	21.3 (81)	24.1 (80)	23.5 (91)	32.5 (110)	40.1 (137)	33.9 (122)
χ^2	5.53 ($p = .063$)		178.85 ($p = .000$)		152.00 ($p = .000$)		5.28 ($p = .071$)	
N	725		713		727		702	

and a mere 18% support Peter. In other words, being a Conservative candidate and supporting leave is a much stronger signal than being a Conservative and supporting remain.

When David is a Conservative remain candidate there is a limited effect compared to when he is a leave supporting Conservative candidate. The exact opposite is the case when David is labelled the Labour party candidate. Amongst leave respondents, 54% support Peter when David is a remainer (and the Labour party candidate). Peter remains the preferred candidate amongst leave voters when David supports leave, but by a smaller margin (Peter's 36% to David's 30%). For remain voters, again, greater differences are witnessed when David votes remain. 56% of remain respondents support David when he votes in accordance with them (compared to Peter's 20%). As for when he votes leave, Peter is preferred to David although the difference between the two is reduced (Peter's 37% to David 23%).

To gauge the full extent to which this is a uniform result across Conservative and non-Conservative voters we split the results further as we report in [Table 5](#) below. The main result to take away from this is the clear difference as to how large a proportion of respondents would go against their Brexit preference in order to prefer a candidate of the party they voted for at the 2017 General Election. Amongst Conservative leave voters, 41% would support a Conservative remainer. Similarly, 50% of Conservative remainers would support a Conservative leave candidate. Amongst those who did not vote for the Conservatives at the 2017 General Election, and are leavers, 25% would support a Labour remainer. Alternatively, 26% of non-conservatives who voted remain, would support a Labour leave candidate. For the Labour candidate, this is undoubtedly a very conservative estimate given that "not voting Conservative" in 2017 includes all who reported casting a ballot for a party that was not the Conservative party in 2017. These results are suggestive of two things, the first being that there is a difference in whether a respondent voted leave or remain and how strong their overall candidate preference is.

Table 5. Overall preference – Brexit information and Party information – divided by respondents’ view on party and Brexit.

	David is conservative and supports remain				David is conservative and supports leave				David is labour and supports remain				David is labour and supports leave			
	Non-conservative voting		Conservative voting		Non-conservative voting		Conservative voting		Non-conservative voting		Conservative voting		Non-conservative voting		Conservative voting	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
Peter	51.9 (139)	58.4 (80)	15.1 (13)	18.6 (41)	75.6 (220)	35.1 (46)	22.5 (18)	6.9 (13)	10.1 (29)	30.1 (43)	51.7 (47)	72.3 (136)	28.7 (74)	14.0 (20)	63.6 (49)	52.2 (108)
David	14.9 (40)	7.3 (10)	61.6 (53)	40.9 (90)	5.5 (16)	32.1 (42)	50.0 (40)	76.7 (145)	70.3 (201)	25.2 (36)	15.4 (14)	5.3 (10)	26.0 (67)	48.3 (69)	14.3 (11)	18.4 (38)
Neither	33.2 (89)	34.3 (47)	23.3 (20)	40.5 (89)	18.9 (55)	32.8 (43)	27.5 (22)	16.4 (31)	19.6 (56)	44.8 (64)	33.0 (30)	22.3 (42)	45.4 (117)	37.8 (54)	22.1 (17)	29.5 (61)
X^2	5.01 ($p = .081$)		11.25 ($p = .004$)		77.41 ($p = .000$)		21.25 ($p = .000$)		79.27 ($p = .000$)		13.91 ($p = .001$)		23.19 ($p = .000$)		2.99 ($p = .224$)	
N	405		306		422		269		429		279		401		284	

The second concerns the mediating effect of the party label attached to a candidate on that Brexit effect. Again, these results can be presented in a slightly different fashion – see Figure 2 below. Here the results of four multinomial regressions are presented after controlling for the effect of party choice, Brexit position, age and gender.

Generally, we see a much stronger effect amongst leave respondents than remain respondents. Although, for this latter group, the party label attached to the candidate matters, where Conservative voters are more willing to accept a candidate with an opposing position on Brexit to their own if said candidate is a Conservative, as opposed to non-Conservative voters. However, in the hypothetical scenario we present, between 50 and 60% of those who supported the Conservatives in 2017 would prefer a different party's candidate if the Conservative candidate did not support the Brexit position of the respondent. This is evidence of a very strong schism among the British electorate and especially within supporters of the Conservative party. Brexit alone – and in relation to political party – is an issue that strongly divides the electorate in a way that is perhaps not currently expressed as clearly as one would expect if this is a new dividing societal cleavage in Britain.

In the time period between the first two surveys and the last, much has happened politically. Not least in relation to Brexit where negotiations, resignations, votes of confidence and Common votes are constant reminders to the voters that Brexit is still an active issue. In this respect, it is little surprise that the Brexit effect evident in the second set of surveys persists. The lack

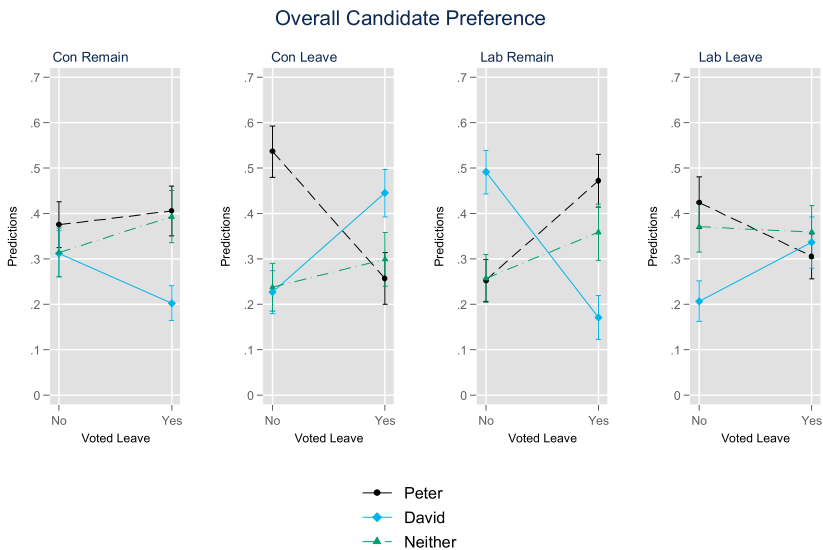


Figure 2. Overall preference – Brexit and party information.

of decay in the effect is noteworthy where, again, in the Conservative case, setting a candidate to vote leave is a much stronger signal than supporting remain. While the opposite is the case for the Labour party candidate, it is a strong effect nonetheless. With effects broadly comparable between the second and third set of surveys, it is possible that Brexit will continue to divide the electorate, although only further study after more time has passed will be necessary to draw these conclusions.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, there is a Brexit effect, in that election candidates' Brexit positions appear to have an influence on respondents' overall candidate preferences, both alone and in relation to party label. We have shown a respondent's standpoint on the European issue to affect their candidate preferences, where we have seen leave voters in the 2016 EU Referendum significantly hostile to a candidate who campaigned and voted for Britain to remain in the EU. Concurrently, they expressed significant favourability towards a candidate whose Brexit preference suited their own. Moreover, we have established this to be case when party is not taken into account and that similar patterns appear when party information is provided to the respondent.

This effect, however, is mostly one-sided. Whilst there is an effect setting a candidate to vote remain, the candidate who is set as voting leave produces effects of a greater magnitude. Where a remain-supporting candidate is rated differently to a candidate with no information, it is predominantly negatively by leave voters. The effect varies between Labour- and Conservative-specified candidates, with supporters of the latter party having much more distinct views amongst their remain and leave voters in comparison to those respondents who did not support the Conservative party in 2017.

The contribution of this study is two-fold. Whilst our research speaks to and confirms other recent work on the on-going impact of Brexit for voter decision-making (e.g. Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2018), the finding that election candidates can utilise either their own previous voting behaviour on Brexit or that of their opponent to provide an electoral advantage is something that goes against the existing literature on usage of previous positions (see e.g. Vivyan, Wagner, and Tarlov 2012). For a candidate standing in a constituency documented as passionately pro-leave, to explicitly highlight their own referendum vote as being in accordance with the majority of the constituency would be to increase their electoral prospects; particularly so if their opponent voted for the contrary. Although this is highly dependent on the party label attached to a candidate – much stronger effects were found for Conservative candidates. While it has long been known that there is division within the Conservative party amongst those favouring remain and leave, it is nevertheless a significant finding that 50–60% of 2017 Conservative party

voters would prefer another candidate if the Conservative candidate did not support the position held by the respondent on Brexit. This means that there is a sizeable group of Conservative party voters for whom partisan loyalty is more important than the issue of Brexit. However, there is no doubt that Brexit is polarizing for those who voted Conservative in 2017. For many of these voters, Brexit is likely to influence their preference which, if it continues and can be observed at later general elections, it appears to be a challenging time ahead for the Conservative party. As a final point, it is worth noting that these findings are based on providing respondents with different alternatives across three surveys and this does not necessarily equate to an electoral loss.

Notes

1. In Scotland and Wales, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru were also unequivocal in their support for remain.
2. The Conservative Party was, and at the time of writing, still is, the party most divided by Brexit. We have therefore decided to make the party variable dichotomous with all other parties coded as non-Conservative. This should increase the possibility of interpreting the results over splitting parties into a number of distinct categories, some of which would have a low N that interpretation becomes problematic.
3. All figures are presented using a Stata graphics scheme by Bischof (2017).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Table A1. Overall preference – no Brexit or party information – broken down by respondents' Brexit position and Party choice.

	Remain respondents		Leave respondents	
	Non-conservative voting	Conservative voting	Non-conservative voting	Conservative voting
Peter	45.2 (243)	40.3 (118)	36.7 (59)	36.6 (148)
David	21.4 (115)	25.6 (75)	39.1 (63)	38.4 (155)
Neither	33.5 (180)	34.1 (100)	24.2 (39)	25.0 (101)
χ^2	2.55 ($p = .279$)		0.05 ($p = .978$)	
N	831		565	

Table A2. Regression analysis for Figure 1.

VARIABLES	Peter vs. neither No Brexit or party information	David vs. neither No Brexit or party information	Peter vs. neither Remain	David vs. neither Remain	Peter vs. neither Leave	David vs. neither Leave
Voted leave	-0.196 (0.157)	-0.0888 (0.174)	-0.202 (0.226)	-1.016*** (0.243)	-0.738*** (0.247)	1.579*** (0.268)
Voted Conservative in 2017	0.0119 (0.167)	0.619*** (0.177)	0.246 (0.232)	0.235 (0.254)	-0.236 (0.242)	0.870*** (0.251)
Male	-0.297** (0.141)	0.109 (0.153)	-0.539*** (0.195)	0.241 (0.222)	-0.423* (0.216)	0.364 (0.238)
Age	0.000420 (0.00464)	0.0120** (0.00540)	0.00877 (0.00652)	0.00227 (0.00715)	0.0192*** (0.00732)	0.0307*** (0.00813)
Education (reference category: Low level of education)						
Medium level of education	-0.222 (0.182)	-0.294 (0.198)	-0.250 (0.234)	0.179 (0.274)	-0.168 (0.277)	0.122 (0.279)
High level of education	-0.180 (0.200)	-0.346 (0.228)	-0.321 (0.265)	0.0672 (0.309)	0.475 (0.311)	0.371 (0.346)
Geographical region of domicile (reference category: London)						
North East	-0.430 (0.395)	0.411 (0.421)	1.635*** (0.566)	0.247 (0.677)	-0.271 (0.600)	0.197 (0.709)
North West	0.333 (0.301)	0.546 (0.344)	0.657 (0.413)	-0.128 (0.453)	0.302 (0.449)	1.191** (0.493)
Yorkshire and Humber	0.0817 (0.310)	0.584* (0.352)	0.243 (0.457)	-0.282 (0.501)	0.0756 (0.510)	0.508 (0.559)
East Midlands	0.125 (0.319)	0.316 (0.362)	0.201 (0.440)	-0.321 (0.521)	0.0995 (0.486)	0.852 (0.527)
West Midlands	0.0472 (0.310)	0.354 (0.337)	0.593 (0.441)	-0.115 (0.475)	0.512 (0.482)	1.578*** (0.578)
East of England	0.0169	0.0285	0.465	0.448	0.311	0.970*

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

VARIABLES	Peter vs. neither No Brexit or party information	David vs. neither No Brexit or party information	Peter vs. neither Remain	David vs. neither Remain	Peter vs. neither Leave	David vs. neither Leave
	(0.299)	(0.348)	(0.426)	(0.448)	(0.449)	(0.529)
South East	-0.0158 (0.269)	0.208 (0.302)	0.879** (0.426)	0.362 (0.465)	-0.0162 (0.431)	1.082** (0.493)
South West	0.303 (0.317)	0.530 (0.350)	0.626 (0.450)	0.429 (0.473)	-0.397 (0.427)	0.345 (0.520)
Wales	0.0248 (0.373)	0.545 (0.405)	0.855* (0.505)	0.196 (0.538)	-0.213 (0.656)	1.679*** (0.644)
Scotland	-0.465 (0.301)	0.0683 (0.362)	-0.00429 (0.467)	-0.181 (0.467)	-0.321 (0.435)	0.687 (0.566)
Constant	0.570* (0.341)	-1.092*** (0.393)	-0.407 (0.493)	-0.327 (0.546)	-0.143 (0.547)	-3.996*** (0.706)
Observations	1,396	1,396	704	704	672	672

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$



Variables	Peter vs. neither Con remain	David vs. neither Con remain	Peter vs. neither Con leave	David vs. neither Con leave	Peter vs. neither Lab remain	David vs. neither Lab remain	Peter vs. neither Lab leave	David vs. neither Lab leave
Voted leave	-0.0837 (0.221)	-0.766*** (0.253)	-1.192*** (0.263)	0.888*** (0.262)	0.576** (0.244)	-1.635*** (0.271)	-0.377 (0.231)	0.566** (0.240)
Voted conservative in 2017	-1.040*** (0.249)	1.517*** (0.272)	-1.206*** (0.296)	1.637*** (0.265)	1.292*** (0.239)	-1.674*** (0.298)	1.354*** (0.240)	-0.515* (0.273)
Male	-0.466** (0.205)	0.0944 (0.223)	0.134 (0.241)	0.0542 (0.263)	-0.431* (0.222)	0.0120 (0.225)	-0.268 (0.207)	0.337 (0.218)
Age	-0.00346 (0.00734)	0.0104 (0.00689)	-0.00399 (0.00771)	0.0247*** (0.00886)	0.00599 (0.00748)	0.00262 (0.00772)	-0.00470 (0.00703)	0.00752 (0.00718)
Education (reference category: Low level of education)								
Medium level of education	0.120 (0.251)	-0.0448 (0.268)	0.556* (0.317)	0.142 (0.306)	0.135 (0.262)	-0.162 (0.305)	0.202 (0.252)	0.0272 (0.259)
High level of education	-0.0681 (0.288)	0.206 (0.308)	0.621* (0.337)	-0.117 (0.360)	-0.0980 (0.311)	-0.383 (0.329)	0.174 (0.291)	0.227 (0.296)
Geographical region of domicile (reference category: London)								
North East	1.181** (0.580)	-0.0554 (0.922)	1.090 (0.774)	0.589 (0.877)	-0.0724 (0.623)	0.415 (0.585)	-0.242 (0.556)	0.938 (0.588)
North West	-0.0432 (0.434)	0.137 (0.552)	0.00150 (0.532)	0.622 (0.578)	-0.196 (0.503)	0.393 (0.498)	-0.192 (0.434)	0.856* (0.517)
Yorkshire and Humber	-0.156 (0.448)	0.130 (0.555)	-0.105 (0.549)	0.168 (0.573)	0.0737 (0.493)	-0.109 (0.511)	-0.388 (0.472)	1.035* (0.538)
East Midlands	-0.260 (0.532)	-0.0110 (0.567)	-0.140 (0.583)	0.325 (0.575)	0.118 (0.504)	0.170 (0.484)	-0.508 (0.484)	0.888* (0.530)
West Midlands	-0.253 (0.480)	0.394 (0.535)	0.609 (0.596)	0.729 (0.591)	-0.0593 (0.562)	0.338 (0.482)	0.490 (0.552)	1.155* (0.593)
East of England	-0.312 (0.489)	0.427 (0.530)	0.319 (0.547)	0.179 (0.581)	0.317 (0.468)	0.0145 (0.544)	-0.317 (0.474)	1.010* (0.534)
South East	-0.886** (0.439)	0.664 (0.470)	0.316 (0.532)	0.799 (0.618)	-0.117 (0.463)	0.230 (0.453)	-0.290 (0.393)	0.361 (0.490)

(Continued)

Continued.

Variables	Peter vs. neither Con remain	David vs. neither Con remain	Peter vs. neither Con leave	David vs. neither Con leave	Peter vs. neither Lab remain	David vs. neither Lab remain	Peter vs. neither Lab leave	David vs. neither Lab leave
South West	-0.631 (0.507)	0.179 (0.520)	0.122 (0.523)	0.599 (0.594)	-0.263 (0.466)	0.138 (0.467)	0.171 (0.425)	0.456 (0.530)
Wales	0.177 (0.587)	1.146* (0.648)	0.232 (0.635)	0.0753 (0.717)	-0.607 (0.660)	0.522 (0.576)	-0.158 (0.484)	0.487 (0.601)
Scotland	-1.158** (0.455)	0.142 (0.514)	-0.395 (0.516)	-0.610 (0.607)	-0.0296 (0.546)	-0.111 (0.480)	-0.933** (0.428)	-0.363 (0.516)
Constant	1.076** (0.538)	-1.756*** (0.620)	0.783 (0.644)	-2.881*** (0.778)	-0.939 (0.600)	1.047* (0.590)	0.000970 (0.546)	-1.691*** (0.590)
Observations	725	725	713	713	727	727	702	702

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$