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# Populist referendum: Was 'Brexit' an expression of nativist and anti-elitist sentiment?

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## Abstract

Was the outcome of the United Kingdom's 'Brexit' referendum to leave the European Union a visible and consequential manifestation of right-wing populism? After all, skepticism in the UK towards the EU predates the recent rise of European right wing populism. Original survey data show, however, that the interaction of nativist sentiment and anti-elitist attitudes, the cocktail of right-wing populism, led to widespread support for Brexit, even while controlling for other factors. Although hostility to immigrants was an important factor, nativists were particularly prone to vote 'leave'; if they also did not trust political elites, a crucial element of populism. Further underscoring this explanation is the conditional effect of anti-elite sentiment. The relationship between anti-elite sentiment and support for leaving the EU only exists among those with high nativist sentiment; among those low in nativist sentiment, anti-elite feelings did not increase support for Brexit.

## Keywords

Brexit, populism, public opinion, referendum voting

## Introduction

The 2016 referendum decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union has been heralded as one of the most visible examples of the growing strength of right-wing populism in the advanced industrialised world.[1] How do we know, then, that the Brexit decision was truly the manifestation of right-wing populist sentiment? Euroskepticism is hardly new to the UK or the Consevative party, and has been widespread on the right in the United Kingdom long before the recent increase in support for right-wing populist parties in Europe as a whole (Forster 2002; Norton 1990; Evans 1998). Recent research shows that both populism and anti-immigrant sentiment, the core features of right-wing populism, predict support for Brexit individually (Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). This is different, however, than showing the effect of right-wing populism, which suggests an interactive effect between nativism and anti-elite attitudes.

Using survey data from a multi-wave panel survey of British respondents, we find such an interaction. Anti-elite sentiment increased support for Brexit by 17 percentage points among those high in nativism, but anti-elite sentiment had no effect on those low in nativism. Those with higher anti-immigrant attitudes and distrust of politicians had a predicted probability of 66% for voting to leave, whereas the same class of nativist voters with more muted anti-elite feelings were largely on the fence, with a 49% chance of supporting Brexit.

## What is Populism? What is Right-Wing Populism?

Much progress has been made in conceptualising populism in recent years. There is now a general consensus

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that populism is, in Mudde's words, a 'thin-centered ideology' that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde 2007, 23; see also Stanley 2008; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Canovan 1999; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016, 114). Authors note the strong moralistic streak in populism. Elites are not incompetent and ineffective but rather disingenuous and self-serving. Hawkins notes that populism is accompanied by a Manichaean discourse that identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite. The populist notion of the General Will ascribes particular virtue to the views and collective traditions of common, ordinary folk, who are seen as the overwhelming majority (Hawkins 2009, 3). Politicians and other elites are thought by populists to be dishonest and profit-seeking. Because of this, populists endorse more direct forms of democratic governance such as referendums that allow ordinary individuals to circumvent 'backroom deals and shady compromises' (Canovan 1999, 6).

Populist ideology is thin in the sense that although it incorporates a set of substantive beliefs about politics, it is not fleshed out enough to produce a specific policy agenda. It must be connected to a particular type of adversary said to be taking advantage of the population as a whole (Canovan 1999; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Populism needs a focus for its animosity, a foe generally thought to be in cahoots with political elites that are doing the people harm. This adversary can vary enormously, and helps define whether a party or movement is a manifestation of right-wing or left-wing populism (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Stanley 2008; Hawkins 2009, 24). In the case of Brexit, finding an enemy to enemy to fill this role is easy and straightforward – the EU and bureaucrats in Brussels.

The key element that seems to distinguish right-wing populism from other forms is its racial and ethnic component. Mudde (2004, 2007) argues that right-wing populists are nativists who claim to represent the true people who make up the true nation and whose purity is being muddied by new entrants. He writes, 'nativism is defined here as an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group "the nation" and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state' (Mudde 2007, 19). This gives right-wing populism its particular ethnic, cultural and racial caste. Consequently, concerns about immigration are the clearest expression of right-wing populism, many argue (Betz 1994). Recently, Inglehart and Norris (2016) equate populism in the advanced industrialised world with these kind of nativist beliefs. Nativism adds substance to who is doing harm to the people, which in left-wing populism might be replaced by the enemy of big banks or multinational corporations.

It is important, however, to be mindful of the fact that nativist sentiments may be 'populist' in the sense that they assert the privileges, often thought to be unfairly fading, of the most numerous racial, ethnic or religious group against newcomers (Gest 2016; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Parker and Barreto 2014). However, nativism need not necessarily be linked with anti-elitist beliefs. In other words, there is nothing inherently anti-establishment about a commitment to a racially, culturally and ethnically homogenous society. Indeed authoritarianism – in other words, deference to elites – and strong in-group identity generally go together (Altemeyer 1981; Graham et al. 2009). We define 'right-wing populism' as the combination of anti-elitism and nativist identity, arguing that this particular psychological cocktail was a likely driver of Brexit attitudes.

Existing literature has explored the influence of nativism on European integration attitudes. Some studies show that attitudes toward immigrants are the most important predictors of citizens' support for the EU (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; de Vreese et al. 2008; McLaren 2002; Azrout et al. 2011). More broadly, McLaren (2002) argues that attitudes toward the European integration tend to be largely based on a general hostility toward other cultures; therefore, individuals who are more concerned about national degradation perceive heightened threat to national integrity from both domestic minority groups and the EU. Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) show the important role played by anti-immigrant sentiment in the Brexit decision in particular and Hobolt (2016) also demonstrates that populism predicts support for leaving the EU.

However, to say that right-wing populism had an effect on the Brexit vote implies something more than the additive effect of nativism and anti-elite attitudes. To show that right-wing populism affected the Brexit vote suggests an interaction. It implies that the effect of populism and nativism in combination is stronger than the additive effect of the two. No study (that we are aware of) looks at the interaction of anti-elitism and nativism – what we use for the purposes of our paper as the definition of right-wing populism. Right wing populism is a constellation of attitudes that should have an effect that is more than the some of its parts.

## Research design

The data used in the analyses below come from an eight-wave panel study of Great Britain, administered by the survey firm YouGov. The initial wave of the study was fielded in November 2011 ($n = 2780$), and the last wave was finished in April 2015 ($n = 2687$; 978 of these final wave respondents participated in both the first and final waves).[2] Although cross-sectional surveys have limits in their ability to unambiguously demonstrate causality, the multi-wave design helps considerably in this regard. Our key independent variables are measured early in the panel in Wave 2. We did not begin asking our key outcome variable until Wave 5 (and we

ask it in the final four waves of the panel). Having our key independent variables come temporally prior (not by minutes as in a typical survey but by months/years in our panel study) to our measures of Brexit opinions helps make a much stronger causality case, particularly because we asked our nativism and anti-elitism questions well before there was a concrete plan to offer a referendum. Consequently, there is little reason to think that attitudes about a referendum on EU membership are causing nativist and anti-elite sentiment.

## Dependent variable: Support for Britain leaving the EU

Our outcome variable examines support for the UK leaving the EU. Fortunately, the specific wording of our question (first asked approximately three years before the 23 June 2016 referendum) very closely matched the specific ballot paper. Specifically, we asked respondents 'If there was a referendum on Britain's membership in the United Nations (UN), how would you vote?' Respondents could choose 'leave', 'remain', 'would not vote', or 'don't know' (full question wording is available online in Appendix A). We recoded these responses into a three-point variable, where the greatest values indicate a desire to leave the EU, the intermediate category a plan not to vote or an undecided attitude, and the lowest value a desire to remain. In online Appendix B, we show that responses to this question were remarkably stable over time and reveal just how closely divided the outcome was always going to be.

## Anti-elitism

Our survey includes a large battery of questions on multiple dimensions of political efficacy that allow us to measure populism. Our measure of anti-elite sentiment comes from a subset of questions from a larger battery of political efficacy. Although this subscale is often described as capturing trust towards incumbent politicians generally (Craig et al. 1990), the simple converse is that it shows distrust in politicians and therefore reveals sentiment against political elites. We use an additive scale of four survey questions to measure this anti-elite sentiment, which form a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.77). Full question wording is available online in Appendix A. This battery of questions was asked in the second wave (May 2012) of our eight-wave panel.[3]

## Nativism

Nativism is measured through a battery of 10 Likert scale questions capturing attitudes towards immigration, Islam, and non-white citizens in the UK. Opposition to immigration stands out here because it is the most obvious expression of belief in an ethnically and culturally homogenous people. The items create a clear one-dimensional scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.9). We use an additive scale in our

models. Full question wording is available online in Appendix A, but examples are 'The United Kingdom has benefitted from the arrival in recent decades of people from many different countries and cultures' (reverse-coded) and 'All further immigration to the UK should be halted.' This battery of questions was asked in the second wave (May 2012) of our eight-wave panel.

## The interaction of nativism and anti-elitism

If Brexit was in large part a right-wing populist product, we expect that the interaction of these variables will lead to high levels of support for leaving the UN. To examine the interaction between nativist and anti-elitist sentiment, we create a series of dummy variables by splitting respondents at the medians of these two variables to create four groups: those who are low in both nativism and anti-elite sentiment (LN-LAE, the excluded or baseline category in the statistical models); those who are low in nativism but high in anti-elite sentiment (LN-HAE); those who are high in nativism but low in anti-elite sentiment (HN-LAE); and those who are high in both nativism and anti-elite sentiment (HN-HAE). The distribution of these respondents can be found online in Appendix C; all categories are well-populated. This categorisation both eases presentation of our interaction effects but also has a methodological grounding. As Hainmueller et al. (2017) remind us, multiplicative interaction models are based on the crucial assumption that the interaction effect is linear, which fails unless the effect of the independent variable changes at a constant rate with the moderator. Indeed an analysis of our data reveal that our data does not meet this strong assumption. Therefore we dichotomize our key independent variables. We expect that those who are high in nativist sentiment will, on average, be more likely to support Britain leaving the UN. However, we expect that the effect of anti-elitism will be sensitive to how nativist one is. More specifically, we expect that among those who have lower levels of nativist sentiment, low levels of efficacy will not manifest themselves in appreciably higher levels of support for leaving the EU. However, among those who have strong nativist leanings, we expect that the added fuel of high levels of anti-elite sentiment should lead to a significant increase in desire to withdraw from the EU. Importantly, each of these four groups is sufficiently well populated for meaningful comparisons. In the table of ordered probit results that comes later, we refer to abbreviations of these groups, which we present here for easy reference.

## Control variables

There is a large literature on the determinants of Brexit (Clarke et al. 2017), Euroskepticism and Europhilia in member countries of the EU that helps us identify important control variables, such as authoritarianism, ideology, globalisation attitudes, economic sentiment and demographic attributes. Full question wording is available online in Appendix A.

**Table 1.** Support for the UK leaving the EU (Brexit).

| | Wave 5 | | Wave 6 | | Wave 7 | | Wave 8 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | March 2014 | | May 2014 | | June 2014 | | April 2015 | |
| Low nativism/High anti-elite | −0.25* | −0.02 | −0.16 | 0.06 | −0.15 | 0.02 | −0.16 | −0.00 |
| | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.13) |
| High nativism/Low anti-elite | 0.91*** | 0.59*** | 1.00*** | 0.64*** | 1.00*** | 0.63*** | 1.01*** | 0.66*** |
| | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.12) | (0.13) |
| High nativism/High anti-elite | 1.23*** | 0.94*** | 1.37*** | 1.04*** | 1.36*** | 1.03*** | 1.40*** | 1.10*** |
| | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.12) |
| Authoritarianism | | 1.04*** | | 1.30*** | | 1.06*** | | 1.06*** |
| | | (0.18) | | (0.20) | | (0.22) | | (0.24) |
| Ideology | | 1.70*** | | 1.38*** | | 1.38*** | | 1.46*** |
| | | (0.21) | | (0.23) | | (0.24) | | (0.29) |
| University degree | | −0.16* | | −0.17* | | −0.20* | | −0.22* |
| | | (0.08) | | (0.08) | | (0.08) | | (0.10) |
| Internal efficacy | | −0.04 | | −0.06 | | −0.01 | | −0.02 |
| | | (0.05) | | (0.05) | | (0.06) | | (0.07) |
| Economic sentiment | | −0.31 | | −0.51* | | −0.45 | | −0.58* |
| | | (0.21) | | (0.23) | | (0.23) | | (0.29) |
| Globalisation negative | | 0.52*** | | 0.38* | | 0.53** | | 0.33 |
| | | (0.14) | | (0.15) | | (0.16) | | (0.18) |
| British identity | | −0.12 | | −0.11 | | 0.11 | | −0.18 |
| | | (0.16) | | (0.17) | | (0.18) | | (0.20) |
| Support for redistribution | | −0.45*** | | −0.51*** | | −0.44** | | −0.42* |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.14) | | (0.14) | | (0.17) |
| Age | | 0.15 | | 0.38 | | 0.22 | | 0.33 |
| | | (0.20) | | (0.21) | | (0.23) | | (0.28) |
| Female | | 0.20** | | 0.16 | | 0.14 | | 0.19 |
| | | (0.08) | | (0.08) | | (0.08) | | (0.10) |
| London | | −0.11 | | −0.10 | | −0.04 | | 0.04 |
| | | (0.10) | | (0.11) | | (0.11) | | (0.12) |
| Scotland | | −0.32* | | −0.18 | | −0.07 | | −0.18 |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.15) | | (0.15) | | (0.19) |
| High nativism/Low anti-elite - Low nativism/High anti-elite | 1.16*** | 0.61*** | 1.16*** | 0.58*** | 1.15*** | 0.61*** | 1.16*** | 0.67*** |
| | (0.10) | (0.12) | (0.11) | (0.13) | (0.11) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.13) |
| High nativism/High anti-elite - Low nativism/High anti-elite | 1.47*** | 0.96*** | 1.52*** | 0.99*** | 1.52*** | 1.02*** | 1.55*** | 1.11*** |
| | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.11) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.15) |
| High nativism/High anti-elite - High nativism/Low anti-elite | 0.31*** | 0.35*** | 0.37*** | 0.40*** | 0.36*** | 0.41*** | 0.38*** | 0.44*** |
| | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.13) | (0.13) |
| Number of observations | 1553 | 1553 | 1331 | 1331 | 1294 | 1294 | 938 | 938 |
| Pseudo *R*-squared | 0.12 | 0.20 | 0.13 | 0.21 | 0.13 | 0.20 | 0.14 | 0.21 |

For the Wave 5 model, economic sentiment is measured in Wave 5; for Waves 6 and 7, economic sentiment is measured in Wave 6; for Wave 8, economic sentiment is measured in Wave 8. Ordered probit. SEs are expressed in parentheses. Cutpoints are omitted. 'LN-LAE' is the excluded category. LN-LAE: Low-Nativist/Low Anti-Elite; HN: High Nativist/Low Anti-Elite.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

## Results

To analyze the effect of our independent variables on support for exiting the EU, we ran a series of ordered probits. For each wave, we present two models. The first model for each wave only includes indicator variables to identify the four key attitudinal subgroups. The second model includes the full slate of control variables we discuss above. Results to
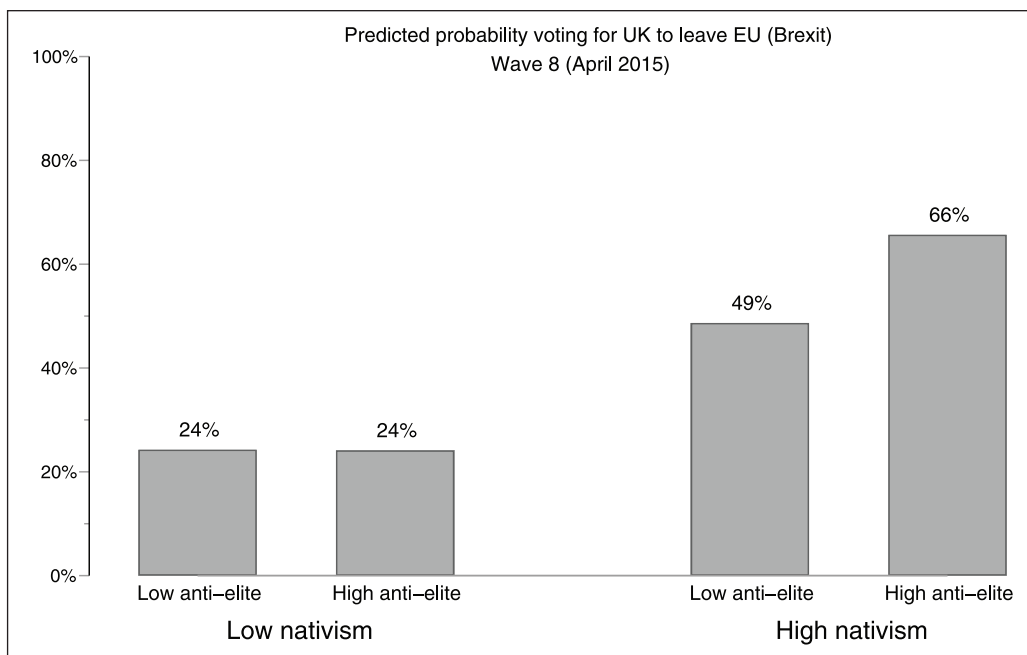
**Figure 1.** Predicted probability of supporting 'Leave' in EU referendum.
EU: European Union; UK: United Kingdom.

these models are presented in Table 1; Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities from the fully specified model using the Wave 8 data with all other variables set to their means.[4] The baseline or excluded categories in all models are those who are low in both nativism and anti-elite sentiment. The regression coefficients and associated *p*-values for our indicator variables represent the difference between that group (e.g. High nativist/High anti-elite) and the excluded category. The lower panel in the table computes difference-in-means and associated SEs and *p*-values for the full set of pairwise comparisons.

Results conform to expectations.[5] As expected, high-nativists are consistently more supportive of leaving the EU than are low-nativists. However, whether there is an effect from anti-elite sentiment depends on whether one is in the high-nativist or low-nativist group. Anti-elite sentiment does not lead to an increase in support for leaving the EU among those who are low in nativist sentiment in any of the eight models. Yet, in all models there is a significant additional effect on top of nativist sentiment for anti-elite sentiment for those who are in the high nativist category. (The difference between those who are high nativist/low anti-elite (or HN/LAE) and those who are high nativist/high anti-elite (or HN/HAE) is indicated in the second panel in Table 1 in the row labeled 'HN/HAE - HN/LAE'.) Interestingly, the difference between these two groups gets marginally larger in the fully specified model compared to the sparsely specified model. The effect of anti-elite sentiment on support for leaving the EU is limited and concentrated to those above the median on nativism.[6]

All of the other variables have been rescaled from zero (0) to one (1), allowing one to roughly compare the magnitude of coefficients (also true of the models in the online appendices). The controls and alternative explanations that matter are those that line up with previous research into support for Euroskepticism.

## Conclusion

The British public's vote to leave the UK appears to have indeed been a nativist reaction to the threat posed by the EU. However, the anti-establishment votes among those nativists seem to have a particularly strong antipathy to the EU. As we have argued, this indicates that Brexit was indeed a right-wing populist moment. Typically, British resistance to further encroachments of EU authority was a function of leftist protectionist sentiment and conservative concerns about erosions of national sovereignty. Our paper shows that although the latter was still important in determining Brexit attitudes, right-wing populism was indeed a potent force in the outcome.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

## Supplementary materials

The supplementary files are available at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/2053168018773964. The replication files are available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi%3A10.7910%2FDVN%2FYX4S5X.

## Notes

1. Britain allowed its populist right to rise (2016) *The Guardian*, 24 June; Why the far-right is growing in the UK and beyond (2016) *The Independent*, 31 May; Right-wing populism is prevailing in left-wing strongholds around the world (2016) *The New York Times*, 27 June; Populist anger upends politics on both sides of the Atlantic (2016) *The New York Times*, 24 June.
2. The YouGov sampling frame includes the three home countries of England, Scotland, and Wales, but excludes Northern Ireland. The panel was periodically refreshed with new respondents. Panelists continued to be invited to take part in survey waves.
3. These questions capture the same sort of attitudes previously used to capture populism in other studies. In a study of party discourse, Pauwels (2011) uses words such as 'arrogant', 'promise', 'betray', 'disgrace', or 'truth' to measure populism. A survey by Rooduijn (2014) asks respondents whether politicians are honest, reliable and keep their promises in order to measure populism. However, we recognize that our measures capture only the anti-elite elements of populism, not two other features: a belief in direct democracy and a faith in ordinary people. Silva et al. (2018) note the centrality of inefficacy to populism.
4. Predicted probabilities are calculated using the margins command in STATA 14 (which uses the delta method). All other variables are held at their mean.
5. The online appendices (available in the supplementary files) contain several robustness tests. Online Appendix D shows results with the nativism and anti-elite scales, and also shows the median split models with an interaction term instead of the categorical variable approach we take here. In online Appendix E, we show that our results are not sensitive to the inclusion or coding of the middle category of our dependent variable through multinomial models and dichotomous probit models in which we exclude the middle category, code the middle category as 'remain', or recode the middle category as 'leave'. Results are consistent across all of these alternate specifications.
6. In online Appendix F, we demonstrate that the effect of anti-elite sentiment appears to be fairly linear among high nativists by separating the former variable into terciles (see Table

8 and Figure 2 in online appendix). This relationship can be seen most clearly in Figure 1, which uses predicted probabilities calculated from the Wave 8 (April 2015) saturated model.

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