

Populism fed pro-Leave sentiment, but what kind of populism?



*Euroscepticism is an established force in British politics. Did it explain the Leave vote, or was the advent of right-wing populism also responsible? **Brian Rathbun (University of Southern California)** looks at the correlation between nativist and anti-elite sentiments and support for Brexit. He concludes that a particular kind of populism – one grafted onto a distrust of multiculturalism – was associated with pro-Leave feeling.*

The Brexit referendum is often said – along with the election of President Donald Trump – the most consequential manifestation to date of the rise of right-wing populism in the advanced industrial world. Given longstanding Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom, however, is right-wing populism necessarily part of the explanation for Brexit? The European Union issue has been tearing apart the Conservative Party for almost three decades, whereas populism is a more recent phenomenon, at least in Great Britain.

In a [recently published article](#) with [Evgeniia Iakhnis](#), [Jason Reifler](#), and [Tom Scotto](#), we sought to test this idea that right-wing populism was an important predictor of how the British mass public intended to vote on Brexit, based on a panel survey conducted by Tom Scotto and Jason Reifler on foreign affairs. We found that right-wing populism is indeed, alongside other familiar drivers of Euroscepticism, crucial for understanding the Brexit vote.

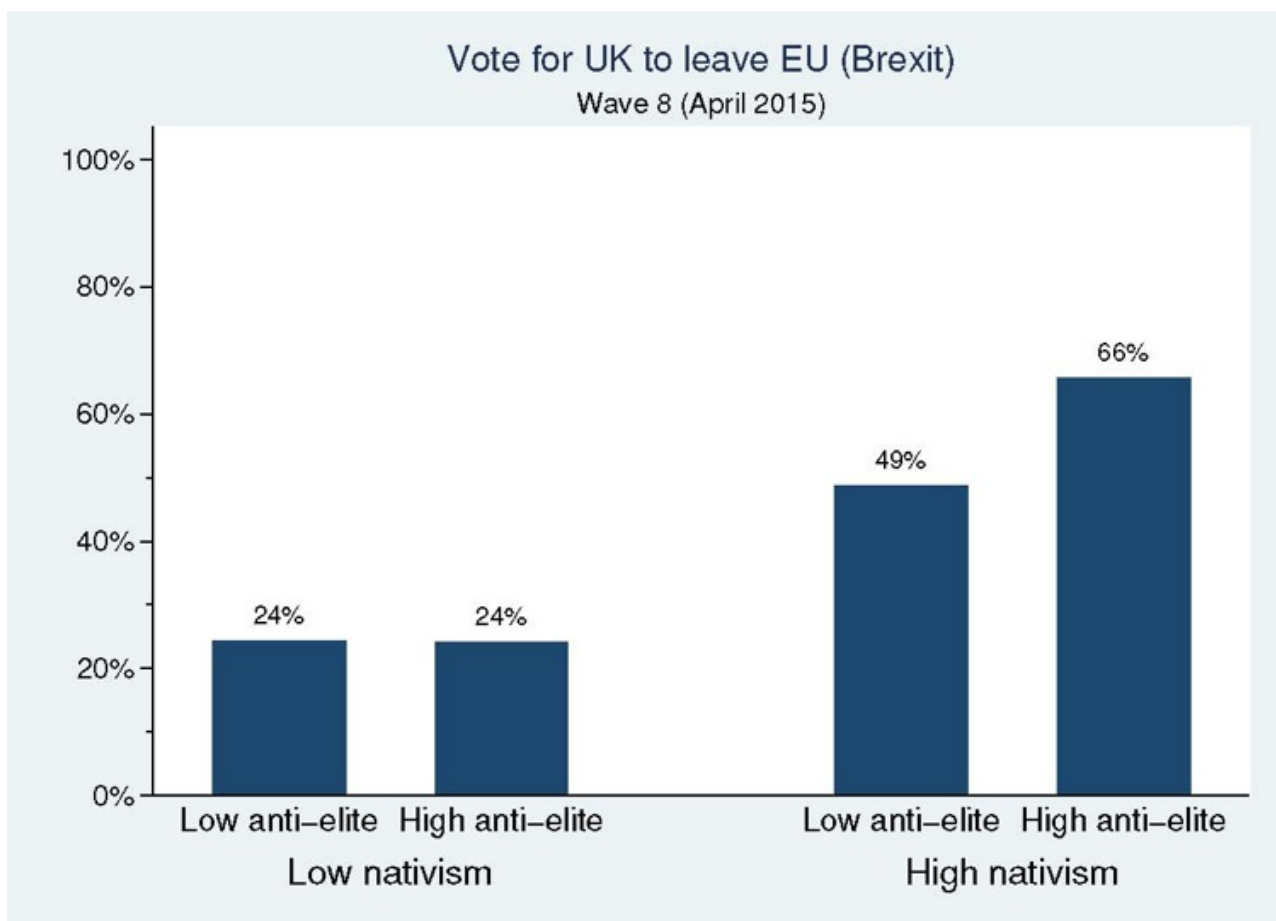


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What is right-wing populism, though? The concept is still the source of much contestation in the academic literature. For the purposes of our study, we thought of it as the combination of nativism on the one hand and anti-elite sentiments on the other. Populists don't like the establishment. They think that politicians are crooked and self-serving. But populism is grafted onto other ideological concerns, giving it a particular flavour. For left-wing populists, greedy capitalists are the enemy. For right-wing populists, the problem is ethnic and cultural. They object to the changing ethnic composition of their society, most clearly manifested in increasing immigration. Right-wing populists are nativists.

We wanted to know if a combination of nativism on the one hand and anti-elite attitudes on the other made British survey respondents particularly likely to endorse the Brexit option. The data used in the analyses below come from an eight-wave panel study of Great Britain, administered by the survey 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). These asked people whether they agreed with statements such as “The United Kingdom has benefitted from the arrival in recent decades of people from many different countries and cultures” and “All further immigration to the UK should be halted.” Based on their answers to set of questions about immigration in which responses were highly correlated, we separated our respondents into groups of low and high nativists. We also captured their anti-elitism with responses to assertions such as “Quite a few of the people running our government are not as honest as the voters have a right to expect.” We used four questions to separate respondents into anti-elitists and elitists. We could use these splits to separate those surveyed into four categories.

Our results show that even as we statistically control for a whole host of other factors, those who combine anti-elite and nativist sentiments were inclined to support Brexit early on and consistently through the run-up to the referendum. Most telling is that among those low in nativism, anti-elitism did not have an effect on Brexit attitudes. As this table shows, those below the median on nativism had a 24% likelihood of expressing, for instance, support for leaving the European Union in April 2015. It did not matter if they trusted elites or not. However, among those high in nativism, anti-elitism had a very strong effect. In other words, the mixing of populism and anti-immigrant sentiment was a potentially explosive combination. Populism exacerbated EU hostility for nativists but not for non-nativists. Elitist nativists were on the fence on Brexit, with about 49% likelihood of favouring “leave.” In contrast, anti-elitist nativists had a roughly 2/3 likelihood of supporting leave.



This indicates that right-wing populism actually did matter for the Brexit outcome, although populism on its own did not. It was a particular kind of populism, one grafted onto a view of the UK as threatened by multiculturalism, that mattered. This suggests to us that the dynamics of opposition to the European Union have changed considerably since the early days of Euroscepticism, exemplified by Margaret Thatcher's "No, no, no!" In those days, it was primarily a matter of national sovereignty and national symbols threatened by the idea of an "ever closer Union" mucking about with the pound sterling and NATO. There were various insults about "Eurocrats" that suggested a proto-populism, but one directed at European elites. Our results show that a new element in Euroscepticism – a frustration with politicians in general, combined with a faith in ethnic purity – was a significant factor in the decision to leave.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

[Brian Rathbun](#) is Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California.