

'It means Europeans aren't at the front of the queue': beyond the liberal/ cosmopolitan divide

Leavers are prejudiced and Remainers are elitists – or so the popular caricature goes. Eleni Andreouli (Open University) finds much more nuanced strands of public opinion about Brexit.

Brexit has, it is said, divided the UK into a country of leavers and remainers, an identity divide that seems to have persisted over the course of the post-referendum era (Hobolt & Tiley, 2019). In the context of this polarisation, support for remain has often been described as elitist, while support for Brexit has been branded as xenophobic and racist. It is telling that campaigners for leaving the EU labelled pro-EU campaigning as Project Fear (for keeping the UK out of a supposed fear of venturing out to the world as an independent and sovereign country), whilst campaigners for Remain dubbed the Brexit project as 'Project Hate' (because it is supposedly anti-immigration). These two constructions are based on the same foundations: that to be prejudiced is both morally wrong (because it means thinking ill of others) and irrational (because it is based on pre-judgement). According to a large tradition of social psychological scholarship, stemming from the pioneering work of Billig and colleagues (1988), this 'norm' against prejudice is a central tenet of liberal ideology as manifested in everyday political discourse.



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These constructions are politically consequential in the context of Brexit. By constructing Brexit supporters as xenophobic and Remain supporters as tolerant, Brexit is frowned upon as nationalistic project. On the other hand, casting Remainers as elites who are themselves prejudiced against the 'ordinary people' that voted Brexit, constructs Brexit as a democratic project that acts upon the 'will of the people'.

In [research with colleagues](#), we studied the relationship between constructions of Brexit and of prejudice, but

“instead of seeking to establish whether support for Brexit is indeed the result of prejudice, [we argued] that constructions of prejudice are complex symbolic resources which help people position themselves and others within the changing political landscape of Brexit Britain.”

Using data from focus groups before and after the EU referendum with both Leave and Remain voters, we found, as anticipated, that the connection between support for Leave and prejudice was a widely shared frame of reference, among supporters of both Leave and Remain. However, that frame of reference was endorsed and resisted in equal amounts.

Constructing an image of the 'reasonable and tolerant Leave voter' was common in our dataset. This was achieved through several discursive strategies such as linking Brexit support with values of humanitarianism and anti-racism, thus countering the supposed prejudicial Eurocentrism of the remain project. In the words of one research participant:

"Leaving the EU kind of helps people that are refugees and- or like non-EU citizens more in terms of migration, I suppose? Because it means that people who are from Europe aren't in front of the queue. It will be equal for everyone now, that's why it's less racist."

This 'cosmopolitan anti-Europeanism' position draws on the principles of colour-blind equality and meritocracy which are often employed to deracialise immigration management ([Gibson & Booth, 2018](#)). On the other hand, we also found Eurosceptic accounts that were positioned against neoliberal global capitalism, as encapsulated in EU policies, but were also firmly pro-diversity and pro-immigration. In that case, a position of 'pro-diversity anti-globalisation' was developed by participants.

What are the implications of these findings? Our work suggests that 'what the public thinks' is more nuanced than the polarised political landscape of Brexit suggests. People are not just liberals and cosmopolitans, or nationalists and xenophobes. Rather, lay political thinking is much more nuanced and much more creative. What is needed is political leadership that can mobilise citizens beyond narrow us/them polarities to new political visions that, instead of caricaturing 'the people', builds on citizens' capacity for pluralism and multivoicedness.

Offline reference

Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. London: Sage.

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