

For much of the electorate, Europe is now the issue that determines party allegiance. This cleavage has overwhelmed voters' views on almost everything else

Are voters motivated by policy preferences or partisan identities? [Bryan Schonfeld](#) and [Sam Winter-Levy](#) argue that the British Conservative Party's sudden change in Brexit policy (following the surprising result of the 2016 referendum) offers a unique opportunity to study partisanship in the context of a natural experiment. They find evidence that voters care primarily about policy: pro-EU Conservatives disaffiliated from the party, while Eurosceptics became more likely to identify with the Conservatives. These findings suggest that voters are sufficiently policy motivated to change parties if they disagree with their party on important issues.

Ever since the 2016 referendum, British voters have been leaving their old parties and joining new ones. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this volatility has been driven largely because of their views on one issue: Brexit.

In a [new study](#) published in the *Journal of Politics*, we find that in the wake of the referendum, 8% of pro-Europe Conservatives – some 40% of the party [voted](#) to remain – abandoned the party, while Eurosceptics from other parties swung behind the Conservatives. In public opinion surveys conducted immediately after the referendum, as well as in the 2017 election, Eurosceptics who did not vote Conservative before the referendum were substantially more likely to turn out for the Conservatives, while formerly Conservative Europhiles were much less likely to support the party. Parties' positions on Brexit thus played a crucial role in shaping voters' political loyalties.

These realignments over Brexit have led to some of the most extreme volatility in recent British political history. But they also tell us something about the importance of policy positions for voters. A large body of social science literature, dating back at least [a half-century](#), argues that party loyalties, rather than policy preferences, drive voters' choices. In this view, voters do not hold [consistent or stable ideological preferences](#). Instead, they respond above all to [partisan cues](#) when they evaluate policies.

In the British context, an earlier generation of scholarship [argued](#) that 'allegiance to party is one of the central facts of the British elector's political awareness'. The most extreme version of this argument, outlined in one journalist's summary of the academic research on American politics, [maintains](#) that 'there's basically no plausible position a politician or political party can endorse or enact that will have a meaningful impact on their likelihood of retaking political power'.

That is probably not true in the American context. A wide body of research suggests that voters generally respond to the economy and government performance, seem to [care about policy](#), and [punish extremists](#). And it is certainly not true in contemporary British politics. Traditional political loyalties [have weakened](#), electoral volatility has increased, and voters are punishing and rewarding political parties and candidates for their policy positions – or at least, for their positions on Brexit. On some issues – European integration, above all – most voters are not simply following their psychological attachments to their political parties. Brexit has given rise to [new political identities](#), which cut across old party lines and [shape](#) how voters view the world.

But even in the United Kingdom, where party identification appears to be in long-term decline, party loyalties remain a powerful force. Voters who identified strongly with the Conservatives before the referendum followed the party in becoming more Eurosceptic, with the party's most loyal supporters embracing an increasingly headline view on the issue. And as voters' partisan attachments shifted in response to parties' stances on Brexit, their views on other policy issues followed suit: as soon as Eurosceptic voters affiliated with the Conservatives, we found that their views on economic policy became more Conservative as well, shifting toward increased scepticism of economic redistribution. Voters remain receptive to cues from parties and leaders they trust on major issues that happen to be less politically salient.

For much of the British electorate, Europe is now the defining issue that determines party allegiance. This cleavage has overwhelmed voters' views on almost everything else, cutting across party lines and class divides, running through the traditional support base of both of Britain's major parties, and leaving the country's old two-party system in flux. What was once a central axis of political competition – the appropriate level of economic redistribution – has become secondary to voters' views on Britain's relationship with the EU.

Of course, whether this will remain true in the wake of the pandemic remains unclear. Perhaps the debates over how best to manage COVID-19 will supersede both Europe and redistribution as a central political issue. But for now, at least, the question of Europe is likely to remain one of the dominant cleavages dividing voters.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in the *Journal of Politics*.

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