

# Which voters have changed their minds about Brexit?



So-called swing voters are often portrayed as being dissatisfied and disengaged from politics. **Germ Janmaat (University College London)** draws from the conclusions of a [research paper](#) on changing preferences on Brexit to challenge that view, and shows that voters who changed their mind on Brexit express considerable interest in politics and believe they are better informed than average.

Much research has already been done on the predictors of the view that Britain should leave the European Union. We thus know that [older people, males, whites, and the less well educated](#) are more inclined to vote for Brexit than their counterparts. We also know that those with [socially conservative values and opinions](#) on issues such as immigration, raising of children, and law and order are much more likely to prefer Leave over Remain. It is further common knowledge that opinions on UK's membership of the EU are not exactly static: While 53.8 per cent of the British public wanted the UK to leave the EU in June 2011, this percentage declined to [37.0 in May 2015](#) before it rose again to more than 50 in 2016.

We do not know,

# #remainernow

Image: public domain

however, *who* changed their view on Britain's membership of the EU and *how* they changed it. Was it primarily the indifferent and disengaged voters who started leaning more towards leave from a position of indecisiveness? Or was it a feature of well-informed and involved citizens who made a radical switch from backing Remain to supporting Leave? Knowing this will help us in making meaningful predictions about future trends in opinions about Brexit. If the changers were mainly engaged voters closely following the news, one could imagine that support for Leave starts to decline if the economy splutters and Brexit is increasingly blamed for this in the public debate. In contrast, if volatility is a feature of the disengaged, it might be more difficult to predict future developments.

Scholars agree that western electorates have become much more volatile in the last decades but they evaluate this phenomenon very differently. Some believe it has led to ineffective government, short term policies and populism as politicians need to respond constantly and immediately to capricious voters. They tend to portray volatile voters [as uninterested and uninformed people responding to fads and being absorbed by their own interests](#). I label this the pessimistic perspective. Others have a more positive take on the phenomenon. They see the changeable voter as [an informed and engaged person willing to vote a government out of office](#) if this government is seen as ineffective or as not delivering on promises. Democracy, in their view, needs these [critical emancipated citizens](#) to remain responsive to its electorate and not degenerate into a sclerotic political system serving only the elites. Some say that people alternating between voting and non-voting are mainly [critical "stand-by" citizens](#), i.e. people who only see the need to become engaged and participate in politics if they are dissatisfied about the performance of the government. I call this the optimistic perspective.

So which of these perspectives is right when we look at people changing their view on Brexit? We explored this question by analysing Understanding Society data and tracking trends from early 2016 to the first quarter of 2017. Financed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), [Understanding Society](#) is the largest UK household longitudinal study. It surveys 40,000 households annually.

Four groups of voters emerged from our analyses.

**The trusting voters** (20.5%). These people tended to vote at the last general election, show a preference for the Tories, think that voting is a civic duty, and are satisfied with democracy. They are also relatively trusting of public officials, think they have a say in politics and consider their British identity to be very important.

**The highly engaged and satisfied** (30.3%). This group mainly supports one of the major parties, say they will definitely vote in the next GE, express a high interest in politics and believe they have a say in government. They are also content with democracy and consider themselves to be qualified for politics and better informed than the average citizen.

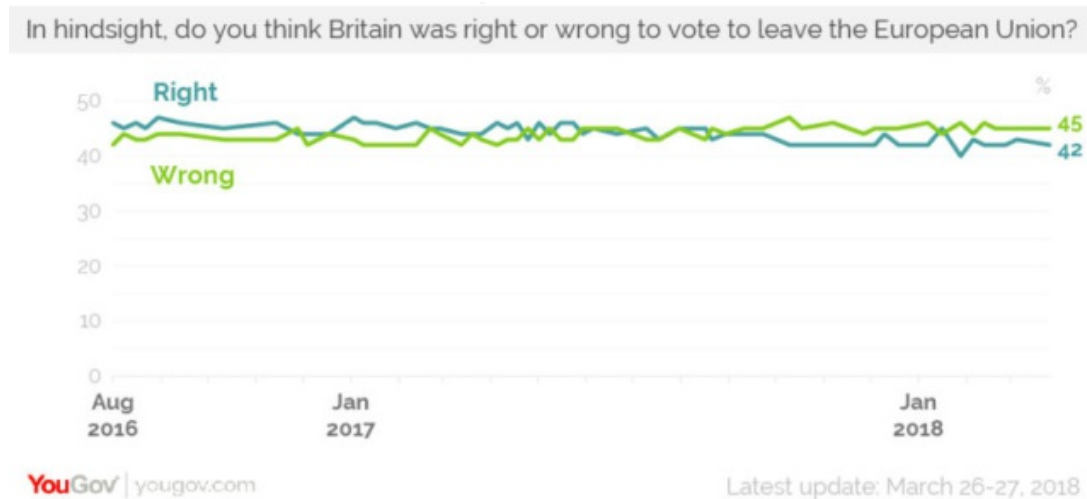
**The non-engaged** (24.4%). These people are least inclined to vote; if they vote at all, they avoid the major parties. They are not interested in politics and do not think that voting is a civic duty. They are undecided or dissatisfied about democracy, and they do not feel qualified to participate in the political arena. They are also distrusting of public officials, and record the lowest level of Britishness.

**The dissatisfied voters** (21.8%). This group shows the strongest propensity to vote for UKIP and expresses relatively low levels of trust in public officials. They have a very low score on political efficacy and have a strong sense of British identity.

So which of these groups changed preferences the most? Interestingly, it turned out to be the “highly engaged and satisfied”. This group was the only one showing a significant change from remain to leave. In the other groups the (slight) increase in support for Leave was mostly due to a decline in the number of undecided voters (the “don’t knows”). Our results are thus more in line with the optimistic perspective.

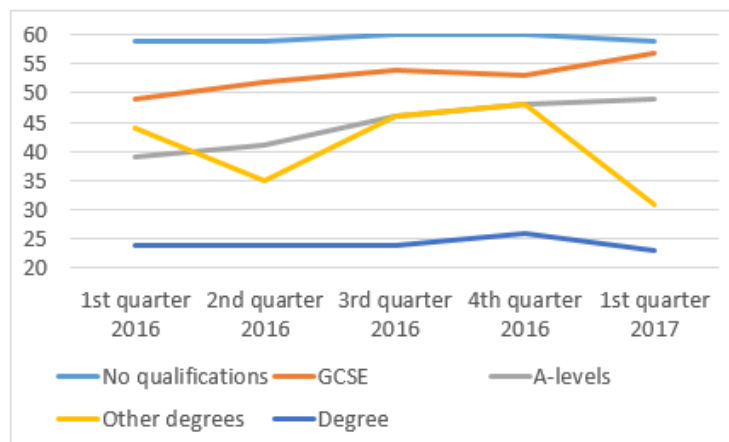
Why did the highly engaged and satisfied become more supportive of leave? We can only speculate about the reasons. Perhaps the changing positions of the mainstream political parties and the sound performance of the economy in the aftermath of Brexit have played a role. After the referendum Labour and the Conservatives, who officially supported remain in the run-up to the poll, quickly embraced the result of the referendum and stated they would lead the UK out of the EU in an orderly manner. The highly engaged and satisfied, who also happen to form the backbone of these parties, may well have responded to this changing position and the new political reality post-referendum by bringing their views in line with their parties’ standpoints. Their increasing inclination towards leave may have been further propped up by the sound performance of the economy in the second half of 2016, as this gave the impression that the British economy would not be affected by the departure from the EU. Our results do *not* suggest that radical voices on the fringes of the political spectrum and expressed through the social media are responsible for the change, because the group showing rising support for leave is unlikely to have been susceptible to such voices.

That it was the engaged and satisfied who showed the greatest propensity to change preferences makes the recent developments in public opinion on Brexit also more understandable. The [YouGov](#) graph below shows that support for Remain surpassed that of leave at the end of 2017 when it became clear the British economy performed less well than that of the Eurozone countries. If there is one group that is likely to have adjusted their views because of this development it is the engaged and satisfied.



I have to end on a rather disconcerting note. We found clear evidence of growing polarisation among the electorate regarding views on Britain's membership of the EU as the percentage of undecided people contracted in all four political groups. This polarisation appeared to happen along social lines as we found people with lower than average levels of education increasingly leaning towards the leave side while those with higher than average levels of education displayed a growing preference for remain (see the figure below). It may well be the case that the continued salience of the issue in the media has pushed people to make up their minds about Britain's membership of the EU or cling ever more tenaciously to their existing preference. It may take years before the divisions generated by the Brexit process can heal.

**Figure 1. Trends in support for leave by highest qualification obtained (%)**



*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It first appeared at the [UCL Brexit blog](#).*

*[Germ Janmaat](#) is Reader in Comparative Social Science at the UCL Institute of Education. This article is originally based on a [research paper](#) for the Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES).*