

Brexit psychology: cognitive styles and their relationship to nationalistic attitudes



Leor Zmigrod looks at the cognitive underpinnings of nationalistic ideology in the context of Brexit. She writes that those with strongly nationalistic attitudes tend to process information in a more categorical manner, and this relationship manifests itself through a tendency to support authoritarian and conservative ideologies.

The failure of political polling in the recent elections of Europe and North America has revealed weaknesses in both our polling methodologies and our understanding of the psychological origins of voting behaviour. Traditional accounts tend to focus on the role of demographics and emotional influences in determining how citizens vote. Pollsters, politicians, and the public often fixate on how socioeconomic status, age, gender, race and geographical location shape voting preferences, or how charismatic leaders or emotionally-charged slogans motivate – and at times distort – voters' preferences.

Nonetheless, new empirical research conducted by myself and my colleagues at the University of Cambridge is revealing that *non-emotional psychological dispositions* also shape citizens' ideological inclinations. That is, differences in the ways in which our brains process information may hold clues for why we vote in certain ways.

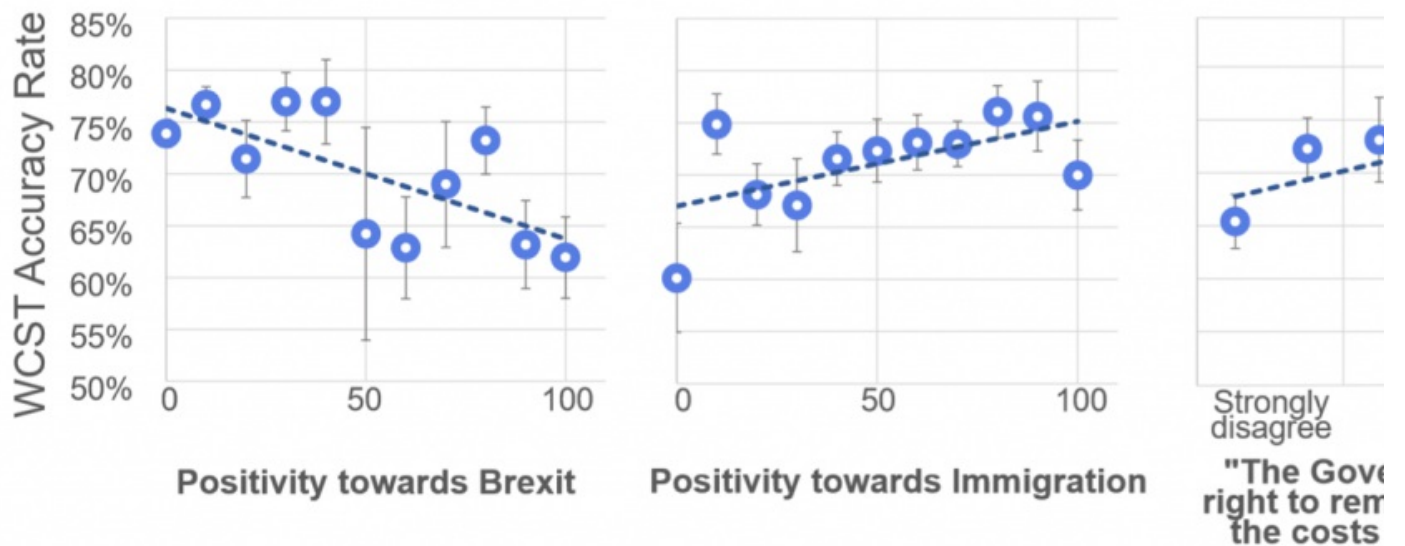
The idea that our ideologies reflect our psychological motivations is not new. In an influential book titled *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), Adorno and colleagues [hypothesized that](#) "ideologies have for different individuals, different degrees of appeal, a matter that depends upon the individual's needs and the degree to which these needs are being satisfied or frustrated". Similarly, in 1954, the famous psychologist Gordon Allport already [suggested that](#) our prejudices and ideological preferences are "unlikely to be merely specific attitude(s) toward specific group(s)... [these are] more likely to be a reflection of [a person's] whole habit of thinking about the world". These eloquent proposals captured the hearts and minds of researchers by making politics an extension of personal psychology, and not merely a feature of demographic circumstance.

Even though these ideas have been around for nearly 70 years, there has been little rigorous empirical research examining how cognitive traits shape nationalism and voting behaviour. In [a recent paper](#), we sought to investigate the extent to which individual differences in emotionally-neutral, "cold" information processing styles predict voting behaviour and nationalistic sentiments in the 2016 EU Referendum.

The findings reveal that individuals with strongly nationalistic attitudes tend to process information in a more categorical and persistent manner, even when tested on neutral cognitive tasks that are unrelated to their political beliefs. These cognitive tasks probed how flexibly individuals process and evaluate perceptual and linguistic information. Notably, while most research relies on often-biased self-report questionnaires to measure psychological traits, here objective cognitive measures were administered to quantify cognitive information processing tendencies in a rigorous manner.

As evident in Figure 1, cognitive flexibility (measured by the [Wisconsin Card Sorting Test](#)) and support for Brexit were negatively correlated. In turn, cognitive flexibility was positively correlated with favourable attitudes towards immigration, the European Union, free movement of labour, and access to the EU Single Market (more details [here](#)).

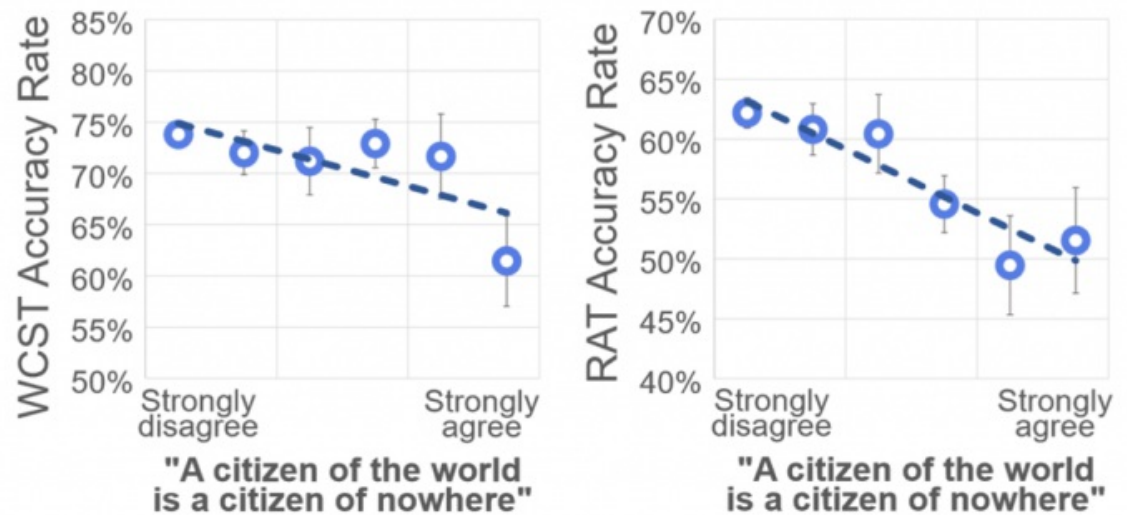
Figure 1. Cognitive flexibility (measured by Wisconsin Card Sorting Test accuracy) according to Brexit-related attitudes.



Note: Error bars reflect $1 \pm SE$; dashed lines reflect significant linear correlation

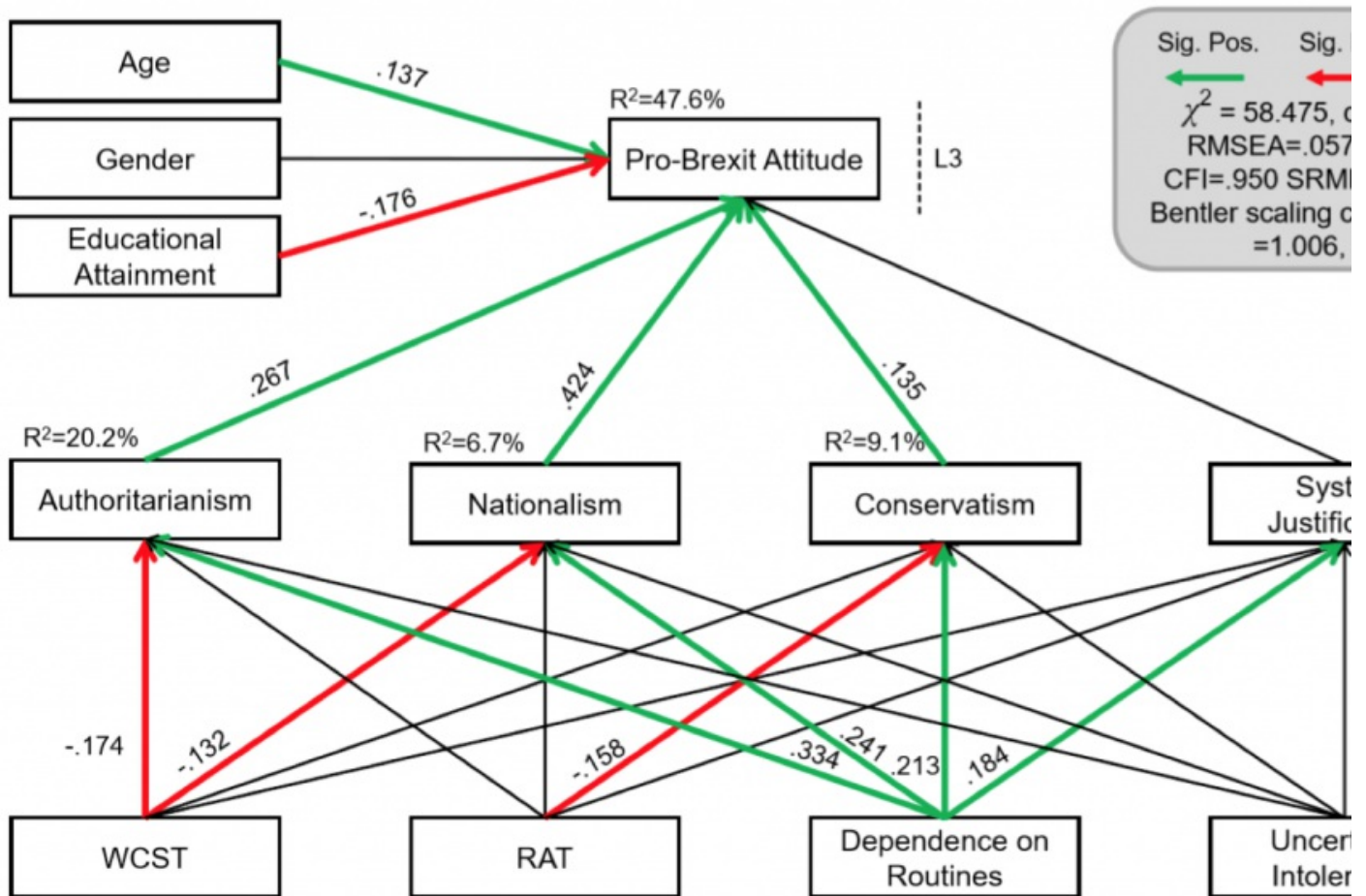
Additionally, cognitive flexibility was significantly negatively correlated with agreement with the idea that “a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere,” a quote by UK Prime Minister Theresa May (see Figure 2). This quote may be interpreted as reflecting a highly specific and narrow definition of citizenship, as well as some negativity toward globalization; the negative correlation might therefore indicate that psychological flexibility could be linked to how broadly versus narrowly identity boundaries are drawn.

Figure 2. Cognitive flexibility (WCST and RAT accuracy rates) in relation to citizenship.



Error bars reflect $1 \pm SE$; dashed lines reflect significant linear correlations.

Furthermore, Structural Equation Modelling analysis demonstrated that cognitive flexibility and intolerance of ambiguity predicted individuals' endorsement of authoritarianism, conservatism, and nationalism to a substantial degree (see Figure 3). Individuals who exhibited greater cognitive flexibility and were more tolerant of uncertainty were less likely to support authoritarian, conservative, and nationalistic attitudes. These ideological orientations in turn predicted participants' attitudes towards Brexit, immigration, and free movement of labour, accounting for 47.6% of the variance in support for Brexit. The results suggest that cognitive thinking styles associated with processing perceptual and linguistic stimuli may also be drawn upon when individuals evaluate political and ideological arguments.

Figure 3. Structural equation model predicting support for Brexit.

Note: All parameters shown are fully standardized. Significant parameter estimates are shown in green and red bolded lines. Significance level was $p < 0.05$ (psychological flexibility variables); L2, level 2 (ideological orientation variables); L3, level 3 (cognitive flexibility variables); N.S., not significant; RAT, Remote Associates Test; Neg., significant negative pathway; Sig. Pos., significant positive pathway; WCST, Wisconsin Card Sorting Test accuracy.

Participants were also asked to indicate whether they believe that the UK Government has the right to remain in the EU if the costs of Brexit are too high. Cognitive flexibility was positively related to participants' endorsement of the government's right to adapt its policies to potential risks (see Figure 1). This highlights a parallel between flexible cognitive styles and support for flexible policy implementation.

Notably, these psychological dispositions are not fixed or purely genetically determined. Education, training, and experience can shape individuals' cognitive flexibility throughout the lifespan.

We have already replicated these findings in other studies focused on different ideological domains. The results illustrate that non-emotional psychological dispositions [can also predict religiosity](#), political partisanship (Zmigrod et al., under review), and intellectual humility (i.e. individuals' receptivity to evidence in forming decisions; Zmigrod et al., under review).

What are the implications of this research for British politics? Firstly, these findings challenge the idea that political behaviour is solely a product of emotional processes and demographic characteristics; our ideologies possess cognitive, non-emotional dimensions that transcend socioeconomic issues. Secondly, the results provide empirical evidence that – to some degree – democracy reflects a battle to capture and exploit our psychological biases and tendencies. Consequently, effective political campaigns may need to consider framing and providing policy solutions in terms that satisfy both individuals' preferences for traditions and clarity as well as their desire for flexibility and change. As a Brexit deal or no-deal scenario approaches in the coming months, policymakers may benefit from incorporating these considerations and implementing them in socially responsible ways.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) (with Peter J. Rentfrow, and Trevor W. Robbins) in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

About the Author



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