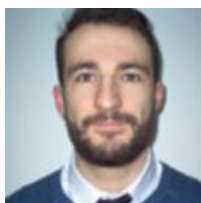


Remainer or Leaver? The emergence of the Brexit identity prism



*Britons used to identify as supporters of a political party. Now they are more likely to identify themselves as a 'Remainer' or a 'Leaver'. **Ian Montagu (ScotCen)** looks at the challenges this new political divide presents as Britain prepares to leave the EU.*

The past half-century has seen a more or less continuous decline in the number of voters who say that they identify with a political party. While this development has meant that the choices made by many voters may now be more likely to reflect their policy preferences, it has also been seen as resulting in an electorate that is more difficult to motivate to turn out and vote in the first place.



Photo: Ros Taylor

In the wake of Brexit, however, it appears that new political identities may have emerged. [Sara Hobolt has argued](#) that voters have developed a sense of emotional attachment with being a 'Remainer' or a 'Leaver', and that these identities have in turn become a prism through which the Brexit debate is interpreted.

[New research](#) undertaken using NatCen's mixed-mode random probability panel supports this claim. Brexit identities are now much more prevalent than traditional party identities – while 31% of people don't think of themselves as a supporter of a political party, only 11% don't think of themselves as a 'Remainer' or a 'Leaver'. Even more tellingly, 44% say that they are a 'very strong' Remainer or Leaver, while only 9% say they identify 'very strongly' with a political party.

This development might go some way to explaining why, as the WhatUKThinks Poll of Polls illustrates, support for both Remain and Leave has been so stable during the Brexit negotiations. Those with strong Brexit identities are particularly unlikely to change their minds about the merits of their decision in 2016 – 99% of 'very strong' and 94% of 'fairly strong' Remainers report that they would vote the same way again, as do 98% of 'very strong' and 94% of 'fairly strong' Leavers.

Those with a strong Brexit identity often have distinctive views about some of the key issues in the debate about Britain's future relationship with the EU. For example, while requiring migrants from the EU to apply to come to Britain in the same way as those from outside the EU is relatively popular among Remainers as well as Leavers, a far lower proportion of those who identify 'very strongly' with Remain are in favour of this idea.

This pattern is echoed in voters' attitudes to whether or not Britain should allow freedom of movement for EU citizens in return for the continuation of free trade with the EU. While most Remainers are divided between those who think that Britain 'probably should' be willing to strike such a deal and those who believe that it 'probably should not', a relatively high proportion of 'very strong' Remainers (62%) believe that Britain 'definitely should' allow free movement in return for free trade. Similarly, while 18% of 'not very strong' Leavers believe that Britain 'definitely should not' allow free movement in return for free trade, at 41% the proportion of 'very strong' Leavers who feel that Britain 'definitely should not' strike such a deal is more than twice this size.

Those with a strong Brexit identity also make a different assessment of how likely or unlikely it is that Britain will emerge with a good deal from the EU – those who identify 'very strongly' with Remain are most likely to think that Britain will emerge with a bad deal, while 'very strong' Leavers are most likely to believe that Britain will negotiate a good deal.

Finally, the strength of voters' Brexit identity is reflected in who they believe is to blame for the prospect of a bad deal, with 'very strong' Remainers particularly likely to feel that the UK government has been handling the talks badly and 'very strong' Leavers especially critical of the EU. Both groups are seemingly attributing blame in a way that reinforces their existing views, with Leavers inclined to blame the EU because they dislike the institution itself while Remainers lay the fault at the door of the UK government because they disagree with its attempt to leave the EU in the first place.

The emergence of these new identities over the past two years may have a positive impact upon levels of turnout – those with a strong Brexit identity were more likely to have voted in both the EU referendum (86%) and in the subsequent 2017 General Election (87%) than those with no sense of Brexit identity (50% and 51% respectively). However, the prevalence and strength of Remain and Leave as new political identities illustrates just how deep the Brexit chasm now runs – and how much of a challenge it may prove to bridge it.

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

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