

Chapter 20

On how Brexit solidified support for the EU

Catherine E. de Vries

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, the British population voted to leave the EU. The decision sent shockwaves through the political establishment in London, Brussels and beyond. Immediately after the vote, the pound fell sharply, as uncertainty among investors about Britain's economic future started to grow, and political uncertainty started to capture Westminster. After the Brexit vote and the ensuing economic and political turmoil facing the United Kingdom (UK), experts pointed to a possible silver lining for the European integration process: Brexit could spark further integration among the remaining 27 member states (EU-27), especially in light of geopolitical tensions between Russia, China and the West. The decade before the Brexit vote, the European Union (EU) was characterized by political paralysis following the Eurozone crisis and rapid influx of Syrian refugees and other migrants in 2015, the EU's approach to Brexit, the aftermath of COVID-19, and the start of the War in Ukraine. The question thus is whether Brexit was a unifying moment for Europe.

I aim to shed light on this question by examining how Brexit has affected public opinion in EU-27. I do so by relying on the *eupinions* survey data that I have collected together with the Bertelsmann Foundation (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2016a, 2016b). The data allows me to track opinions about European integration within the EU-27 pre- and post-Brexit (de Vries, 2017, 2018; Walter, 2021; Jurado, León and Walter, 2022). Drawing on van Kersbergen's (2000, 2003; see also Crum in this volume) claim that political allegiance to the EU originates in the public's primary allegiance to the nation-state (see also de Vries and van Kersbergen, 2007), I argue that Brexit provides citizens in the EU-27 with information about how EU institutions improve their national political elites' ability to provide security and well-being. In other words, due to the political and economic costs associated with Brexit, at least in the immediate aftermath, citizens

in the EU-27 are able to benchmark the degree to which their national well-being and security are the result of their country being a member of the EU (de Vries, 2018).

This contribution documents three main findings.¹ First, support for EU membership was higher immediately after the Brexit vote than before. Although I cannot make causal claims about a ‘Brexit effect’ per se as the data is not based on a panel, these findings seem to suggest that as the uncertainty of leaving manifested itself, the status quo of membership started to look more favorable. Second, this increase in support for EU membership after Brexit is especially pronounced among those who think that Brexit will have negative consequences for the UK. Third, while support for remaining in the EU has increased after Brexit, this does not necessarily mean that people wish to see deeper political and economic integration in the future. Hence, the long-term effects of Brexit on public opinion in the EU-27 will remain a topical issue for students of European integration for years to come.

Double allegiance and Brexit

There is a long and established literature on support for the EU (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Despite the breadth and scope of this literature, the question why people do or do not support EU institutions essentially boils down to a classic question why people support any type of political system in the first place (van Kersbergen 2000, 2003). Put differently, under what conditions and to what extent do publics (the ruled) accept and support decisions and actions by their governments (the rulers) that affect their well-being and security beyond their direct control? The social contract between ruled and rulers is in large part about benefits. Security and well-being are the major sources of benefits for national publics offered by a government, and citizens in return offer their support to political institutions. Van Kersbergen (2000, 2003) has introduced the term ‘allegiance’ to denote the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Allegiance is defined as the willingness of a national public to approve of and support its government’s decisions in return for a more or less immediate and straightforward reward or benefit to which the public feels entitled based on its approval and support.

¹ Parts of this contribution are based on de Vries (2017).

Political allegiance to a supranational institution, like the EU, originates in the public's primary allegiance to the nation-state (de Vries and van Kersbergen 2007). Support for the EU constitutes a form of 'double allegiance', which can be defined as the extent to which supranational institutions allow national political elites to provide political, social, psychological and economic security and well-being (van Kersbergen 2000; see also Schumacher in this volume). Support for the EU tends to be low and fragile when people feel that membership hampers their national political elites' capacity to provide political, sociopsychological and socioeconomic security and well-being. In this case, the EU is seen as jeopardizing their interests and their sense of national identity, reinforcing feelings of socioeconomic, sociopsychological and political insecurity, which, in turn, corrode the 'double' allegiance on which EU support depends. The reverse relationship also holds. Support for the EU is high when people find that membership allows their national political elites to provide more political, sociopsychological and socioeconomic security and well-being.

Linking this reasoning to Brexit leads to the following question: How might Brexit affect double allegiance? Following the notion of double allegiance, public opinion about the EU is best understood in relative rather than absolute terms. It develops in close communication with people's evaluations of how well their nation-state is doing. Does the EU increase my country's ability to prosper? Will my country to do better on its own? Public opinion about the EU is thus a comparison of the benefits of current membership and those associated with non-membership (de Vries, 2018). While it is normally very difficult to benchmark how much EU membership helps national political elites provide political, sociopsychological and socioeconomic security and well-being, Brexit gave people information about the potential benefits of EU membership. When Brexit is associated with economic and political costs and uncertainty, it makes membership look more beneficial, and support for the EU should increase as a result, and vice versa.

The Brexit vote and public attitudes towards the EU

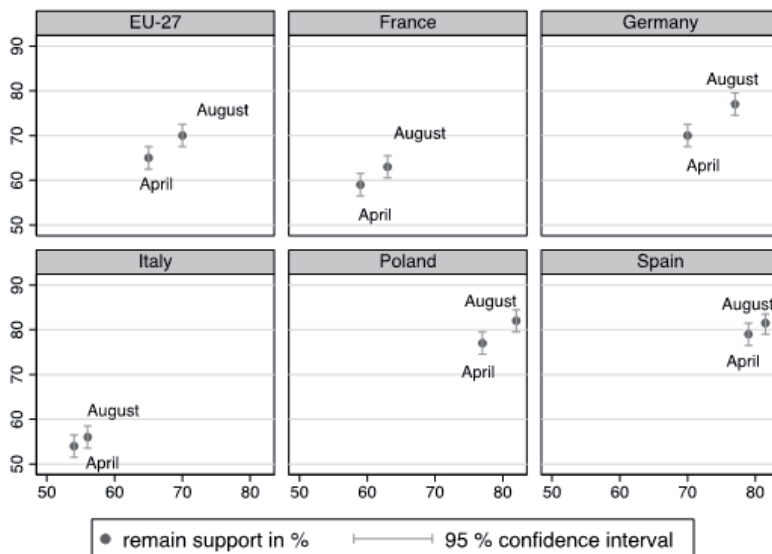
Did uncertainty about the British position after the vote increase support for remaining in the EU in other member states? To exam-

ine the extent to which the economic and political uncertainty that manifested itself immediately following the Brexit vote in newspaper reporting and public commentary affected public opinion about the EU, I rely on two waves of eupinions surveys (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2016a, 2016b). eupinions is a bi-annual survey of public sentiment towards the EU and national political systems in the EU as whole as well as in the six most populous member states (France, Great Britain², Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain). In 2016, two waves of the eupinions survey were conducted, one before the Brexit vote in April and one in August. In both waves, we asked a little over 12,000 respondents whether they would vote ‘remain’ or ‘leave’ the EU if a membership referendum were held today. Since I am interested in support for remaining in the EU pre- and post-Brexit in the EU-27, Figure 1 displays the percentage of those intending to vote remain excluding Great Britain plus percentages in the five largest member states, namely France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain, where we conducted more in-depth studies. Note that I am not able to identify a Brexit effect causally, as the surveys are not fielded to a panel where the same group of people is asked the question twice. Thus, there is no way of ruling out that factors other than Brexit might have played a role. That said, the data is unique in the sense that I am able to gauge membership support in hypothetical membership referenda across the EU as a whole and within selected member states.

Figure 1 shows that overall support for remaining in the EU is slightly higher in August than in April of 2016. The increase is statistically significant for the EU-27 as well as Germany and Poland. The largest jump in support for remaining in the EU is recorded in Germany with 8%. Interestingly, Figure 1 shows that support for remaining in the EU is overall quite high at 70% or higher in the EU-27, Germany, Poland and Spain. In comparison, support is much lower in France and Italy. In Italy where support for remaining hovers between 50 and 55%, the EU, especially the euro, is a highly divisive issue. Especially the Five Star Movement has criticized what they call an inefficient European bureaucracy and heartless austeri-

2 In the remainder of the contribution, I will refer to Great Britain rather than the United Kingdom. The public opinion data sources I use do not always include Northern Ireland, and to be consistent, I rely on data from Great Britain only.

Figure 1: Comparing support for remaining in the EU before and after Brexit

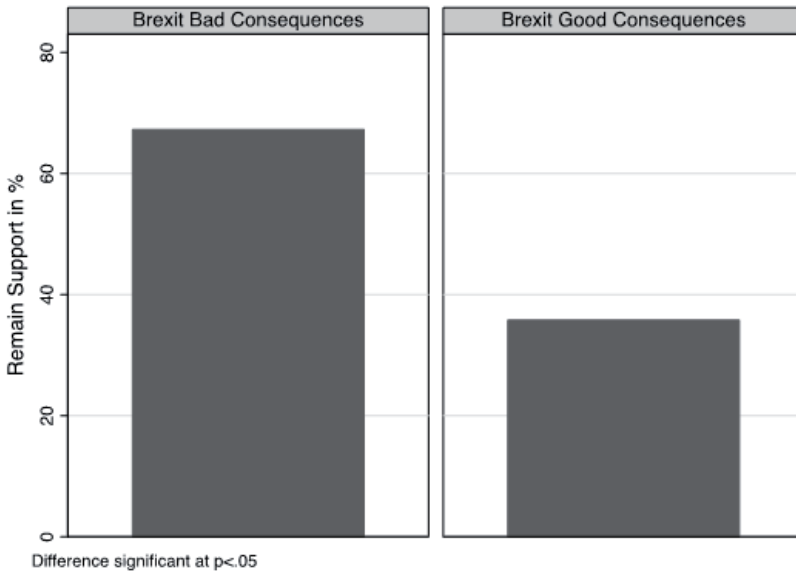


Note: The dots represent the percentage of people who would vote for their country to remain in the EU if a membership referendum were held today in the April and August waves of the eupinions survey with 95% confidence intervals.

ty during the Eurozone crisis by the so-called Troika (the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). Although a referendum on the EU or euro membership is unlikely given the Italian constitutional arrangements, these findings suggest that the outcome of such a vote would be highly uncertain. However, since 2016, public opinion about the EU has been much more positive in Italy.

The findings presented in Figure 1 provide some support for the idea that the uncertainty following Brexit might have lowered people's perceptions of how viable it would be for their country to be outside the EU and therefore increased support for membership. Figure 2 provides further support for this interpretation. It plots the support for remaining in the EU for two sets of people: those who think Brexit will have negative consequences for Britain (close to 70%), and those who think that it will have positive consequences (38%).

Figure 2: Comparing support for remaining in the EU of those who think consequences of Brexit will be good or bad for Britain, EU-27



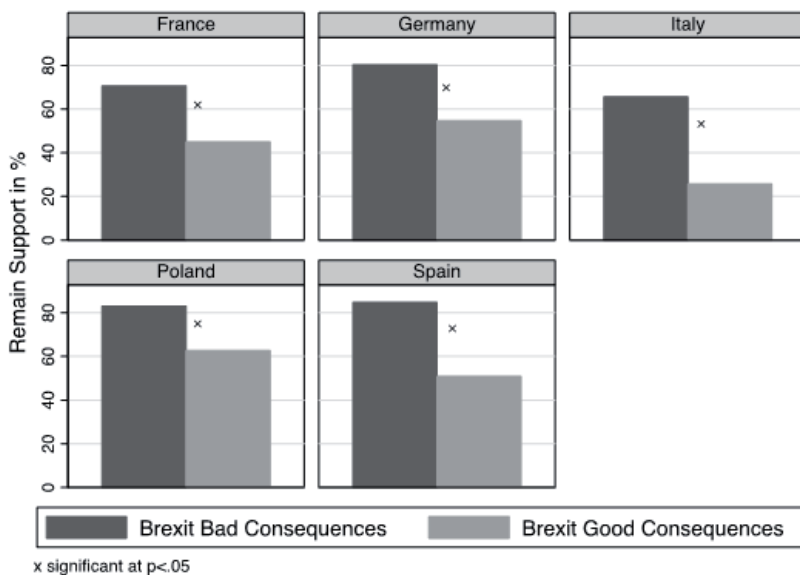
Note: The bars represent the percentage who would vote for their country to remain in the EU if a membership referendum were held today of those who think that the consequences of Brexit will be bad or good for Britain respectively based on the August wave of the eupinions survey. The difference in remain support between both groups is statistically significant at a $p < .05$ level (two-tailed).

Figure 3 displays the same information split by the five largest EU member states. The figure shows the same pattern as in the EU-27 with highest remain support among those who think that Brexit will have negative consequences. The differences are most pronounced in Italy and Spain. They are still considerable and statistically significant in France, Germany and Poland but overall somewhat smaller.

Do these effects persist in a multivariate analysis when I control for a host of other variables like gender, education, age, residency, unemployment, subjective class perception as well as people's views about the politicians and number of foreigners in their country?³

³ Specifically, I use the questions 'What is your view on the competence of politicians in your country?' ('not at all competent' or 'overall compe-

Figure 3: Comparing support for remaining in the EU of those who think consequences of Brexit will be good or bad for Britain

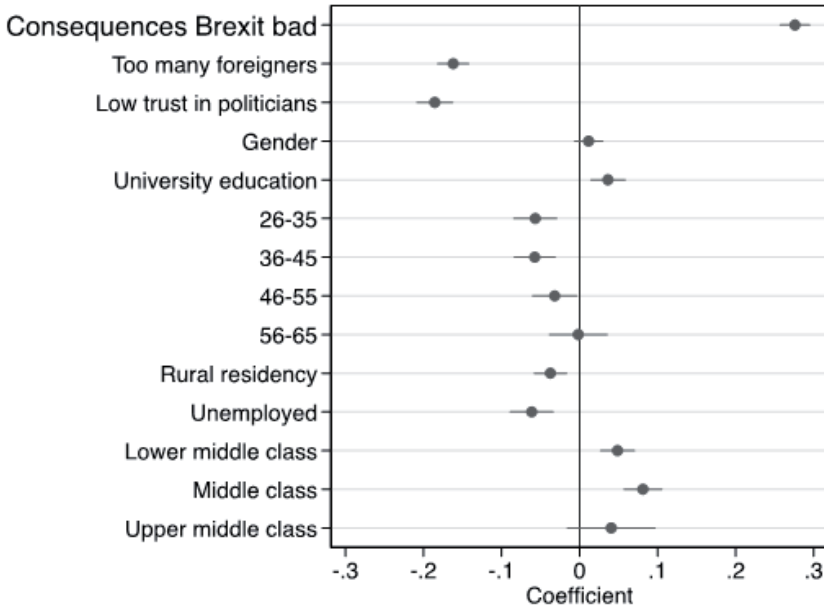


Note: The bars represent the percentage who would vote for their country to remain in the EU if a membership referendum were held today of those who think that the consequences of Brexit will be bad or good for Britain respectively based on the August wave of the eupinions survey. The crosses indicate that the difference in remain support between both groups are statistically significant at a $p < .05$ level (two-tailed).

These controls at least in part tap into the economic interest, national identity and cues explanations outlined earlier. Figure 4 displays the coefficients of a linear probability model where vote intention in a hypothetical EU membership referendum is the dependent variable. All variables are dummy variables coded between 0 minimum value and 1 maximum value to ease comparison. In order for an effect to be statistically significant, the coefficient represented by the grey dot and the 95% confidence intervals represented by the grey line should not fall on or cross the black solid line at the zero point on the x-axis.

tent') and 'What is your view on the number of foreigners in your country? ('about right' or 'too many').

Figure 4: Predicting support for remaining in the EU



Note: The dots represent the coefficients of linear probability model where vote intention in a hypothetical EU membership referendum is the dependent variable. The lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. Country dummies were included in the analysis but are not shown here. The data is based on the August wave of the eupinions survey.

Figure 4 suggests that if people think that Brexit will have negative consequences for Britain, the likelihood of voting for remaining in the EU increases substantially. This effect remains statistically and substantially significant even if we control for other factors such as skills levels, age or people's views about the politicians or number of foreigners in their country. In fact, the effect of people's expectations about the consequences of Brexit is larger than any other factor included in the model. When it comes to the controls, we find that as people become more suspicious of politicians or the number of foreigners in their country, the likelihood of voting to remain decreases, while having a university education, being female or middle class increases it. Finally, being older, unemployed or living in a rural area decreases support for remaining. Interestingly, the factors that decrease or increase the likelihood of voting to remain among the

EU-27 are similar to those reported for voting behaviour in the Brexit referendum (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017; Hobolt, 2016).

Long-term effects of Brexit on public attitudes towards the EU

Taken together, these findings suggest that the outcome of the Brexit vote and the subsequent political and economic uncertainty sent a powerful signal to people in the EU-27 about the potential costs and benefits of exit. The British decision to leave the EU provides people with more information about the benefits of EU membership for their national political elites' ability to secure economic, political and social well-being. The data presented thus far is from 2016 and suggests that Brexit largely set a negative precedent for leaving. Yet, how has public opinion in the EU-27 developed since then?

Table 1 below shows the development of attitudes towards the EU, support for remaining in the EU and for more political and economic integration, between the August 2016 and the December 2022 eupinions wave. Of course, many things have happened in the last six years, such as the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine, but these events are generally, like Brexit, associated with more support for the EU (de Vries, 2022). The table shows two important things. First, support for remaining in the EU has solidified since the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, i.e., it increased straight after Brexit, as demonstrated in the previous section, has remained high and even increased in Spain (by 7%) and Italy (by 12%). Second, while support for remaining in the EU solidified since Brexit, this did not necessarily translate into preferences for see deeper political and economic integration in Europe in the future. While only 53% of Europeans want more integration, this masks considerable cross-country variation. Support for more political and economic integration is high in Italy and Spain (68%) but low in the Netherlands (37%) and France (38%). In some countries, e.g., the Netherlands and Poland, support for more integration increased post-Brexit (6% and 10% respectively), while it decreased in Germany, France and Italy (by 7% and 3% respectively).

Table 1: Attitudes towards the EU, EU-27 between August 2016 and December 2022

	Remain in the EU			More political and economic integration		
	August 2016	December 2022	Difference	August 2016	December 2022	Difference
EU-27	70	74	4	51	53	3
France	63	69	6	41	38	-3
Germany	77	76	-1	57	50	-7
Italy	56	68	12	71	68	-3
Netherlands	63	63	0	31	37	6
Poland	82	86	4	46	56	10
Spain	79	86	7	67	68	1

Concluding remarks

Although experts had already pointed out prior to the Brexit referendum that outcomes of EU referendums are notoriously hard to predict, the outcome of the vote was a shock for many. The polls leading up to the referendum predicted a small lead for the Remain side, but as the results of the referendum started pouring in from around the country, a different picture started to emerge. The polls got it wrong. 51.9% of the British people voted for their country to leave. The outcome of the vote is of historical importance. One of the six largest members of the EU in terms of population turned its back on Europe, demonstrating that exit is a possibility. This contribution suggests that by setting a precedent for exit, the Brexit vote is likely to cast a long shadow on public opinion about the EU in the remaining 27 member states.

The results presented here suggest that support for EU membership has increased after Brexit. Although I do not have panel data and therefore cannot rule out that other factors than Brexit were important in this change, these findings support the idea that the political and economic uncertainty immediately following the vote made EU membership look more favourable and the prospect of leaving less so. This supports the notion that Brexit provided people with information about the potential benefits of EU membership, thus increasing people's double allegiance to the EU. Second, the findings suggest that an increase in support for EU membership after Brexit is especially pronounced among those who think that Brexit will have negative consequences for the UK. This fits the interpretation that when Brexit is perceived as setting a bad precedent because of the negative political and economic consequences, support for remaining in the EU should increase in the other member states. It also underscores the notion that double allegiance drives support for the EU, i.e., people support the EU when they think that membership increases their national political elites' ability to secure economic, political and social security and well-being (de Vries and van Kersbergen, 2007). What is interesting, however, is that this increased allegiance does not necessarily translate into people preferring deeper political and economic integration in the future.

What could these results mean for the future of the EU? Two things seem important to highlight. First, they suggest that it will

be crucial for the EU-27 and the national governments to make sure that the British example does not set a positive precedent for leaving. So far, Brexit is seen by much of the European public as a mistake, but how will this develop in the future? When in the long term the UK is able to mitigate the economic and political fallout of Brexit, or the EU-27 seem to be worse off politically and economically, this might have grave consequences for the support for leaving the EU in other countries. The data suggests that Brexit has become a deterrent for leaving, at least until now, but the question is for how long.

Second, while support for remaining has solidified in the EU-27 since Brexit, this does not necessarily lead to an impetus for more European solutions. High support for remaining does not necessarily go hand in hand with support for further integrative steps. In addition, the deep structural problems that the EU faces are still there and fuel potential conflict between EU member states. Public opinion about the European project is very diverse (de Vries, 2018), in part because the Eurozone crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis have exacerbated the structural imbalances. A rift in people's policy demands has emerged within the EU. Some sceptics, especially in the North-Western region, demand less intra-EU migration, while others, most notably Southern, Central and Eastern European member states, want further economic investment and employment programmes. It seems hard to come up with policy proposals that could satisfy both constituencies simultaneously, especially in the short run. These differences in opinion have not disappeared in the wake of the Next Generation EU response to the pandemic that crossed the Rubicon of debt mutualization in the EU. Given this heterogeneity in policy demands, a one-size-fits-all approach to Europeans weaknesses is likely to be unsuccessful. The EU will need to find a way to deal with this diversity, and relying on a boost in support for the EU following Brexit will not be not enough.

References

- Clarke, Harold, Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley (2017). *Brexit! Why Britain voted to leave the European Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Vries, Catherine E. (2017). Benchmarking Brexit: How the British decision to leave shapes EU public opinion. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55 (S1): 38-53.

- de Vries, Catherine E. (2018). *Euroscepticism and the future of European integration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- de Vries, Catherine E. (2022). How foundational narratives shape European Union Politics. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61 (4): 867-881.
- de Vries, Catherine E. and Kees van Kersbergen (2007). Interests, identity and political allegiance in the European Union. *Acta Politica* 42: 307-328.
- de Vries, Catherine E. and Isabell Hoffmann (2016a). *A European finance minister with budget autonomy? Need for reforms of the Eurozone and their potential, given public opinion in Europe*. Report for the Bertelsmann Foundation.
- de Vries, Catherine E. and Isabell Hoffmann (2016b). *Fears not values: Public opinion and the populist vote in Europe*. Report for the Bertelsmann Foundation.
- Hobolt, Sara B. (2016). The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23 (9): 1259-1277.
- Hobolt, Sara B. and Catherine E. de Vries (2016). Public support for European integration. *Annual Review of Political Science* 19: 413-432.
- Jurado, Ignacio, Sandra León and Stefanie Walter (2022). Shaping post-withdrawal relations with a leaving state: Brexit dilemmas and public opinion. *International Organization* 76 (2): 273-304.
- van Kersbergen, Kees (2000). Political allegiance and European integration. *European Journal of Political Research* 37 (1): 1-17.
- van Kersbergen, Kees (2003). Welfare state reform and political allegiance. *The European Legacy* 8 (5): 559-571.
- Walter, Stefanie (2021) Brexit domino? The political contagion effects of voter-endorsed withdrawals from international institutions. *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (13): 2382-2415.