

The limits of Brexit prejudice

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Abstract

Since the Brexit referendum, two novel political identities, Leaver and Remain, have gained political salience in the United Kingdom. Some work contends that Leavers and Remainers display great animus toward one another in ways similar to affective polarization (dislike of opposing partisans). However, it remains unclear whether the dislike is as deep as partisan affective polarization and whether these identities are still relevant several years after Brexit. Additionally, it is not known whether Brexit-related animus is based more on in-group favoritism or out-group dislike. Using a survey experiment paradigm to assess different levels of prejudice (based on pre-registered hypotheses), we find clear prejudice based on Brexit identity in 2019 that is almost unchanged in 2023. Both in-group favoritism and out-group animus appear to drive these tendencies, but out-group animus's effects are more robust. Leavers and Remainers have different motivations for different manifestations of prejudice, but each displays both tendencies at times.

KEYWORDS

affective polarization, Brexit, British politics, partisanship, social identity, survey experiments

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the United Kingdom participated in a defining referendum over its membership in the European Union (EU). Referendum positions—Leave versus Remain—cut across traditional party lines (Hobolt et al., 2021; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). Brexit created two identities, those who supported the Remain vote (Remainers) and those in favor of a Leave vote (Leavers), with these identities described as being both “prevalent” and “personally important” (Evans & Schaffner, 2019; Hobolt et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2021; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020;

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Highlights

- Even as Brexit fades as an item on the policy agenda, it is still the source of hostility and can have behavioral manifestations.
- Issues can divide the public as strongly as partisanship does.
- The cosmopolitan-nationalist divide is a likely source of polarization that elites will have to manage carefully.

Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). Even years after the referendum, people continue to strongly identify with Brexit identities at levels that rival partisanship (Murray et al., 2017; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023).

Leavers and Remainers, just like partisans in the United States (Iyengar et al., 2019) and United Kingdom (Gidron et al., 2020), experience affective polarization, or animosity, based on their political identities (Hobolt et al., 2021). The presence and depth of affective polarization in a polity represent a key dilemma to democratic health. On the positive side, liking one political faction and disliking another stimulate political engagement and participation (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Mason, 2015, 2018). On the negative side, it can drive support for and rationalization of anti-democratic measures (Druckman et al., 2024, Graham & Svulik, 2020; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022; Krishnarajan, 2023; though see Broockman et al., 2023).

Given the novelty of these identities, several puzzles remain that our analysis will address. First, it is unclear how much Brexit identities manifest in discriminatory behavior. On the one hand, it is possible that Brexit animosity, due to its novelty, is only surface level, and longer as well as deeper experiences with the opposing faction are needed for people to translate their attitudes into behavior (Phillips, 2022). On the other hand, affective polarization can be quite high even with novel partisan identities (Reiljan, 2020), and people form prejudices based on randomly assigned identity alone (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This suggests Brexit identity, like other identities, can give way to prejudice and discrimination.

Second, it remains unclear whether discrimination, if found, stems from in-group favoritism, out-group threat, or both (Brewer, 1999). In-group favoritism is a feature of most inter-group divisions and involves providing benefits to in-group members over out-group members. In contrast, out-group animosity is rarer and results from perceived threat (Riek et al., 2006) and results in much more intractable conflict. Work on partisanship provides little guidance, as it shows both in-party favoritism (Amira et al., 2021; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Luttwig, 2017; McConnell et al., 2018; Nicholson et al., 2016) and out-party animus (Amira et al., 2021; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Warner & Villamil, 2017) can motivate partisan prejudice.

Finally, it remains unclear what the relative salience of Brexit and partisan identities is. At the height of the Brexit debate post-referendum, some argued that Brexit identities supplanted partisan identities as a dividing line in British politics (Hobolt et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2017; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). Indeed, Brexit identities appear to have shifted partisan identities themselves, with Leavers (Remainers) moving toward (away) from the Conservative Party (Schonfeld & Winter-Levy, 2021). However, there remains a dearth of tests about these identities' relative importance that require people to prioritize one over the other.

To address these questions, we export an experimental paradigm developed by Lelkes and Westwood (2017) to assess the limits of partisan prejudice to the context of Brexit identities. Their paradigm, which consists of increasingly drastic instances of discrimination, is based on Allport's (1954) framework of prejudice. Through assessing the severity of discrimination Leavers and Remainers are willing to exact against one another, we can capture how strongly Brexit animosity manifests. Through examining how warmth toward allies versus opposition

affects behavior in each experiment, we also assess the source of prejudicial behavior. Just as they replicated their experiments in a time of heightened polarization (Westwood et al., 2019), we ran our experiments twice. One round was in April 2019 (at the height of Brexit deal negotiations), while the other took place in Summer 2023, 2.5 years after Brexit went into effect.

The results from both 2019 and 2023 reveal that Leavers and Remainers display a wide range of biased behaviors against one another. Both groups display double standards in publishing speech, investigation of their respective campaigns, and there is mixed evidence that they are less willing to associate with Brexit out-group members. In 2019, but not 2023, we found mixed evidence that Brexit identities overtook partisan identities in importance. Overall, this evidence underscores the continuing relevance of Brexit identities for the United Kingdom long after the referendum and suggests that issue-based identities can drive discrimination. The results also have implications beyond the United Kingdom, providing critical evidence that the cosmopolitan-nationalist dimension can be a potent source of political animosity (Hahm et al., 2023; Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

THE RISE (AND FALL?) OF BREXIT IDENTITIES

In 2016, the British government presented voters with a referendum on whether to *remain* in the EU or *leave* the EU. Both sides ran extensive and expensive campaigns, and ultimately, Leave won a narrow victory with 52% of the vote.

The issue was far from settled in the post-referendum period, with the public divided over whether the government should adhere to the referendum result. There were also deep divisions in the Leave camp on whether they wanted Brexit to involve a clean break from all EU institutions or to remain in the single market and customs union (Hobolt et al., 2022; Tilley & Hobolt, 2017). Within the Remain camp, some wanted a second referendum on a more specific Brexit proposal. Others accepted the United Kingdom's eventual exit, but wanted the United Kingdom to remain in the single market and customs union.

Post-referendum, people who supported Leave and Remain began to form strong identities around their choice (Evans & Schaffner, 2019; Hobolt et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2021; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). At one point, more people reported a Brexit identity than a partisan identity (Hobolt et al., 2021; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). Existing social identities tended to be subsumed into the Leave and Remain debate, including Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalist resentment of England's choice and center-periphery divisions within England (Evans & Schaffner, 2019).

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), people derive a sense of self at least partially from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1981). Any definable characteristic can be the source of social identity, including political opinion. People possess multiple social identities at the same time, and context heavily determines which identities are salient at any given time (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, partisan identities tend to be stronger during electoral campaigns (Singh & Thornton, 2019). In the context of Brexit's continual salience as a political issue, it follows that one can chronically see oneself and others through the lens of Brexit opinion (Tilley & Hobolt, 2023).

However, it remains an open question as to how deeply these identities are held, as well as whether these identities were temporally bound to the Brexit debate itself. The United Kingdom formally left the EU in 2020, ending debate over whether and how it would exit. Both major parties are against overtures to rejoin the EU. Economic difficulties in the United Kingdom have led some who previously supported Leave to reconsider whether Brexit was a good idea (Wager & Surridge, 2022). At the same time, existing political conflicts that have become bound up in divisions over Brexit (e.g. immigration) may have kept these identities salient long after the referendum's consequences (Tilley & Hobolt, 2023).

SOCIAL IDENTITIES, PREJUDICE, AND DISCRIMINATION

According to SIT, intergroup distinction often lends itself to prejudice, or lower warmth toward out-group members than in-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). While attitudinal in nature, prejudice also probabilistically leads to discriminatory behavior, or worse treatment of out-group members relative to in-group members (Allport, 1954; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The expression of prejudice as discriminatory behavior depends on whether social norms support or inhibit its expression (Allport, 1954; Crandall et al., 2002; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), as well as whether opportunities exist in everyday life to engage in discrimination (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003).

Discrimination varies in its level of severity. Allport (1954) outlined a typology of discriminatory behaviors, each more severe than the last. The first level, *antilocution*, involves the promotion of negative speech toward an out-group. The second, *avoidance*, involves deliberately avoiding interactions with members of an out-group provided the choice. The third, *discrimination*, represents active harm to an out-group or passive harm by intentionally withdrawing a resource from an out-group member. The fourth level, *physical attack*, involves outright physical violence against out-group members. The fifth level, *extermination*, represents the systematic killing of out-group members.

While Allport's typology is out-group-focused, it is not automatically the case that prejudice or discrimination represents out-group animus. A gap in warmth or treatment between the in-group and the out-group can occur out of a desire to help the in-group that is not extended to out-group members (in-group favoritism), hostility toward out-group members (out-group animus), or both (Brewer, 1999). The default prejudice people show in intergroup settings is in-group favoritism (Brewer, 1999; Brewer & Brown, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In-group favoritism can pop up even with novel identities people were recently randomly assigned in the laboratory (Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Conversely, out-group animus shows up under conditions of intense, zero-sum competition in which one group's win is another group's loss. Such conditions provoke a sense of threat. These threats can be realistic (i.e. threats to one's economic standing) or symbolic (i.e. threats to one's broader cultural values) (Riek et al., 2006; Stephen & Stephan, 2013). In response to threats, people tend to feel both fear and anger toward out-groups (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). In the political arena, anger particularly motivates out-group animosity (Renström et al., 2023).

POLITICAL PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Political prejudice, or lower warmth toward political out-group members than political in-group members, is a feature of democracies throughout the world. Previous investigations have generally found that there is no strong norm against the expression of partisan prejudice (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). This suggests that there will be a strong correspondence between prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior. However, norms of civility still exist whereby citizens tend to be uncomfortable with particularly hostile displays of political prejudice (Druckman et al., 2019; Shafraneck, 2020). As a result, Brexit prejudice might translate into increased willingness to spread negative speech about an out-group member, but it is an open question as to the extent and in which situations prejudicial attitudes translate into discriminatory behavior.

Lelkes and Westwood (2017) operationalized Allport's typology of prejudice through developing a series of behavioral experiments that capture the first three levels of discrimination. To ensure our research's comparability to other partisan discrimination work, we make use of this exact paradigm. Across their experiments, they found that partisans liked

the out-party less than the in-party. However, while this prejudice resulted in lower level displays of prejudice such as the promotion of negative speech and the avoidance of out-group members, it did not result in a desire for out-group members to be subject to violence or persecution. Westwood et al. (2019) replicated these findings in a more recent set of samples.

It is an ongoing question in the literature as to whether political prejudice, and by extension Brexit prejudice, is better understood as in-group favoritism or out-group animus. There is reason for both to exist. Partisans, out of a desire for positive in-group distinctiveness, are particularly motivated to see their side win (Huddy et al., 2015; Miller & Conover, 2015) and to consider their side as superior to alternative parties (Huddy, 2001). Indeed, Lelkes and Westwood (2017) find, in most instances, affective polarization corresponds to in-group-favoring behavior and not out-group-harming behavior (see also McConnell et al., 2018; Nicholson et al., 2016). This would suggest that if Brexit identities operate like partisan identities, Brexit-based affective polarization would result primarily in in-group-favoring behavior.

While other experiments do capture in-group favoritism as the consequence of affective polarization (Amira et al., 2021; Engelhardt & Utych, 2020; McConnell et al., 2018; Nicholson et al., 2016), others detect the existence of out-party animus either instead of (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Shafraneck, 2021) or alongside in-group favoritism (Amira et al., 2021). Out-group animus can and generally does occur alongside in-group favoritism (Brewer, 1999). Lelkes and Westwood (2017) find out-group animus solely motivates avoidance of opposing partisans but operates alongside in-group favoritism when deciding to promote negative speech.

Our pre-registered hypotheses adhere to Lelkes and Westwood (2017)'s findings, as they serve as a starting point for comparing patterns of Brexit affective polarization with that of partisan affective polarization. We generally expect Brexit affective polarization to manifest in discriminatory behavior reflecting in-group favoritism rather than out-group animus. Indeed, since it is the default mode of prejudice, Brexit identities, being more novel issue-based identities may adhere to it more neatly:

H1A. Voters are more willing to suppress rhetoric that is hostile toward their Brexit identity related in-group but are not more willing to promote rhetoric that criticizes the Brexit identity related out-group.

H1B. Affective polarization increases the group identity-related bias.

H2A. Voters avoid individuals from their Brexit out-group even in non-political situations and even when this may create a disadvantage.

H2B. Affective polarization increases the extent to which individuals avoid the out-group.

H3A. Individuals will not discriminate against members of the Brexit out-group in situations where democratic norms are being violated.

H3B. Individuals will favor their Brexit in-group even in a situation in which democratic norms are being violated.

At the same time, one could expect out-group animus to exist with Brexit identities, regardless of its mixed evidence with partisan identities. Out-group animus exists in response to threat (Brewer, 1999; Riek et al., 2006). The perceived threats Brexit posed to the economic well-being and freedom of movement for Remainers could predispose them to dislike and resent Leavers. Likewise, the perceived threats from remaining in the European Union of

immigration and encroachment of UK sovereignty could predispose Leavers to display animus against Remainers. Our research design allows us to assess these alternatives.

IS BREXIT OR PARTY IDENTITY STRONGER?

Several studies assert that the British public display stronger Brexit identities, on average, than they do partisan identities (Hobolt et al., 2021; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). These conclusions are based on self-reports of identity strength. Because Brexit identities are newly acquired political identities, however, it is possible that identity strength does not manifest itself as clearly in behavior as partisan identity. Partisan identities are acquired, often long term, and slowly accumulate in strength over the lifespan (Campbell et al., 1960; Phillips, 2022). In situations where one has to choose between helping a co-partisan or a fellow Remainer/Leaver, it may be more difficult to deprioritize the co-partisan.

However, there is reason to expect the opposite. Even with newly acquired identities lacking in content, group identities can rapidly gain in strength (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore, according to work on social identity complexity, the more that different social identities overlap (in other words, include the same sets of people), the stronger each constituent identity becomes (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). This happens because in-group members now have commonality on an increasing number of dimensions. Such overlap can diminish tolerance toward out-groups because out-group members on one dimension are less likely to be in-group members (and thus worthy of help and consideration) on another (Brewer & Pierce, 2005). In the United States, a major factor driving increases in partisan affective polarization since the 1970s has been the increased correlation between partisanship and other identities such as class, geography, ethnicity, and gender (Mason, 2015, 2018; Mason & Wronski, 2018; Mason et al., 2021).

One can argue that Brexit identities in Britain have become strong enough to manifest in in-group-defending behavior. More people can assert Brexit identities than partisan identities in the first place (Hobolt et al., 2021). Leavers and Remainers display more in-group homogeneity in social class and geography than the voting coalitions for each political party do (Cutts et al., 2020). For more of the British public than not, then, helping a fellow co-Leaver/Remainer will be helping an in-group member on a greater number of identity dimensions simultaneously than helping a co-partisan. Therefore, we expect in-group-serving behavior, on balance, will help co-Remainers/Leavers rather than co-partisans.

H4. When both party identity and Brexit identity are salient in a political situation, an individual's Brexit identity will create a stronger group serving bias.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Samples

We recruited two samples, both through the Prolific platform. Prolific offers high quality convenience samples with diversity higher than on MTurk (Douglas et al., 2023; Irvine et al., 2018; Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). Furthermore, while Prolific samples are not fully representative of the population (e.g., they skew more liberal (Krupnikov et al., 2021)), such samples still successfully replicate popular findings in the social sciences (Irvine et al., 2018; Peer et al., 2017). We obtained ethics approval before beginning the fieldwork from the University of Exeter and the University of Kent.

Characteristics for both of our recruited samples are in Table 1 above. We implemented quotas on gender and education (university education vs. no university education) to increase

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics.

	April 2019	July 2023
Total <i>N</i>	912	1002
% Male	50.5	50.5
<i>M</i> _{age}	39.2	44.8
<i>SD</i> _{age}	12.8	14.2
Remainer (incl. simple vote)	61.2%	66.2%
Leave (incl. simple vote)	31.6%	29.6%
Labor (incl. leaners)	35.7%	39.6%
Conservative (incl. leaners)	19.7%	18.8%
Labor % Remain	78.3%	83.9%
Conservative % Leave	64.3%	68.4%

Note: "Simple vote" includes people who do not identify as Leavers or Remainers, but who voted for one side of the Brexit referendum.

the descriptive representativeness of the samples. Those that did not report a Leave or Remain identity were assigned to an identity based on their Brexit vote choice. Those that did not report a vote choice or a Brexit identity were excluded from analysis, leaving a final sample size of 846 (April 2019) and 960 (July 2023).

Procedure and analytic strategy

Prior to the experiments, respondents filled out demographic information, stated their political party and Brexit identity. They also indicated their level of warmth toward Leave voters and Remain voters on feeling thermometers spanning from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest). We measured Brexit affective polarization by subtracting warmth for the Brexit out-group from warmth for the Brexit in-group. Subsequently, they completed each behavioral task described in [Lelkes and Westwood \(2017\)](#) and [Westwood et al. \(2019\)](#), though adapted to Brexit identities in the United Kingdom. We added one experimental task designed to pit serving one's Brexit identity against one's partisan identity.

To assess whether in-group favoritism or out-group animus motivates particular courses of action, we make use of the Brexit affective polarization measure. If the measure corresponds to behavior helping the in-group, we treat it as evidence of in-group favoritism. If the measure corresponds to behavior harming the out-group, we treat it as evidence of out-group animus. Our use of the difference score rather than raw feeling thermometer scores to establish this is twofold. The first is that this design choice maximizes continuity with [Lelkes and Westwood \(2017\)](#)'s approach, which also uses the difference score. The second is that feeling thermometer ratings are particularly prone to individual differences in response style ([Wilcox et al., 1989](#)). The same underlying feeling could result in one respondent rating a group at "70," while another identifies that feeling as "50." This interferes with comparing respondents on these ratings. However, the same bias would affect the ratings of different objects similarly, meaning the difference score is a more robust estimate of differential warmth for one group over another.

Using the same participants for all behavioral experiments is a departure from those prior experiments, which used a fresh sample for each task. Respondents also filled out the experiments in the same order, moving from least severe (antilocution) to most severe (discrimination). One can argue that this opens up results to question order effects ([Zaller, 1992](#)) and the chance respondents will feel pressure to display consistent behavior across tasks ([Coppock, 2019](#);

Mummolo & Peterson, 2019). However, in this set of experiments, the likelihood these issues threaten results is minimal. First, we would argue that, by ratcheting up the severity of prejudice, the survey response experience is more akin to answering a Guttman scale in which each new question places a respondent ever higher on a latent trait (Andrich, 1982; Bart, 1976). Second, even with pre-post experimental designs, respondents tend not to display consistency pressures (Clifford et al., 2021; Mummolo & Peterson, 2019).

For ease of presentation, we detail the procedure of each behavioral experiment as they come up. Prior to fielding the experiment on the April 2019 sample, we pre-registered hypotheses and an analysis plan with Evidence in Government and Politics (EGAP): <https://osf.io/sr42d>. 2023 analyses were done according to the same plan. We estimated all analyses both with and without the use of pretreatment covariates. We estimated models on Remain and Leave supporters separately in order to examine whether patterns differ between Remainers and Leavers. All predictors are scaled from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. The operationalization of control variables can be found in Table A1 of the Supplementary Material.

RESULTS

Brexit affective polarization

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of feeling thermometer ratings for Brexit in-group and Brexit out-group members among Leavers and Remainers, respectively. Participants in 2019 displayed fairly high affective polarization ($M = 41.57$, $SD = 32.33$), a similar level as that displayed in the 2012 and 2016 United States presidential elections (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). Affective polarization was also high in 2023 ($M = 35.86$, $SD = 32.01$), though significantly lower than in 2019 ($p < .001$). This occurred both due to a decrease in in-group warmth ($M_{2019} = 74.34$, $M_{2023} = 70.86$, $p < .001$) and an increase in out-group warmth ($M_{2019} = 32.79$, $M_{2023} = 35.01$, $p = .023$).

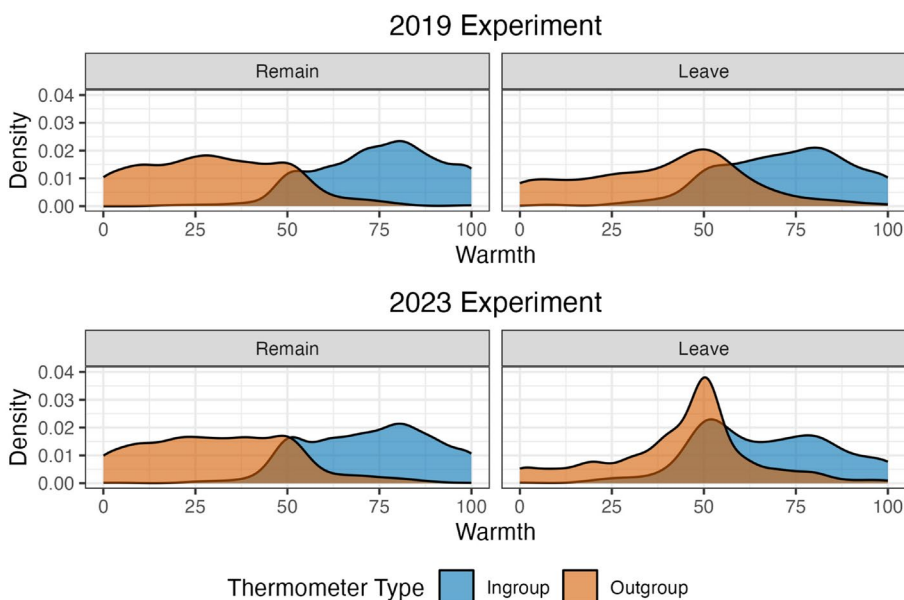


FIGURE 1 Distribution of Brexit group affects among the Leavers and Remainers in each sample.

In both 2019 and 2023, Remainers displayed higher levels of affective polarization than Leavers (2019: $M_{\text{remainers}} = 45.32$, $M_{\text{leavers}} = 34.31$; 2023: $M_{\text{remainers}} = 41.50$, $M_{\text{leavers}} = 23.26$; $ps < .001$), both due to higher levels of in-group warmth (2019: $M_{\text{remainers}} = 75.35$, $M_{\text{leavers}} = 72.38$; 2023: $M_{\text{remainers}} = 72.56$, $M_{\text{leavers}} = 67.07$; $ps \leq .018$) and lower levels of out-group warmth (2019: $M_{\text{remainers}} = 30.06$, $M_{\text{leavers}} = 38.06$; 2023: $M_{\text{remainers}} = 31.07$, $M_{\text{leavers}} = 43.81$; $ps < .001$). Between 2019 and 2023, both Remainers and Leavers decreased in in-group warmth ($ps \leq .004$) and affective polarization ($ps \leq .030$). Leavers also increased in out-group warmth ($p = .001$), but Remainers did not ($p = .369$).

Experiment 1: Antilocution

In the first experiment, we randomly assigned participants (probability = 0.5) to either read an article by the Sun (a right-wing, pro-Brexit British newspaper) critical of Remainers or an article by the New Statesman (a left-wing, pro-Remain British magazine) critical of Leavers. These articles did not strictly mirror one another, but instead employed commonly used accusations of lying against the Leave and Remain campaigns (see the Supplementary Material for full treatment materials). Participants then decided how much they endorse the article's publication with the following item: "A large website that posts stories from many different news sources is considering sharing the article you just read. How likely would you be to endorse this article for inclusion in the website?" on a 5-point scale from 0 (extremely unlikely) to 4 (extremely likely).

For **H1A** to be supported, participants would be more likely to publish an article critical of the Brexit out-group than the Brexit in-group. Indeed, we find that exact pattern ($p < .001$, see [Figure 1](#)) in 2019 and in 2023. In 2019, 74% of participants were at least somewhat likely to endorse out-group criticism for publication, while only 36% would do the same with in-group criticism. The respective figures in 2023 were 69% (out-group criticism) and 30% (in-group criticism). These findings are consistent with prior experiments (Amira et al., 2021; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Westwood et al., 2019).

While both Leavers and Remainers displayed this tendency, Remainers displayed it more strongly ($F_{(1,842)} = 69.346$, $p < .001$ in 2019 and $F_{(1,1086.8)} = 76.373$, $p < .001$ in 2023). This is both because Remainers were more likely than Leavers to publish out-group criticism (and less likely to publish in-group criticism ($ps < .001$)). These estimates signify that a huge gap existed in willingness to share in-group versus out-group criticism in 2019 and remained intact in 2023.

For **H1B** to be supported, Brexit affective polarization would be a significant and negative predictor of sharing in-group criticism and a non-significant predictor of sharing out-group criticism. We find partial support for this hypothesis. Increases in Brexit affective polarization corresponded with lower endorsement of publishing in-group criticism, consistent with **H1B** ($\beta = -0.934$, $p = .001$ in 2019 and $\beta = -1.303$, $p < .001$ in 2023). However, contrary to expectations, increases in Brexit affective polarization corresponded with higher endorsement of publishing out-group criticism ($\beta = 1.008$, $p < .001$ in 2019 and $\beta = 2.351$, $p < .001$ in 2023). [Figure 2](#) depicts the predicted likelihood of sharing in-group (left panel) and out-group criticism (right panel). Moving from the lowest to the highest levels of Brexit affective polarization corresponds to moving from "neither likely nor unlikely" to "somewhat unlikely" to publish in-group criticism, and moving from "neither likely nor unlikely" to "somewhat likely" to publish out-group criticism.

Subsetting by Brexit identity, it becomes evident that the patterns differ by year (see [Tables A3](#) and [A23](#) in the Supplementary Material). In 2023, both Remainers and Leavers displayed the same pattern. They were less likely to share in-group criticism and more likely to share out-group criticism as affective polarization increased. In 2019, however, they displayed different patterns. As affective polarization increased, Remainers, like the full sample, became

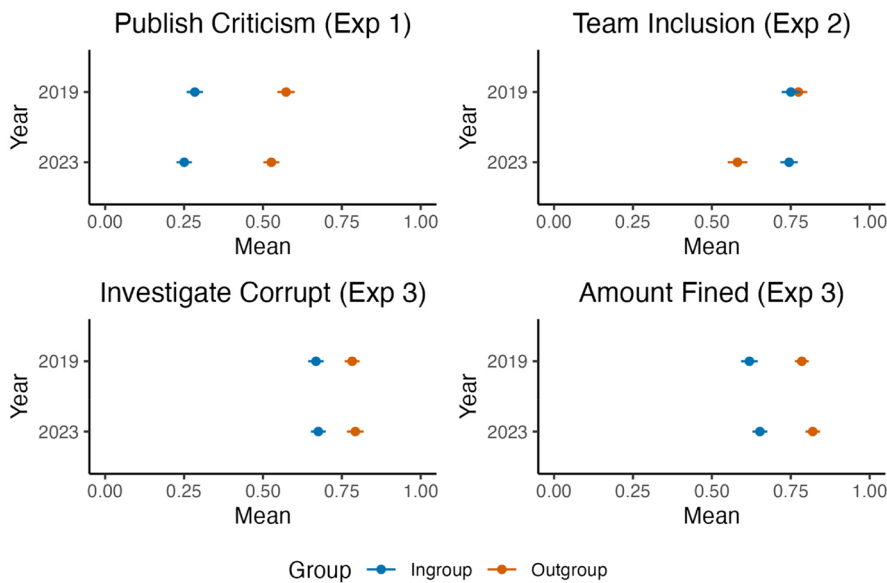


FIGURE 2 Overall Brexit in-group bias.

less likely to share in-group criticism ($\beta = -1.072$, $p < .001$), though not out-group criticism ($p = .124$). In contrast, among Leavers, affective polarization corresponded to a greater likelihood of publishing out-group criticism ($\beta = 1.53$, $p = .006$), not in-group criticism ($p = .284$).

Taken together, these findings are clear evidence in favor of antilocution. Leavers and Remainers alike display a greater willingness to publish out-group criticism than in-group criticism. However, there is mixed evidence on the motivations behind the discrepancy. While it appears Remainers' decisions are motivated primarily by in-group favoritism, Leavers display out-group animus.

Experiment 2: Avoidance

In the next stage, we told participants that they would be in a work group with other Prolific participants competing with other groups of Prolific participants to complete a series of words with accompanying clues (e.g., Milky way is one: _ _ l _ × _). All participants completed three training words.

Then, we randomly assigned 80% of our participants the role of “team leader” in which they had to choose three players from a list of four to include in their group (player order randomly assigned). Deception was used for this task, as none of the selected profiles represented real individuals in a waiting room. This task gave participants the opportunity to choose both Brexit in-group and Brexit out-group members. It also forced participants, if they wanted to exclude Brexit out-group members, to pick players that had lower levels of education (who presumably would be less adept at the task, risking losing the competition). Therefore, out-group exclusion was a costly behavior.

One player was a 30-year-old married co-partisan woman with an undergraduate degree who supported Britain leaving the European Union (player partisanship was aligned with respondents' party identification elicited earlier in the survey). Another player was a 31-year-old single man with no party affiliation that completed his GCSEs that was undecided on Brexit. Another player was a 35-year-old married man with no party affiliation or educational

TABLE 2 Percentage who supplied each reason for excluding players, 2019 and 2023 experiments.

	2019		2023	
	Included Brexit outgroup	Excluded Brexit outgroup	Included Brexit outgroup	Excluded Brexit outgroup
Brexit Group	15.8%	77.0%	13.3%	69.7%
Party	0.8%	0.5%	11.8%	1.9%
Age	6.2%	5.2%	7.0%	2.4%
Education	21.3%	20.9%	63.3%	4.3%
Marital Status	4.5%	1.6%	4.3%	0%

Note: Not all respondents supplied a reason, and respondents could select more than one reason. Bold values denote most common reason for inclusion or exclusion.

qualification that was undecided on Brexit. The final player was a 31-year-old married co-partisan woman with an undergraduate degree who supported Britain remaining in the EU.

Participants indicated their choices and then chose one or more reasons why they excluded one player (age; level of education; political party affiliation; marital status; Brexit position; none of the above). The other 20% of participants were randomly assigned to take the role of the excluded fourth player and indicate, on the same list, the reasons they thought they were excluded. Full treatment materials can be found in the Supplementary Material.

For **H2A** to be supported, participants would include members of the Brexit in-group more than they did the Brexit out-group. Surprisingly, we found support for this hypothesis in 2023 ($Diff = 16\text{ pp.}$, $p < .001$) but not in 2019. In 2019, participants were as likely to include a member of their Brexit in-group as they were to include members of their Brexit out-group ($p = .254$, see **Figure 1**). In both waves, though, those who excluded a member of the Brexit out-group mentioned Brexit identity as the reason the majority of the time (77% in 2019 and 70% in 2023, see **Table 2** for the full list of reasons participants gave for exclusion).

Since inclusion was a binary decision, we employed logistic regression to test affective polarization's association with inclusion of Brexit in-group and out-group members. If **H2B** is supported, Brexit affective polarization would be associated with a higher likelihood of including Brexit in-group members but lack any association with including Brexit out-group members. We found the opposite. Affective polarization did not predict whether respondents included Brexit in-group members in either 2019 ($p = .218$) or 2023 ($p = .271$). However, affective polarization was associated with a lower likelihood of including a Brexit out-group member in the team ($\beta = -2.433$, $p < .001$ in 2019 and $\beta = -1.500$, $p = .001$ in 2023). In terms of predicted probabilities (see **Figure 3**), moving from minimum to maximum affective polarization corresponds to roughly a 25 pp decrease in the likelihood of choosing a Brexit out-group member in each year. Results were substantively identical when we restricted the sample to Remainers and Leavers (see **Tables A5** and **A25** in the Supplementary Material).

Of the set of respondents we assigned to experience exclusion, they mentioned Brexit identity the most often as a suspected reason (41% in 2019 and 35% in 2023). However, it was not obvious to respondents that exclusion was only due to Brexit identity. Party was often cited (36% in 2019 and 33% in 2023), as was age (29% in 2019 and 31% in 2023).

Taken together, these findings present mixed evidence that Leavers and Remainers engage in avoidance. However, when they do avoid Brexit out-group members, it is indeed because of their Brexit identity. Interestingly, when participants themselves experience exclusion, they appear to suspect Brexit identity is a reason, but only as one possible reason among many. Additionally, while we predicted that avoidance would primarily stem from in-group favoritism, it more clearly stems from out-group animosity (**Figure 4**).

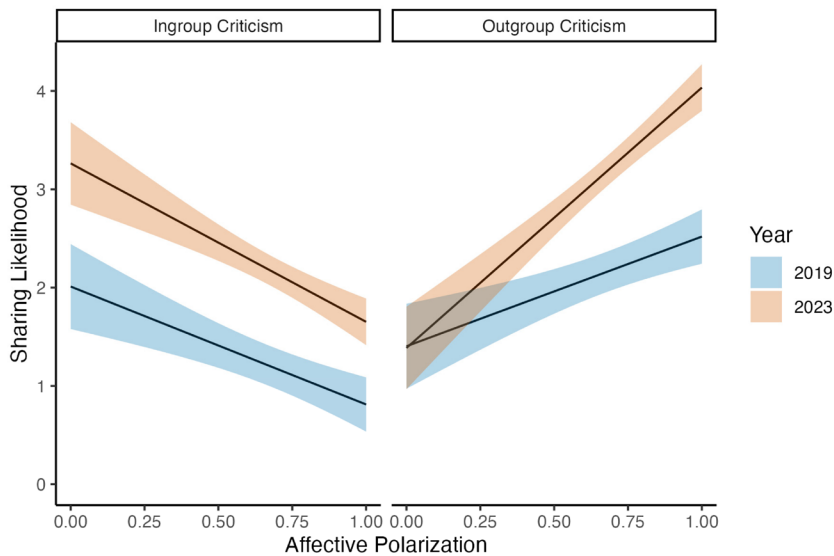


FIGURE 3 Affective polarization and support for publication of Brexit in-group and Brexit out-group criticism. See Tables A2 and A22 in the Supplementary Material for full models.

Experiment 3: Political corruption

Like Lelkes and Westwood (2017), we also ran a discrimination experiment.¹ We randomly assigned participants (probability=0.5) to read an article that described a situation in which either the Remain or Leave campaign was issued with a fine following an investigation into electoral malpractice and issues with campaign spending. We recoded the treatment variable to indicate whether a respondent's Brexit in-group was implicated. After reading the article, we asked respondents, "To what extent do you support the investigation into the campaign's spending?" and "To what extent do you support the decision to fine the campaign?" on 5pt. scales from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support). Full treatment materials can be found in the Supplementary Material.

For H3A to be supported, participants would display greater support for investigating and fining the out-group more than the in-group. Our data support both patterns in 2019 and still in 2023. Participants displayed greater support for investigating out-group campaign spending than in-group campaign spending ($p < .001$, see Figure 1), and greater support for fining the out-group campaign than the in-group campaign ($p < .001$, see Figure 1). Both Leavers and Remainers displayed these patterns, but Leavers indicated lower baseline support for the investigation and fines across conditions. In 2023, 64% of Remainers and 35% of Leavers supported in-group investigations, and 77% of Remainers and 60% of Leavers supported out-group investigations. 61% of Remainers and 35% of Leavers supported fining corrupt in-group members, while 79% of Remainers and 67% of Leavers supported fining corrupt out-group members. Figures were similar in 2019.

For H3B to be supported, affective polarization would correspond to lower support for the investigation into and fines levied at the in-group campaign, but lack an association with

¹Lelkes and Westwood (2017) also conducted an experiment on approval of political violence. We replicated this experiment in 2019 with a scenario based on actual events that took place recently in the United Kingdom. We preregistered this experiment and found intergroup double standards in tolerance toward political violence, and report results in Figure A1 and Tables A6–A9 in the Supplementary Material. However, we did not conduct a replication in 2023 because the stimulus would have to be substantially deceiving and would no longer appear realistic.

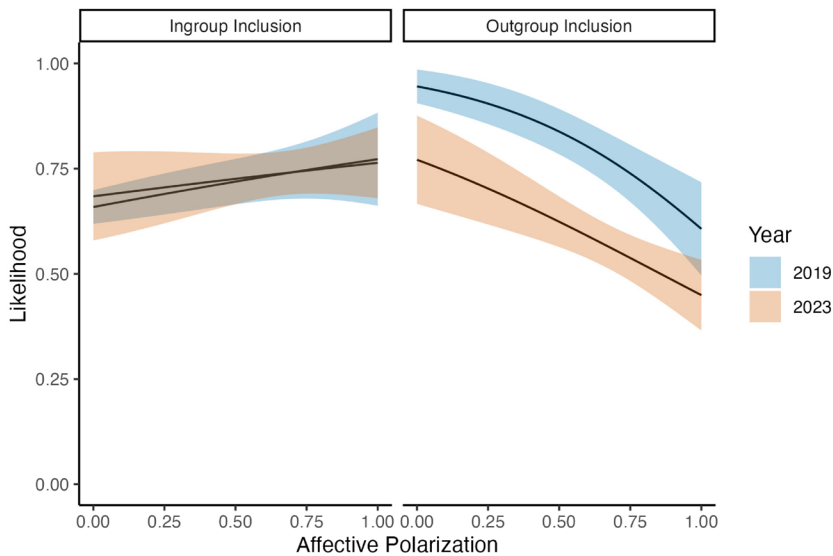


FIGURE 4 Affective polarization and inclusion of Brexit in-group and out-group members. See [Tables A4](#) and [A24](#) in the Supplementary Material for full models.

support for investigating and fining the out-group campaign. For support for the investigation, in both years, we found the opposite pattern in the full sample. There was no evidence that affective polarization was linked to support for investigating the in-group campaign ($p = .750$ in 2019, $p = .958$ in 2023), but it corresponded to greater support for investigating the out-group campaign (2019: $\beta = 0.667$, $p = .014$; 2023: $\beta = 0.800$, $p = .010$). As indicated in [Figure 5](#), people “somewhat agreed” with investigating the in-group across levels of affective polarization, but moving from minimum to maximum affective polarization moved one from “somewhat agree” to “strongly agree.”

Consistent with [H3B](#), affective polarization corresponded to lower support for fining the in-group campaign ($\beta = -0.819$, $p = .012$ in 2019; $\beta = -0.900$, $p = .003$ in 2023), but inconsistent with [H3B](#), it also predicted higher support for fining the out-group campaign ($\beta = 0.908$, $p < .001$ in 2019; $\beta = 1.057$, $p < .001$ in 2023). As indicated in [Figure 5](#), moving from minimum to maximum affective polarization corresponded with moving from “somewhat agree” to the scale midpoint on fining the in-group, and moving from the midpoint to “somewhat agree” on fining the out-group.

Remainers and Leavers displayed different patterns albeit in a consistent fashion across years (see [Tables A12–A13](#) and [A28–A29](#) in the Supplementary Material). While affective polarization did not predict support for investigating the in-group campaign among Remainers (2019: $p = .109$; 2023: $p = .531$), it was associated with greater support for investigating the out-group campaign (2019: $\beta = 1.107$, $p = .002$; 2023: $\beta = 1.295$, $p = .001$). Similarly, affective polarization did not predict support for fining the in-group campaign among Remainers (2019: $p = .464$; 2023: $p = .052$), but it predicted higher support for fining the out-group campaign (2019: $\beta = 1.345$, $p < .001$; 2023: $\beta = 1.456$, $p < .001$). Affective polarization had no detectable link with supporting either in-group investigations (2019: $p = .071$; 2023: $p = .443$) or out-group investigations (2019: $p = .801$; 2023: $p = .896$) among Leavers. However, it did predict lower support for fining the in-group campaign (2019: $\beta = -1.355$, $p = .016$; 2023: $\beta = -1.499$, $p = .018$), though not for the out-group campaign (2019: $p = .565$, 2023: $p = .553$).

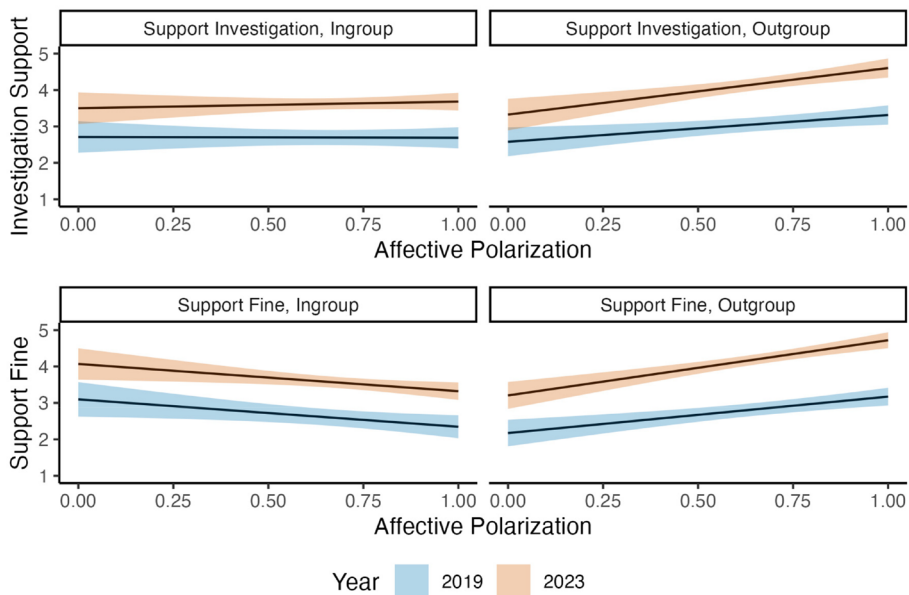


FIGURE 5 Affective polarization and support for investigating corruption in and fining in-group and out-group campaigns. See Tables A10–A11 and A26–A27 in the Supplementary Material for full models.

Experiment 4: Brexit or party?

The previous experiments were about the role of Brexit identities. Party identities are usually decisive for voter attitudes and behavior; hence, we are also interested in the interplay of Brexit identities and party identities. Our final set of experiments tests which of the two identities plays a more important role for voters, which we test using a novel set of experiments.

Across conditions, participants had to read two passages (see Supplementary Material for exact wording). We randomly assigned these passages to either originate with an MP who shared the participant's party but had the opposite Brexit position or with an MP who shared the participant's Brexit identity, but was in the opposite party. We restricted this analysis to the 506 respondents who displayed both partisan and Brexit identities. The experiment allows us to test if group bias is more likely to appear because of a shared Brexit identity (in a situation in which party identity is not shared) or a shared party identity (in a situation in which Brexit identity is not shared).

For each passage, respondents answered two items. We first asked respondents, “How interested would you be in reading the result of this text?” They indicated their answer on a scale from 0 (not at all interested) to 5 (very interested). Then, we asked, “A large website that posts stories from many different news sources is considering sharing the article you just saw. How likely would you be to endorse this article for inclusion in the website?” Participants indicated their answers on a scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 5 (extremely likely).

For H4 to be supported, participants would display greater interest in and greater endorsement of each article for publication when it originates with a Brexit in-group/partisan out-group source than with a Brexit out-group/partisan in-group source. We find some evidence that voters prioritize Brexit identity over party identity in 2019.

In 2019, participants displayed a pattern consistent with H4 for the first of the two passages but not the second. Participants were more interested in the first passage when it was attributed to a Brexit in-group/partisan out-group member than when it was a partisan in-group/Brexit out-group member ($p = .043$) and displayed stronger endorsement of the Brexit in-group passage for

TABLE 3 Summary of Results.

Experiment	Year	Outcome	In-group bias?	Motivation, full sample	Motivation, remainers	Motivation, leavers
1 (Antilocution)	2019	Publication	Yes	In-group/Out-group	In-group	Out-group
	2023		Yes	In-group/Out-group	In-group/Out-group	In-group/Out-group
2 (Avoidance)	2019	Teammate Selection	No	Out-group	Out-group	Out-group
	2023		Yes	Out-group	Out-group	Out-group
3.2 (Discrimination)	2019	Support Investigation	Yes	Out-group	Out-group	In-group
	2023		Yes	Out-group	Out-group	None
3.2 (Discrimination)	2019	Campaign Fines	Yes	In-group/ Out-group	Out-group	In-group
	2023		Yes	In-group/ Out-group	Out-group	In-group
4 (Brexit or Party)	2019	Interest	Mixed	Undefined	Undefined	Undefined
	2023		No	None	Unclear	None
4 (Brexit or Party)	2019	Publication	Mixed	Undefined	Undefined	Undefined
	2023		No	Undefined	None	None

publication ($p = .006$). While the same descriptive pattern occurs in the second passage, the differences were not significant for interest ($p = .174$) or publication endorsement ($p = .107$). These patterns held with both Remain and Leave supporters with one exception: Leavers also displayed greater interest in the second passage when it originated with the Brexit in-group than with the partisan in-group ($p = .009$), but not publication of the first passage ($p = .325$).

However, in 2023, participants did not display differential interest ($ps \geq .264$) or publication propensity ($ps \geq .464$) between a Brexit in-group/partisan out-group piece versus a Brexit out-group/partisan in-group piece. These patterns held among both Leavers and Remainers. In an exploratory analysis, we also assessed the role of Brexit affective polarization for interest and publication endorsement in 2019 and 2023. The results do not suggest that Brexit affective polarization plays any systematic role (for full results, see Supplementary Material [Tables A14–A21](#) for 2019, [A30–A37](#) for 2023).

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Pioneering work by Hobolt et al. (2021) showed that people display prejudice based on Brexit identities. However, prejudiced attitudes do not automatically translate into discriminatory behavior, and it was unclear how much discrimination people engage in based on Brexit identities. In a series of behavioral tasks from a paradigm created by Lelkes and Westwood (2017), we found strong evidence that, in both 2019 and 2023, Brexit identity is a potent source of discriminatory behavior. Despite their novelty compared to partisan identities, participants were willing to engage in discrimination at all levels of severity (see [Table 3](#)). There was only one exception, and in only one experiment: People were unwilling to exclude Brexit opponents from their teams if it meant foregoing potential rewards for task performance. In general, the severity of bias based on Brexit identity exceeds that found in partisanship in America, where differential support for police repression based on partisanship was not found (Lelkes & Westwood, 2017).

The source of in-group bias in 2019 appears mixed, but the evidence for out-group bias appears more robust. Across experiments, the full sample demonstrated a consistent pattern. The more people disliked their Brexit opponents relative to their Brexit allies, the less they were willing to extend charity and resources toward their Brexit opponents. In some contexts, though never among both Leavers and Remainers simultaneously, the same sentiment appeared to drive extending resources and charity to Brexit in-group members. In 2023, the balance was similarly mixed, but similarly tipped in favor of out-group animus as a motivator, particularly among Remainers. One way to read these findings is that it remains inconclusive as to whether Brexit identity prejudice is in-group favoritism or out-group animus. Another is to view each as activated differentially depending on the situation (Amira et al., 2021) or to accept that both can be present simultaneously in individuals and affect behavior accordingly (Brewer, 1999; Brewer & Brown, 1998).

Additionally, while there was a mixed picture of whether Leavers or Remainers displayed more bias, the source of their biases differed, particularly in 2023. In 2019, each group had its share of displaying in-group favoritism and out-group animus. In 2023, both Leavers and Remainers again displayed a mix of motives, but the balance tipped in favor of in-group favoritism among Leavers and out-group animus among Remainers. These findings indicate that Brexit affective polarization, as it exists today, has become more asymmetric. Our findings cannot directly speak to why this asymmetry has emerged. An intuitive explanation is that the “losers” of the referendum display more animus-motivated behavior. However, future work would do well to explain this further.

This work does have some limitations. First, we use convenience samples. Prolific is generally high quality (Douglas et al., 2023) and results from convenience samples do generalize

(Coppock, 2019), making it unlikely that inferences from these samples are distorted. However, they do overrepresent Remainers and underrepresent Leavers, leading to some concern about statistical power for analyses of Leavers. Second, the experiments were not conducted in random order. While we made this design choice deliberately to ratchet up levels of discrimination during the survey experience, this does raise the odds of survey order effects. At the same time, however, it is unlikely that this design dramatically affects choices. One reason is that convenience sample respondents tend not to try to assist researchers in confirming their hypotheses (Mummolo & Peterson, 2019). The other reason is that other survey-based assessments of assessing how much one needs to increase the severity of non-normative behavior show that people are less willing to endorse major acts than minor acts (Westwood et al., 2022). A third limitation is that while these experiments take place in an established paradigm and employ material from actually existing articles or events to maximize external validity whenever possible, caution should be used when extrapolating the findings they generate to daily decision-making. Fourth, and finally, we merely measure, rather than manipulate affective polarization. Therefore, it is possible that other factors that induce both affective polarization and Brexit-based discrimination may drive observed effects.

It remains murky whether the British public prioritize Brexit identities over partisan ones. When we asked respondents to choose to either read a Brexit in-group member or a partisan in-group member's words, they prioritized reading the Brexit in-group member in 2019, but gave both group memberships equal priority in 2023. One possible reason for this is that the salience of party relative to Brexit genuinely changed in 2023 compared to 2019, even if Brexit identities have remained sources of discriminatory behavior. However, it is also possible that partisan sorting on Brexit (Schonfeld & Winter-Levy, 2021) stance made pro-Brexit Labour politicians and anti-Brexit Conservative politicians less realistic.

At the same time, these findings represent a major advance in the literature on political identities in general and Brexit identities in particular. They indicate that even as the issues that characterize political life change, certain issue-based identities can lead to discrimination that rivals partisanship in severity even after the issue fades as a live policy issue. It also underscores prior findings (e.g. Hobolt et al., 2021) that Brexit identities are a deep and enduring feature of British politics. While it is an ongoing question whether affective polarization is generally harmful for democracy (Broockman et al., 2023), these results indicate that these enduring identities can be exploited by opportunistic elites for anti-democratic projects (Druckman et al., 2024).

The results also raise questions for research beyond the United Kingdom, given the increasing role that a new cultural or transnational cleavage plays vis-à-vis the economic left-right cleavage that structured party competition for many decades (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The divide between Leavers and Remainers is a distinct one because these identities received a particular meaning for a broader public in the Brexit campaign and referendum. The same dimension of contestation exists in many countries though, with cosmopolitans that hold a European identity (or EU-supporters) being on one side and Eurosceptics with an exclusively national identity on the other side (Hahm et al., 2023; Kriesi et al., 2012; Kuhn, 2015; Kuhn & Stoeckel, 2014; Risse, 2010). Future research could examine if these identities create affective polarization as well as prejudice even without a referendum or the Leaver/Remainer labels and how this process reshapes political competition in a context of weakening identification with political parties.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

A non-anonymous version of our 2019 pre-registration signifying that we pre-registered the study and analyses prior to fielding (we followed identical protocol in 2023), can be found here: <https://osf.io/m3e8c/>. Data and code files can be found here: <https://osf.io/qmea2/>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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