Social Perceptions
and the EU Referendum

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How do citizens form opinions about policy issues?

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What role does *social* information play?

Opinion Formation

- A *political attitude* is a cognitive evaluation of some object that expresses favour or disfavour toward that object

- Generally understood that attitudes are a weighting of belief considerations:
$$A = \sum_{x=1}^{I} \text{Belief}_i * \text{Weight}_i$$

- Most research focuses on *information* or *arguments* that are likely to change beliefs

"Atomic" Citizens

- Most research portrays citizens as "atomic" actors

- Exceptions to this:
    - Network studies (Huckfeldt and Sprague; Mutz)
    - Deliberation experiments (Karpowitz and Mendelberg)
    - Normative behaviour experiments (Bolsen; Gerber, Green, and Larimer)

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Cues

- *Cues* are seen as a particularly important type of information

- Cues are information communicated from (better-informed? other?) individuals about how to evaluate an object

- Enable citizens to be cognitive misers
  - Outsourcing information processing (Downs 1957)

Cues: An Example

- A referendum issue arises on which citizens must vote

- Citizens *a priori* know little about the issue

- Desiring to form an opinion, they look to political elites for guidance on the issue

- Political parties communicate what position to take and why

- Citizens update to conform to the party-endorsed position

What do we know about cues?

- Two broad categories of cues have been studied:
    - Elite cues (mostly partisan endorsements)
    - Explicit/implicit racial or ethnic group references

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- Two broad categories of cues have been studied:
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- Debate about when and why people follow cues

- Limitations of extant work
    - Most research is in the United States
    - Most research is on fairly low-stakes issues

Social cues signal "attitudinal norms"

- *Attitudinal norms*
    - "widespread viewpoints held by members of a social group"
    - A form of "impersonal influence"
    - Cues about group rather than elite attitudes

- Driven by inherent needs for belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995)

- Individuals should conform to norms when they identify with a group

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- Very little research on this form of impersonal influence

But maybe that's because people don't know anything about or care about what other people think.

We don't think so.

BES Experiment

- Try to understand how perceptions of "leave" and "´remain" as social identity groups impacts attitudes toward the referendum

- Design (2x2 factorial)
  - Treatment: Prompt for open-ended (positive | negative) description of (leave | remain) groups
  - Outcome: Vote intention and feeling about Brexit

- Implementation on BES Panel (Wave 7)
  - Large, representative sample (n = 6,250)
  - About n=1500/cell

Treatment: Positive Leave

*Please think for a minute about people who plan to vote for Britain to **leave** the European Union. In the space below, please write 3 or 4 things you think **positively** describe this group of "leave" supporters.*

Treatment: Negative Leave

*Please think for a minute about people who plan to vote for Britain to **leave** the European Union. In the space below, please write 3 or 4 things you think **negatively** describe this group of "leave" supporters.*

Treatment: Positive Remain

*Please think for a minute about people who plan to vote for Britain to **stay in** the European Union. In the space below, please write 3 or 4 things you think **positively** describe this group of "remain" supporters.*

Treatment: Negative Remain

*Please think for a minute about people who plan to vote for Britain to **stay in** the European Union. In the space below, please write 3 or 4 things you think **negatively** describe this group of "remain" supporters.*

Outcome: Vote Intention

In this upcoming referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, voters will be asked "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?" How do you think you will vote?

To remain a member of the European Union
To leave the European Union
I would not vote
Don't know

Outcome: Feeling about Brexit

How will you feel if Britain votes to leave the EU?

Very unhappy
Somewhat unhappy
A little unhappy
Indifferent
A little happy
Somewhat happy
Very happy
Don't know

Results: Open-Ended Responses

- Excited about open-ended coding
  - Currently have RA coding this
  - Haven't fully analysed it

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- Complementary set of Tweets about referendum

Comments about Remainers (Positive)

- "passionate, hygenic, intelligent, nice"

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- "People who feel they want to be more than just little Englanders and who believe there is strength economically and politically in being part of a larger group."

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- "People who feel they want to be more than just little Englanders and who believe there is strength economically and politically in being part of a larger group."

- "recognise co-operation, interested in security from global terror, recognise the benefits of financial stability in a large organisation"

Comments about Leavers (Positive)

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- "xenophobes"

- "Meh"

Comments about Remainers (Negative)

- "Lefties Hippies Middle class"

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- "Elitist, ideological, lacking passion"

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- "anti-British , unpatriotic"

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- "Elitist, ideological, lacking passion"

- "i do not know anybody that is going to vote to remain"

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- "British supremacy, islamophobic, angry"

Comments about Leavers (Negative)

- "Anti-Immigrational Racist Bigotted Monarchist"

- "British supremacy, islamophobic, angry"

- "Nothing negative"

Comments about Leavers (Negative)

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- "British supremacy, islamophobic, angry"

- "Nothing negative"

- "Elderly, xenophobes, unintelligent."

Comments about Leavers (Negative)

- "Anti-Immigrational Racist Bigotted Monarchist"

- "British supremacy, islamophobic, angry"

- "Nothing negative"

- "Elderly, xenophobes, unintelligent."

- "Racist, little Englanders"

Comments about Leavers (by Leavers)

Positive

Negative

Comments about Leavers (by Remainers)

Positive

Negative

Comments about Remainers (by Leavers)
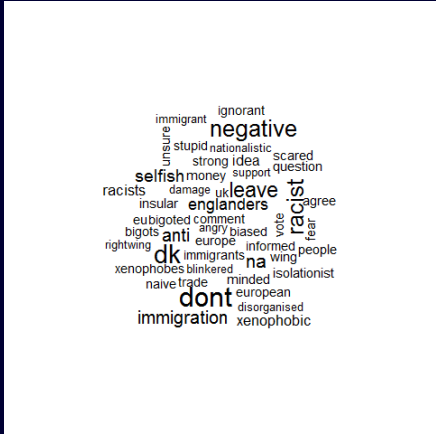
Positive

Negative

Comments about Remainers (by Remainers)

Positive

Negative

Overall Sentiment
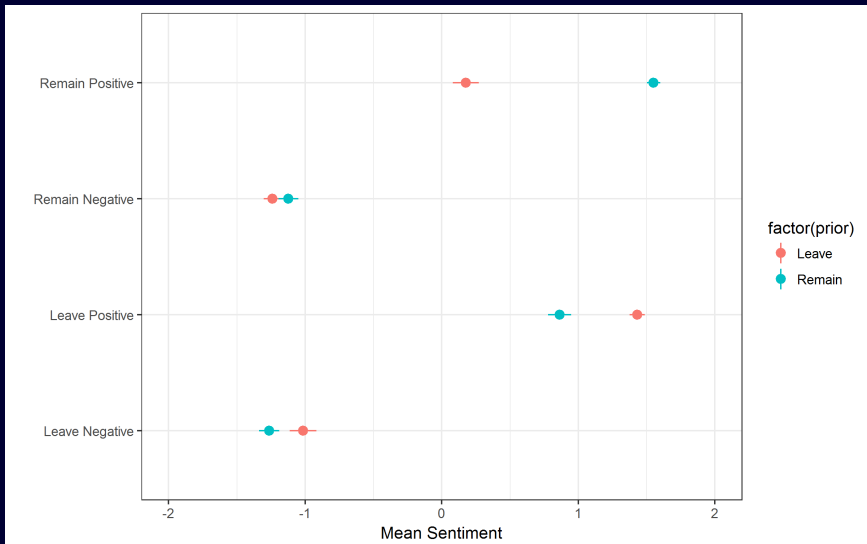
Results: Opinion Descriptives

- Remain: 49.8%

- Leave: 47.1%

- Won't vote: 3.1%

- Mean happiness w/ Brexit: 0.49

	Remain (1)	Leave (2)	DK (3)	Happiness (4)
Leave Positive	0.011	−0.008	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.012)	(0.014)
Remain Negative	0.006	−0.002	0.001	−0.010
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Remain Positive	−0.001	0.013	−0.011	0.019
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Constant	0.423***	0.406***	0.144***	0.485***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Observations	6,250	6,250	6,250	5,612
R^2	0.0001	0.0002	0.0002	0.001
Adjusted R^2	−0.0004	−0.0002	−0.0003	0.0002

	Remain (1)	Leave (2)	DK (3)	Happiness (4)
Tr Favours Remain	−0.010	0.011	−0.005	0.015
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Constant	0.432***	0.401***	0.143***	0.479***
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Observations	6,250	6,250	6,250	5,612
R^2	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.0004
Adjusted R^2	−0.0001	−0.00003	−0.0001	0.0002

What's going on?

- Possibly nothing!

- But, this is late-stage so we shouldn't expect large effects

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- Advantage of panel: this is within-subjects so we can compare changes in attitudes against prior self-report

| | Remain | Leave | DK |
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Tr Negative	-0.033^{***}	-0.038^{***}	0.062^{***}
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Tr Positive	-0.043^{***}	-0.031^{***}	0.069^{***}
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Tr Negative	-0.040^{***}	-0.034^{***}	0.068^{***}
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Tr Positive	-0.036^{***}	-0.029^{***}	0.061^{***}
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Observations	12,500	12,500	12,500
R^2	0.025	0.024	0.048
Adjusted R^2	0.013	0.012	0.024

	Remain	Leave	DK
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Tr Favours Leave	-0.042^{***}	-0.032^{***}	0.069^{***}
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Tr Favours Remain	-0.035^{***}	-0.033^{***}	0.062^{***}
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Observations	12,500	12,500	12,500
R^2	0.025	0.023	0.048
Adjusted R^2	0.013	0.012	0.024
F Statistic (df = 2; 6248)	80.473^{***}	74.440^{***}	156.546^{***}

What does this tell us?

- Not all citizens automatically think about issues in group terms

- But, thinking about groups can influence their judgement processes

- Open question: what happens if we supply social cues about groups?

Social cues signal "attitudinal norms"

- *Attitudinal norms*
    - "widespread viewpoints held by members of a social group"
    - A form of "impersonal influence"
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- Driven by inherent needs for belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995)

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Our Research

- Examine information about attitudinal norms in a novel context
  - Outside the United States
  - Norms of non-partisan and non-racial/ethnic groups that are not heavily politicized
    - Conservative test of social influence
  - High-stakes issue (British referendum on EU membership)

- Use experiments to manipulate access to normative information and measure effects on opinion

Our Research

Our general expectation is opinion change in response to social cues

Our Research

We think this might suggest one or two mechanisms:

1. Social identity mechanism: people conform to the opinion of the group they identify with

2. Informational mechanism: people use attitudinal norm cues as information or evidence in favour and against a policy

But we do not test for this (yet).

Experiment 1: Study Design

- Interested in attitude formation with regard to the British referendum to leave the EU

- Examine identification with three one of three social group types:
    - Social class: Working class (anti EU) versus middle class (pro EU).
    - Nationality: English (anti EU) versus British (pro EU).
    - Age: Old (anti EU) versus young (pro EU).

- Randomly supply information about vote intentions of these groups

Study Design

Group	Treatment	Control
Class	493	481
Nationality	465	498
Age	486	487
Control		n = 492

Expectations

Cues should increase support for group-normative attitude:

- For those identifying with a "remain" group, treatment should make attitude more pro-remain.

- For those identifying with a "leave" group, treatment should make attitude more pro-leave.

Most people think of themselves as either young or old. What do you think of yourself as?
Young
Old
Neither

How close do you feel to other (young/old) people?
Very close
Fairly close
Not very close
Not close at all

Most people think of themselves as either middle class or working class. What do you think of yourself as?
Middle class
Working class
Neither

How close do you feel to other (middle/working) class people?
Very close
Fairly close
Not very close
Not close at all

Most people in Britain think of themselves as either British or English. What do you think of yourself as?
British
English
Neither

How close do you feel to other (British/English) people?
Very close
Fairly close
Not very close
Not close at all

In June this year the British people will vote in a referendum on whether the United Kingdom will remain in or leave the European Union.

Most people who consider themselves young say they will vote to remain in the EU, whereas most people who consider themselves old say they will vote to leave the EU.

On a scale from 0 to 10, what do you think about Britain's membership of the European Union?
Britain should definitely leave the European Union

—

Britain should definitely remain in the European Union

In June this year the British people will vote in a referendum on whether the United Kingdom will remain in or leave the European Union.

Most people who consider themselves middle class say they will vote to remain in the EU, whereas most people who consider themselves working class say they will vote to leave the EU.

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YouGov

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0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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- ⚪ To remain a member of the European Union
- ⚪ To leave the European Union
- ⚪ I will not vote
- ⚪ Don't know

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YouGov

How will you feel if Britain votes to leave the EU?

- ○ Very unhappy
- ○ Somewhat unhappy
- ○ A little unhappy
- ○ Indifferent
- ○ A little happy
- ○ Somewhat happy
- ○ Very happy

>

YouGov

On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very negative and 10 means very positive, how would you describe your feelings toward people who plan to vote to remain in the European Union?

Very negative   `0` — `1` — `2` — `3` — `4` — `5` — `6` — `7` — `8` — `9` — `10`   Very positive

`>`

YouGov

On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very negative and 10 means very positive, how would you describe your feelings toward people who plan to vote to leave the European Union?

Very negative   0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Very positive

>

Implementation

- Two days of the YouGov Omnibus panel
  - 18–20 April 2016
  - Median completion time: 5 minutes

- Total sample size n=3,402
  - Power to detect $d = 0.07$

- Not strictly representative

Demographics

- Gender: 55% female

- Age: mean = 48.3, sd = 16.9

- Social class:
    - AB: 32%
    - C1: 29%
    - C2: 18%
    - DE: 22%

- Education: > Secondary = 49%; > University = 22%

- Voted 2015 General: 82%

- Party ID: 30% Con.; 27% Labour; 8% LibDem

Identification w/ Social Groups by Experimental Condition

Group	Leave group	Remain group	Neither
Age	21%	33%	46%
Nationality	40%	53%	7%
Class	45%	37%	18%
Total	35%	40%	24%

Identification w/ Class Group

Class identification matches "objective" class
identities

	Leave	Remain	Neither
AB	0.31	0.57	0.12
C1	0.40	0.41	0.19
C2	0.59	0.19	0.22
DE	0.59	0.17	0.24

Identification w/ Age Group

Age identification matches objective ages

Self-Identified Group	Mean Age
Older/Leave	60.45
Young/Remain	34.53
Neither	53.03

Descriptives

- Britain should definitely (leave/remain in) the European Union:
  mean = 5.16 (0 = leave; 10 = remain)

- Vote intention

    - Leave: 37.8%
    - Remain: 41.7%
    - Excluding DKs: 52% Remain

- Feeling scale: mean = 0.52 (0 = happy; 1 = unhappy)

- Thermometers (0-1 scale)

    - Remainers: mean = 0.58
    - Leavers: mean = 0.52

Predictors of Pro-Remain Attitude
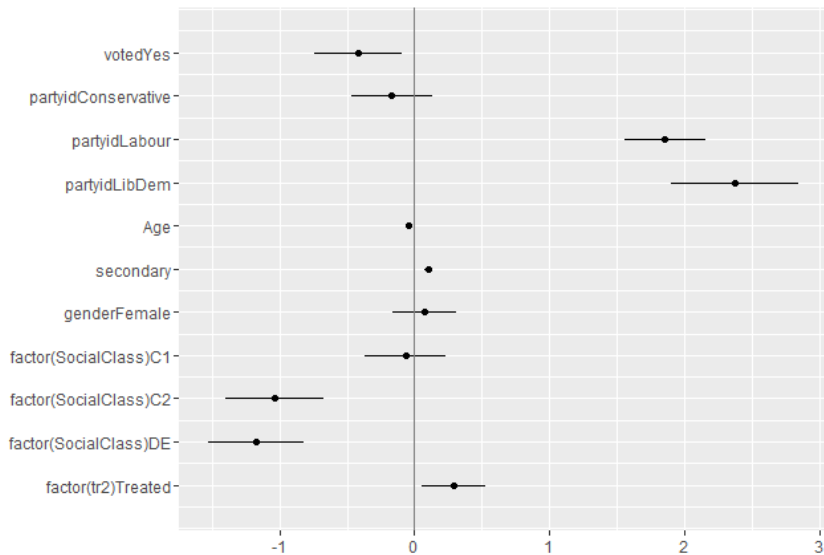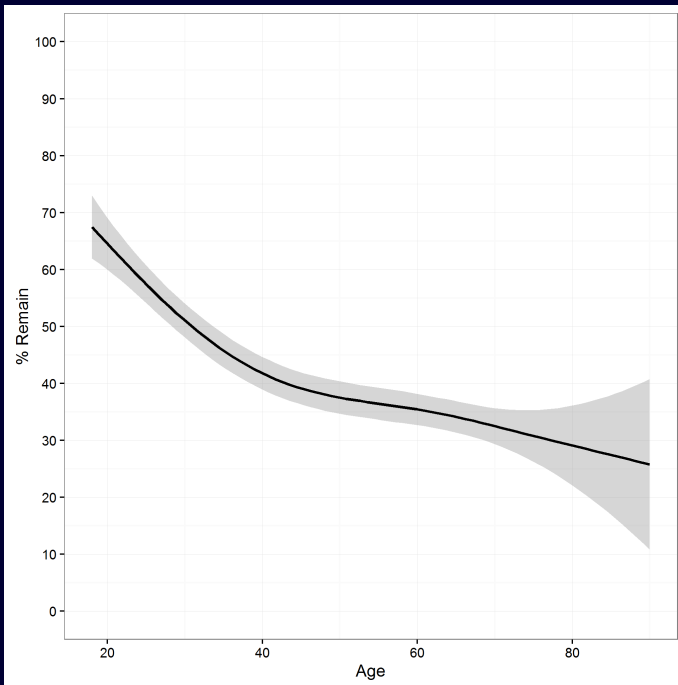
Results

- Really small effects!

Results: % Vote Remain

Results: % Vote Remain (Class)
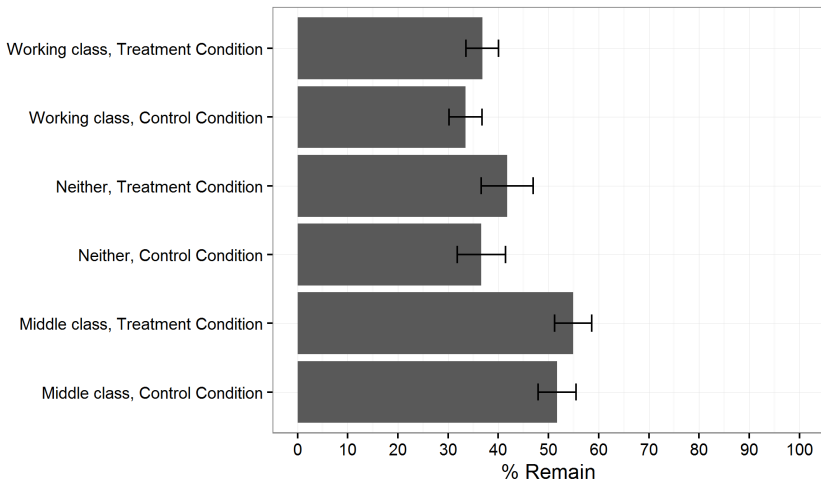
Results: % Vote Remain (Age)
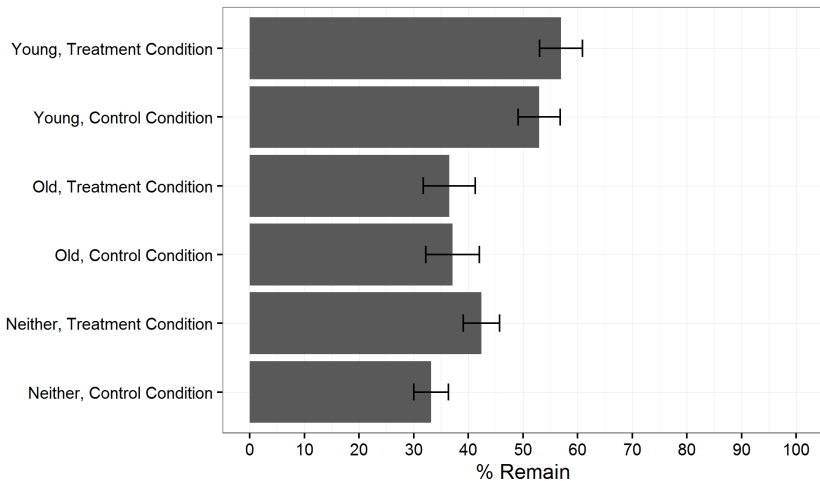
Results: % Vote Remain (Nationality)
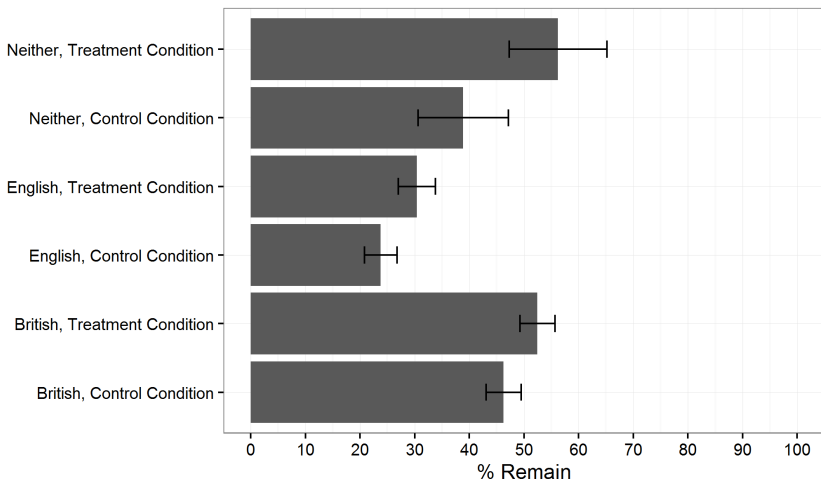
Results: % Vote Remain (All)
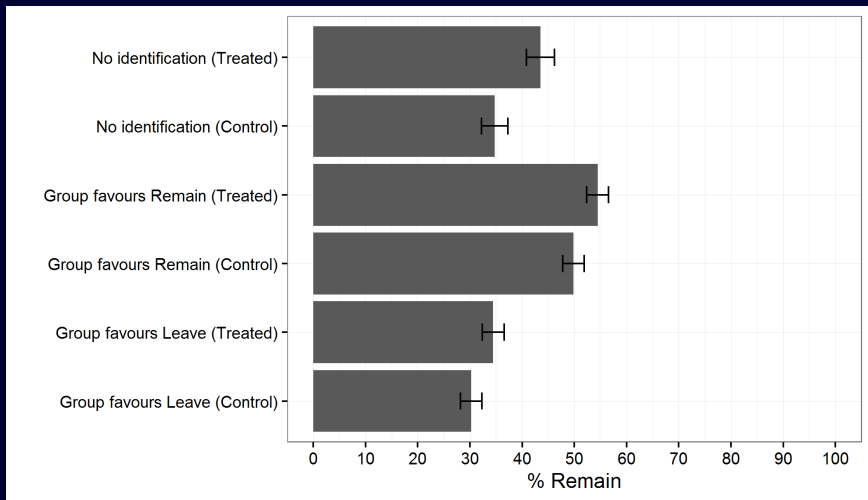
Results: All outcomes

Effect of cue (versus no cue) across all outcomes

Outcome	β	SE
Leave	-0.10	0.08
Remain	**0.23**	0.08
DK	-0.21	0.17
Scale	**0.33**	0.14
Feeling	**0.03**	0.01
Therm (Diff)	**0.04**	0.02
Avg	**0.09**	0.03

Results: All outcomes

Effect of cue (versus no cue) across all outcomes among only "neither" respondents

Outcome	β	SE
Leave	**-0.40**	0.16
Remain	**0.37**	0.16
DK	0.03	0.33
Scale	**0.73**	0.28
Feeling	**0.07**	0.03
Therm (Diff)	0.06	0.04
Avg	**0.17**	0.07
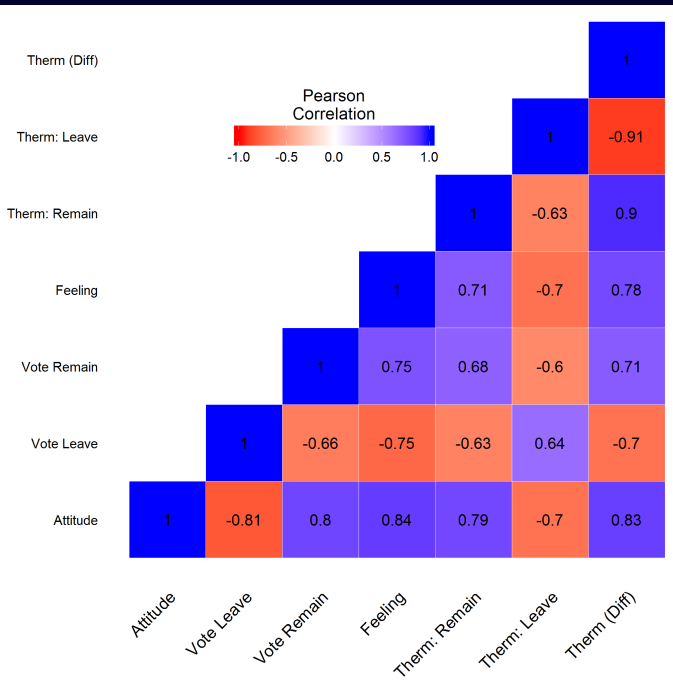
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- Possible explanations?
    - True effect is small
    - Late in the campaign
    - Attitudes likely crystallized
    - Competing cues
    - Inattention
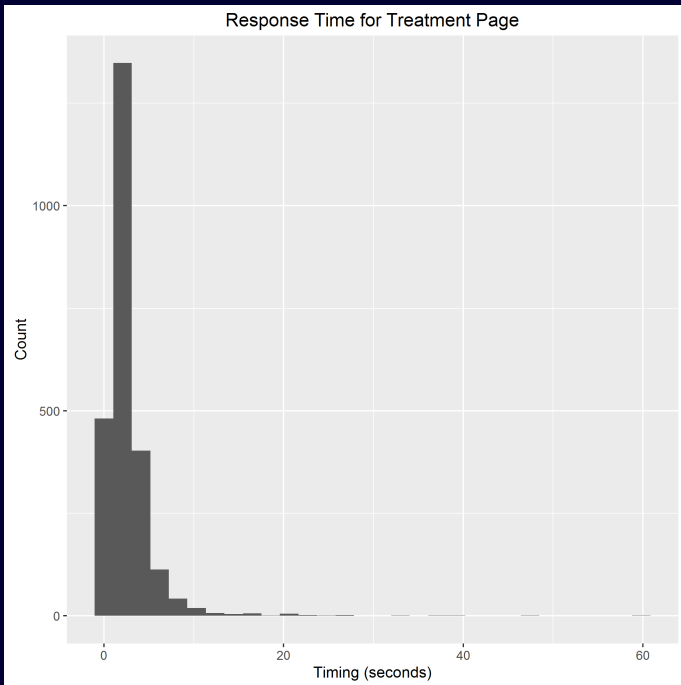
Experiment 2: A Replication!

- Goal is to replicate our Experiment 1 results

- But focus only on:
    - class identity
    - one specific aspect of the issue (immigration/market trade-off)
    - try to distinguish informational from conformity effects

Experiment 2: A Replication!

- Goal is to replicate our Experiment 1 results

- But focus only on:
  - class identity
  - one specific aspect of the issue (immigration/market trade-off)
  - try to distinguish informational from identity mechanisms

- In the field now

Experiment 2: Design

Self-identification	Control	Favour	Oppose
Working class	1	2	3
Middle class	4	5	6

- Measure self-identification
- Measure perceptions of that group's views
- Randomly assign to "favour" or "oppose" cue
- Measure respondent's view
- Manipulation check

YouGov

Do you think of yourself as belonging to a social class? If so, which one?

- ⬤ Middle class
- ⬤ Working class
- ⬤ Other (please specify) [_____]
- ⬤ None

>

YouGov

Last June the majority of British people voted in favour of Britain leaving the EU. A key issue in the British government's negotiation with the EU about Brexit is whether to prioritise free trade with the EU or to prioritise controlling immigration from the EU.

Do you think that a majority of working class people support allowing unrestricted immigration from EU countries in return for free trade with the EU?

○ Yes, the majority of working class people favour allowing unrestricted immigration in return for free trade

○ No, the majority of working class people oppose allowing unrestricted immigration in return for free trade

○ Don't know

[>]

YouGov

A majority of working class people oppose allowing unrestricted immigration from the EU in return for free trade with the EU. To what extent do YOU agree or disagree with the following statement:

'The government should allow unrestricted immigration from EU countries in return for free trade with the EU'

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Don't know

>

YouGov

For each of the following groups, do you think **a majority of that group** support allowing unrestricted immigration from EU countries in return for free trade with the EU?

	Majority favours allowing immigration in return for free trade	Majority favours controlling immigration at the cost of free trade	Don't know
Middle class people	○	○	○
British people as a whole	○	○	○
Working class people	○	○	○

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    - Measure perceptions and preferences surrounding Brexit negotiations

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- Key components
    - Measure perceptions and preferences surrounding Brexit negotiations
    - Examine emergence of "Leaver" and "Remainer" as opinion-based identities and evolution thereof during negotiations

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    - 3- or 4-wave panel survey over 2017/18
    - Plans for several embedded survey experiments and conjoint experiments

- Key components
    - Measure perceptions and preferences surrounding Brexit negotiations
    - Examine emergence of "Leaver" and "Remainer" as opinion-based identities and evolution thereof during negotiations
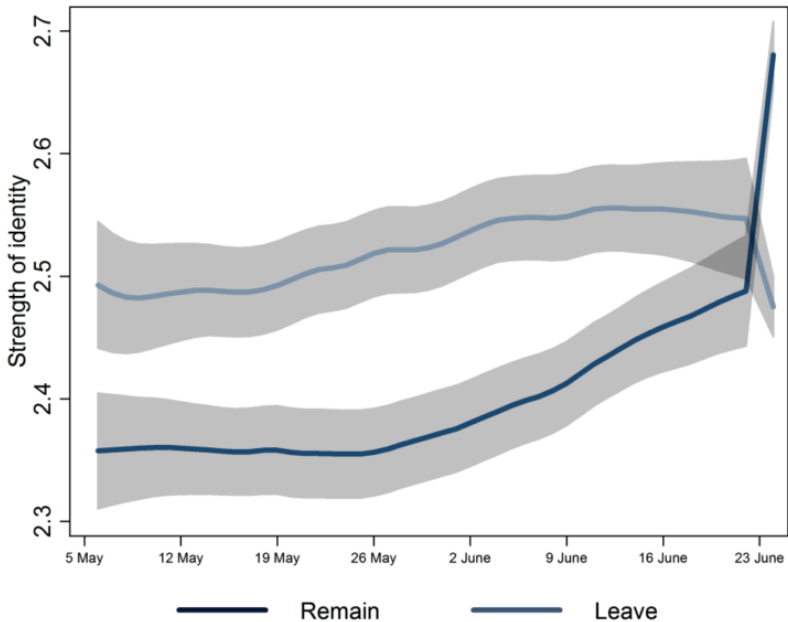   - Examine how those identities shape preferences on post-Brexit policymaking

Conclusion I

- Cues seem to be an important part of citizen reasoning about policies

- We offer some of the first non-US experimental data on *social* cues that communicate attitudinal norms within non-politicised groups

- Results are fairly inconclusive at this point, but replications in the field and more work coming

Conclusion II

- Brexit continues to be an interesting site to study social influence because of the transformation of a two-stage process that seems to be progressing:
    - Citizens use social identity cues to form opinions on Brexit
    - Brexit itself is leading to new *opinion-based group* identities ("Leave" and "Remain")

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- We can learn a lot about Brexit — but also political psychology generally — by examining how these group identities affect perceptions and preferences in the coming year(s)