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Emotions and domestic vote choice

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Abstract

What is the emotional impact of extraordinary events and how do they shape subsequent electoral outcomes? We posit that voters' emotional reactions to such events influence whether they are likely to re-think their prior vote choice. We focus on the Brexit referendum as a prominent example of such an event. The referendum outcome elicited different emotional responses among voters, and these challenged party loyalties. Using evidence from an online cross-sectional survey conducted in the UK in June 2017 shortly after the UK General Election, we show that anger is associated with defection among Remainers and enthusiasm is linked to vote-switching among Leavers. Fear, on the other hand, does not have an effect. Our article contributes to our understanding of how extraordinary events and emotional reactions lead to shifting partisan loyalties and electoral change.

Keywords: vote switching, fear, anger, enthusiasm, referendum, Brexit

Introduction

What is the emotional impact of extraordinary events, such as Brexit, and how do they affect political behaviour and citizens' political alignment? Brexit – the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) following the outcome of the 23 June 2016 referendum – is a critical moment in contemporary British history. The UK electorate voted against the status quo, unlike in previous UK-wide referendums, such as the 1975 referendum on the UK's European Community membership and the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum. Scholars have examined the causes of the Brexit referendum outcome (e.g. Hobolt, 2016; Clarke et al., 2017; Evans and Menon, 2017; Vasilopoulou, 2016). Less attention has been paid to how Brexit has elicited emotional responses among the British public and the ways in which these have affected subsequent electoral politics. Yet, momentous events create a political context different than 'normal' politics. They bring voter and media attention to political actors, institutions and policies, encouraging fresh evaluations of government performance. Such events can disrupt the normal cycle of politics, creating an environment that increases the likelihood of updating previous opinions and forming new preferences.

In this article, we suggest that people experienced different emotional reactions to the referendum result. These emotions – notably anger, fear and enthusiasm – were likely conditional not just on how people voted in the referendum, but also on whether their referendum vote was at odds with their previous party preference. We draw on literature on citizens' emotional reactions to terrorist attacks and natural disasters (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012; Vasilopoulos, 2018; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018) and posit that voters' emotional reactions to extraordinary events influence whether they are likely to re-think their prior vote choice as a consequence. Unlike terrorist attacks and natural disasters that are valence issues, however, Brexit is a positional issue, symbolising sharp divisions within the UK, which have consolidated into newly salient identities: 'Leave' and 'Remain' (Hobolt et al., 2020; Evans and Schaffner, 2019). We argue that Brexit elicited strong emotions, including fear, anger and enthusiasm, which led voters to rethink party loyalties. We demonstrate that Remain voters who voted for Leave-campaigning parties in 2015 were more likely to switch if they were angry about the referendum result. Enthusiasm led Leave voters who voted for Remain-campaigning parties in 2015 to defect. In contrast, fear did not have such an effect among voters.

Using evidence from an online cross-sectional survey conducted in the UK by YouGov in June 2017 (N=1699), our study makes three significant contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on the electoral effects of extraordinary events by studying Brexit, a politically divisive event. We show that momentous events of a positional nature can elicit both negative and positive emotions. Under certain conditions, emotions associated with higher reliance on predispositions and habits might in fact result in weakening of partisan identities – at least when the event is highly salient. Second, by demonstrating that emotional reactions to an EU referendum moderate the effect of voters' EU preferences on vote choice, we advance the limited literature on the impact of EU referenda on domestic vote choice (e.g. De Vries, 2009). Third, we contribute to the literature on British politics. Brexit had an affective impact on citizens who experienced different emotions as a result of the referendum outcome. By demonstrating that discrete emotional reactions to Brexit have different effects on vote stability, we show that emotions not only divided individuals across but also within

the same Brexit camp. Our findings have implications for understanding shifting party loyalties in a general European context of high electoral volatility, as the effects of extraordinary events and their emotional impact deserve further study as drivers of party system change and dealignment.

Emotional Reactions to Extraordinary Events: the case of Brexit

Extraordinary events are moments in a country's history that tend to have a long-lasting effect on those citizens that experience them. Such events may include natural or man-made disasters (e.g. floods, hurricanes, pandemics, power plant accidents), epochal terrorist events, such as 9/11, major economic downturns and incidents of widespread social unrest. Although they can vary in terms of breadth of relevance from localised to having nation-wide consequences, extraordinary events tend to have a collective dimension often prompting citizens to confront questions about the fundamental principles and values in their society (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012). Extraordinary events are critical moments that reshape the political debate, alter the hierarchy of dominant issues on the political agenda, and change the direction of public policy (Birkland, 1997). Given that prominence and importance represent key news selection criteria (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), national media are likely to prioritise such events. In contrast to periods of normal politics, dramatic events strongly command the attention of the public. Their intensity and salience bring citizen attention to political elites, institutions and public policies, as well as the government's ability to promptly address the problem and lead to attributions of blame (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012). The surprise or shock of the event is likely to elicit a range of different emotional responses (e.g. Lerner et al., 2003; Huddy et al., 2005; Vasilopoulos, 2018; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018). This change in the political environment creates opportunities for citizens to update existing political opinions, form new preferences and reassess government performance (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012).

Brexit has the qualities of an extraordinary event. Although this was the second UK referendum on the question of Europe, the decision to end the UK's EU membership is one of the most significant public policy decisions in contemporary British history. It has had a profound effect on domestic UK party politics, the country's political system and constitutional arrangements, its political economy, governance and role in the world (Gamble, 2018). It revealed a significant gap between the citizens and the parliament: despite the fact that citizens opted for Leave, the majority of the MPs were pro-Remain. It also exposed major divisions within parties. On the one hand, in Labour, Jeremy Corbyn, a Eurosceptic politician, won the leadership of a mostly Europhile party. On the other hand, the Conservative party initially supported a Remain-backing leader after the referendum, even though there was a significant Eurosceptic faction within the party (Gamble, 2018). Brexit has a strong collective dimension and has drawn public attention from citizens from a variety of socio-demographic backgrounds independent of how they voted in the referendum. The continuous news coverage of this highly newsworthy event (e.g. Hönnige et al. 2020) has encouraged nationwide debates about Brexit-related policy, increased public scrutiny of the government's response and prompted government evaluations. Brexit requires a collective response in the sense that any government's solution to the Brexit question should reflect as many varied interests as possible in order to be perceived as legitimate.

Extraordinary moments, in contrast to periods of normal politics, are likely to be highly emotionally stimulating events. Terrorist attacks and natural disasters may be characterised as valence issues, as few – if any – citizens will perceive them as positive events. As such, they tend to elicit negative affective responses, including fear and anger (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012; Vasilopoulos, 2018; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018). In contrast, Brexit is a positional issue, symbolising sharp divisions within the UK, which have consolidated into newly salient identities: ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ (Hobolt et al., 2020; Evans and Schaffner, 2019). Brexit created shared identities, which influence attitude formation, policy evaluation, decision-making and political behaviour. These are widespread, cut across traditional party lines, are often stronger than party identity, and are linked to evaluative biases (Hobolt et al., 2020). The debate about Brexit is ‘so intense for many voters that they have come to form a strong emotional attachment to the cause of remaining in or leaving the EU’ (Curtice, 2018: 4). In line with key works in political psychology that differentiate between three distinct emotional responses affecting human behaviour (e.g. Brader, 2005; MacKuen et al., 2010; Valentino et al., 2008; Valentino et al., 2011), we also focus on fear, anger and enthusiasm as the principal emotions generated by the Brexit referendum outcome.

Some members of the public, most likely Remainers, may perceive Brexit as a threat. These conscious or pre-conscious threat appraisals may elicit anger and fear (Erisen et al., 2020). Anger will be triggered if Brexit is interpreted as an illegitimate threat to the existing social and moral order. For angry individuals, Brexit is perceived as an unjust disruption to a person’s desired condition. Continuous discussions regarding the content of the two Leave campaigns and the extent to which their argumentation relied on facts may serve to further fuel and entrench feelings of anger.

Fear, on the other hand, will be activated when Brexit is interpreted in light of uncertainty. Changing the status quo implies novelty and unpredictability, especially given that there are different interpretations regarding the specific UK–EU relationship post-Brexit (Menon and Fowler, 2016). In the short run, Brexit resulted in a sharp drop in the value of the pound; in the long run it is hard to predict what the economic and social consequences might be. This uncertainty might evoke feelings of anxiety for some individuals about the future of themselves and their families and fear about the potential negative economic effects of Brexit on the country as a whole.

Other citizens, however, will have responded to Brexit with enthusiasm. For these individuals, who are most likely Brexit supporters, the referendum outcome may represent the UK’s first opportunity to reclaim its sovereignty and be exclusively responsible for the laws in its territory. It is a symbol of the UK’s independence from external elites and organisations.

Behavioural Consequences of Emotional Reactions to Brexit

We argue that these different emotional reactions to the referendum outcome will have behavioural consequences in the domestic electoral arena. Conscious or pre-conscious appraisals of an event are likely to produce discrete emotions, which have different effects on political judgement and decision-making (Kühne et al., 2011). Emotions influence how people deal with the world, shape the way that they approach politics and structure the type of action they will undertake (MacKuen et al., 2010; for an evolutionary psychology perspective, see Tooby and Cosmidis 2008). Although they

are primarily tailored to help the individual to coordinate their response to the event that elicited the emotion, their effects ‘often persist past the original emotion-evoking event’ (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015, p. 6; see also Lerner and Keltner, 2001). Given that EU attitudes are also influential in the context of domestic elections held after EU referenda (De Vries, 2009), we expect a direct effect between vote choice in the referendum and vote choice in the subsequent general election.

In this article, we go beyond the direct effect of EU-related attitudes on vote choice, by arguing that emotions moderate the effect of EU preferences, i.e. whether citizens voted to Leave or Remain in the EU, on vote choice in national elections. In normal circumstances, different emotions are expected to strengthen or weaken *partisan* political identities (Marcus et al., 2000); in the UK since 2016, the existence of two sets of cross-cutting political identities has complicated such predictions. Considering the strength and salience of Brexit identities and the nature of Brexit as a positional issue (Hobolt et al., 2020), we posit that the effects of emotional reactions are conditional on which side of the Brexit debate one is on. This process is also strengthened by the fact that although post-referendum the Labour and Conservative parties were formally associated with the Remain and Leave camps respectively, they suffered from internal divisions and as such provided conflicting signals to the electorate. On the one hand, the Labour party officially campaigned in favour of Remain, yet its leader Jeremy Corbyn was ambivalent towards Brexit. After the referendum, the party promised to honour the result. On the other hand, the Conservative party was internally split during the run-up to Brexit, with some senior Conservatives siding with the Remain camp and others advocating their country’s withdrawal from the EU. In the aftermath of Brexit, they appointed a Remain-supporting leader who nonetheless was charged with ‘getting Brexit done’ (see also Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Hobolt, 2018; Mellon et al., 2018).

Starting with Remainers, we argue that discrete emotional responses to the referendum, i.e. anger and fear, is associated with different patterns of voting behaviour. Our focus is on Remainers who voted for a Leave-supporting party in 2015, since we are primarily interested in vote switching across rather than within Brexit camps. Given that Remainers were unhappy with the Brexit results, we focus on the negative emotions of anger and fear. Although both emotions are negatively valenced, they are linked to different judgement and choice outcomes. Anger and fear differ in the appraisal themes of certainty and control and have opposite effects on risk-perception and preferences (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; 2001). Starting with anger, research shows that it activates the disposition system, which regulates the execution of previously learned behaviour (Marcus et al., 2000; Brader and Marcus, 2013). In this condition, voters tend to rely on political heuristics and habits, such as partisan preferences, in order to make decisions and avoid processing new information (MacKuen et al. 2010; Valentino et al. 2011; Suhay and Erisen 2018). Anger is also associated with a perception that a given event or object poses an illegitimate threat to the social order and a moral violation to a person’s desired condition (Vasilopoulos et al., 2018). Anger is the expression of frustration over something that the individual perceives to be rightfully theirs. This appraisal of injustice results in a strong tendency for blame attribution. Feeling angry entails that an actor will be blamed or deemed responsible for the event (Wagner, 2014). These actors who are blamed are perceived to have been in control of their actions and ‘capable of having acted otherwise’ (Rico et al., 2017: 448). Angry individuals tend to feel control over the situation and seek to

remove obstacles that are blocking progress towards their desired goal (Brader, 2011). As such, anger is associated with defensive actions to protect extant identifications. It also encourages aggressive, confrontational, hostile and risk-taking responses (Huddy et al., 2005; Druckman and McDermott, 2008). Angry people tend to make optimistic risk-assessments (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; 2001), are less willing to compromise (MacKuen et al., 2010) and are more ready to support punishment (Kühne and Schemer, 2015). For example, anger elicited by appraisals of responsibility and illegitimate harm is associated to populist attitudes and support for Brexit (Rico et al., 2017; Vasilopoulou and Wagner, 2017).

Applied to Brexit, angry Remainers will perceive Brexit as an illegitimate threat. They will place blame on elites and political parties who they hold responsible for the referendum outcome. Here we follow literature that suggests that Brexit created stronger identification than partisanship and cut across traditional party lines (Hobolt et al., 2020; Evans and Schaffner, 2019). Recall that the 2017 election was characterised by the high salience of Brexit, not least because the then PM called for it in order to strengthen the government's hand in the UK–EU Brexit negotiations (Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Hobolt, 2018). Given the strength of Brexit-related affective polarization, we expect that anger could boost pro-EU dispositions rather than partisanship. The mechanism related to the strength habitual behaviour remains the same yet the primary disposition here is Brexit identity. Under conditions of high salience of this identity, we posit that protecting one's Remain identity required changing vote preferences. Increased confidence in their Brexit preferences will lead angry Remainers to 'deepen their commitment to the preference, to ignore and not pursue additional information, and to resist persuasion' (Druckman and McDermott, 2008, p. 303). Their heightened sense of optimism and control over the situation will impact upon their willingness to compromise. Angry individuals will become much more polarised on Brexit and seek to punish their party at the polls as responsible for Brexit. The belief that something went morally wrong with Brexit and that their party was partly complicit will predominate. The heightened willingness to take risks may also make the decision to switch parties more likely. Among this group, defection should be understood as retaliatory and punitive action against the threat and the groups that are associated with it.

Fear activates the surveillance system (Marcus et al., 2000), which motivates individuals to seek out more information and inhibits reliance on habitual routines, such as partisanship. It is also related to the unpredictability of an event, which is thought to be determined by circumstances outside the individual's control. Fearful people tend to have a heightened perception of risk and feel lack of control over the threat. Anxiety leads to more pessimistic judgments about a situation and is associated with caution, vigilance and risk-aversion (Lazarus, 1991; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Druckman and McDermott, 2008). Uncertainty depresses confidence and often leads to conciliatory behaviour and support for political concessions (e.g. Huddy et al., 2005; MacKuen et al., 2010). As such, fear facilitates persuasion and compromise, as anxious individuals are risk-averse and seek protection in order to avoid danger and create a safer environment (MacKuen et al., 2010, p. 449).

Applied to Brexit, those Remainers who have reacted to the referendum with fear will be less likely to change their vote based on their Brexit stance. Again, we focus on the importance of Brexit identities and suggest that anxiety will inhibit reliance on

their prior Brexit predispositions, i.e. it will essentially weaken their Brexit identity. They will be more likely to want to seek compromise on the issue rather than sticking to their pro-EU credentials. They will be more open to information and persuasion to accept the referendum outcome, and as such update their Brexit identity in line with their partisanship, as this will reduce their fear and uncertainty. Unlike angry Remainers who will cast a punishment vote blaming the elites for the referendum outcome, anxious individuals will perceive defection as a risky strategy that does not sit comfortably with their emotional disposition.

Among Brexit supporters, on the other hand, we posit that enthusiasm about the referendum outcome should motivate them to bring their party choice in line with their Leave stance. Enthusiasm is a positive emotion and needs to be evaluated in the context of a referendum that resulted in an outcome consistent with these individuals' preferences. Note that enthusiasm is only one out of many potential positive emotions that individuals might feel as a result of the Brexit referendum result. Research shows that hope, pride and sympathy essentially fall into the same cluster of emotions summarised by the latent concept of enthusiasm (Marcus and MacKuen, 1993; Marcus et al., 2017). These positive emotions tend to be similar in terms of their 'neural, psychological, expressive, cognitive, and behavioral responses' (Brader and Marcus, 2013: 175). They are all approach emotions, and as such their effects are similar to those of anger (Marcus et al., 2019). Therefore the mechanism would be similar to angry Remainers.

Enthusiasm activates the disposition system, which enables and affirms reliance on habits (Marcus et al. 2019). It also tends to be associated with confident and strong opinions (Brader, 2005; Valentino et al., 2008; Valentino et al., 2011) and should also boost individuals' EU dispositions rather than partisanship. Enthusiasm minimises perceived risks and is geared towards action-oriented behaviour. For enthusiastic Brexiteers, the referendum outcome represents an opportunity rather than a threat. A risk-taking decision, such as defection, might be justified in order to support and solidify their Brexit identity.

Taken together, we hypothesize that:

H1: Among 'Remainers', anger about the referendum is likely to increase their likelihood to defect from a Leave-supporting party.

H2: Among 'Remainers', fear about the referendum is likely to decrease their likelihood to defect from a Leave-supporting party.

H3: Among 'Leavers', enthusiasm about the referendum is likely to increase their likelihood to defect from a Remain-supporting party.

Data and Methods

The survey was fielded by YouGov on 29 June 2017, a few days following the official start of the Brexit negotiations on 19 June 2017 after the UK invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union beginning the member state's withdrawal from the EU (BBC, 2017). This was approximately one year after the Brexit referendum, which was held on 23 June 2016 and shortly after the 8 June 2017 UK General Election. The Conservative party under the leadership of Theresa May called an early election with the intention of solidifying the government's Brexit mandate vis-à-vis the EU. When

the election was called, the Conservatives had a sizable lead in the polls, but during the campaign the Labour party recovered ground. The snap election resulted in an increase in the Conservative's vote share at 42.3 per cent but a surprising net loss of 13 seats. This paved the way for the formation of a Conservative minority government with the support of the Democratic Unionist Party on a confidence-and-supply deal. The Labour party came second with 40 per cent of the vote, i.e. a 9.6 per cent increase since 2015. This election reversed the trend towards multi-party politics, with the combined Labour and Conservative party vote being one of the highest in recent decades. The two parties promised to honour the referendum outcome but were divided about the type of post-Brexit UK-EU arrangement (Hobolt, 2018). At the individual level, 2015–2017 vote switching 'was heavily influenced by the EU referendum choices' (Mellon et al., 2018). There was a clear relationship between Brexit vote and Labour and Conservative vote choice with the Labour party attracting mostly Remain supporters and the Conservative party primarily appealing to Leavers. This suggests that Brexit was clearly a salient issue among the electorate.

Our sample is representative of the general British population in terms of age, gender, education, social grade, region, political attention and EU referendum vote (n=1699).

Vote choice

A key variable for our analysis is vote choice, i.e. who people say they voted for in the 2015 and 2017 elections. Vote choice information in 2015 and 2017 was provided by YouGov directly, which collects this information as part of its core data on panel participants.

Figure 1 presents citizens' 2017 vote choice by EU referendum decision and 2015 vote choice (for full details, see Appendix Table 2). We have broken down our data into four voter categories, i.e. Conservative, Labour, UKIP and Pro-EU; the latter category gathers together Liberal Democrat, SNP, PC and Green voters. While a number of voters remained loyal to their 2015 party preferences, there was also a considerable proportion of switchers among 2015 voters. As discussed in other recent research (e.g. Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Hobolt, 2018; Mellon et al., 2018), we can see that the 2016 referendum helps to predict switching. Most voters who switched away from the Conservatives were Remainers, as blue dots dominate in the first panel. Among 2015 Labour voters, Remainers switched to more unequivocally pro-EU parties, i.e. LD/SNP/PC/Green. 2015 UKIP voters who switched were Leavers, and they mainly moved to the Tories. Finally, many 2015 voters for the Lib Dems, SNP, PC or Greens switched to Labour, and these were mainly Remainers. This Figure illustrates that the referendum vote was important in determining who switched parties between 2015 and 2017.

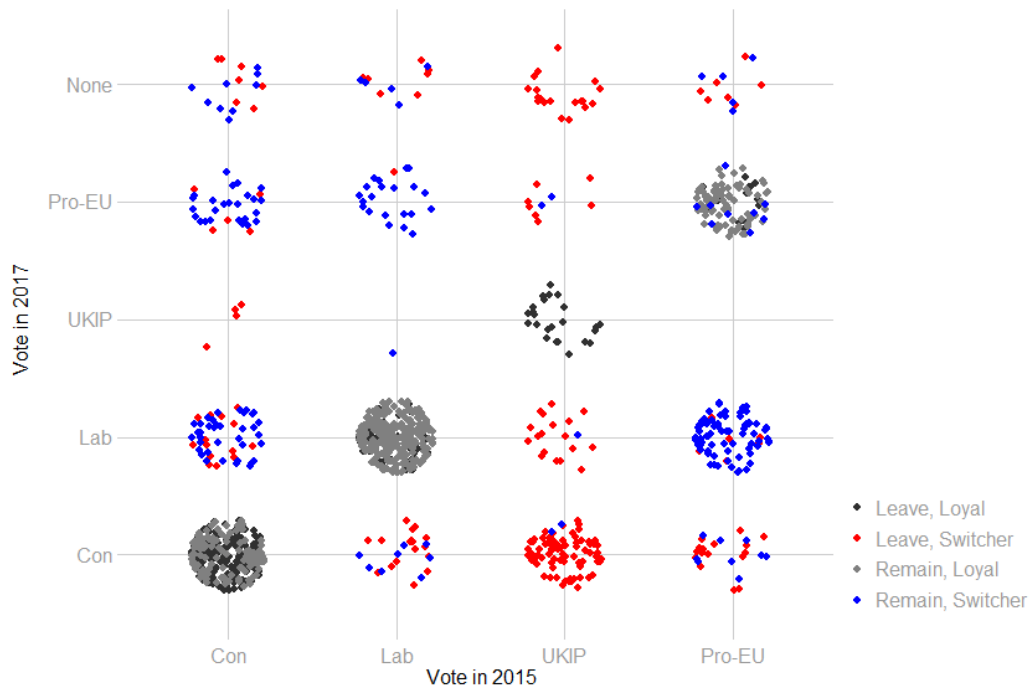


FIGURE 1. 2017 vote choice by referendum decision and 2015 vote choice.
Note: Lab=Labour; Con=Conservatives; the Pro-EU category includes Liberal Democrat, SNP, PC and Green voters. Black dots: Leave voters who remained loyal to their 2015 party; grey dots: Remain voters who remained loyal to their 2015 party; red dots: Leave voters who switched away from their 2015 party; blue dots: Leave voters who switched away from their 2015 party. Full numbers shown in Appendix Table 2.

Measures of Affective Reactions to the Brexit Referendum Outcome

Our key predictor is emotional reactions. We asked: ‘To what extent do you feel the following when thinking about the outcome of the EU referendum?’ The three options were enthusiasm, anger and fear. The answer scale ranged from 0 to 10, with 10 labelled as ‘very’. Overall, among our entire sample, there were moderate-to-high levels of fear ($M=6.16$; $SD=2.74$) and anger ($M=5.41$; $SD=3.09$) about the referendum outcome as opposed to comparative lower levels of enthusiasm ($M=3.79$; $SD=2.94$) (see Appendix Table 1). These emotional reactions are interacted in our models with voting behaviour in the EU referendum (leave, remain or did not vote). The three emotions correlate moderately to strongly (fear and enthusiasm: $r=-0.67$; anger and enthusiasm: $r=-0.68$; fear and anger: $r=0.79$). Note that we asked these emotions in 2017, so we essentially asked respondents to recall their emotional state concerning the Brexit outcome in the year since the referendum.

Figure 2 presents the emotional reactions of respondents within each group. We can see that those who voted Remain state that they reacted with fear and, to a slightly lower extent, with anger. Those who voted Leave report feeling enthusiasm as well as (somewhat surprisingly) moderate levels of fear. Those who did not vote during the referendum report moderate to high levels of fear as well as some anger and enthusiasm.

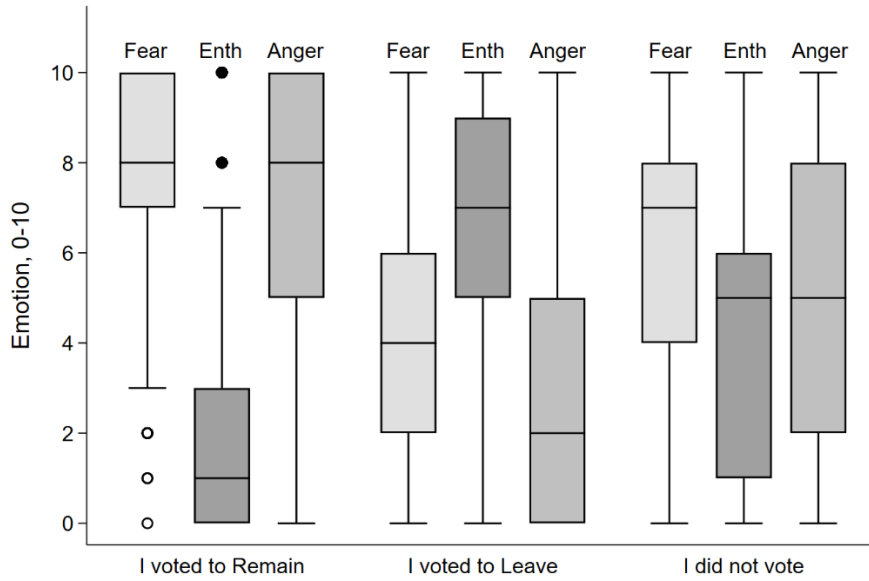


FIGURE 2. Emotions relating to the referendum outcome by referendum decision.

Note: The horizontal axis divides respondents into groups based on their EU referendum vote. Emotions were self-reported on a 0-10 scale, with high values indicating high levels of this emotion in response to the outcome of the referendum. Boxes indicate the interquartile range (25th percentile to 75th percentile, with the median indicated by a solid line. Outliers beyond 1.5 times the interquartile range are indicated as dots.

Figure 3 then examines how the emotions felt in reaction to the referendum vote differed not just by which side of the debate one was on, but also by 2015 vote choice. Turning first to Remainers, we can see that supporters of parties who campaigned to stay in the EU were more angry and fearful about the result than 2015 Conservative/UKIP voters who chose Remain. They were naturally also less enthusiastic about the outcome. The right panel then focuses on Leavers. We can see that emotional reactions here differs less by 2015 vote choice, but Leavers who voted in 2015 for parties who campaigned for Remain were less enthusiastic, more fearful and angrier than Leavers who voted in 2015 for parties who campaigned for Leave.

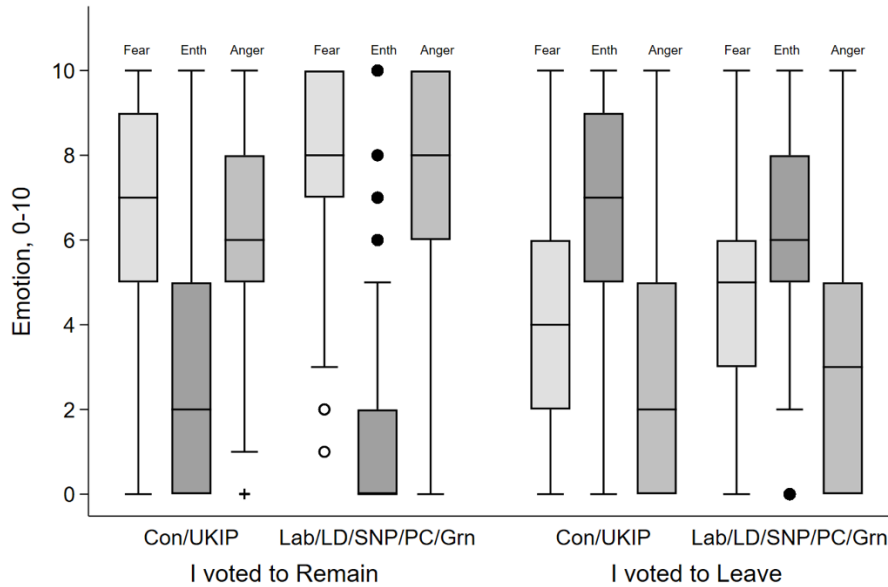


FIGURE 3. Emotions relating to the referendum outcome by referendum decision and 2015 vote choice.

Note: The horizontal axis divides respondents into groups based on their EU referendum vote and their 2015 vote choice. Emotions were self-reported on a 0-10 scale, with high values indicating high levels of this emotion in response to the outcome of the referendum. Boxes indicate the interquartile range (25th percentile to 75th percentile, with the median indicated by a solid line. Outliers beyond 1.5 times the interquartile range are indicated as dots.

Model and Results

Are emotional reactions associated with who switched and who did not? For this analysis, we turn to multivariate models. We model switching between 2015 and 2017 using binary logistic regression models. To keep analyses straightforward, we group together parties that campaigned to leave the EU (Conservatives and UKIP) and parties that campaigned to stay within the bloc (Labour, Lib Dems, SNP, PC, Greens). Non-voters in 2015 and 2017 are excluded. We code switching as 1 if the respondent moved between Brexit camps, so from a Remain-supporting party to a Brexit-supporting party or vice versa. Switching is 0 for respondents who stayed within each camp. We model our hypotheses using a three-way interaction term: emotional reactions (anger/fear/enthusiasm) x 2016 referendum vote x 2015 vote choice.

We always include all emotions simultaneously in our regression models so that we can isolate the distinct effects of each affective reaction. This is in line with literature that suggests that although distinctive in their outcomes, emotional responses can be ‘experienced simultaneously and in parallel’ (Marcus et al. 2019: 114). This choice allows us to model the distinct effects of one emotion while controlling for the effect the other two affective response (see also Vasilopoulou and Wagner 2017; Vasilopoulos et al. 2018; Erisen et al. 2020; Marcus et al. 2019).

In these multivariate models, we control for the important attitudes that may correlate with emotional reactions. First, overall evaluations of the EU may colour emotional reactions, even accounting for the 2016 referendum vote. Specifically, we control for trust in the EU and in the UK government as well as their interactions with

the 2016 referendum vote. These are variables scaled 1-4, where 1 is a high level of trust. Given that we subset our analyses to partisan subgroups, one common issue – the partisan shaping of emotional reactions – applies less in our case. Finally, note that we always include EU referendum vote in our analyses, so that our model always accounts for the fact that emotional reactions are shaped by one’s position on the referendum. Hence, what we are interested in is how people’s emotional reactions shape their subsequent behaviour, conditional on their opinion on the issue at hand. In addition, we control for whether someone has a European identity (coded as those who feel European only, European and British or British and European, with those stating ‘British only’ as the reference category) and left-right self-placement. We also control for age, gender, social class and education level.

We now turn to our analysis of multivariate models; full results are included in the Appendix Table 3. Here, we graphically present how emotional reactions to the referendum outcome shaped party loyalty in the 2017 election. Figure 4 shows marginal effects on vote switching conditional on 2015 vote choice, 2016 referendum vote and emotional reactions. The Figure presents the marginal effects for each of the 0-10 emotion variables, which can be interpreted as the effects of a one-unit change.

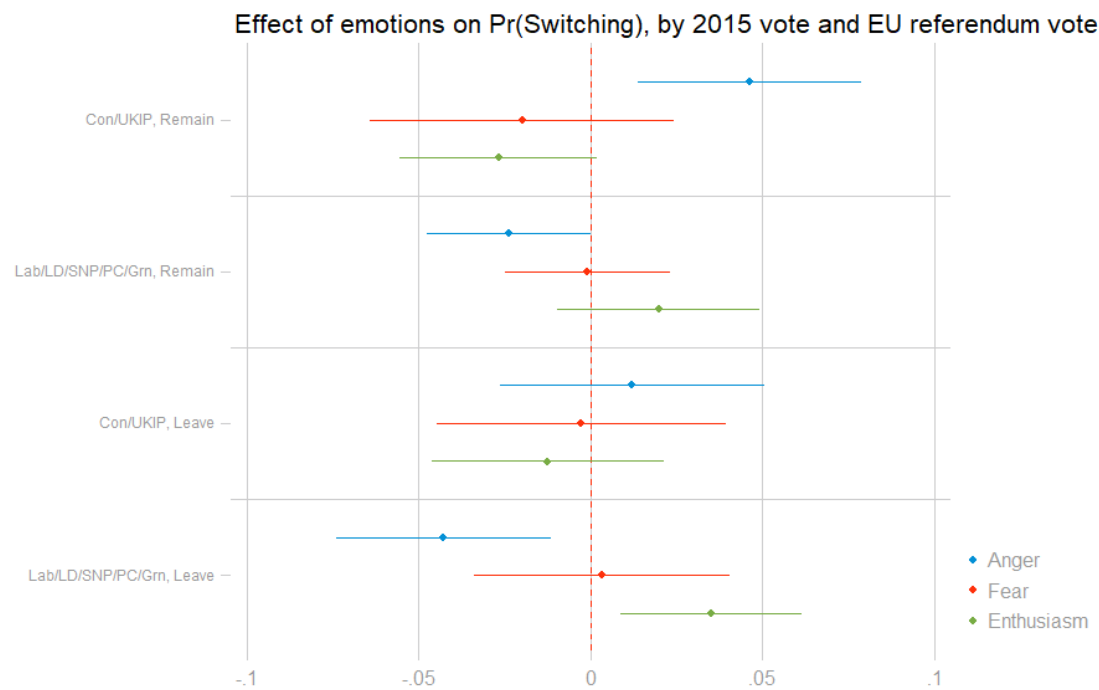


FIGURE 4. Marginal effects on vote switching of 2015 vote choice, 2016 referendum vote and emotional reactions. 95% confidence intervals shown. Emotions measured on a 0-10 scale. Full results of the logistic regression model (1=switching, 0=loyalty) in Appendix Table 3.

We turn first to Remainers who voted for a Leave-supporting party in 2015. Confirming H1, we find that anger increases switching for those Remainers who voted for a Leave-supporting party in 2015 (top row of Figure 4). These voters were more likely to switch to another party if they were angry about the referendum result. A one-unit increase in anger leads to about a five percentage point increase probability of switching. A standard-deviation change in anger in this group, i.e. 2.5 units, would thus lead to about a 12.5 percentage point change in the probability of switching.

While there is also some evidence in favour of H2, as Remainers who voted for a Leave-supporting party in 2015 were less likely to switch if they felt fearful about the result, this effect is far from significant at conventional levels. Hence, while angry Remainers were likely to defect from pro-Leave to pro-Remain parties, fearful Remainers more or less acted in line with their prior (pro-Leave) partisanship.

Next, we turn to Leavers who voted for a Remain-supporting party in 2015 (bottom row of Figure 4). For these voters, the effects of emotional reactions are clear. Consistent with our third hypothesis, enthusiastic Leavers were more likely to switch away from Remain-supporting parties. The magnitude of the effect is similar to that of anger in the top row, if slightly smaller. A standard-deviation change in enthusiasm in this group (about 2.4) would thus lead to about a ten percentage point increase the probability of switching.

So far, we have described the results that relate to our main hypothesis, confirming H1 and H3. However, our results also show effects of emotional reactions for other groups. Thus, anger increases party loyalty for Remainers who previously voted for Remain-supporting parties (second row of Figure 4). Given that their Brexit identity aligns with their partisan identity, these individuals had an incentive to stay committed to Remain-supporting parties. This finding fits with the expectation that anger will activate the disposition system and increase reliance on habitual behaviour.

Surprisingly, anger also decreases switching for Leavers who previously voted for Remain-supporting parties (bottom row of Figure 4). We did not develop specific hypotheses about this effect, but it not in line with potential theoretical expectations. We would note that anger was very low for this group overall, so the variation here is between people who are moderately angry and not angry at all. A potential explanation for this pattern is that voters who regretted their Leave vote experienced anger, increasing their likelihood of returning to their previous partisan identity.

Finally, for Leavers who voted for Leave-supporting parties in 2015 (third row of Figure 4), there is no discernible effect of emotional reactions at all. This clearly underlines that we need to consider other attitudes and behaviour in order to understand the effect of emotional reactions to extraordinary events. For some groups, emotional reactions are irrelevant, while for others they appear to play an important role.

Emotional reactions are not the only variables that predict vote switching in our model (Appendix Table 3). Thus, trust in the EU decreases switching while trust in the UK government increases switching, effects that probably capture that many UKIP voters switched to the Conservatives between 2015 and 2017 (Figure 1).

Discussion

Extraordinary events have the capacity to elicit strong emotional reactions among citizens, which have a subsequent effect on electoral behaviour. We have argued that Brexit is a momentous event that shocked the British political system. Brexit has become a powerful political symbol of sharp divisions within the UK society. Against this backdrop, we put forward and tested a theoretical framework of how affective reactions to this extraordinary event moderate the effect of voters' EU preferences on

domestic vote choice. Going beyond the direct effect of EU predispositions on domestic political behaviour, our model expects that, among Remainers, anger about the referendum increases their likelihood to defect whereas fear decreases their likelihood to switch their vote. Among Leavers, on the other hand, we expect enthusiasm about the referendum to decrease party loyalties.

We show that Brexit, as a momentous event, was able to elicit strong emotional responses among the electorate. While Remainers reacted to Brexit primarily with fear and anger, Leavers felt enthusiastic about the referendum outcome. Our analyses demonstrate that these emotions had differential effects on vote choice. Given the positional nature of the Brexit issue, i.e. the fact that citizens were strongly divided into pro and anti-Brexit camps, these effects were dependent on Brexit identities. We found that anger was indeed associated with defection among Remainers, while among Leavers it was enthusiasm that was associated with defection. This is line with the risk-taking and action-oriented properties of both anger and enthusiasm. Individuals who experience such emotions are much more likely to go against the status quo in order to 'defend' their prior dispositions. Fear, on the other hand, did not have an effect on vote choice. This emotion is much more oriented towards caution and unwillingness to take risk. Our findings also point towards the fact that emotional reactions are not related to vote switching among some voter groups, which opens up avenues for future research.

Our findings have important implications. They indicate that we need to take citizens' emotional responses into consideration because they are responsible for short-term fluctuations in their behaviour (see also Magni, 2017; Vasilopoulos, 2018). We observed high likelihood of defection among those Remainers who reacted to the referendum result with anger. This is particularly important in a political context of high levels of vote switching, electoral volatility and decline of party identification. Our results help us contextualise why the 2017 general election unexpectedly resulted in a Conservative minority government despite the fact that the Conservative party had a considerable lead in the polls when the Prime Minister decided to call for an early general election (Gamble, 2018; Hobolt, 2018). Citizens' emotional reactions to the referendum contributed to the incumbent's inability to deliver Brexit following the 2017 general election.

What do these findings tell us about Brexit identities and partisanship? Our findings indicate that emotions moderated the effect of Brexit identities on vote choice. Angry Remainers and enthusiastic Leavers defected, which allowed them to bring their partisanship in line with their Brexit identity. Fearful Remainers, however, did not switch their vote. We have proposed that these individuals were open to persuasion and essentially updated their Brexit identity; hence, a vote switch was not necessary. This suggests that modelling the effect of Brexit identities without taking different emotional responses into consideration would essentially omit an important group of voters and their preferences. Research has shown that Leavers were more likely to opt for the Conservative party, whereas Remainers were more likely to vote for Labour (e.g. Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Hobolt, 2018; Mellon et al., 2018). Our work adds an important complement to this work by showing the differential effects of emotions about the referendum, particularly among Conservative Remainers. We demonstrate that Conservative Remainers who were angry about the referendum outcome were more likely to defect compared to Conservative Remainers who were fearful about Brexit and thus more likely to remain loyal to their party.

Our work represents a first exploration of the links between emotions and vote choice in an extraordinary political environment and is based on a cross-sectional dataset. We have shown that emotional reactions to extraordinary events can be drivers of volatility and party system change and as such we suggest that this line of enquiry deserves further attention. Yet our findings are also limited by our design choices.

First, we have focused on vote switching across rather than within Brexit camps. This is because our starting point has been the positional nature of the Brexit referendum, its high salience and the ensuing formation of Brexit identities that are stronger than and cross-cut traditional party lines (Hobolt et al., 2020; Evans and Schaffner, 2019). Yet, it is also possible that individuals switched parties within the Brexit camp. For example, Remainers who voted for pro-Remain parties in 2015 might have also felt anger borne out of a sense of betrayal, especially if they perceived that their party did not put forward a convincing pro-Remain campaign. For these individuals, the psychological contract entered into at the ballot box in 2015 had been broken and vote switching within the same Brexit camp in 2017 may have been as much about self-preservation as blame attribution. We have been unable to model this relationship due to sample size considerations.

Second, we have measured emotional reactions to Brexit one year after the referendum result. It is possible that these were different or perhaps less intense to those felt on the morning of 24th June 2016. A lot happened during this year which likely resulted in cognitive and affective beliefs and feelings about the referendum. It is also likely that partisan blame attribution, underpinned by affective ties, will have updated in between and especially for Remain-supporting parties like Labour who went into the 2017 General election with a view to honouring the referendum result. Future research should shed more light on these relationships by employing more causally oriented models, such a panel data or experimental designs. Such work could also explore potential mechanisms, such as the effects of emotional reactions on political information-seeking. In addition, future work could consider examining the distinct effect of different positive emotions beyond enthusiasm, such as hope, joy and pride.

Despite these limitations, we are confident that our study is an important step towards understanding shifting party loyalties in a general European context of high electoral volatility, and demonstrates the significance of researching the effects of extraordinary events as drivers of party system change and dealignment. More broadly, our findings have implications with regards to the relationship between individuals' affective responses and shifting partisan loyalties in an era of populism and high levels of electoral volatility.

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Appendix Table 1: Summary statistics for DVs, IVs and controls

	N	mean	sd	min	max
Vote switcher	1191	0.14	0.35	0	1
Anger	1575	5.41	3.09	0	10
Fear	1588	6.16	2.74	0	10
Enthusiasm	1593	3.79	2.94	0	10
Voted Leave (0: No, 1: Yes, 2: Did not vote)	1678	1.66	0.69	1	3
Vote in 2015 (1: Pro-Leave party, 2: Pro-Remain party)	1289	1.51	0.50	1	2
European identity	1698	0.36	0.48	0	1
Left-right position	1323	4.82	2.30	0	10
Trust in EU	1547	2.86	0.95	1	4
Trust in UK government	1587	2.77	0.96	1	4
Age	1698	47.5	16.7	18	86
Male (1 yes, 0 no)	1698	0.44	0.50	0	1
Social grade	1698	2.29	1.16	1	4
Education level	1698	2.01	0.74	1	3
<i>Total</i>	1698				

Appendix Table 2: Descriptive statistics, Vote switching 2015 to 2017

Leave voters					
Vote in 2015					
Vote in 2017	Con	Lab	UKIP	Pro-EU	n
None	3.09	7.48	12.84	12.28	338
Pro-EU	1.93	0.93	4.73	31.58	132
UKIP	1.54	0	16.22	0	28
Lab	6.56	75.7	12.16	28.07	31
Con	86.87	15.89	54.05	28.07	42
n	259	107	148	57	571

Remain voters					
Vote in 2015					
Vote in 2017	Con	Lab	UKIP	Pro-EU	n
None	4.89	1.76	0	2.86	132
Pro-EU	13.59	7.39	40	50.86	359
UKIP	0	0.35	0	0	1
Lab	20.11	87.68	20	41.14	137
Con	61.41	2.82	40	5.14	19
n	184	284	5	175	648

Appendix Table 3: Vote switching model

Variables	Coefficients
Anger	0.385* (0.156)
Voted Leave	0.278 (1.578)
Voted Leave x Anger	-0.309 (0.198)
Pro-Remain vote in 2015	-0.610 (1.822)
Pro-Remain vote in 2015 x Anger	-0.722*** (0.205)
Voted Leave x Pro-Remain vote in 2015	0.237 (2.368)
Voted Leave x Anger x Pro-Remain vote in 2015	0.224 (0.298)
Fear	-0.166 (0.190)
Voted Leave x Fear	0.149 (0.231)
Pro-Remain vote in 2015 x Fear	0.154 (0.257)
Voted Leave x Fear x Pro-Remain vote in 2015	-0.104 (0.343)
Enthusiasm	-0.223 (0.134)
Voted Leave x Enthusiasm	0.146 (0.169)
Pro-Remain vote in 2015 x Enthusiasm	0.503* (0.201)
Voted Leave x Enthusiasm x Pro-Remain vote in 2015	-0.0802 (0.265)
European identity	0.351 (0.296)
Left-right position	-0.0179 (0.0707)
Trust in EU	-0.467** (0.166)
Trust in UK government	0.527** (0.161)
Age	-0.00467 (0.00832)
Male	-0.0229 (0.239)
C1 (ref: AB)	0.360 (0.295)
C2 (ref: AB)	0.0510 (0.423)
DE (ref: AB)	0.503

Medium education. (ref: low)	(0.349) 0.476 (0.323)
High education (ref: low)	0.324 (0.380)
Constant	-1.845 (1.599)
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Observations	927
Log likelihood	-262.2
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Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$	