

# Policy or Partisanship in the United Kingdom? Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Brexit

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**Bryan Schonfeld**, Princeton University  
**Sam Winter-Levy**, Princeton University

Are voters motivated by policy preferences or partisan identities? In this paper, we argue that the British Conservative Party's sudden change in Brexit policy (following the surprising result of the 2016 referendum on EU membership) offers a unique opportunity to study partisanship in the context of a natural experiment. Using an interrupted time series design, we find evidence that voters care primarily about policy: Europhilic Conservatives disaffiliated from the party, while Euroskeptics became more likely to identify with the Conservatives. These findings suggest that voters are sufficiently policy motivated to change parties if they disagree with their party on important issues. But we find that partisan identities do play a role in the development of voter preferences in another issue area: voters who joined the Conservatives immediately after the referendum subsequently adopted more right-wing views on economic redistribution.

**W**hat, if anything, do voters care about? For decades, political scientists have debated whether voters are loyal, unthinking partisans, on the one hand, or rational actors motivated by policy preferences, ideological principles, and candidate performances, on the other. The answer, if there is one, has profound consequences for theories of ideological responsiveness, political representation, and democratic accountability.

On one side of the debate, the idea that voters lack coherent, stable preferences—and that party identification overwhelmingly influences vote choice—dates back at least to the work of Campbell et al. (1960). Since then, a vast body of research has advanced similar arguments. Voters back copartisan candidates at high rates (Bartels 2000; Kam 2005; Rahn 1993). They do not appear to subscribe to consistent or stable ideologies (Freder, Lenz, and Turney 2019; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). They respond to partisan cues, not ideological principles, when they evaluate policies, often adjusting their views—and even their answers to purely factual questions—to match their political loyalties (Cohen 2003; Lenz 2013; Levendusky 2009; Margolis 2018; Mason 2018; Zaller et al. 1992; but see McGrath [2017] for evidence against the idea that partisanship generates a “perceptual screen”). Those loyalties

are typically acquired in childhood, highly correlated across generations, and stable over time (Butler and Stokes 1974; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Niemi and Jennings 1991). During political campaigns, meanwhile, expressive partisan identities appear to drive participation and generate emotional reactions more effectively than issue-based concerns (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). In perhaps the most influential recent argument for the dominance of social identities and partisan loyalties over issue preferences, Achen and Bartels (2017) maintain that citizens' policy preferences play little role in electoral politics even during what appear to be “exceptionally ideological” political transformations, such as the New Deal realignment of the 1930s (Achen and Bartels 2017; Burnham 1967).

Although these patterns of voting behavior may be especially intense in the contemporary United States, they are not an exclusively American phenomenon. In much of Europe, researchers have argued that partisanship, rather than issue-based preferences, drives self-placement on the left-right ideological scale (e.g., Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). A wave of scholarship in the 1970s showed that British voters likewise lack coherent ideologies and that “allegiance to party is one of the central facts of the British elector's political awareness”

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Bryan Schonfeld (bryanjs@princeton.edu) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Politics at Princeton University. Sam Winter-Levy is a PhD candidate in the Department of Politics at Princeton University.

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(Butler and Stoke 1974, 329). In recent decades, voters in the United Kingdom have become less committed to the established political parties (Sanders 2016), although at the time of the Brexit referendum, only 18% of voters had no party identity (Evans and Schaffner 2019).<sup>1</sup> In general, this body of research suggests that voters are overwhelmingly influenced by deep and lasting partisan attachments.

Others disagree. Fowler (2020) argues that voters are not “intoxicated partisans” but instead possess genuine policy preferences, offering as evidence the realignment over civil rights in the United States and further results from a series of survey experiments.<sup>2</sup> Other experimental research suggests that competing considerations can sometimes surpass the influence of party labels on political choices. In Germany, meanwhile, Chou et al. (2021) show that the stability of partisan identification with the far-right Alternative for Germany is the result of the party’s policy positions on refugees. Finally, Caughey, Dougal, and Schickler (2020) dispute Achen and Bartels’s interpretation of the New Deal realignment, arguing that mass policy preferences did play a significant role. Party identity, in these accounts, is mostly endogenous to other political attitudes, wielding little independent causal force in shaping voters’ policy preferences.

These debates over the relationship between partisanship and policy preferences continue, despite decades of research, for two primary reasons: first, because the question remains of first-order normative importance for theories of democratic representation and electoral accountability, and second, because separating voters’ partisanship from their policy preferences, outside of a lab setting, is a tough empirical challenge. Disentangling the two requires surmounting profound endogeneity and selection challenges. As Fowler points out, “partisan intoxication” and policy voting are often observationally equivalent (Fowler 2020). Distinguishing between them is challenging because “partisanship and ideology virtually always run in the same direction” and parties’ positions on important issues rarely change (Barber and Pope 2019, 2). Even if policy preferences exclusively determined voting behavior, with partisanship playing no independent causal role, we would still expect party affiliation to predict vote choice, remain stable over time, and be correlated across generations—factors that have been cited as evidence for the importance of partisan identification. As a result, as one recent paper notes, “although multiple stories exist about the importance of partisanship relative to issues and ideology, the

existing tests are simply not definitive and suffer from problems of causal identification and external validity” (Barber and Pope 2019, 1). And in European democracies such as the United Kingdom, where the strength of party identification has progressively attenuated over the past few decades and where by some accounts voters are behaving “more like discriminating consumers than committed partisans,” the exact nature of the relationship between partisanship and policy preferences also remains unclear (Sanders 2016, 108).

One approach to disentangling the roles of policy preferences and partisan affiliations is to study party realignments, which can occur when the policy position of a major party changes rapidly and significantly. When a party changes its platform on an important issue, its supporters can either continue to back it, regardless of their prior expressed policy preference, or change their voting behavior to reflect their underlying views. The former response would constitute evidence for the dominance of partisanship; the latter, evidence for the causal power of genuine political preferences. Unfortunately for scholars of political behavior, however, such rapid changes in a party’s policy position are rare.

In this paper, we draw on evidence from one such change: the sudden, unanticipated shift in Conservative Party positioning on Brexit following the surprising result of the 2016 referendum. Within days, the leadership of the Conservative Party was forced to shift its position on Britain’s role in Europe—an almost immediate change in the policy platform of a major political party on a major political issue and one that was triggered by the result of a referendum so narrow that it was more or less a coin flip. This natural experiment affords a rare opportunity to disentangle the relative importance of voters’ political preferences (in this case over Britain’s relationship with the EU) and their loyalties to their favored political party, allowing us to evade some of the endogeneity concerns that have shadowed this debate for decades.

We find strong evidence that voters are in fact policy motivated: Conservative partisans who were less Euroskeptic withdrew their support from the party following its sudden change in Brexit positioning, while more Euroskeptic voters, who previously had not affiliated as Conservatives, backed the newly Euroskeptic party. This reflects real changes in voters’ behavior in subsequent elections: Euroskeptics who did not vote Conservative in the 2015 election were substantially more likely to turn out for the Conservatives in 2017, while Conservative voters in 2015 who were not Euroskeptic were much less likely to vote Conservative in the election two years later. Although we find some evidence that highlights the power of partisanship—Conservatives (especially those who described their partisan identity as “very strong”)

1. Some, such as Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2018), see Brexit as creating a new source of political identification: Remain and Leave, they argue, have emerged as stable political identities.

2. For more on the defection of white Southerners from the Democrats in response to civil rights, see Kuziemko and Washington (2018).

who perceived a shift in Conservative Euroskepticism became increasingly Euroskeptic themselves—these shifts are small in comparison to the scale of party switching. However, partisan identification still matters in another issue area: we find that people who joined the Conservatives right after the referendum became more hostile to economic redistribution in the months to follow. In other words, a shift in party identification—one initially triggered by a voter’s policy preferences in a particular domain—prompted a corresponding shift in a voter’s position in another policy area.

These findings help stake out a middle ground in the debate over the determinants of voters’ decisions. Our results show that on high-salience issues, party loyalty has real limits: the Conservative Party’s evolving position on European integration was salient enough to drive some supporters away while attracting others who previously had not backed the party.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, our findings show that partisan affiliation influences voters’ attitudes on another major political issue. Partisanship remains a powerful force even in countries where party identification appears to be in secular decline.

This research also has important implications for cleavage theory. Our findings suggest that divisions over Europe cut across the traditional left-right economic cleavage, as individuals sort themselves into parties based on their positions on European integration. For a substantial portion of the electorate, this cleavage appears to dominate what was once the traditional dimension of economic policy: new Conservatives, attracted to the party by its support for Brexit, adopt significantly more right-wing views on redistribution. Where once economic issues helped determine voters’ partisan allegiances, today Europe is the issue that structures the political space.

### THE AS-IF RANDOM CHANGE IN CONSERVATIVE PARTY POSITIONING

In January 2013, British Prime Minister David Cameron promised that if the Conservatives were to form a majority government at the next general election, he would hold an in/out referendum on Britain’s membership in the EU. After the Conservatives unexpectedly won an overall majority in the 2015 general election, Cameron fulfilled his promise. Although there were divisions within the Conservative Party, its leadership overwhelmingly backed remaining within the EU: 24 out of 30 Cabinet ministers campaigned for Remain, including the prime minister, the chancellor, the home secretary, and the foreign secretary—the most senior positions

3. This finding substantiates Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood (2018), who, in the American context, use survey experiments to document a pattern of “conditional party loyalty” in which voters stick with copartisan candidates if their positions differ only on low-salience issues but defect to another party if a candidate disagrees with them on high-salience issues.

in the British government. On June 23, 2016, Britain voted to leave the EU by a margin of 51.9% to 48.1%. The following morning, Cameron resigned.

Almost overnight, the party was forced to shift its position on the country’s role in Europe. “The will of the British people is an instruction that must be delivered,” Cameron declared in his resignation speech. His resignation triggered a leadership election that further drove the center-right party down a more Euroskeptic path. During the leadership contest, all five candidates promised to take Britain out of the EU and rejected the idea of calling a second referendum. “Brexit means Brexit,” the eventual winner, Theresa May (herself previously a Remainer), declared in the speech launching her leadership bid. “There will be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it by the back door and no second referendum. The country voted to leave the European Union and as Prime Minister I will make sure that we leave the European Union” (*Reuters* 2016). Within days of becoming prime minister in mid-July, May had created a new government department for exiting the EU and appointed three prominent Brexiteers to crucial cabinet posts. By October, at a speech she delivered at the Conservative Party conference in Birmingham, she had laid out a series of red lines that appeared to rule out Britain’s continued membership in the customs union and the single market—in her view, to “respect what the people told us on the 23rd of June” (*Spectator* 2016). And within a year of the referendum, May had triggered Article 50, beginning a two-year countdown to Britain’s departure from the EU. The result of the referendum, in other words, determined the Conservative Party’s platform on Brexit going forward: the party shifted from being one that, although divided, was committed to Britain remaining in the EU to one that had thrown its weight behind Brexit.

Yet even as the outcome of the referendum transformed the Conservative Party’s position on the EU, that outcome was itself more or less a coin flip, making the change in Conservative policy platform independent of individual voters’ policy preferences and partisan affiliations. The result was close: if little more than 600,000 people (just over 1% of registered voters) had cast their ballots differently, Remain would have won. In an expert survey of 600 journalists, academics, and pollsters conducted on June 3, just over two weeks before the referendum, 87% thought the country would vote to remain; just 5% predicted Brexit (Jennings and Fisher 2016). Remain enjoyed a consistent and substantial lead in telephone polls from 2010 to February 2016 and led in polls until late May. At the close of the campaign on June 22, the trend line of polls showed Remain on 45.6% and Leave on 43.8% among decided voters. These trend numbers implied that Remain would win by 51–49 (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017).

And in the final polls released by seven polling companies, six reported a lead for Remain—one of them a 10-point lead. Even minutes before the first results were announced, betting markets still gave Remain a 93% chance of victory, and Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), delivered a premature concession.<sup>4</sup> Clarke et al. (2017), meanwhile, simulate a million referenda and find Remain's total is greater than Leave's in 66.03% of contests. According to Dominic Cummings, the campaign director of Vote Leave, Leave only won "because of a combination of events that was improbable. . . . For Leave to win a string of events had to happen many of which were independently improbable or 50-50 and therefore the combination was very improbable" (Cummings 2017). The result of the referendum, in other words, can usefully be viewed as an "as-if" random occurrence—a coin flip that determined the EU policy of one of Britain's two major parties.

Of course, Britain's decision to leave the EU did not come from nowhere; it was arguably part of a wider populist upsurge across the western world. But regardless of its broader causes, the result induced a discontinuous shift in Conservative Party positioning, and it is this discontinuity that is central to our identification strategy.<sup>5</sup>

#### IDENTIFICATION STRATEGY: INTERRUPTED TIME SERIES

To assess the causal impact of the sudden change in Conservative positioning, we examine panel survey data from the British Election Study. We compare partisan identification and policy attitudes in waves 8 (immediately leading up to the referendum) and 9 (immediately post-referendum). In effect, we employ an interrupted time series design, where the uncertainty of the referendum outcome makes the interruption in the time series quasi-exogenous. Given this identification strategy, the key assumption necessary to attribute any change in partisan identification to the referendum and the shift in Conservative Party policy that it induced is that no other factor that affects partisan identification also systematically changed at the same time. The narrow interval between the two waves of our panel survey data—wave 8 started in May and ended on June 22, 2016, while wave 9 ran from

June 24 to July 4, 2016, with the referendum held on June 23—alleviates concerns about any unobserved confounders that might change between observations. The high frequency of measurement around the "treatment"—the shift in Conservative policy dictated by the unanticipated result of the referendum—means that we are unlikely to be conflating other events in the time series with the Conservative Party's embrace of Brexit.

One leading candidate for an omitted variable that could bias our findings is a change in Labour Party policy at the same time as the Conservative Party's shift; this would constitute an additional event in the time series, distorting our estimates of the treatment effect. Fortunately, no such shift occurred. During the referendum campaign and in its immediate aftermath, "the Labour party played an enigmatic role" (Menon and Salter 2016). Throughout, Jeremy Corbyn, the party's leader and a lifelong Euroskeptic who only half-heartedly campaigned for Britain to remain in the EU, "sought to lie low," embracing a policy of strategic ambiguity in an attempt to hold together his coalition of urban Remain voters and northern, working-class Leave voters (Freytas-Tamura 2019). Weeks before the referendum, internal polling showed that one in five Labour voters did not know the party's position on the referendum—an ambiguity that persisted in the ensuing months (McTague, Spence, and Dove 2016). As late as January 2019, 71% of voters viewed Labour Party policy on Brexit as "unclear and confusing" (Menon and Wager 2019). In the aftermath of the referendum, as the Conservative Party responded to the result by committing itself to implementing Britain's exit from the EU, Labour's policy remained ambiguous—and, importantly for our identification strategy, consistently so.

This is supported by our panel data. Voters clearly perceived a change in the Conservative Party's policy between waves 8 and 9. The average perceived Euroskepticism of the Conservatives increased by 8% between waves 8 and 9, a relatively substantial increase in an extremely short time period. By comparison, the mean perceived Euroskepticism of Labour remained essentially unchanged between the two waves (it increased from 3.46 to 3.50 on the 0–10 scale), indicating that voters recognized that only the Conservatives exhibited a sudden change in positioning on Brexit.

The combination of the short time period between survey waves, the unanticipated nature of the referendum result, the absence of a simultaneous policy change by the Labour Party, and the well-defined moment of interruption all strengthen the plausibility of our key assumption: that other important omitted variables are not also changing suddenly at the same time, so our identification strategy is recovering the causal effect of a sudden change in party positioning.

4. In the final count, 28% of eligible voters failed to turn out, and non-voters were twice as likely to be (perhaps complacent) Remainers. Indeed, some evidence (see Clarke et al. 2017, for example) suggests that Remain would have won if turnout had been higher.

5. Although it is impossible to rule out the possibility that some unobserved factor influenced both the unexpected Conservative majority in 2015, the unexpected Leave victory in the referendum, and the subsequent realignment of voters that we observe, the narrow window of our panel survey data should alleviate some of these concerns.



## HYPOTHESES

**Policy voting hypothesis.** Pre-referendum Euroskepticism positively predicts switching from non-Conservative to Conservative and negatively predicts switching from Conservative to non-Conservative.

**Partisan intoxication hypothesis.** Pre-referendum Conservative Party identification predicts increasing Euroskepticism.

### Do voters change their partisan identification for policy reasons?

We begin by testing the policy voting hypothesis: do voters switch their party identification as a function of their Euroskepticism? We first examine voters who identified as Conservatives before the referendum. We create a dummy variable, “Left Conservatives,” that equals 1 if a respondent no longer identifies with the Conservatives immediately following the referendum. The independent variable is a respondent’s self-reported level of Euroskepticism on a 0–10 scale (prior to the referendum).

Using formal quantitative tests (ordinary least squares regression [OLS], displayed in table 1), we find strong support for the policy voter model: Euroskepticism negatively and significantly predicts leaving the Conservatives, the major party now most closely associated with Brexit. The coefficient estimated in column 1 indicates that a 1-point increase in pre-referendum Euroskepticism (on the 0–10 scale) yields a .3% decrease in the probability of defection from the Conservatives. What is more, when we create a variable, Perceived Change in Conservative Euroskepticism—a respondent’s perception of the Conservatives’ Euroskepticism after the referendum minus the level of perceived Euroskepticism before the referendum—and interact this variable with the respondent’s own Euroskepticism before the referendum, the interaction is negative and significant: Conservatives who were less Euroskeptic and who perceived that the party had become increasingly Euroskeptic were especially likely to reject it.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, within weeks of the referendum, over 8% of Conservatives disaffiliated from the party. Of those who identified as Conservative before the referendum, 9.0% of respondents with pre-

6. To alleviate concerns that more Euroskeptic voters might perceive a greater increase in Conservative Euroskepticism (because of motivated reasoning or biased cognition), we checked the relationship between a voter’s own Euroskepticism pre-referendum and their perception of changes in Conservative Euroskepticism. The overall correlation was only 0.03: more Euroskeptic voters were not more likely to perceive an increase in the Conservative Party’s Euroskepticism, mitigating concerns about the extent of biased perceptions.

Table 1. Euroskepticism and Defection from the Conservatives

	Dependent Variable: Defect from Conservatives		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pre-referendum Euroskepticism	-.003* (.001)	-.001 (.001)	.0001 (.001)
Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		.011* (.004)	.009* (.004)
Age			-.001*** (.0002)
Female			-.007 (.007)
White			-.058** (.019)
Scotland			.002 (.012)
Wales			.021 (.014)
Pre-referendum Euroskepticism: perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		-.001* (.001)	-.001* (.001)
Constant	.101*** (.011)	.084*** (.011)	.181*** (.023)
Observations	7,330	6,476	6,216
R <sup>2</sup>	.001	.001	.006
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.0004	.001	.005
Residual SE	.272	.261	.258
	(df = 7,328)	(df = 6,472)	(df = 6,207)
F-statistic	3.912* (df = 1; 7,328)	2.709* (df = 3; 6,472)	4.554*** (df = 8; 6,207)

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

referendum Euroskepticism scores of 4–5 (on a 10-point scale), 9.8% of those with scores of 2–3, and 9.9% of those with scores of 0–1 turned their backs on the party. The less Euroskeptic a voter was before the referendum, the more likely they were to disaffiliate from the party in the aftermath of its embrace of Brexit.

We now assess voters who did not identify as Conservative before the referendum. We create a dummy variable, Joined Conservatives, that equals 1 if a respondent switched their identification to Conservative following the referendum.

Table 2. Euroskepticism and Joining the Conservatives

	Dependent Variable: Joined Conservatives		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pre-referendum Euroskepticism	.007*** (.0005)	.007*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)
Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		-.003* (.001)	-.004** (.001)
Age			.0004*** (.0001)
Female			-.002 (.003)
White			-.008 (.007)
Scotland			-.017*** (.005)
Wales			-.012 (.006)
Pre-referendum Euroskepticism: perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		.001*** (.0002)	.001*** (.0002)
Constant	-.001 (.003)	.00004 (.004)	-.007 (.009)
Observations	18,517	15,139	14,544
R <sup>2</sup>	.012	.015	.017
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.012	.015	.017
Residual SE	.198	.204	.202
	(df = 18,515)	(df = 15,135)	(df = 14,545)
F-statistic	216.857*** (df = 1; 18,515)	78.431*** (df = 3; 15,135)	31.854*** (df = 8; 14,545)

\*  $p < .05$ .  
 \*\*  $p < .01$ .  
 \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Once again, we find support for policy-motivated voter behavior: in table 2, we show that Euroskepticism positively and significantly predicts shifting support to the pro-Brexit Conservatives. A 1-point increase in pre-referendum Euroskepticism generates a .7% increase in the probability of switching loyalties to the Conservatives. And the interaction term is positive and significant, indicating that Euroskeptical non-Conservatives who perceived an increase in Conservative Euroskepticism following the referendum were especially

likely to join the Conservatives. In all, 4% of respondents who did not back the Conservatives before the referendum switched to the party, and as expected, the pattern is the inverse of the one described above: of those respondents who did not identify as Conservative before the referendum, 2.8% with Euroskepticism scores of 5 or 6, 5.0% with scores of 7 or 8, and 6.7% with scores of 9 or 10 joined the Conservatives. The more Euroskeptical the respondent, the more likely they were to swing behind the Conservatives following the party's shift in policy position.

### Do strong partisans change their policy preferences?

The previous results suggest that a policy position adopted by the Conservative Party causally influenced many voters' behavior. But not all voters are alike: some are more committed to their political parties than others. In figure 1, we look at whether stronger Conservative partisans were more likely to become Euroskeptical following the sudden, as-if random change in Conservative positioning on Brexit than less staunch supporters of the party. We subset voters into three types based on their pre-referendum partisanship: very strong Conservatives, moderate Conservatives (those who described their partisan identity as fairly strong or not very strong), and non-Conservatives. The dependent variable is a respondent's change in Euroskepticism between waves 8 and 9; the independent variable is the perceived increase in Conservative Euroskepticism. As the relative gradients in figure 1 show, with the line almost horizontal for non-Conservatives, positive for

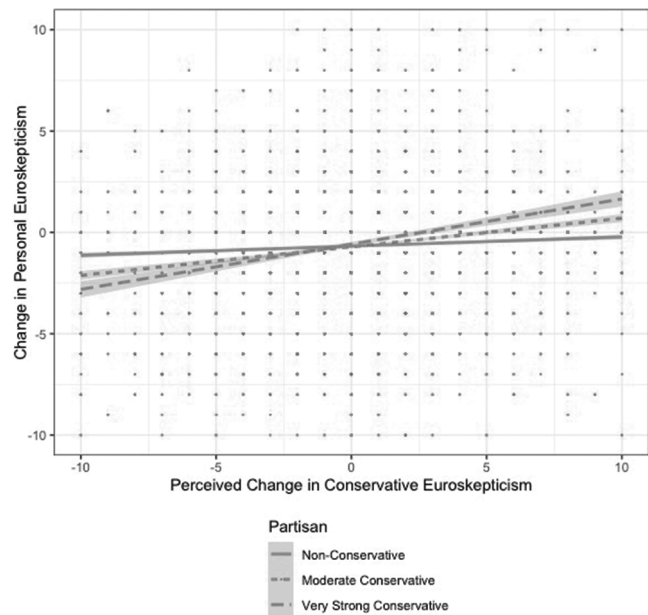


Figure 1. Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism and change in personal Euroskepticism. Color version available as an online enhancement.

moderate Conservatives, and sharply positive for very strong Conservatives, the intensity of Conservative partisanship determined the extent to which voters followed the party's evolving position on the EU—or, more precisely, their perception of the party's evolving position. But there are real limits to the flexibility of even the strongest partisans' preferences on Brexit. Even the 18% of Conservatives who identified as “very strong” partisans did not update their own positions on Europe to the full extent to which their party shifted.<sup>7</sup>

The results of the ordinary least squares analysis shown in table 3 present a similar picture. There is a clear, statistically significant, positive relationship between Conservative partisans' perception of their party's increasing Euroskepticism and their own Euroskepticism. But the size of the effect is limited: even for very strong Conservatives, a one-unit increase in perceived Conservative Euroskepticism on a 10-point scale yields only a 0.22-unit increase in personal Euroskepticism. Unsurprisingly, as the relative sizes of the two coefficients in the top row indicate, the effect is stronger among Conservatives who described their partisan identity as very strong before the referendum—a finding that echoes recent work showing that the 100,000 or so grassroots members of the Conservative Party embraced an increasingly hard-line view on Brexit in the years after the referendum (Bale 2019).

### Do new Conservatives adopt right-wing attitudes toward redistribution?

We have shown that in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, as the Conservative Party became increasingly affiliated with Brexit, Conservative voters who were relatively more pro-European abandoned the party while previously non-Conservative Euroskeptics swung behind it: the sudden change in the party's policy induced some voters to switch loyalties, even as the party's strongest partisans followed it as it tacked in a more Euroskeptical direction. But as previously non-Conservative Euroskeptics flocked to the party, what happened to their views on other issues?

In this section, we find that joining the Conservatives led voters to update their views on economic issues to bring them into line with the positions of their new party; party affiliation, we contend, influenced the subsequent evolution of voters' policy preferences. We exploit the change in some voters' partisan affiliations described above to assess whether joining the Conservatives induced changes in voters' views on redistri-

7. We see in the figure that some survey respondents (incorrectly) perceived a Europhilic shift by the Conservatives. As noted above, however, the (average) perceived Euroskepticism of the Conservatives increased after the referendum.

Table 3. Individual Shifts in Euroskepticism

	Dependent Variable: Change in Personal Euroskepticism	
	Moderate Conservatives	Very Strong Conservatives
Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism	.139*** (.011)	.220*** (.020)
Female	-.055 (.054)	-.109 (.113)
Age	.006*** (.002)	.004 (.004)
White	.094 (.154)	-.186 (.300)
Scotland	.131 (.096)	.099 (.192)
Wales	.017 (.111)	-.324 (.245)
Constant	-1.161*** (.178)	-.573 (.340)
Observations	5,000	1,180
R <sup>2</sup>	.038	.101
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.036	.097
Residual SE	1.882 (df = 4,993)	1.883 (df = 1,173)
F-statistic	32.559*** (df = 6; 4,993)	22.025*** (df = 6; 1,173)

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

bution—the most salient aspect of economic policy and still one of the most important political issues in Britain today. If partisanship shapes the development of voters' policy preferences, Conservative affiliation should reduce an individual's support for redistribution, since the Conservatives are the major party most hostile to this approach to economic policy. Indeed, figure 2 confirms that voters perceived that the Conservatives were the most antiredistribution party in both wave 7—before the referendum—and wave 11—after the referendum.<sup>8</sup>

We first subset to British Election Study survey respondents who did not identify as Conservative in the period immediately preceding the Brexit referendum (wave 8, May–June 2016). As before, we create a dummy variable, Joined

8. These are the closest waves to the referendum that include a question about redistribution.

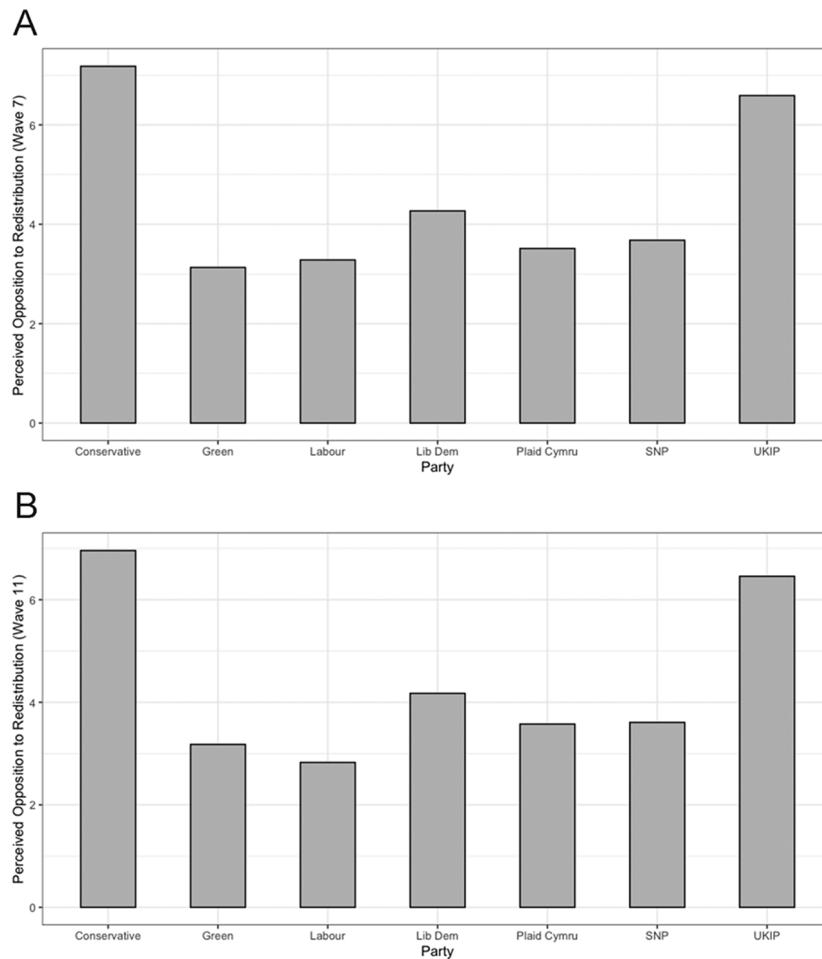


Figure 2. Perceived opposition to redistribution by party, waves 7 and 11; SNP = Scottish National Party; UKIP = UK Independence Party

Conservatives, which equals 1 if a respondent joined the Conservatives in the period immediately following the referendum and 0 otherwise.

We now estimate the effect of joining the Conservatives on changes in attitudes toward redistribution. Our dependent variable, Increase in Opposition to Redistribution, is the level of opposition to redistribution in wave 11, conducted between April 2017 and May 2017, minus the level of opposition to redistribution in wave 7 (conducted between April 2016 and May 2016), the most recent post- and pre-referendum survey waves, respectively, that ask about redistribution preferences. More specifically, the survey question asks, “Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people’s incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people’s incomes are. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” Possible answers range from 0 (“Government should try to make incomes equal”) to 10 (“Government should be less concerned about equal incomes”).

In table 4, we present the OLS estimates. We find a positive association between joining the Conservatives and increased opposition to redistribution: as column 1 shows, affiliating with the Conservative Party is associated with more than a half-point increase in opposition to redistribution on a 10-point scale.

Since UKIP’s opposition to redistribution is almost as high as that of the Conservatives (as shown in fig. 2), the effect of joining the Conservatives on redistributive attitudes should be stronger among respondents who were not previously members of UKIP. To test this, we subset to respondents who did not identify with the Conservatives or UKIP before the referendum (i.e., in wave 8) and once again assess the relationship between joining the Conservatives and changes in opposition to redistribution. As columns 2 and 3 show, the effect of joining the Conservatives is stronger for this non-UKIP sample than for the sample that included former members of UKIP, while we find null results among those voters who shifted from UKIP to the Conservatives—findings consistent with the relatively minor discrepancy between the



Table 4. Joining the Conservatives and Opposition to Redistribution

	Dependent Variable: Change in Opposition to Redistribution		
	Overall (1)	Non-UKIP (2)	UKIP (3)
Joined Conservatives	.542*** (.133)	.605*** (.158)	.042 (.285)
White	.179 (.119)	.155 (.120)	.360 (.528)
Age	-.001 (.002)	-.003 (.002)	.008 (.007)
Female	-.009 (.052)	.0001 (.054)	.003 (.191)
Scotland	-.162* (.071)	-.109 (.071)	-.472 (.468)
Wales	-.051 (.091)	-.112 (.094)	.536 (.312)
Constant	-.161 (.144)	-.094 (.146)	-.518 (.631)
Observations	9,065	8,086	979
R <sup>2</sup>	.003	.003	.007
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.002	.002	.001
Residual SE	2.477 (df = 9,058)	2.415 (df = 8,079)	2.906 (df = 972)
F-statistic	4.155*** (df = 6; 9,058)	3.804*** (df = 6; 8,079)	1.090 (df = 6; 972)

Note. UKIP = UK Independence Party.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Conservatives and UKIP in their perceived opposition to redistribution. For those new Conservatives who did not previously affiliate with an antiredistribution party, joining the Conservatives in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum is linked to a shift in economic attitudes in the direction of the Conservative Party's traditional policy preferences.

### Has changing partisanship influenced actual voting?

We have demonstrated that the change in Conservative positioning on Brexit has had significant consequences for many voters' partisan attachments and, through the channel of their evolving party loyalties, for their preferences in another policy domain. But has it shaped actual voting behavior and electoral outcomes? Although we cannot identify causality for changes in electoral voting, we analyze actual

voting behavior to examine the broader implications of the Brexit-induced change in Conservative positioning. We assess the relationship between Euroskepticism and voting in the 2015 and 2017 elections by drawing on data from British Election Study wave 6 (conducted in May 2015, in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 election) and wave 13 (conducted after the June 2017 election).

We first examine survey respondents who reported voting for the Conservatives in the 2015 election. In table 5, we test whether a Conservative voter's level of Euroskepticism in 2015 is related to the probability that the voter decides to

Table 5. Euroskepticism and Defecting from Conservatives

	Dependent Variable: Defected from Conservatives		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
2015 Euroskepticism	-.029*** (.003)	-.031*** (.003)	-.026*** (.003)
Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		.009 (.008)	.010 (.008)
Age			-.004*** (.001)
Female			.023 (.015)
White			-.020 (.041)
Scotland			-.053* (.026)
Wales			.024 (.027)
2015 Euroskepticism: perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		-.001 (.001)	-.001 (.001)
Constant	.358*** (.023)	.362*** (.028)	.608*** (.053)
Observations	2,142	1,902	1,902
R <sup>2</sup>	.047	.059	.096
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.047	.058	.092
Residual SE	.332 (df = 2,140)	.321 (df = 1,898)	.315 (df = 1,893)
F-statistic	105.620*** (df = 1; 2,140)	39.927*** (df = 3; 1,898)	25.150*** (df = 8; 1,893)

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

back the Conservatives in 2017. We find a consistent negative relationship between 2015 Euroskepticism and the likelihood of defecting from the (now more Euroskeptic) Conservatives in 2017. The effects are substantively large: a one-unit increase in Euroskepticism on the 10-point scale (in 2015) makes someone 2.9% less likely to abandon the Conservatives in the 2017 election.

Next, we examine survey respondents who did not vote for the Conservatives in the 2015 election. Using an OLS regression (displayed in table 6), we find a clear positive relationship between their level of Euroskepticism in 2015

and the probability that they voted for the Conservatives in 2017. A one-unit increase in 2015 Euroskepticism (on the 10-point scale) makes a non-Conservative as much as 4.7% more likely to vote for the Conservatives in 2017. The consequences of the Conservative Party’s embrace of Brexit, this analysis suggests, extend beyond voters’ partisan identities and self-reported policy preferences to their behavior in the voting booth.

**CONCLUSION**

Understanding what motivates voters has proven to be an enduring problem for political scientists. As Fowler (2020) notes, intoxicated partisans and policy-motivated voters are often observationally equivalent, and studies of policy and partisan preferences outside of experimental conditions are plagued by endogeneity. To address this problem, we analyze a unique natural experiment, namely, the sudden shift in the Conservative Party’s position on Brexit following the surprising 2016 referendum result. We find substantial evidence that voters are policy motivated: Euroskeptic voters flocked to the newly Euroskeptic Conservatives, while formerly Conservative Europhiles defected from their original party—a voter realignment that has had significant electoral ramifications. Eight percent of Conservatives defected from the party following its sudden shift on Brexit; by contrast, even very strong Conservatives did not shift their views on Europe to the same extent as their party. For voter behavior in advanced democracies, our findings suggest, at least some policies matter. On at least some issues—European integration, in this case—most voters do not simply follow their psychological attachments to their political parties. Instead, on both sides of the debate over Britain’s role in the EU, voters’ policy preferences shaped their partisan loyalties, in ways more or less consistent with conventional normative accounts of democratic accountability.

At the same time, however, we show that parties remain highly influential in shaping the views of their supporters on major political issues that happen to be less salient in driving voter decision-making. Those voters who joined the Conservative Party just after the referendum exhibited reduced support for economic redistribution—evidence of the continued importance of partisan affiliation, even in countries marked by increased electoral volatility and the ongoing decline of traditional political loyalties. The precise mechanism by which political parties shape the evolution of their supporters’ views, whether through exposure to new sources of information, the desire to avoid cognitive dissonance, or some other channel, remains unclear and is a productive avenue for future research.

Table 6. Euroskepticism and Switching Vote to Conservatives

	Dependent Variable: Switched to Conservatives		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
2015 Euroskepticism	.047*** (.002)	.049*** (.002)	.047*** (.002)
Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		.005 (.004)	.004 (.004)
Age			.002*** (.0004)
Female			-.015 (.012)
White			.061* (.028)
Scotland			.010 (.015)
Wales			-.034 (.020)
2015 Euroskepticism: perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism		.001* (.001)	.001* (.001)
Constant	-.068*** (.011)	-.076*** (.012)	-.228*** (.035)
Observations	4,388	3,758	3,758
R <sup>2</sup>	.164	.203	.210
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.164	.202	.208
Residual SE	.367 (df = 4,386)	.364 (df = 3,754)	.363 (df = 3,749)
F-statistic	861.685*** (df = 1; 4,386)	318.651*** (df = 3; 3,754)	124.664*** (df = 8; 3,749)

\* p < .05.  
 \*\* p < .01.  
 \*\*\* p < .001.

Table A1. Euroskepticism and Joining the Conservatives (by Pre-Referendum Partisan Affiliation)

	Dependent Variable: Joined Conservatives					
	Labour	Liberal Democrats	UK Independence Party	Green	Scottish National Party	None
Pre-referendum Euroskepticism	.001** (.0004)	.002 (.002)	-.001 (.006)	.005** (.001)	.002 (.001)	.001 (.002)
Perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism	-.001 (.001)	.001 (.004)	-.033 (.023)	-.003 (.003)	.0004 (.002)	-.005 (.004)
Age	.00000 (.0001)	.0004 (.0003)	.002*** (.001)	.0004 (.0003)	.0001 (.0002)	.001* (.0003)
Female	-.004 (.002)	.015 (.010)	.001 (.015)	.002 (.009)	.001 (.006)	-.015 (.009)
White	-.014** (.005)	-.020 (.028)	-.012 (.040)	-.023 (.017)	.007 (.017)	-.002 (.019)
Scotland	.005 (.004)	.016 (.017)	.065 (.037)	.001 (.012)	.011 (.065)	-.035** (.013)
Wales	.001 (.004)	-.034 (.020)	.015 (.026)	-.010 (.016)		-.025 (.017)
Pre-referendum Euroskepticism: perceived change in Conservative Euroskepticism	.0002 (.0001)	-.0004 (.001)	.005* (.002)	.0004 (.001)	-.0002 (.0003)	.001 (.001)
Constant	.015* (.006)	.023 (.031)	-.007 (.070)	-.006 (.020)	-.027 (.068)	.036 (.024)
Observations	5,930	1,518	1,904	567	842	3,013
R <sup>2</sup>	.004	.007	.025	.033	.006	.007
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.003	.002	.021	.019	-.003	.005
Residual SE	.089 (df = 5,921)	.201 (df = 1,509)	.315 (df = 1,895)	.101 (df = 558)	.091 (df = 834)	.252 (df = 3,004)
F-statistic	3.326*** (df = 8; 5,921)	1.354 (df = 8; 1,509)	6.021*** (df = 8; 1,895)	2.379* (df = 8; 558)	.663 (df = 7; 834)	2.836** (df = 8; 3,004)

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Finally, our findings speak to the political realignments reshaping politics in contemporary Britain. Europe has become the defining issue that determines party allegiance for much of the electorate. This cleavage cuts across party lines and class divides, running through the traditional support base of both of Britain's major parties, and leaving the country's old two-party system in flux. Indeed, our findings show that for many voters, what was once a defining axis of political competition—the appropriate level of economic redistribution—has become secondary to their views on Britain's relationship with the EU. As these voters' partisan loyalties shifted in response to the parties' stances on Brexit, their views on economic policy followed suit.

Ultimately, the long-term significance of Brexit for Britain's political system remains unclear. But as democracies across the West confront increasing polarization and political fragmentation, understanding the determinants of voter decision-making remains as vital as ever.

## APPENDIX

### Euroskepticism and Joining the Conservatives (by Previous Party)

In table A1, we disaggregate the relationship between Euroskepticism and joining the Conservatives by pre-referendum party. We find that Euroskepticism strongly predicts joining

the Conservatives for those who identified as Labour or Green Party supporters. Furthermore, more Euroskeptic members of UKIP who perceived a larger increase in Conservative Euro-skepticism were more likely to join the Conservatives.

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