



Political alienation and referendums: how political alienation was related to support for Brexit

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Published online: 20 February 2020
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Abstract

A common interpretation of the UK's Brexit vote is that it was an expression of anti-establishment sentiment, outrage and dismay from a politically alienated majority. This line of thinking suggests Brexit, like the electoral appeal of Donald Trump and parties such as the Five Star Movement, is but the latest manifestation of a growing disconnect between Western citizens and their democratic institutions. The direct role of political alienation in building support for such anti-establishment causes has, however, barely been examined. This study addresses this gap and uses previous literature on political alienation to build a model to test the claim that Brexit was (at least in part) driven by political alienation in UK citizens. The analyses show that while political alienation did have a substantial effect in making some citizens more likely to support Brexit—specifically those who lacked trust in the integrity of the political elite and felt that the political system was unresponsive—its impact overall was limited. Moreover, claims that Brexit was driven by political alienation understate how alienated from politics most people who were opposed to it also feel.

Keywords Brexit · British politics · Political alienation · Euroscepticism

Introduction

A common interpretation of the UK's 'Brexit vote' is that of an alienated majority of voters, left behind by economic development and let down by out of touch politicians, venting their frustration by rejecting the preference of the political and economic elite. The efforts of the Leave campaigns during the referendum to link support for Brexit with a rejection of the political establishment and their management of issues such as the economy, healthcare and immigration were clear (Shipman 2016, 2017). The efforts of the Remain campaign to link opposition to Brexit with the protection of the status quo were equally clear. Since the

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referendum, journalists have frequently emphasised the link between support for Brexit and anger at the perceived failings of the political and economic system (Freedland 2017; Harris 2016; Shipman 2016, 2017), and both the Labour and Conservative Party campaigns during the 2017 general election reflected their belief that Brexit was “an anti-establishment vote” (Shipman 2017, p. 261). Academics have similarly suggested that political discontent and alienation was correlated with support for Brexit and opposition to some of the more visible consequences of European Union (EU) membership, such as mass migration (Vines and Marsh 2017; Ford and Goodwin 2014; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Watson 2017; Clarke et al. 2017; Curtice 2017; Marsh 2018). Some also suggest that Brexit is the UK’s manifestation of rising levels of political discontent and anti-establishment sentiment apparent in numerous Western democracies, comparable with the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and support for parties such as Italy’s Five Star Movement, Jobbik in Hungary or Alternative for Germany (Ford and Goodwin 2014; Geddes 2014; Vines and Marsh 2017; Marsh 2018).

While there have been numerous insightful assessments of the referendum in both the media and academia that highlight the importance of discontent with the political elite (Clarke et al. 2017; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Jackson et al. 2016; Curtice 2017; Shipman 2016; Freedland 2017), the effect of characteristics associated with ‘political alienation’ in the academic literature on the concept has not been directly examined. Rather, there is an assumption that support for Brexit was driven at least in part by political alienation, resulting from voters’ perceptions or circumstances such as economic deprivation or feeling that there are too many immigrants in their neighbourhood. In other words, alienation is implied as the causal link that bridges certain voter perceptions or circumstances with their support for Brexit.

This is problematic for several reasons. First, alienation does not necessarily have to be positively associated with support for Brexit. While someone who is aggressively opposed to mass immigration from the EU, for example, *may* have felt alienated from the political system that allowed it, they need not necessarily feel that way—they may simply be dissatisfied with government policy. Second, the assumption implies that those who voted ‘remain’ in the referendum were less alienated than Brexit supporters, which could be unsustainable in light of the numerous studies that have examined political alienation, political discontent or anti-politics in the UK and shown that it is more widespread than the 52% who voted ‘leave’ in 2016 (Whiteley 2012; Stoker 2006; Fox 2015; Hay 2007; Jennings et al. 2016). Third, not only is a potential contribution to explanations for Brexit overlooked, but an opportunity to learn more about political alienation is missed as well. There is a healthy literature on the theory, measurement, causes and consequences of political alienation, and the concept has been used to examine a range of political concerns, such as support for populist or non-mainstream political candidates, the development of attitudes towards democracy in children and low youth turnout (Southwell 2003, 2012; Southwell and Everest 1998; Kabashima et al. 2000; Fox 2015; Gniewosz et al. 2009; Dermody et al. 2010; Dahl et al. 2017). Examining how alienation was related to vote choice in the UK’s referendum presents an opportunity to learn more about a concept of increasing relevance to contemporary political and social research.



This study addresses these gaps in the literature and examines the effect of political alienation on the likelihood of British citizens supporting Brexit. It develops a model of political alienation rooted in previous research that is based around voters' political trust and efficacy. The effect of these traits on support for Brexit is modelled while controlling for other characteristics associated with participation in the referendum and Euroscepticism. The analyses show, first, that concern regarding the extent of political alienation and anti-political sentiment in the UK may be justified, with a clear majority of British voters feeling that the political elite cannot be trusted and that the political system is unresponsive, and a substantial minority finding the political process too complex to effectively engage with. Second, while the people most likely to hold such views are also those most likely to have voted for Brexit (i.e. older, white males with low education, limited economic resources and who are sceptical about immigration), the association between such attitudes and support for Brexit was relatively weak. Only voters who felt that the political elite could not be trusted *and* that the political system and elite were unresponsive were significantly more likely to support Brexit; there was no appreciable difference between the vote choices of those who exhibited other forms of alienation and those who were not alienated at all.

This article begins by defining political alienation and outlining the theory and approach to operationalising it developed in previous research. It then outlines the model used in this analysis and the hypotheses to be tested, before presenting the results. The conclusion summarises the findings and considers the implications both for the future study of political alienation and for understandings of why the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016.

Defining and measuring political alienation

The concept of alienation was first popularised in the fields of political economy and sociology in the nineteenth century. Its hey-day in political science came in the 1960s and 1970s when it was used to explain various activities amongst US citizens in opposition to government policy that indicated far more than simple disagreement or dissatisfaction, such as voluntary renunciation of citizenship (Ranade and Norris 1984; Keniston 1965). This literature defined political alienation in terms of a lasting form of estrangement from some aspect of one's political system, community or environment (Citrin et al. 1975; Finifter 1970; Seeman 1959; Cutler and Bengston 1974). Political alienation does not refer to a short-term expression of dissatisfaction; rather, it is a long-term orientation towards the political system that is perceived as something alien to the individual, which is heavily influenced by that individual's political socialisation (Citrin et al. 1975; Dermody et al. 2010). This means that key socialising agents and experiences during adolescence are vital to determining one's alienation from the political system, such as the attitudes of one's parents, key early experiences of the political process, or exposure to institutions or communities that can encourage alienation (such as the press that has been shown to promote low trust and cynicism in the political process) (de Vreese 2005; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Gniewosz et al. 2009). As individuals age, the values and



dispositions developed during adolescence are reinforced and become habitual; barring a dramatic event that ‘over-rides’ these habits, alienation (or a lack of it) becomes a relatively stable and lasting component of one’s political characteristics, meaning that changes in political alienation are very rare (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009; Fox 2015).

Political alienation is expressed attitudinally, not through behaviour, although the attitudes do necessarily affect behaviour (Citrin et al. 1975; Olsen 1969). This means that acts such as refusing to vote, rioting, or voting for Brexit are not indicators of political alienation in themselves, but rather are caused by the attitudes that reflect alienation. The utility of the concept is that it provides the causal link between an individual’s negative perceptions of the political system and their subsequent behaviour (Citrin et al. 1975; Cutler and Bengston 1974). Those behavioural consequences of alienation can be highly varied, but in essence take one of two forms: “[w]hen an individual is faced with an external situation that is perceived as undesirable, [s]/he is presented with two options: (1) take remedial action, or; (2) exit the scene” (Southwell and Everest 1998, p. 43; Hirschman 1970). Taking remedial action could involve activities intended to change or remove the object of the political system that makes the individual feel estranged, such as voting for radical anti-establishment candidates or rioting (Hooghe et al. 2011; Templeton 1966). ‘Exiting the scene’ essentially means disengaging from the political process altogether, or at least refusing to participate in ‘formalised’ activities (such as voting) (Southwell and Everest 1998).

Previous literature has identified three attitudinal ‘domains’ or ‘dimensions’ of alienation, each of which constitutes a means by which it can be expressed and all of which were linked with behavioural consequences in the form of remedial action or withdrawal. The first is ‘political powerlessness’ (Finifter 1970; Aberbach 1969; Nachimas 1974), which refers to the individual’s perception that the political process or elite is unresponsive to their influence, essentially mirroring the concept of external political efficacy (Citrin et al. 1975). This is usually associated with an individual’s withdrawal from political activity (Fox 2015). The second is ‘political normlessness’ (Finifter 1970; Schwartz 1973), which refers to the individual’s belief that the norms governing just and fair political interaction are not adhered to. It refers to the trust that a citizen has in the integrity of the political elite or process and in the fairness of the operation of the political system. This can be associated with withdrawal from politics, but also with the desire to take remedial action (Southwell and Everest 1998; Southwell 2012). Finally, ‘political meaninglessness’ refers to citizens’ lack of faith in their own knowledge and understanding of politics, which results in them feeling unable to identify any order or meaning in the political process, and so undermining their confidence in their capacity to effectively engage with it (Nachimas 1974; Denters and Geurts 1993). It mirrors the concept of internal political efficacy. This alienation is likely to result in the individual’s withdrawal from the political process altogether (Fox 2015).

It is in these dimensions that the distinction between political alienation and related concepts such as political discontent or anti-politics becomes apparent (Jennings et al. 2016; Stoker 2006; Hay 2007; Vines and Marsh 2017). While a wide array of negative perceptions of the political system is associated with ‘anti-politics’



or political discontent, they are usually focused on voters' assessments of their politicians. Jennings et al. (2016), for example, outline five dimensions of political discontent, focussed on citizens beliefs about politicians' lack of technical skill to deliver desirable outcomes; lack of courage to pursue radical objectives; focus on short-term victories and 'the median voter' or on 'big business' and opinion formers; and weakness in the face of globalisation and 'big money'. While these could clearly inform an individual's political trust or efficacy, they do not cover ways in which respondents' could be alienated from other elements of the political system besides the political elite, such as the electoral system, the party system or even the idea of a democratic society. Jennings et al.'s (2016) dimensions also do not account for how citizens can be politically alienated by their own lack of confidence in their understanding of it—a trait that could have nothing to do with the performance of politicians. While there is clear overlap between political discontent, anti-politics and political alienation, therefore, and it is likely that there are causal relationships between them, there are also differences in the traits they refer to and the object to which expressions of discontent/alienation can be directed.

Research Design

This research was conducted using a nationally representative sample of British adults (Northern Ireland was excluded), surveyed online by YouGov in June 2017 and commissioned by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD). Respondents were asked just before the 2017 general election about a variety of attitudes relating to the political system. The YouGov panel also included data on how those respondents voted in the EU Referendum in 2016, collected either immediately after the referendum or as soon as possible after it. This study uses expressions of political attitude indicative of political alienation in June 2017, therefore, to predict vote choice in the 2016 referendum. This, clearly, falls some way short of the ideal standard for testing causal hypotheses in social research. It is considered an acceptable limitation for the objective of this study—to assess the claim that support for Brexit was (at least in part) driven by political alienation—for several reasons. First, the inherent stability of traits indicative of political alienation—political trust, internal efficacy and external efficacy—means that people who were (for example) alienated by their lack of trust in politicians in 2016 were highly unlikely to have substantially changed their opinions over the following year. Even an event as dramatic as the referendum would not be expected to affect such attitudes, although the wider impact of Brexit on British politics over the following years may well have done so and is a further avenue of research discussed below. In other words, respondents who felt politically un/alienated in 2017 were highly likely to feel that way in 2016 before voting in the referendum. While clearly problematic, therefore, this survey data can give a glimpse into how alienation may have contributed to the UK's Brexit vote. Second, there is no other survey capable of sustaining this study; while surveys such as the British Election Study or United Kingdom Household Panel Study include *some* indicators of political alienation alongside EU Referendum vote choice, they do not include indicators of all three dimensions.



Reliance on them would preclude not only a complete assessment of how alienation affected support for Brexit, therefore, but also the potential to examine how different dimensions of alienation may have interacted. Despite the drawbacks, therefore, this survey still provides the best way of examining how political alienation contributed to Brexit.

A combination of descriptive statistics and regression analyses were used to examine the relationship between alienation and vote choice in the referendum. Three dependent variables were used: voting 'leave', voting 'remain' or not voting at all. Political alienation was measured by three survey items corresponding to the three dimensions of external efficacy (powerlessness), political trust (normlessness) and internal efficacy (meaninglessness). External political efficacy was measured through respondents' agreement (measured on a five-point Likert scale) that 'politicians don't care what people like me think'. Political trust was measured through agreement that 'politicians in Westminster cannot be trusted to put the interests of the country ahead of the interests of their party', while internal political efficacy was measured through responses to the view that 'politics and government can seem so complicated, I find it hard to understand what's going on'. The number of respondents who 'neither agreed nor disagreed', 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' for each measure was very small and so the variables were collapsed into dichotomous indicators separating respondents who could be described as politically alienated to some extent (i.e. agreed that politicians did not care what they thought, that politicians could not be trusted, or that politics and government was too complicated) from those who were not.¹ A single independent variable was then created that grouped respondents based on their expression of political alienation, to account for the fact that people can be alienated by more than one dimension at a time. The variable distinguished between those who felt no alienation at all (i.e. did not agree with any of the statements), who were alienated in terms of all three dimensions (i.e. agreed with all three), who were alienated only in terms of external efficacy, political trust or internal efficacy, and every combination of the three, producing an eight category measure.

The political alienation literature suggests that a lack of political trust should be associated with 'taking remedial action', i.e. being more likely to vote for Brexit and against the political establishment. While there is little research into how interactions between different forms of alienation might affect political behaviour, it is possible that someone with low trust in politics could feel even more strongly about the need to take remedial action if they also felt that the political system was unresponsive and felt that the political process was too difficult to understand. Conversely, those respondents who did not feel alienated from politics at all should have been the staunchest opponents of Brexit, as they held the political elite and system in high regard and would be the most likely to want to retain the status quo. The first hypotheses will test this expectation:

¹ Just one in ten respondents disagreed, for example, that politicians could not be trusted, and 16% disagreed that politicians did not care what they thought.



H1 Respondents who felt alienated in terms of all three dimensions of alienation were the most likely to support Brexit.

H2 Respondents who did not feel alienated in terms of any dimension were the least likely to support Brexit.

There should also be variations between manifestations of alienation. The association of normlessness with ‘remedial action’ should mean that those whose alienation was at least in part driven by their lack of trust in politicians should have been more supportive of Brexit than those who had more trust:

H3 Respondents who felt alienated by their lack of trust in politicians were more likely to support Brexit than those with higher trust, or who were alienated only by their lack of external or internal efficacy.

Conversely, the fact that powerlessness and meaninglessness tend to be associated with ‘exiting the scene’ and essentially withdrawing from politics suggests that these forms of alienation should be associated with a lower chance of voting in the referendum at all:

H4 Respondents who felt alienated by their low external political efficacy should be less likely to vote in the referendum than those with high external efficacy.

H5 Respondents who felt alienated by their low internal political efficacy should be less likely to vote in the referendum than those with high internal efficacy.

The hypotheses were tested using descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses, which allowed for the inclusion of control variables indicating other traits associated with participation in the referendum and support for Brexit/Euroscepticism:

- Education as a proxy for political sophistication, given that higher levels of each are associated with less Euroscepticism (Gabel 1998).
- Age, marital status, education status and retirement status, to account for the relationship between the life cycle and Euroscepticism (Fox and Pearce 2018; Down and Wilson 2013, 2017).
- National identity, as those who hold to exclusive national identities are more likely both to oppose the impact of EU membership on the sovereignty of the national government and the impact of immigration on the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of that nation (McLaren 2002; Haesly 2001).
- Occupational social grade, household tenure, work type, employment status and whether the respondents lived in an urban, semi-urban or rural area, to account for the relationship between economic deprivation and/or a lack of economic resources and hostility to EU membership/support for Brexit (Clarke et al. 2017; Ford and Goodwin 2014; Watson 2017; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Gabel 1998).



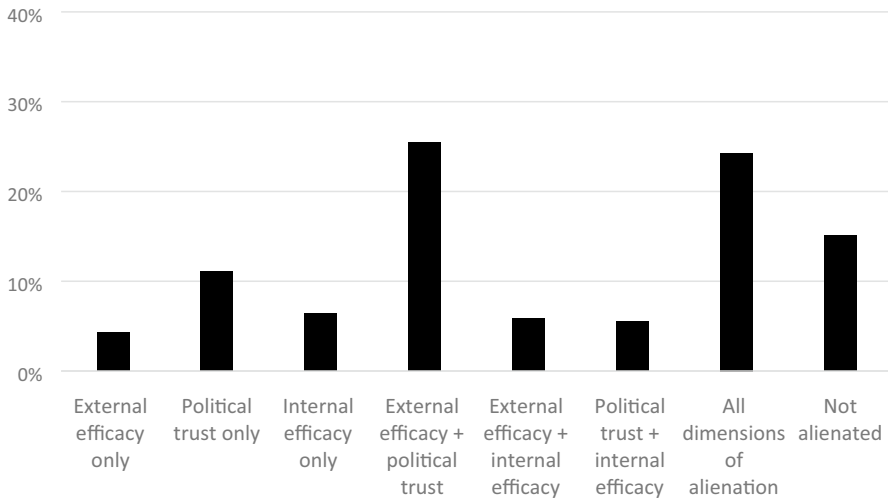


Fig. 1 Political alienation in Britain (%). *Source* YouGov (weighted data); $n = 5095$

- Attachment to domestic political institutions (such as political parties) associated with differing levels of Euroscepticism, political ideology and assessments of the performance of the incumbent government (Nelsen and Guth 2017; Fox and Pearce 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Franklin et al. 1995).
- A dummy variable indicating whether respondents had no interest at all in politics, to account for the positive relationship between political engagement and support for EU membership, and the importance of being politically engaged to the possibility of being politically alienated (Citrin et al. 1975).
- Finally, controls for the demographic traits of gender and ethnicity were also included.²

Results

The survey showed that most British citizens could be described as politically alienated in some way. Clear majorities felt that the political system/elite is unresponsive (60%) and that politicians cannot be trusted (66%), and a substantial minority (42%) felt that politics is too complex. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents in each category of alienation and demonstrates that while there is no particular form

² While measures of political ideology were available in the survey, there were no direct measures of respondents' assessments of the performance of the national government or their loyalty to domestic political parties. This effect was captured, therefore, through measures of respondents' political ideology and newspaper readership (assuming that those who were left-wing and/or read *The Guardian*, for example, were more likely to be opposed to the incumbent Conservative government and to feel that it was doing a poor job of running the country than respondents who were right-wing and/or read *The Daily Mail*).



that dominates, most respondents were estranged either by their lack of political trust *and* their lack of faith in the responsiveness of the political system, or by both of these *and* their lack of confidence in their understanding of that system.

Consistent with previous research, political alienation tends to be concentrated amongst those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds (Finifter 1970; Citrin et al. 1975; Southwell 2012). Almost one in five respondents with degrees or post-graduate qualifications, for example, did not feel alienated from politics, compared with 13% of those with no qualifications; conversely, 30% of those with no qualification felt alienated in terms of all three dimensions, compared with 16% of graduates. Similarly, 18% in social grades A and B did not feel alienated at all, and another 18% felt alienated in terms of all three dimensions—the equivalent figures for those in grades D and E are 13% and 29%. That said, respondents from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to be alienated by their lack of trust in politicians alone: 16% of graduates and 17% of those in social grades A and B, for example, were alienated only by their lack of trust in politicians, compared with 8% of those with no qualifications or in grades D and E, respectively. This does not indicate a greater propensity to distrust politicians amongst these respondents, rather than the lower likelihood of them lacking internal or external political efficacy. In other words, political normlessness is more widespread and reaches across socio-economic boundaries more extensively than powerlessness or meaninglessness.

There were few substantial differences in terms of gender or ethnicity, with around 15% of men and women not feeling alienated at all. This is actually against the expectations of previous literature, with numerous studies identifying women as more likely to be alienated by low internal efficacy than men, and Guerrina et al. (2018) arguing that prior to the 2016 referendum women stood out for being less confident in their understanding of it. While there was some evidence of this, the differences were very small, with 8% of women alienated by lack of internal efficacy alone, and another 8% by lack of internal *and* external efficacy, compared with 5% and 4% of men, respectively. The only exception is with regard to political trust, where men were more likely to be alienated than women: 13% of men were alienated in terms of normlessness only and 31% in terms of normlessness and powerlessness, compared with 9% and 21% of women, respectively.

Ethnicity had virtually no effect, with the small exception of non-white respondents being less likely to be alienated by powerlessness and normlessness (18%) than white respondents (26%). Age, however, had a more substantial impact. A common claim in studies of youth political participation is that young people are less likely to vote because they feel alienated from mainstream politics (Henn et al. 2005; Henn and Foard 2012; Marsh et al. 2007; Sloam 2014). While the differences are small, and most young people do not hold the British political system in high regard, younger respondents are less likely to feel alienated than their elders: 51% of 18–24-year-olds agree that politicians do not care what they think, compared with an average of 61% of older age groups, while 62% of under-25s do not trust politicians, compared with 67%. The only area where young people stand out for being slightly more alienated is their lack of confidence in their own political understanding, with 45% of under-25s finding politics too complex to understand, compared with 42% of their elders.



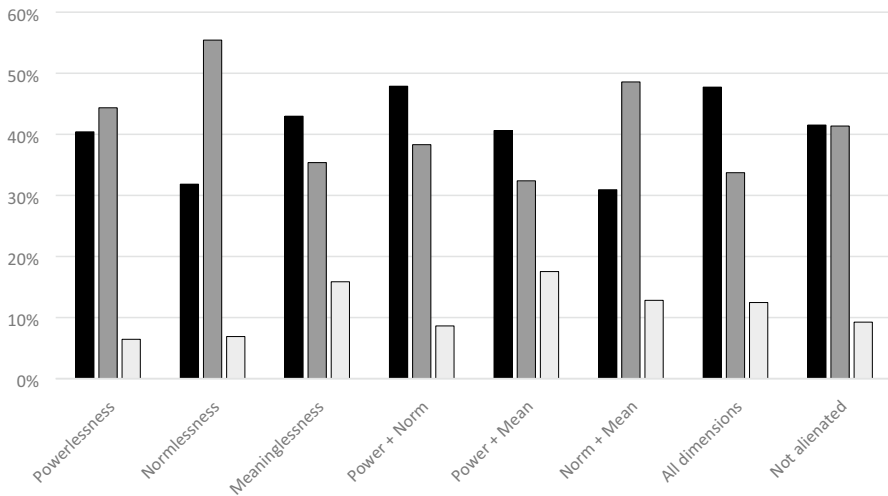


Fig. 2 Alienation and participation in EU referendum (%). *Source* YouGov (weighted data); $n = 5095$

Figure 2 shows how alienation was related to participation and vote choice in the EU referendum. Consistent with H1 (which expected those alienated in terms of all three dimensions to be the strongest supporters of Brexit), those alienated by low internal and external efficacy and trust were the most likely to vote for Brexit, with 48% voting ‘leave’ and only 34% voting ‘remain’. That said, respondents alienated only in terms of low external efficacy and trust were equally likely to support Brexit, though slightly more (38%) voted for ‘remain’, suggesting that a lack of internal efficacy was less important than a lack of trust and external efficacy in shaping support for Brexit.

H2 theorised that those who did not feel alienated at all would be the least likely to vote for Brexit, but this is not supported. Figure 2 shows that such respondents voted ‘leave’ in greater numbers (42%) than those alienated by only a lack of political trust (32%) or low trust and internal efficacy (31%). The fact that those alienated by low trust or low trust and efficacy were the least likely to support Brexit also challenges H3 (which stated that low trust would lead to greater support for Brexit than having higher trust, or being alienated only by low efficacy): not only were those with low trust the least likely to support Brexit, they were the most likely to oppose it by supporting ‘remain’: 55% of those alienated by low trust alone voted ‘remain’, along with 49% of those alienated by low trust and internal efficacy. The only instance in which political normlessness was associated with high support for Brexit was when it was combined with a low feeling of external political efficacy. Finally, H4 (stating that low external efficacy should be associated with a lower likelihood of voting at all) is also challenged, while H5 (stating that those with low internal efficacy should be less likely to vote) is supported: while the majority of respondents reported voting in the referendum, non-participation was concentrated amongst those with low internal efficacy, with 16% of those alienated by their lack of confidence in their understanding of politics not voting, as did 18% of those



alienated by low internal and external efficacy.³ Amongst those alienated by a lack of external efficacy alone, only 6% chose not to vote, along with 9% of those alienated by low external efficacy and low trust.

Table 1 presents the results of regression analyses in which the relationship between alienation and support for Brexit was examined while controlling for other traits associated with participation in the referendum, while Table 2 shows the same information with non-voting as the dependent variable. The first model in each table included control variables only; the second included measures of political alienation only; and the final model included all variables. Table 1 shows that the control variables had the anticipated effects on support for Brexit. Older, white people with no university education and working in manual or skilled manual occupations were the most likely to vote to leave the EU. Those who identified themselves as ideologically right-wing, who read newspapers sympathetic to the right-wing Conservative party and critical of the EU, or who strongly identified with an ‘English’ (or ‘Welsh’) and not ‘British’ national identity, were also particularly pro-Brexit.

The alienation model confirms that some forms of alienation had a significant and substantial effect on vote choice in the referendum, although not always in the anticipated direction. The most likely to support Brexit were those alienated by low external efficacy and trust or all three dimensions of alienation, both of whom were around 6% more likely to vote ‘leave’ than those with no alienation (the reference category). The least likely to vote ‘leave’ were those alienated only by political trust or by trust and internal efficacy, who were each around 10% less likely to support Brexit than those with no alienation. There was no notable impact from being alienated by a lack of external or internal efficacy only, nor of the two combined.

Accounting for the control variables had substantial impacts on some of these effects. There was no significant impact on the effects of low external or internal efficacy, or the two combined, nor the effect of being alienated by low external efficacy, internal efficacy *and* trust. This confirms the rejection of H1—that those alienated in terms of all three dimensions would be the most likely to support Brexit—and H2—that those with no alienation would be least likely to support it. The greatest impact from accounting for the control variables is on the effect of political trust. With controls, being alienated by low political trust, or low trust plus internal efficacy, no longer had a significant effect on support for Brexit. The effect of being alienated by low trust *and* external efficacy becomes stronger (and remains statistically significant), however, after accounting for the controls. The typical respondent alienated in this way had a 47% probability of supporting Brexit, 11% greater than those who were not alienated at all. There was no single dimension of alienation that made people more likely to support Brexit, therefore, but those who felt that the norms of the political system were not being respected *and* that it (or the political elite) was unresponsive to their influence were more likely to vote to leave the

³ 87% of respondents reported voting in the referendum. While the referendum turnout—at 72.2%—was high and above the average for general elections in the UK since the 1990s, this survey clearly overestimates turnout. This is typical of surveys of electoral behaviour, however, in which respondents are frequently shown to exaggerate their electoral participation (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009).



Table 1 Regression analysis results, support for brexit

	Control		Alienation		Full	
	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er
(Not alienated at all)						
Alienated on all three dimensions			0.25 ^a	0.11	0.23	0.13
External efficacy only			- 0.05	0.17	0.08	0.20
Political trust only			- 0.42 ^c	0.12	- 0.10	0.14
Internal efficacy only			0.06	0.15	0.07	0.18
External efficacy + political trust			0.26 ^a	0.10	0.45 ^c	0.12
External efficacy + internal efficacy			- 0.04	0.17	- 0.04	0.20
Political trust + internal efficacy			- 0.46 ^b	0.17	- 0.21	0.19
Age	0.03 ^c	0.00			0.02 ^c	0.00
Gender (female)	- 0.11	0.09			- 0.08	0.09
Ethnicity (White British)						
Other white background	- 1.42 ^c	0.32			- 1.47 ^c	0.32
Non-white background	- 0.61 ^b	0.20			- 0.58 ^b	0.20
No interest in politics	- 0.56 ^b	0.22			- 0.54 ^a	0.22
Education (no qual/no post-compulsory)						
A-level/Scottish higher	- 0.07	0.12			- 0.08	0.12
Nursing/teaching/HE diploma	- 0.17	0.16			- 0.19	0.16
Other technical/professional/higher	0.04	0.13			0.03	0.13
Degree/higher degree	- 0.29 ^a	0.12			- 0.31 ^a	0.12
Region and national identity (England and British only/more British)						
England and British and English equally	- 0.18	0.10			- 0.18	0.10
England and English only/more English	0.58 ^c	0.11			0.56 ^c	0.11
England and none	- 0.17	0.22			- 0.15	0.22
Wales and British only/more British	- 0.16	0.27			- 0.15	0.26
Wales and British and Welsh equally	- 0.25	0.36			- 0.27	0.39
Wales and Welsh only/more Welsh	0.25	0.31			0.18	0.32
Wales and none	- 1.18	0.86			- 1.25	0.83
Scotland and British only/more British	- 0.23	0.28			- 0.22	0.29
Scotland and British and Scottish equally	- 0.67 ^b	0.24			- 0.67 ^b	0.23
Scotland and Scottish only/more Scottish	- 0.44 ^a	0.20			- 0.45 ^a	0.20
Scotland and none	- 0.79	0.46			- 0.76	0.46
Tenure: rented/not owned	0.00	0.10			- 0.03	0.10
Social grade (AB)						
C1	0.05	0.11			0.05	0.11
C2	0.16	0.13			0.16	0.13
DE	0.26 ^a	0.13			0.24	0.13
Work type (professional/higher technical)						
Manager/senior admin/intermediate	- 0.01	0.14			- 0.03	0.14
Clerical/junior management	0.32 ^a	0.14			0.32 ^a	0.14
Sales/services	0.40 ^a	0.19			0.39 ^a	0.19



Table 1 (continued)

	Control		Alienation		Full	
	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er
Foreman/supervisor	0.81 ^b	0.31			0.85 ^b	0.31
Skilled manual	0.50 ^a	0.20			0.45 ^a	0.20
Semi/Un-skilled manual	0.38 ^a	0.18			0.37 ^a	0.18
Other	0.34 ^a	0.17			0.33	0.17
Never worked	0.03	0.30			0.03	0.30
Employment status (working full-time)						
Working part-time	0.02	0.12			0.04	0.12
Not in/looking for work	0.09	0.15			0.10	0.15
Unemployed	- 0.24	0.23			- 0.25	0.23
Other	- 0.01	0.25			- 0.02	0.25
Urban/rural (urban)						
Town/fringe	0.14	0.12			0.14	0.12
Rural	0.12	0.12			0.13	0.12
Ideology (centre)						
Very left-wing	- 1.05 ^c	0.28			- 1.06 ^c	0.28
Fairly left-wing	- 1.02 ^c	0.15			- 1.00 ^c	0.16
Slightly left-wing	- 0.45 ^c	0.14			- 0.47 ^c	0.14
Slightly right-wing	0.36 ^b	0.13			0.40 ^b	0.13
Fairly right-wing	0.86 ^c	0.16			0.89 ^c	0.16
Very right-wing	1.21 ^c	0.35			1.19 ^c	0.35
Don't know	- 0.05	0.11			0.00	0.11
Newspaper readership (none)						
Daily Express/Mail	0.68 ^c	0.12			0.69 ^c	0.11
Daily Mirror/Record	0.24	0.20			0.23	0.21
The Sun	0.30	0.16			0.30	0.16
Daily Telegraph	0.06	0.24			0.13	0.24
The Guardian/Independent	- 0.90 ^c	0.15			- 0.88 ^c	0.15
Financial Times/The Times	- 0.45 ^b	0.17			- 0.42 ^a	0.17
Other	0.06	0.15			0.06	0.15
Other local newspaper	- 0.15	0.18			- 0.15	0.18
Constant	- 1.52 ^c	0.28	- 0.34 ^c	0.08	- 1.64 ^c	0.30
Obs	5091		5095		5091	
Pseudo r^2	0.207		0.012		0.212	
BIC	6051		6948		6080	

Source: YouGov, logistic regression analysis with robust standard errors

^aCoefficient statistically significant at 95% confidence level

^bAt 99%

^cAt 99.9%. Life cycle effects not reported because of space limitations but available on request



Table 2 Regression analysis results, non-voting in referendum

	Control		Alienation		Full	
	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er
(Not alienated at all)						
Alienated on all three dimensions			0.34 ^a	0.17	0.01	0.19
External efficacy only			- 0.18	0.32	- 0.38	0.35
Political trust only			- 0.20	0.23	- 0.09	0.24
Internal efficacy only			0.58 ^a	0.22	0.48	0.25
External efficacy + political trust			- 0.02	0.18	0.09	0.19
External efficacy + internal efficacy			0.70 ^b	0.24	0.14	0.27
Political trust + internal efficacy			0.46	0.26	0.45	0.27
Age	- 0.03 ^c	0.01			- 0.03 ^c	0.01
Gender (female)	0.09	0.13			0.06	0.13
Ethnicity (White British)						
Other white background	2.24 ^c	0.27			2.29 ^c	0.27
Non-white background	0.59 ^b	0.20			0.62 ^b	0.20
No interest in politics	0.96 ^c	0.22			0.95 ^c	0.23
Education (no qual/no post-compulsory)						
A-Level/Scottish higher	- 0.11	0.17			- 0.10	0.17
Nursing/teaching/HE diploma	- 0.18	0.24			- 0.17	0.24
Other technical/professional/higher	- 0.29	0.24			- 0.28	0.24
Degree/higher degree	- 0.60 ^b	0.19			- 0.58 ^b	0.19
Region and national identity (England and British only/more British)						
England and British and English equally	0.06	0.15			0.04	0.15
England and English only/more English	0.10	0.17			0.10	0.17
England and none	0.39	0.22			0.36	0.23
Wales and British only/more British	0.28	0.45			0.30	0.45
Wales and British and Welsh equally	0.90	0.59			0.92	0.59
Wales and Welsh only/more Welsh	- 0.60	0.70			- 0.56	0.69
Wales and none	0.44	0.65			0.34	0.64
Scotland and British only/more British	0.21	0.48			0.21	0.49
Scotland and British and Scottish equally	0.16	0.39			0.20	0.39
Scotland and Scottish only/more Scottish	0.34	0.27			0.35	0.27
Scotland and none	0.28	0.54			0.25	0.56
Tenure: rented/not owned	0.61 ^c	0.15			0.63 ^c	0.15
Social Grade (AB)						
C1	0.09	0.16			0.08	0.16
C2	0.38	0.20			0.36	0.20
DE	0.26	0.19			0.26	0.19
Work type (professional/higher technical)						
Manager/senior admin/intermediate	- 0.01	0.24			0.00	0.24
Clerical/junior management	- 0.19	0.20			- 0.19	0.20
Sales/services	0.02	0.26			- 0.01	0.26



Table 2 (continued)

	Control		Alienation		Full	
	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er	Coef	Std Er
Foreman/supervisor	0.17	0.54			0.19	0.54
Skilled manual	- 0.07	0.33			- 0.02	0.33
Semi/un-skilled manual	0.20	0.25			0.21	0.25
Other	- 0.22	0.27			- 0.22	0.27
Never worked	0.05	0.31			- 0.04	0.31
Employment status (working full-time)						
Working part-time	0.04	0.17			0.05	0.17
Not in/looking for work	0.30	0.20			0.30	0.21
Unemployed	0.39	0.27			0.42	0.27
Other	0.20	0.34			0.26	0.33
Urban/rural (urban)						
Town/fringe	- 0.12	0.22			- 0.15	0.22
Rural	- 0.11	0.20			- 0.12	0.20
Ideology (centre)						
Very left-wing	- 0.59	0.35			- 0.57	0.35
Fairly left-wing	- 0.33	0.22			- 0.34	0.22
Slightly left-wing	- 0.35	0.23			- 0.36	0.23
Slightly right-wing	- 0.43	0.23			- 0.43	0.23
Fairly right-wing	- 0.39	0.26			- 0.40	0.26
Very right-wing	- 0.41	0.53			- 0.43	0.53
Don't know	0.52 ^b	0.17			0.49 ^b	0.17
Newspaper readership (none)						
Daily Express/Mail	- 0.15	0.19			- 0.16	0.18
Daily Mirror/Record	- 0.24	0.35			- 0.24	0.33
The Sun	0.08	0.21			0.10	0.21
Daily Telegraph	- 0.82	0.50			- 0.85	0.49
The Guardian/Independent	- 0.33	0.19			- 0.32	0.19
Financial Times/The Times	- 0.01	0.25			0.03	0.25
Other	- 0.48	0.27			- 0.48	0.27
Other local newspaper	- 0.06	0.28			- 0.05	0.29
Constant	- 1.32 ^b	0.44	- 1.91 ^c	0.14	- 1.44 ^b	0.46
Obs	5088		5095		5088	
Pseudo r^2	0.217		0.025		0.221	
BIC	3997		4399		4048	

Source: YouGov, logistic regression analysis with robust standard errors

^aCoefficient statistically significant at 95% confidence level

^bAt 99%

^cAt 99.9%. Life cycle effects not reported because of space limitations but available on request



EU. Roughly one in four British adults, therefore, were more likely to vote 'leave' in 2016 because of their alienation from the political system. It should be noted, however, that the pseudo *r*-squared and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) statistics show that political alienation offers little to our overall explanation for Brexit. The alienation-only model had a pseudo *r*-squared of 0.01, compared with 0.21 for the control model.

Table 2 presents the analyses relating to non-participation, allowing a test of whether political alienation made certain respondents less likely to vote at all. The control variables once again had the anticipated effects, showing that the least likely to vote were younger respondents, from non-white backgrounds, with no university education and who did not own their homes. The alienation model confirmed that there was no significant effect from a lack of external efficacy on the likelihood of non-voting (once again going against the expectations of H4), nor was there a significant effect from political trust. A lack of internal efficacy was the most likely to result in non-participation (consistent with H5), particularly if it was coupled with a lack of external efficacy as well: those alienated by their lack of confidence in their understanding of politics were typically 8% less likely to vote than those with no alienation, while those also alienated by their lack of external efficacy were 10% less likely to vote. Those alienated on all three dimensions were also significantly less likely to vote, by around 4%. That said, all the alienation coefficients became non-significant once the control variables were included in the model. While this may reflect low statistical power (as most of the sample reported voting in the referendum), it suggests that while political alienation affected vote choice in 2016, it did not significantly affect the decision to vote at all.

Conclusion

The notion that political alienation contributed to the UK's Brexit vote in 2016 is commonplace in popular discourse regarding the referendum and events to which it is compared, such as the election of President Trump. This study has provided the first direct test of the relationship between political alienation and support for Brexit. The results are, perhaps, somewhat surprising: while most British citizens can be described as alienated from politics in some way, the influence of this on their decisions in the referendum was limited. The differences in support for 'remain' or 'leave' between those of differing levels of alienation (or none) were mostly small, and feeling alienated from politics was by no means limited to those who were opposed to or in favour of Brexit. There is also no evidence that political alienation depressed turnout in the referendum. This is not to say, however, that political alienation had no effect at all: roughly one in four British adults are alienated from politics by their view that the norms of democratic behaviour and discourse are not respected by the political elite or system, and that the political process is unresponsive to citizens' influence. These individuals were significantly more likely to vote for Brexit than the wider electorate, although the magnitude of this effect is considerably weaker than those characteristics more frequently associated with Brexit in academic research, such as education or national identity (Curtice 2017; Clarke



et al. 2017). The common description of Brexit as an expression of political alienation and anti-establishment sentiment, therefore, while not entirely misplaced does not do justice to the key reasons most British citizens had for voting to leave the EU, nor indeed to the high levels of alienation exhibited by those who voted to remain in the EU either. While not challenging the many studies associating economic deprivation, concerns about UK sovereignty, distinct political values and hostility to immigration with support for Brexit, this study suggest that the link frequently drawn between these traits and a feeling of alienation from the political system that compelled them to vote to leave the EU is—in many cases—questionable.

These findings also have important implications for the future study of political alienation. Most of the hypotheses developed in this research—based on the findings of previous literature—were not supported by the analyses. It is unclear why most expressions of political alienation did not have the anticipated effect. One explanation is that the specific context of the referendum and the issue of Brexit, which divided British society almost in two along lines reflecting age, education, region, national identity and political ideology, meant that the effect of alienation was not similar to that identified in previous research studying other political contexts (such as elections). Another possibility is that, despite their anti-establishment rhetoric, the ‘Leave’ campaigns were very often led by ‘establishment’ figures, including sitting government ministers, long-serving backbench Members of Parliament and wealthy individuals or politicians such as Nigel Farage. Perhaps the ‘Leave’ campaigns were not particularly successful in winning the support of the politically alienated majority because they were perceived as being a part of the political system many citizens felt alienated from. Either way, further research into how political alienation affects behaviour in contexts beyond national elections or high-profile protests would reveal more about the consequences of what appears to be a more important and widely held trait by democratic citizens. In addition, while this study employed a model of political alienation developed and employed extensively in other literature, it is unique for categorising respondents depending on simultaneous expressions of two or more dimensions of that alienation. Indeed, this captured the only way in which political alienation was significantly related to support for Brexit. There is a need for further research to explore how different dimensions of political alienation may interact and affect political behaviour, to provide a more thorough understanding of the consequences of alienation.

Finally, the limitations of this research highlight valuable avenues for future research. Data limitations meant that this research had to rely on single indicators of political trust and efficacy. While valid operationalisations of the dimensions of political alienation, there are other ways that alienation could be theoretically manifested, such as through lacking trust in elements of the political system besides the elite, or lacking a sense of identification with the British democratic system or the notion of British democracy itself. A wider array of operationalisations of alienation may have shed more light on how alienation affected behaviour during the referendum. Furthermore, as was noted above, while it is unlikely that the result of the 2016 referendum affected the political alienation of British citizens, the events it precipitated in British politics may well have done so. The dominance of Brexit in Parliament and public debate; the polarisation of voters into ‘remain’ and ‘leave’ groups



that have become sources of political identification and terms of abuse; the dramatic shifts in party support following the 2017 general election and the emergence of the Brexit Party; and most recently the election of Boris Johnson as the new Prime Minister and his decision to prorogue Parliament, prompting protests across the UK—collectively, this tumultuous period could have affected British citizens' alienation from their democratic system. Similarly, the process of Brexit started by the 2016 referendum may itself have gradually affected citizens' alienation from the political system that delivers that process despite their opposition (Brandle et al. 2018), particularly with both major parties committing to leave the EU and disagreeing only over the terms of that departure. Future research should examine the impact of Brexit on political alienation with panel data that could go beyond the timeframe and limitations of this study and would learn a great deal about not only the impact of Brexit on public opinion but the nature of political alienation itself.

Finally, it was discussed above how political alienation was related to and distinct from concepts such as anti-politics and political discontent. There is undoubtedly more that could be learned about public opinion, political engagement and those concepts themselves with a more detailed analysis of how they are similar and different in terms of their causes, impact on political behaviour and potential to affect each other. Such a study could then explore how the many different traits associated with these concepts could have interacted to produce the referendum result, or been affected by it. The result would be a much more detailed understanding of the nature of alienation/discontent in the UK, and how political events may affect it, which would itself be a precursor to identifying measures that could reverse it and re-connect British citizens with their democracy.

Acknowledgements This article is based on research supported by the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD), and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Grant Number: ES/L009099/1. WISERD is a collaborative venture between the Universities of Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, South Wales and Swansea.

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