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ARTICLE

Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of the Brexit Referendum

Sara B. Hobolt[1]*, Thomas J. Leeper[1] and James Tilley[2]

[1]London School of Economics and Political Science, UK and [2]University of Oxford, UK
*Corresponding author. E-mail: s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk

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Abstract

A well-functioning democracy requires a degree of mutual respect and a willingness to talk across political divides. Yet numerous studies have shown that many electorates are polarized along partisan lines, with animosity towards the partisan out-group. This article further develops the idea of affective polarization, not by partisanship, but instead by identification with opinion-based groups. Examining social identities formed during Britain's 2016 referendum on European Union membership, the study uses surveys and experiments to measure the intensity of partisan and Brexit-related affective polarization. The results show that Brexit identities are prevalent, felt to be personally important and cut across traditional party lines. These identities generate affective polarization as intense as that of partisanship in terms of stereotyping, prejudice and various evaluative biases, convincingly demonstrating that affective polarization can emerge from identities beyond partisanship.

Keywords: affective polarization; partisanship; group identity; Brexit; bias; referendum

In recent years, scholars of American democracy have pointed to growing affective polarization along partisan lines. Republicans and Democrats have developed strong emotional attachments towards co-partisans and hostility towards opposing partisans (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015; Mason 2018). This is worrying, because a well-functioning democracy requires that citizens and politicians are willing to engage respectfully with each other, even on controversial topics (Dahl 1967; Lipset 1959). Where we instead see mass affective polarization, we find intolerance and political cynicism (Layman, Carsey and Horowitz 2006) and reduced opportunities for collaboration and compromise (MacKuen et al. 2010).

But is affective polarization limited to partisanship? In this article we argue that such polarization can emerge along lines drawn not just by partisan loyalties, but also by identification with *opinion-based* groups. We thus aim to significantly expand the scope of identities and political contexts that might be examined through the lens of affective polarization. Building on theories of social identity, we argue that significant political events can generate affective polarization. They do this by causing people to identify with others based on a shared opinion about the event. We study these opinion-based group identities in the wake of a critical juncture in British politics: the 2016 referendum on Britain's European Union (EU) membership. Our data suggest that affective polarization is not unique to partisanship, and that animosity across opinion-based groups can cut across longstanding partisan divisions.

We make three significant contributions. First, we present an original conceptualization of affective polarization based on an opinion-based in-group identity that focuses on three core components: identification with an in-group based on a common cause, differentiation from the out-group leading to prejudice and animosity, and evaluative bias in perceptions of the

world and in decision making. Second, we examine this phenomenon empirically, using evidence from a large and diverse range of existing data, original surveys and novel experiments. We demonstrate the scope of affective polarization after the Brexit vote using implicit, explicit and behavioural indicators. Finally, we directly compare the impact of these new opinion-based Brexit identities to traditional partisan divisions. We find a similar degree of affective polarization for the new Brexit identities as for party identities in terms of identification, differentiation and evaluative bias. Moreover, Brexit identities cut across traditional party lines, meaning that affective polarization is neither restricted to partisanship nor a mere proxy for partisan affect. We argue that these new identities reflect pre-existing – but less-politicized – social divisions, like age and education, which were mobilized in the context of the referendum and have consolidated into the newly salient identities: Leave and Remain. These findings have important implications for the study of social identities and electoral democracy, not least because they demonstrate the emergence of strongly held political identities over a relatively short period of time.

The article proceeds as follows. We discuss the literature on in-group identities and affective polarization and present our conceptualization of opinion-based group identities. We then briefly introduce the context of the referendum, and proceed to show evidence of identification with the in-group, differentiation towards the out-group, and evaluative biases for both Brexit and partisan identities. All three effects are at least as large, if not larger, for Brexit identity compared to partisan identity. In conclusion, we discuss the sustainability of opinion-based cleavages and consider the conditions under which polarization along these lines is triggered.

Affective polarization and opinion-based groups

> 'Inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy's lifeblood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate society'
> — Seymour Martin Lipset (1959, 83).

Political conflict and competition are at the heart of democratic life (Schattschneider 1960). The classic ideal of democracy is not one absent of conflict, but rather one in which a single conflict is not so entrenched and all-encompassing that society suffers (Dahl 1967). As the quotation from Lipset highlights, the health of democracy is threatened when conflicts solidify and political identities crystallize into polarized groups. At its most extreme, we see ethnically divided societies where government–opposition dynamics are almost entirely replaced by 'ethnic outbidding' (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972) and where those in power view the democratic opposition as 'the enemy of the people' (Horowitz 1993).

But mass polarization can also occur in societies not plagued by such divisions. The most prominent example is the increasing partisan polarization in American politics over the last few decades. While there remains some debate about the particular form of polarization at the mass level (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), there is a broad consensus that the US public has become more divided along partisan and ideological lines in recent years (Hetherington 2009; Layman, Carsey and Horowitz 2006; Mason 2018). Most notably, there has been rising interpersonal animosity across party lines, with Democrats and Republicans increasingly expressing dislike for one another (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Layman, Carsey and Horowitz 2006; Mason 2015; Mason 2018). This phenomenon has been described as *affective polarization,* defined as an emotional attachment to in-group partisans and hostility towards out-group partisans (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019). While affective polarization is often rooted in policy disagreement, it is distinct from ideological polarization. The latter concerns the extremity of political views, whereas the former is focused on hostility towards out-groups (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015; Mason 2018). In other words, affective polarization does not necessarily imply extreme policy disagreement. Studies on affective polarization in the US have shown

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that antipathy towards partisan opponents has escalated substantially among voters. This has meant that increased in-party favouritism has been matched by greater negative stereotyping and out-group discrimination (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Lelkes and Westwood 2017; Mason 2013; Mason 2015; Mason 2018; Miller and Conover 2015).

There are many worrying consequences of affective polarization. Out-group animosity makes it more difficult for citizens to deliberate without prejudice and to seek diverse perspectives on controversial topics (Valentino et al. 2008). This in turn impairs democratic dialogue, collaboration and compromise (MacKuen et al. 2010) and may lead to the erosion of trust in political institutions and the democratic legitimacy of elected leaders (Anderson et al. 2005; Layman, Carsey and Horowitz 2006). Affective polarization also exacerbates 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' as people become unwilling to engage (in person or online) with people from the other side (Levendusky 2013; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016).

The concept of affective polarization is rooted in social psychological research on social identity and intergroup conflict, most prominently work on social identity theory by Henri Tajfel (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel 1979; Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979). The core idea is that group membership is an important source of pride and self-esteem. It gives each of us a sense of social identity. Yet it also means that our sense of self-worth is heightened by discriminating against, and holding prejudiced views about, the out-group (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel 1979). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), there are three mental processes involved in shaping a social identity: social categorization, in which we distinguish between 'us' and 'them'; social identification, in which we adopt the identity of the group we have categorized ourselves as belonging to; and social comparison, in which we compare our own group favourably to others. This desire to compare oneself with an out-group often, although not always, creates competitive and antagonistic intergroup relations. This then serves to further heighten identification with the in-group.

While social identity theory has proved extremely useful to political science (for an excellent review, see Huddy 2001), the identities considered, such as race, gender and partisanship, have been the same social categories common to psychological research (Mason 2015; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Partisanship has been particularly central: after all, 'in the political sphere, the most salient groups are parties and the self-justifications that sustain group life are primarily grounded in – and constructed to maintain – partisan loyalties' (Achen and Bartels 2016, 296). Less attention has been paid to other political identities,[1] even though self-categorized social identities are inherently subjective (McGarty et al. 2009; Turner 1982). We argue that affective polarization can also stem from political identities defined by shared political opinions. Our argument builds on a recent strand in the social psychology literature that has developed the notion of opinion-based groups (Bliuc et al. 2007; McGarty et al. 2009). Merely holding the same opinion as others is not sufficient for such a group to exist; rather, the shared opinion needs to become the basis of a social identity. In other words, people need to define themselves in terms of their opinion group membership in the same way that they would any other meaningful social group, such as a religious denomination or political party. Opinion-based groups emerge in the context of salient intergroup comparisons – that is, situations in which people are compelled to take sides on an issue. Prior research suggests that such identities may emerge, or crystallize, in response to dramatic events, such as wars or man-made disasters (McGarty et al. 2009; Smith, Thomas and McGarty 2015). We argue they can also emerge from politically engineered events, specifically referendums.

We conceptualize the affective polarization of opinion-based groups as having three necessary components: (1) in-group identification based on a shared opinion, (2) differentiation of the

[1]There are two notable exceptions to this. The first is self-identification as a conservative or a liberal in the United States. This has been shown to function as a social identity that is separable from issue positions (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Malka and Lelkes 2010; Mason 2018). The second is gun ownership in the United States, which Lacombe (2019) shows to be a distinct social identity that shapes political action.

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in-group from the out-group that leads to in-group favourability and out-group denigration and (3) evaluative bias in perceptions of the world and in decision making. The starting point of affective polarization is that individuals must have internalized their group membership as an aspect of their self-identification. People form a social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979), but in this case it is based on group membership due to a common cause (McGarty et al. 2009) rather than organized around a social category. Similar to partisanship, 'people think of themselves as members of a group, attach emotional significance to their membership and adjust their behaviour to conform to group norms' (Bartle and Belluci 2009, 5; see also Klar 2014; Westwood et al. 2018).[2]

The next step is that people must favourably compare their own group with the out-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Thus a second indicator of affective polarization is prejudice against (and stereotyping of) members of the out-group. The final step is that group competition must spill over into perceptions and political and non-political decision making. When it comes to opinion-based polarization, in-group bias will be an omnipresent feature that affects opinions and decision making in ways that go beyond the specific group conflict. People will evaluate political outcomes through the lens of their identity and make decisions based on that identity. To diagnose affective polarization, we should therefore observe all three of these factors – identification, differentiation and evaluative bias. In the remainder of the article, we examine these aspects of affective polarization across opinion-based group membership in the context of the 2016 referendum on Britain's EU membership.

The 2016 Brexit referendum

On 23 June 2016, British voters were asked in a nationwide referendum: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' Although all the major parties in Parliament endorsed Remain,[3] 52 per cent of the British electorate voted to exit the EU ('Brexit'). This sent shockwaves through Britain and Europe. Never before had a member state decided to leave the EU. Although the vast majority of British parliamentarians voted to trigger the Brexit negotiation process, and both major parties campaigned on a platform of taking the UK out of the EU in the 2017 general election, the public did not universally rally behind Brexit. As we will show, the referendum and campaign triggered affective polarization over the issue of leaving or remaining in the EU that continued to divide society. Perhaps surprisingly, this occurred even though the question of EU membership and European integration was not a highly salient issue to the electorate – let alone a social identity – before the referendum. During the 2015 general election, only a year before the referendum vote, less than 10 per cent of people identified the EU as one of the two most important issues facing Britain,[4] and the EU issue played a minimal role in the election campaign. The opinion-based group identities 'Leaver' and 'Remainer,' which we will show came to take on considerable meaning for most British voters, have no long-term history in British politics. There were no labels for sides in the Brexit debate until the campaign itself.[5]

[2]Similarly, Mason (2015) demonstrates partisan social polarization in terms of our second and third components: affect (anger) towards the out-group, judgement (bias) of the out-group and behaviour (activism) towards the out-group.

[3]The governing Conservative Party was openly divided: several cabinet members campaigned to leave the EU. Some high-profile members of the Labour Party also endorsed Leave (Hobolt 2016; Evans and Menon 2017).

[4]See IPSOS-Mori (2018) for time-series data on the question: 'What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today? What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?'

[5]Indeed, Leave and Remain were seemingly innocuous labels created by a decision of the UK Electoral Commission in September 2015 to improve the intelligibility of the referendum question (Electoral Commission 2015), which had originally been worded 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?' with the options 'Yes' and 'No.' One possible precursor identity for the Leave side is 'Euro-sceptic'. However, data from the 2005 British Social Attitudes survey (NatCen 2007) shows that even when prompted, only 15 per cent of people thought of themselves in this way. This seems

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Table 1. Data sources

Abbreviation	Full description	Time period	Question coverage	*N*
BES	British Election Study multi-wave panel survey	9 waves from April 2016 to March 2019	Party identity, Brexit identity[a] and emotional attachment to both identities	~30,000 per wave
Tracker	YouGov repeated cross-sectional survey	9 waves from April 2017 to September 2019	Brexit identity[b], economic perceptions (January 2018) and party identity (January 2018)	~1,700 per wave
YouGov	YouGov cross-sectional survey	September 2017	Party identity, Brexit identity[b], prejudice and perceptions for both identities	3,326
Sky	Sky Polling cross-sectional surveys	October and November 2017	Party identity, Brexit identity[b], emotional attachment and prejudice for both identities	3,481
BBC	YouGov conjoint experiment about choice of BBC director-general	October 2017	Out-group prejudice and in-group bias	1,635
Lodger	YouGov conjoint experiment about choice of a lodger	October 2017	Out-group prejudice and in-group bias	1,669

[a]Question asks whether respondent thinks of themselves as 'closer to the either the Leave or Remain side'.
[b]Question asks whether respondent thinks of themselves as a Leaver or Remainer.
Note: all survey respondents are drawn from online panels involving quota sampling, which are then weighted to be representative of the British population with respect to demographic characteristics.

The aftermath of the Brexit referendum is thus an apt case for the study of affective polarization around opinion-based groups. Social identity theory suggests that salient group identities emerge when people are compelled to take sides in a debate. A referendum that asks people to take a stance in favour (Leave) or against (Remain) exiting the EU is such a case. Moreover, the question of leaving the EU is unusual in that it cut across traditional party lines, meaning that the divisions resulting from the referendum were not immediately subsumed into the existing party divide. Yet, while a large body of literature has examined the determinants of voting behaviour in the referendum (Becker, Fetzer and Novy 2017; Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016), we know much less about the way in which the vote subsequently divided people.

Data

To empirically examine affective polarization in the context of Brexit, we use multiple sources of survey and experimental data. All of our data come from public opinion surveys that are designed, and further weighted, to be representative of the British population. Table 1 presents an overview of these datasets. We rely on both the largest data source on public attitudes towards the referendum, the British Election Study 2016–2019 panel (Fieldhouse et al. 2019), as well as a series of original public opinion surveys and survey experiments conducted between 2017 and 2019. Most of these surveys were conducted by YouGov, a prominent polling organization that uses quota sampling and reweighting methods to generate nationally representative samples from an online, opt-in pool of over 1 million British adults. We further supplement these data with surveys from Sky Polling, which applies similar methods to a panel of subscribers to the widely used Sky satellite television service.[6] This variety of data sources means that all our results come from nationally representative samples, but are not dependent on any single data source or survey

relatively low given the question context in which 23 per cent of people thought of themselves as environmentalists, 8 per cent as anti-war campaigners and 9 per cent as animal rights campaigners. Euro-sceptic was not a strongly held identity in 2005 either. Only 20 per cent of that 15 per cent (i.e. 3 per cent of the population) thought that they had 'a lot more in common' with fellow Euro-sceptics.

[6]Approximately 12 million UK households (44 per cent) have a Sky subscription.

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methodology. Given the number and diversity of research designs and measures deployed, we describe each alongside its results in what follows.

Results

As we argued above, there are three key components of affective polarization along opinion-based lines – in-group identification, group differentiation (especially prejudice against members of the out-group), and evaluative bias in both perceptions and decision making. We thus begin by examining the prevalence of Brexit identities in the electorate using the British Election Study (BES), YouGov, Sky, and Tracker surveys as well as the strength and importance of these identities using the BES and Sky surveys. Next, we examine how those with Leaver and Remainer identities stereotype those on each side of the divide, and the extent to which they display prejudice against their Brexit out-group using the Sky and YouGov surveys. Then we show how these identities colour citizens' perceptions of economic performance in a manner that cuts across partisan identities. Finally, we measure the degree to which Brexit identities shape judgements of political and non-political choices using revealed choice conjoint experiments.

Identification

Our starting point is simply to measure the proportion of people willing to express an identity linked to the referendum. Table 2 shows two ways of measuring Brexit identity. The question included in the YouGov and Sky surveys asked people: 'Since the EU referendum last year, some people now think of themselves as Leavers and Remainers, do you think of yourself as a Leaver, a Remainer, or neither a Leaver or Remainer?' This mirrors the standard party identity question which asks people: 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?'[7] The BES used a slightly different format which did not mention the two identity labels and encourages people to pick a side: 'In the EU referendum debate, do you think of yourself as closer to either the Remain or Leave side?'

As Table 2 shows, the BES data revealed high proportions of people with a Brexit identity (over 85 per cent). Yet even with the weaker wording on the YouGov and Sky surveys, about three-quarters of people identified themselves as Leavers or Remainers even though the surveys were administered over 18 months after the referendum. Unsurprisingly, given the close referendum vote, there are roughly even numbers of Leavers and Remainers.[8] The total number of people with a Brexit identity is similar to the proportion of people who identify with a party. For example, the YouGov data show that 57 per cent of people identified with one of the two main parties. Not shown is an additional 16 per cent who identified with one of the other minor parties. In total, 74 per cent of people reported having a party identity, compared to 75 per cent with a Brexit identity in the YouGov data.[9] The prevalence of Brexit identities and traditional party identities is very similar. If anything, Brexit identities have become more widespread than partisan identities.

[7]A list of parties is then provided to respondents which, as well as Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat, also includes the Scottish National Party (in Scotland only), Plaid Cyrmu (in Wales only), UK Independence Party, the Greens, the British National Party, 'other' party and none. For both party and Brexit identity, people are given a 'don't know' option. We have coded this as equivalent to no identity.

[8]This is also the case when slightly different labels are used. Richards and Heath (2017) asked people in July 2017 whether they considered themselves a 'Remainer' or a 'Brexiteer'. They find that 45 per cent of people identified as Remainers and 42 per cent identified as Brexiteers.

[9]As we might expect, these identities overlap to some extent. Nonetheless, the Tracker survey in January 2018 showed that only 35 per cent of Leavers were Conservative identifiers, and only 36 per cent of Remainers were Labour identifiers. Appendix Table A1 shows this breakdown in more detail.

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Table 2. Comparison of the strength of party and Brexit identities

	Party identity		Brexit identity	
	Conservative	Labour	Leaver	Remainer
Proportion of people with identity				
BES – June 2017	26%	30%	43%[a]	44%[a]
YouGov – September 2017	27%	31%	37%	38%
Sky – October/November 2017	32%	35%	35%	35%
Brexit identity scale (1–5 scale of 5-question battery)				
BES – June 2017	2.8	3.0	3.0	3.1
Sky – October/November 2017	2.9	3.0	3.4	3.4

[a]Question asks whether respondent thinks of themselves as 'closer to the either the Leave or Remain side', rather than whether they think of themselves as a Leaver or Remainer.

Note: the BES data have a total unweighted *N* of 31,197. The YouGov data have a total unweighted *N* of 3,326. The Sky data have a total unweighted *N* of 1,692 for party identity and 1,702 for Brexit identity. The emotional attachment scale consists of five questions (with a 1–5 Likert scale) that ask respondents with an identity whether (a) they talk about 'we' rather than 'they', (b) criticism of their side feels like a personal insult, (c) they have a lot in common with people on their own side, (d) they feel connected with other supporters of their own side and (e) they feel good when people praise their own side. High scores indicate greater agreement. These questions were only asked of those with a relevant political identity.

The bottom half of Table 2 also shows that both types of identities are equally strongly held. We show a measure of emotional attachment to people's own identity using a battery of five questions. These questions form a similar scale to that used by others (see Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004; Greene 2000; Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015) and ask people whether they agree or disagree with the following with regard to their own identity:

- When I speak about the [respondent identity] side, I usually say 'we' instead of 'they'
- When people criticize the [respondent identity] side, it feels like a personal insult
- I have a lot in common with other supporters of the [respondent identity] side
- When I meet someone who supports the [respondent identity] side, I feel connected with this person
- When people praise the [respondent identity] side, it makes me feel good

Response options for all items were 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', scored 1–5 and averaged.[10] For the two main party identities the average score is around the midpoint of the scale for both datasets. Interestingly, this is not much lower than the scores for responses to similar questions asked in the United States (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004, 38; Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015, 7). More importantly for our purposes, these emotional attachment scores are slightly higher for Brexit identities than they are for party identities. This is especially obvious for the Sky data, which use the Brexit identity question which is most analogous to the party identity question.

Overall, Table 2 reveals that not only were slightly more people willing to claim a Brexit identity than a party identity, but that people's attachment to that Brexit identity was, if anything, slightly stronger than their party identity. Moreover, these Brexit identities appear to be largely stable at the aggregate level. Figure 1 shows the numbers of people with a Brexit identity over time for nine waves of the BES from April 2016 until March 2019 and for nine waves of the Tracker survey from April 2017 until September 2019. Whether measured using the BES closeness question or the Tracker identity question, the numbers of people with either a Leave or

[10]The BES data use a 4-point scale, but 'don't know' responses are coded as 3 to make it analogous to the Sky data. The items form very reliable scales for both identities. The Cronbach's Alpha scores for the BES data are 0.84 for Leavers, 0.85 for Remainers, 0.81 for Conservatives and 0.83 for Labour identifiers. Alpha scores for the Sky data are 0.79 for Leavers, 0.74 for Remainers, 0.86 for Conservatives and 0.80 for Labour identifiers.

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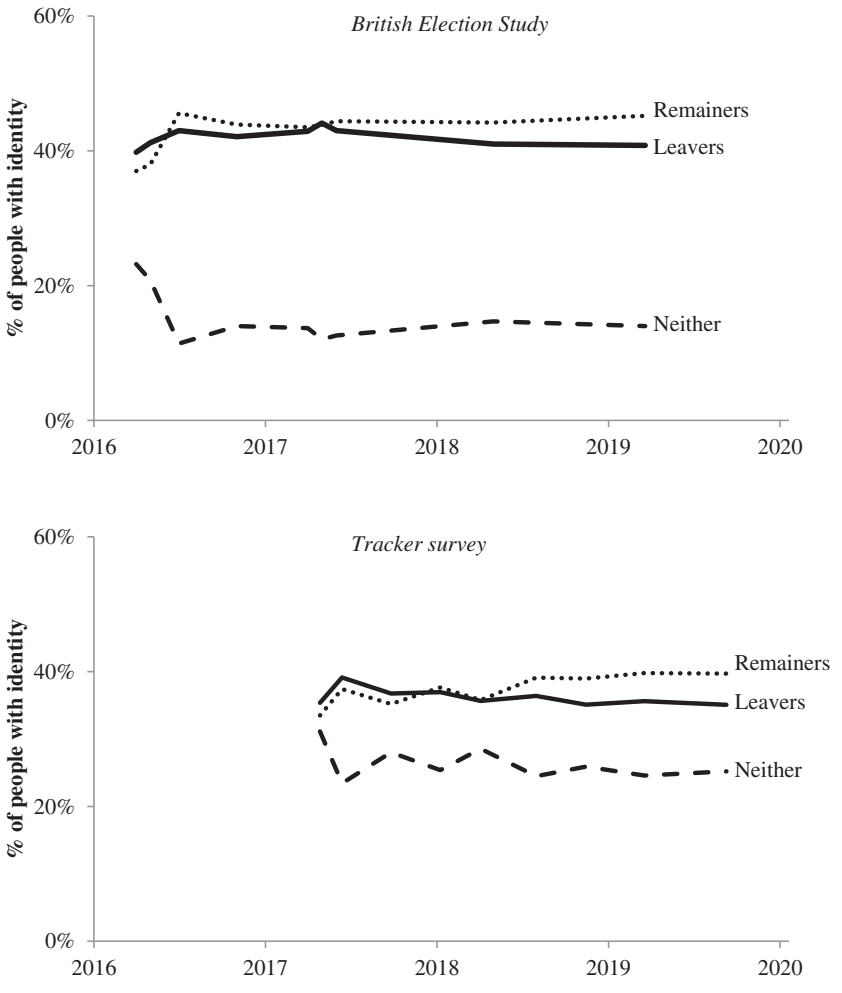

Figure 1. Brexit identities over time

Note: the British Election Study asks whether the respondents think of themselves as 'closer to the either the Leave or Remain side' and includes nine waves from April 2016 to March 2019. The Tracker data comprise nine cross-sectional surveys from April 2017 to September 2019 and asks whether people think of themselves as a Remainer or a Leaver.

Remain identity are almost completely static over time. Around three-quarters of people in Britain thought of themselves as Leavers or Remainers during the period of investigation. Most importantly, there is aggregate-level stability in the numbers within each identity grouping, suggesting the same kind of unmoving affective identity as partisanship. About half of those with an identity are Leavers and half are Remainers in any given month. These proportions have changed very little since the referendum. Indeed, the small increase in the number of Remainers is almost entirely due to an increased prevalence of that identity among people who did not, or were not able to, vote in 2016.[11]

[11]As the BES data are a repeated panel, we can also look at the proportion of people who move in and out of an identity over time. These numbers look very similar for party and Brexit identities. For example, 81 per cent of people have the same party identity in June 2017 as they did in July 2016, whereas 87 per cent of people have the same Brexit identity in June 2017 as they did in July 2016. In both cases most of the movement is from, and into, no identity, rather than movement between different identities.

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Of course, while Brexit identities are a new aspect of British politics, they could reflect underlying societal divides that predate the referendum. Research into the determinants of the Brexit vote indicates that the referendum mobilized an underlying fault line between social liberals with weak national identities, who tend to be younger and have more educational qualifications, and social conservatives with stronger national identities, who tend to be older with fewer educational qualifications (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017; Curtice 2017a; Evans and Tilley 2017; Hobolt 2016; Jennings and Stoker 2017). Using BES data, Appendix 2 confirms that the key socio-economic predictors of a Leave identity relative to a Remain identity are age and education. By contrast, measures of social class (such as income, occupation and housing tenure) continue to matter more for partisan identities than for Brexit identities despite a sharp decline in class voting in Britain in recent decades (Evans and Tilley 2017).[12] Analysis of a subset of the BES data in Appendix 2 also confirms that people with stronger British identities are more likely to hold a Leave identity, although the effect is not huge. These correlates of Brexit identity are clearly important, but in this article we are primarily interested in how such political divides manifest themselves as social identities that facilitate affective polarization. Whether the social and political forces driving diverging preferences about European integration are new or not, the labels provided by the referendum campaign certainly are. It is these labels which allow people to self-identify as a member of one opinion-based group or the other. They also facilitate differentiation, favouritism towards the in-group and animosity towards the out-group.

Differentiation

For the emergence of Brexit identities to constitute affective polarization, we expect to see Leavers and Remainers stereotype their in-group and out-group and express animosity towards the out-group. Figure 2 shows people's perceptions of their own and the other side in terms of three positive personal characteristics (intelligent, open-minded and honest) and three negative personal characteristics (selfish, hypocritical and closed-minded). This list of traits is similar to that used by Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012) to examine partisan affective polarization over time and space. Respondents were asked how well they thought these six characteristics described the two sides on a five-point scale from 1 ('not at all well') to 5 ('very well'). We focus on both differentiation along partisan lines, as a baseline, and differentiation along the lines of Brexit identity.

The top two graphs in Figure 2 show mean perceptions by party identity. We see a familiar story. Perceptions of Conservative supporters, graphed on the left, are very different for people who are themselves Conservative identifiers compared to those who are Labour identifiers. Conservative partisans score their in-group above 3.5 in terms of intelligence, honesty and open-mindedness, but are much more reluctant to say that their in-group are selfish, hypocritical or closed-minded. The exact opposite is true for Labour partisans, who score Conservative supporters at nearly 4 in terms of their selfishness, hypocrisy and closed-mindedness, but are extremely unlikely to say that Conservatives might be intelligent, open-minded or honest. The top right-hand graph shows perceptions of Labour supporters. Again, Labour identifiers only attribute positive characteristics to their in-group while Conservative identifiers only attribute negative characteristics to their out-group.

Fascinatingly, we see the very same patterns for Brexit identities in the two bottom graphs. Remainers and Leavers are much more likely to attribute positive characteristics to their own side and negative characteristics to the other side. The magnitude of these differences is very

[12]The importance of education as a predictor of Brexit identity links to the rise of the cultural dimension in politics across Europe. Divides along transnational integration–demarcation dimensions (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi et al. 2006; Kriesi et al. 2008) are increasingly salient elsewhere in Europe. This dimension is distinct from the traditional economic left–right dimension and is focused more on identity and cultural concerns.

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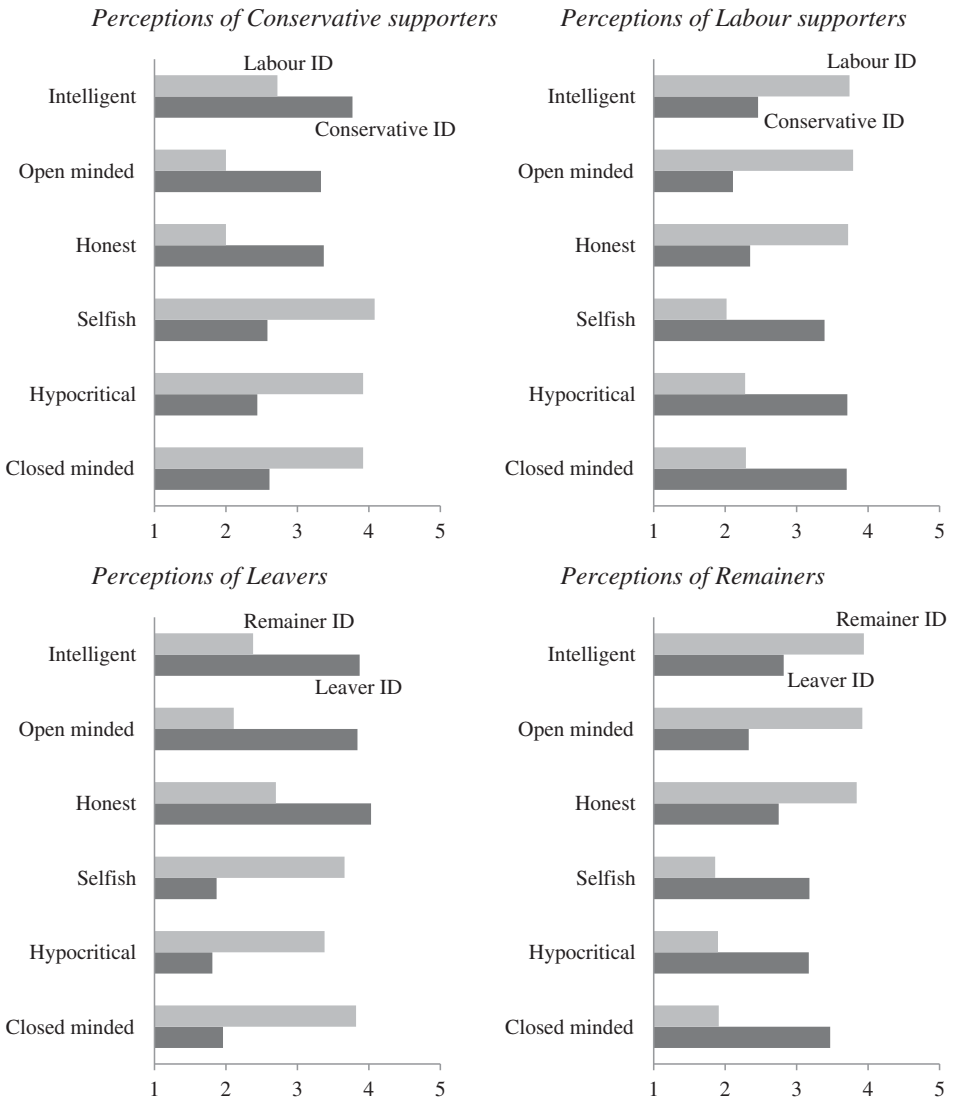

Figure 2. Perceived characteristics of own side and other side

Note: these are mean scores on a 1–5 Likert scale of agreement that these characteristics describe people with a particular political identity. Data are from the YouGov survey in September 2017. For the party identity descriptions, the unweighted *N* is 1,648. For the Brexit identity descriptions, the unweighted *N* is 1,678.

large. Remainers' average score for the three positive characteristics about their own side is 3.9, while their average score for the three negative characteristics about their own side is just 1.9. The gulf between agreement with negative and positive attributes of the out-group is also huge. For Remainers' perceptions of Leavers, the average score for the three positive characteristics is 2.4, yet the average score for the three negative characteristics is 3.6. Nor are these views of Leavers and Remainers driven by party identity. Appendix 3 contains four ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions that predict whether people have positive or negative views of both sides using both party identity and Brexit identity. All four models show very large effects of Brexit identity and very weak effects of party identity on perceptions of Remainers and Leavers.

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Table 3. Prejudice against the other side

	Party identity		Brexit identity	
	Conservative (%)	Labour (%)	Leaver (%)	Remainer (%)
Happy with child marrying other side				
YouGov – September 2017	24	19	45	30
Sky – October/November 2017	25	16	36	23
Happy to talk politics with other side				
YouGov – September 2017	43	46	56	58
Sky – October/November 2017	53	41	51	47

Note: the YouGov data have a total unweighted *N* of 3,326. The Sky data have a total unweighted *N* of 1,692 for party identity and 1,702 for Brexit identity.

When asked about their interest in forms of social interaction with members of the in-group and out-group, people also readily expressed prejudice towards the out-group and favouritism towards the in-group. Table 3 shows the proportions of respondents who said they would be happy with a child of theirs marrying someone from the other side and the proportion that are happy to 'talk politics' with someone from the other side. Only around half would be happy to talk politics with the other side, whether that side is defined by Brexit choice or party identity. Even more strikingly, only a third, on average, of those with a Brexit identity would be happy about a prospective son- or daughter-in-law from the other side. Levels of partisan prejudice are only slightly higher.

Evaluative bias – perceptions

The final indicator of affective polarization is evaluative bias in perceptions and decision making. We start by examining how Brexit identities shape people's views of the world. There is a wealth of evidence of the partisan 'perceptual screen' when it comes to economic performance. Supporters of parties in government consistently tend to think that the economy performed better than supporters of opposition parties (Bartels 2002; Bisgaard 2015; De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Enns, Kellstedt and McAvoy 2012; Evans and Pickup 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Wlezien, Franklin and Twiggs 1997). As Achen and Bartels (2016, 276) bluntly put it, people 'use their partisanship to construct "objective facts"'. A similar process of motivated reasoning should apply to people with Brexit identities. Leavers, who were on the winning side in the referendum, should have a more positive view of past economic performance than Remainers. We asked respondents in January 2018 how they thought the economy had performed over the last 12 months on a 1–5 scale (the standard way of measuring retrospective economic perceptions). Table 4 shows the results of an OLS regression predicting people's scores on this scale with party identity and Brexit identity as predictors.[13] Higher scores indicate a rosier view of economic performance during 2017.

As expected, there is a gap between Conservative and Labour identifiers' assessments of the economy. Conservative identifiers, whose party was in government, were slightly over one-half of a point on the 1–5 scale more positive about British economic performance in 2017 than Labour identifiers. Yet even holding party identity constant, we see large effects for Brexit identity. Leavers are almost three-quarters of a point more positive than Remainers. Brexit identity is thus more likely than party identity to produce biased retrospective views of the economy.

[13]Appendix Table A4a shows that including other demographic factors that are correlated with Brexit identity, such as education and age, does not affect these results. Table A4b also shows similar results using BES data and the more inclusive measure of Brexit identity that is asked of BES respondents. This second model also includes a measure of British identity that, although correlated with Brexit identity (see Table A2c), has no effect on retrospective economic evaluations.

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Table 4. Predicting retrospective economic perceptions

		B	s.e.
Brexit identity	Leaver	0.24*	0.06
	Remainer	−0.49*	0.06
	No identity	–	
Party identity	Conservative	0.28*	0.06
	Labour	−0.30*	0.06
	Other party	−0.13	0.07
	No identity	–	
Constant		2.55*	0.05
Adjusted R^2		0.20	

Note: the data come from the January 2018 Tracker survey and have a total unweighted *N* of 1,418. The dependent variable asks respondents 'How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months' with five options (got a lot worse, got a little worse, stayed the same, got a little better and got a lot better) coded from 1–5. * = p < 0.05

Evaluative bias – decision making

Another component of evaluative bias that we examine is how Brexit identities shape decision making outside the political realm. We are interested in whether these social identities also spill over into decisions, and possibly even discrimination, on non-political matters. We conducted two similar conjoint experiments that asked respondents to choose between alternative candidates to be director-general of the BBC and, separately, to be a lodger in their own home. The advantage of using a conjoint design is that it allows us to uncover the relative influence of different factors in how people make decisions over bundled outcomes (Auspurg and Hinz 2014; Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014; Jasso 2006). Borrowed from marketing research, where it is used to study purchasing decisions, this methodology has recently been used in public opinion research to study complex opinion formation processes such as support for immigration policies (Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015), voting for candidates (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014) and preferences for labour market reform (Gallego and Marx 2017). In a conjoint study, participants are shown a series of vignettes that vary according to a determined set of features, with combinations of features randomly varied. In our studies, each sample was conducted on a distinct sample of approximately 1,600 respondents (see Table 1); each respondent selected from choices in five pairs of fully randomized candidate profiles. The features in the two designs varied along salient characteristics, such as age, sex, hobbies and work experience in the case of the lodger experiment and age, sex, education and career background for the BBC experiment. In both experiments we also included two political features – the candidate's partisan position in the 2017 UK general election (Conservative, Labour or none) and their stance on the 2016 referendum (Leave, Remain or none).

The full results of preferences for both the director-general and lodger experiments are in Appendix 4, but Figures 3 and 4 present the key results. Here we show the marginal mean outcomes for the two political factors – that is, the percentage of times respondents chose profiles with the specified feature, marginalizing across the other features.[14] Figure 3 shows the marginal means for the party position and referendum position features of the BBC director-general experiment separately for people who identified as Conservative and Leaver; Conservative and Remainer; Labour and Leaver; and Labour and Remainer. We find large effects of partisanship

[14]Appendix 4 also reports the full results in the form of average marginal component effects (AMCEs; see Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). Positive AMCEs convey features that make a candidate more attractive, while negative AMCEs convey features that make a candidate less attractive. Presenting the marginal means is simpler, and makes clear the base rates for the reference categories (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2020). In general, the factors that we might expect to constitute an attractive BBC director-general (worked as a television producer at the BBC for a long time) and an attractive lodger (has a job, likes cooking and does voluntary work) positively affect people's choices.

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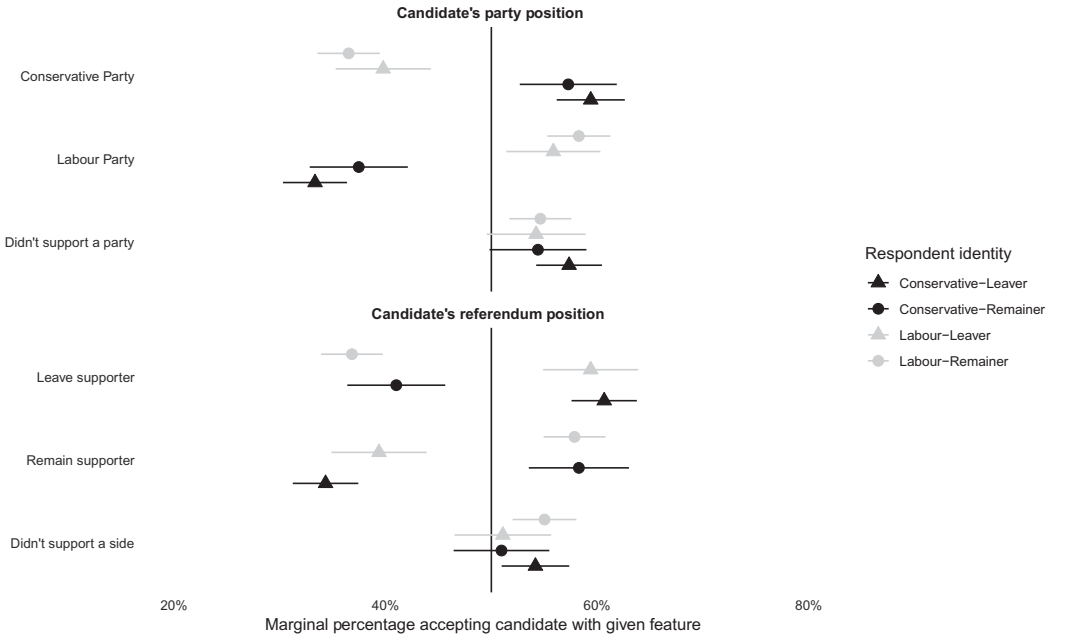

Figure 3. Results from BBC Director-General conjoint experiment by Leave and Remain identity
Note: these are marginal mean outcomes from a discrete choice conjoint experiment, estimated separately for different types of respondents by their partisan and Brexit identity. Data are from the BBC Director-General YouGov survey (n = 1,653) conducted in October 2017. Error bars reflect 95 per cent confidence intervals, clustered by respondent with each respondent completing five binary choice decision tasks.

and Brexit identity. In the upper half of Figure 3, Labour partisans prefer a Labour-supporting director-general; Conservative partisans prefer a Conservative supporter. These effects are matched in size by the difference in preferences between Leavers and Remainers shown in the lower half of Figure 3. Regardless of their partisanship, respondents prefer the head of the BBC to have a similar Brexit identity. For example, while less than 40 per cent of Labour-identified Remainers would pick a candidate who was a Leaver, holding everything else equal, nearly 60 per cent of Labour-identified Remainers would pick a fellow Remainer. On average, the effects of Brexit identity are slightly greater than partisanship. We see very similar patterns in Figure 4 for the lodger experiment. Remainers prefer to live with a fellow Remainer than a Leaver, and Leavers prefer to live with a fellow Leaver than a Remainer. Again, these effects are large, and bigger than the partisan effects. The Brexit divide cross-cuts, and even exceeds, the partisan divide.

Discussion

Huddy (2001, 137) notes that '[p]olitical behavior researchers are often struck by the absence of group conflict despite the existence of distinct and salient groups'. Much research has therefore focused on the rare cases in which long-standing social identities generate considerable tension, such as the partisan divide in the United States or ethnic tensions in other parts of the world. Yet we describe a situation in which distinct and salient groups emerged over a relatively short period of time and engaged in group conflict on par with that of partisanship. Building on theories of social identity, we advance the conceptualization of affective polarization, arguing that such animosity can be mobilized across opinion-based groups in the context of significant political events. Unlike partisan loyalties, opinion-based groups are defined by shared opinions on a specific issue

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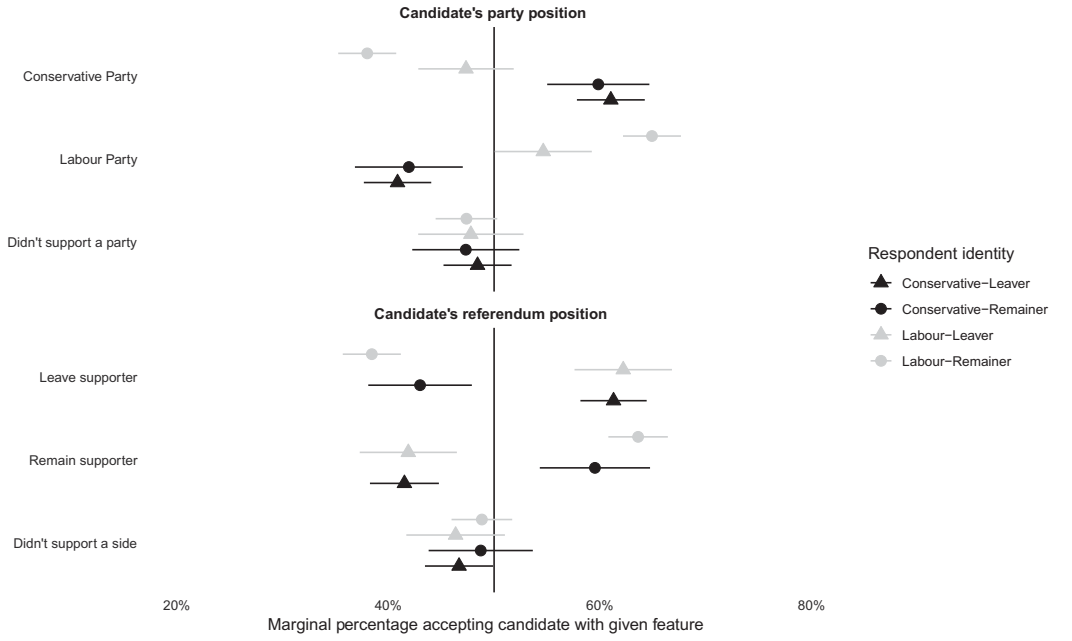

Figure 4. Results from lodger conjoint experiment by Leave and Remain identity
Note: these are marginal mean outcomes from a discrete choice conjoint experiment, estimated separately for different types of respondents by their partisan and Brexit identity. Data are from the Lodger YouGov survey (n = 1,669) conducted in October 2017. Error bars reflect 95 per cent confidence intervals, clustered by respondent with each respondent completing five binary choice decision tasks.

or cause. We study these opinion-based group identities in the wake of a critical political juncture: Britain's 2016 referendum on EU membership. Our results clearly suggest that affective polarization is a phenomenon not unique to partisanship. Indeed, we show that polarization along the Brexit divide is as large, or larger, than partisan affective polarization, and its effects cross-cut partisan identities.

We thus make a significant contribution to the political behaviour literature by developing the notion of affective polarization along these opinion-based group lines. Empirically, we demonstrate these polarization dynamics outside the US context and along nonpartisan lines in all three areas of affective polarization – identification, differentiation and evaluative bias. While theorizing about the origins of affective polarization remains underdeveloped, our work suggests that long-term ideological polarization, at either the elite or mass level, is unlikely to be the only cause of new opinion-based identities. Brexit-related identities and polarization emerged despite no longstanding Leave/ Remain divide and in a manner that cut across partisan identities. This implies that shorter-run dynamics can play an important role in triggering democratically occurring forms of prejudice, discrimination and bias. While our empirical focus here is Brexit, the notion of affective polarization along opinion-based group lines could apply elsewhere, where political issues are sufficiently salient and divisive to give rise to social identities and out-group animosity. For example, this framework could be applied to the issue of Catalan independence, which has become very politicized and divisive in Spain, especially in the mobilization leading up to and following the 2017 Catalan referendum on independence (Criado et al. 2018; Hierro and Gallego 2018; Oller i Sala, Satorra and Tobeña 2019).

At the same time, however, we do not think that all issue debates – regardless of their degree of underlying disagreement – can generate the consistent and intense patterns of polarization demonstrated here. Part of the reason for that is the prevalence of the underlying opinion-based group identities and their perceived importance to large portions of the British public. Although

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some people hold views on many different issues and consider those views to be personally important, such issue publics are generally understood to be small and narrow (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990). In the case of Brexit, opinion-based identities are held by over three-quarters of the public, and the intensity of those identities is similar to partisanship. The national referendum and surrounding debate seem necessary, but insufficient, to have generated such polarization. This is important because not all events of direct democracy, or political debates more generally, create such deep divides. Referendums are frequent occurrences in many democracies, yet few appear to generate salient and lasting polarization. In this case, we suspect that the cross-cutting nature of partisan and Brexit identities played an important role. Most national referendums reflect the playing out of elite partisan competition at the mass level (Prosser 2016), and many EU referendums showcase second-order evaluations of national governments (Garry, Marsh and Sinnott 2005; Hobolt 2009). But the Brexit referendum occurred orthogonally to the traditional partisan divide and has still not been fully subsumed into normal lines of party competition.

This article also raises other number of important questions. For example, how does affective polarization along opinion-based group lines evolve in the long run: does it fade away as the political event that triggered the social identities becomes less salient? It is certainly possible that Brexit identities will eventually become less important to people now that Britain has left the EU. Another possibility is that affective polarization on the Brexit issue will lead to a realignment of the British political system. According to Carmines and Stimson's seminal work on issue evolution, realignments are precipitated by the 'emergence of new issues about which the electorate has intense feeling that cut across rather than reinforce existing bases of support for political parties' (1981, 107). We have shown that the Brexit referendum led to the emergence of intensely felt identities that cross-cut partisan divisions. This could mean that affective polarization along Brexit lines will eventually lead to a more fundamental change in the UK party system. The major political parties could align their positions firmly with one of the two opposing positions on future UK–EU relations, leading voters to discard old party attachments in favour of new patterns of support. Indeed, we could see a similar change in Britain, albeit precipitated in a very different way, to the Southern realignment in the United States (Stanley 1988; Valentino and Sears 2005) and the shift from the main dimension of party competition being economic left–right policy to social conservative–liberal policy. Studies of electoral competition in the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections give some indications that this realignment has already started to occur (Curtice 2017b; Cutts et al. 2020; Heath and Goodwin 2017; Hobolt 2018; Hobolt and Rodon 2020; Jennings and Stoker 2017; Prosser 2018; Tilley and Evans 2017).

Whether there is a party realignment or not, it is clear that the EU referendum activated an important new divide in British society. Intensely felt political division seems to be an all-too-familiar feature of 21st century democratic politics. Ultimately, any time such divisions emerge, normative questions are raised about the implications for democratic society, what might ameliorate the tension and how democratic practice might be improved. Answers to these three questions might be the lack of democratic deliberation, the potential value of a more deliberative democracy and deeper institutionalization of deliberative processes, respectively (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006; Thompson and Gutmann 1996). The deliberative response is to seek consensus by airing rival arguments. Yet citizens' apparent unwillingness to even speak across the divide, let alone respect or befriend one another, would seem to undermine the possibility of a deliberative cure. Other answers need to be found. The task may not be to create consensus across the divide, but instead to help citizens to recognize one another not as enemies and out-groups, but as adversaries with a shared collective identity disagreeing over the outcomes of policy debate (Mouffe 1999). In that sense, perhaps political scientists and political theorists should move beyond trying to understand how to *overcome* political disagreements, and focus more on how those disagreements can be sustained without yielding deleterious social consequences.

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Supplementary material. Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/35M5CV and online appendices at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000125.

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