

How did the EU-UK referendum affect public trust in political institutions in the United Kingdom?

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Introduction

The UK's 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) (hereafter "Brexit referendum") was one of the most significant political events in the history of modern Britain. The Brexit referendum was decided by a small margin: 51.89% of voters voted to leave the EU (17.435 million votes), and 48.11% of voters voted to remain in the EU (16.165 million votes), which was a winning margin (for Leave) of just 3.78% (1.27 million votes). Of the 46.5 million people on the electoral roll at the time of the Brexit referendum, only 33.6 million votes were cast in the referendum, which means that only 72.3% of voters registered on the electoral roll actually voted in the referendum. In real terms, therefore, this means that only 37% of the total sample of registered voters in the UK voted to leave the EU, and that only 26% of the voting age population of the UK voted to leave the EU.

This narrow margin, and the fact that the "leave" vote represented a minority of the UK population, has meant that the Brexit referendum marked a political rupture within UK politics, alongside a dramatic reduction in the level of trust in government (National Centre for Social Research, 2020). Aside from determining the UK's ongoing relationship with the EU, the Brexit referendum represented a challenge to democratic norms, to political authority and to institutional legitimacy. This has had long-lasting consequences for public attitudes regarding governance and representation. This is significant, because public trust in public institutions is a cornerstone of the democratic process and democratic stability.

High levels of institutional trust are associated with higher levels of political compliance, civic engagement and acceptance of political outcomes, with declining trust in public institutions being linked to higher levels of dissatisfaction with democratic processes and political disengagement. Whilst referendums can enhance trust by empowering citizens as they appear to encourage direct participation in democratic processes, as the Brexit referendum, referendums can also undermine trust if outcomes are decided by a small margin, as this can lead substantial segments of the population to question the legitimacy of the outcome.

Research question

Whilst existing research has explored the impact of the Brexit referendum on political polarisation, identity formation and electoral behaviour, there are mixed findings regarding the impact of the Brexit referendum on public trust in political institutions. There is, for example, limited longitudinal research exploring how trust evolved before and after the Brexit referendum, and whether these effects were different across different political institutions and for different social groups. The research therefore proposes to explore the following research question, “How did the EU-UK referendum affect public trust in political institutions in the UK?”. The proposed research will use a longitudinal design to explore this issue, contributing to ongoing debates about democratic legitimacy in post-referendum contexts, and also to understanding how major political shocks shape public trust in political institutions.

Ontological and epistemological foundations underpinning the research philosophy

The proposed research will be underpinned by a post-positivist research philosophy that includes a realist understanding of political institutions and an empiricist approach to studying public attitudes. In terms of the ontological foundations, the proposed research will adopt a critical realist stance which recognises that the UK’s political institutions, including parliament, government and the judiciary have existed, and will continue to exist, as enduring social structures, but that public trust in these institutions is socially constructed, based on interpretation of relevant events, the day-to-day experience of citizens, and the prevailing political context. In the proposed research, trust is therefore understood as real in terms of its consequences, but also contingent in terms of how trust is developed and maintained.

From this foundational basis, the proposed research treats the concept of ‘public trust’ not as an abstract or discursive concept but as a latent attitude that is held by the public that can be observed. Whilst individuals may interpret political events, and day-to-day experiences, differently, the patterns in public trust in political institutions can be identified at the collective level, which allows for comparative longitudinal analysis. This ontological foundation for the proposed research leads to two main observations:

1) that social reality is highly complex, and 2) that political attitudes are not entirely subjective and can be the foundation for empirical research.

Regarding the epistemological foundation of the proposed research, as the research is situated within a post-positivist framework, knowledge of public trust is assumed to be probabilistic and not definitive, given that level of public trust is shaped by the choice of measurement, the historical context in which the measurement is taking place and the interpretation of the data by individual researchers. Survey-based research does not claim to, and cannot, capture an objective truth, but can generate reliable estimates of public attitudes under certain specified conditions (for example the political climate). This epistemological position aligns with the epistemological foundation of research in political behaviour and comparative politics, where survey data is regularly used to assess changes in attitude over time.

Adopting a post-positivist epistemology in this manner also enables reflexivity to be embedded within the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This will allow the researcher to consider their own political position, and also to ensure that the interpretation of the findings from the research is informed by awareness of the broader political landscape of the UK in which the Brexit referendum occurred. This included a general environment of media polarisation and a political environment that was beginning to question and to contest the narratives of democratic legitimacy. By recognising these assumptions and making them explicit, through the use of the selected epistemological framework, the researcher can balance academic rigour with the required sensitivity, allowing the findings from the research to be both methodologically robust and meaningful in terms of the researcher's positionality.

How does the proposed research fit into previous research on the topic? How will you build on existing studies?

Research on public trust in political institutions is central to research on democracy, with trust being conceptualised as a form of evaluative judgement through which citizens make assessments about the competence, integrity and responsiveness of political authority figures, political parties and political institutions (Winsvold, 2024). Decreases in public trust have been associated with reduced compliance with political decisions, reductions in active voters and challenges to democratic legitimacy

(Valgarosson et al., 2025). Trust has been found to be affected by evaluations of institutional performance, economic conditions, perceived levels of corruption and representation, with trust being responsive to the prevailing conditions and not a fixed disposition (Valgarosson et al., 2025). Political shocks can lead to recalibrations of trust in political institutions (Gates, 2020).

Referendums can strengthen democratic legitimacy, as they grant citizens direct control over important decisions, but if managed poorly, referendums can also cause significant political shocks, which are associated with significant recalibrations of trust (Walker, 2003). In the UK, for example, the increasing political divisions post-Brexit referendum has been attributed to long-term declines in public trust in political institutions due to long-standing social cleavages and the emergence of new forms of political identity, and identity politics (Olivas Osuna et al., 2020).

Gaps remain in the existing literature, particularly regarding how trust changes over time and comparative studies of trust across political institutions. The proposed research aims to address these gaps by using a longitudinal approach to data collection and by disaggregating trust across the multiple political institutions that are active in the UK, to provide a more nuanced understanding of how the Brexit referendum impacted public trust in the UK's political institutions.

What is your theory? Will you be testing an existing theory, developing a new theory of adapting an existing theory to a different context?

The proposed research will be guided by theories of political trust and democratic legitimacy, including Easton's theory of political support (Easton, 1953), Norris' democratic deficit theory (Norris, 2010), and performance-based trust theory (Bart et al., 2020), with a particular focus on the concept of loser's consent (Anderson et al., 2007). Within theories of democracy, trust in political institutions is a key mechanism through which citizens accept the outcomes of democratic processes and political outcomes, including those outcomes that are not aligned with their own political preferences and perspectives (Qabazard, 2022). Losers' consent theory suggests that the attainment of democratic stability depends on the willingness of individuals/groups who have lost in political decisions to continue to regard institutions as legitimate and

worthy of their support (Anderson et al., 2007). If they no longer consider institutions as legitimate, then democracy will become unstable.

Applying these theories of democracy to referendums highlights their distinct democratic risks. The binary nature of referendum questions tends to foment prevailing emotionally charged responses to the referendum itself, and as Colignatus (2017) explains, the Brexit referendum question was flawed in its design, as such, the result of the referendum should have been annulled. British citizens were not able to make an informed decision given the flawed question and the amount of misinformation around that time, particularly from the 'leave' camp. The outcome was irreversible, and political institutions needed to implement decisions that lacked broad consensus, leading to an environment in which trust was eroded, and institutional processes following the referendum were seen as unfair and/or incompetent.

Given this theoretical foundation, the proposed research will test the following hypotheses:

H1: Public trust in UK political institutions declined in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum

H2: The decline in trust was greater in people who voted 'remain' than in those who voted 'leave'

What are the key concepts in your research project? How will you operationalise and measure them?

The proposed research is based on three central concepts: 1) public trust, 2) political institutions, and 3) referendum voting position. It will be fundamental to clearly define these three central concepts to ensure conceptual clarity and uniformity, to ensure the validity of measurements, and to ensure analytical coherence. For the purposes of the proposed research, public trust is conceptualised as an attitude that reflects the confidence that citizens have in the integrity, competence and reliability of political institutions. Trust will be assumed to be institution-specific, given that individuals may trust certain institutions but not others. For the purposes of the proposed research, political institution is understood as the formal organisations that are involved in governance and political decision-making during and post-the Brexit referendum,

including the UK Parliament, the UK government, the judiciary and the European Union. For the purposes of the proposed research, referendum voting position is understood as the self-reported voting choice in the Brexit referendum, which was either 'remain' or 'leave'. By defining these three key concepts in this manner, the research ensures that complex theoretical concepts are translated into measurable variables that can be measured to explore the research question.

Which methods will you use to answer your question? Why did you choose this method/set of methods?

The proposed research will use a qualitative longitudinal research design. This approach is appropriate for examining changes in trust over time, and to determine what effect the Brexit referendum had on levels of public trust.

How will you collect and analyse your data?

The data will be collected from large-scale nationally-representative social surveys that included measures of public trust, with data being extracted from these surveys both pre- and post-the Brexit referendum. Using existing datasets reflects the practical constraints associated with conducting research in this context (i.e., time and budgetary constraints). Using existing datasets also enhances the reliability of the data and the comparability of the data across different years (given the standardised nature of the data collection). The data will be collected from the Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions surveys conducted by the OECD, and the British Social Attitudes reports compiled by the National Centre for Social Research. The data analysis process will have two stages: 1) descriptive analysis of the trends in trust over time; and 2) the application of multivariate models to test the two hypotheses, showing the association between referendum voting position and trust.

What practical difficulties might you face when collecting and analysing your data? How will you overcome them?

The proposed research has several practical difficulties and limitations. The availability and structure of the longitudinal data may not be optimal for the desired subset of years pre- and post-Brexit referendum. In cases where data might be missing, then repeated cross-sectional data could be supplemented, which would enable consistency across the entire dataset. Another limitation is regarding the referendum

voting position: self-reported voting choice might be biased through either recall error, recording error or social desirability bias. To mitigate potential bias, only contemporary records of referendum voting choice will be registered in the database. Additionally, given that trust in political institutions can be affected by many variables, observed changes in trust over time might not be solely attributable to the Brexit referendum: whilst the longitudinal design helps mitigate this issue, any claims about causality need to be reported with due caution.

What ethical issues might arise during your research project?

The proposed research has minimal ethical concerns, given that it relies entirely on secondary data collection, with the original data collection complying fully with the UK General Data Protection Regulation. All datasets, from which data will be extracted, have already been anonymised, addressing potential confidentiality concerns, as per ethical and legal standards. Despite this, it is clear that political attitudes and voting behaviour are highly sensitive topics, which means that the researcher has an obligation to report the findings in a way that avoids potential stigmatisation or the categorisation/judgement of respondents. Formal ethical approval will not be required for the proposed research, and the research will follow the ethical guidelines governing research in political science, by ensuring respect for participants, integrity during the data analysis process and clarity in reporting the findings of the research (Jensen, 2025).

Conclusion

This proposal has outlined a research project that will aim to explore how the Brexit referendum impacted public trust in political institutions in the UK. The research will be situated within existing theories of political trust and democratic legitimacy, and will use a longitudinal approach to capture changes in trust following this major political event. The research addresses an identified key gap in the existing literature, and analyses trust across multiple institutions, allowing for the possibility that changes in trust may vary according to the institution, and not as a general decline in trust. The proposed research offers a framework for exploring the relationship between referendums and levels of institutional trust, offering insight into how democratic

governance and political legitimacy are impacted by reduction in trust and by a deepening of political division.

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