

Trust, Influence, Self-Esteem, and the Brexit Vote

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Introduction

The British voters' decision to exit the European Union offers researchers a unique opportunity to examine the how citizens form decisions that will dramatically impact their country's future. The explanation of the Brexit vote draws from international image and social identity theories by examining voters' views on the EU's impact on their self-esteem. Overall, a positive view leads to a remain vote, a negative view leads to an exit vote. Essential to this is the voter's image of the relationship the UK has in the EU vis-à-vis Germany. A positive German image will likely produce a vote to remain because they trust that Germany will lead the way in making decisions that will enhance British self-esteem. In addition, if individuals view Germany as more influential than the UK, they will likely vote to exit because being seen as an equal to German helps self-esteem. Among the more nationalistic voters, self-esteem can be preserved if they believe the UK has high influence. Their choice would be to stay in the EU and see how to guide the integration project along their preferences. This finding is important because it demonstrates that nationalists with different images will have different views regarding EU membership.

Methods

Data gathered came from a representative sample of 500 British survey respondents in late April 2016, two months prior to the referendum, by contract with Prolific Academic. The survey was executed using their online platform. Prolific Academic was the firm of choice given that their respondent selection techniques produce reliable answers and therefore higher quality data. The sample also is representative of each constituent part of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), as well as income and educational levels. Only individuals that were eligible to vote in the June 2016 referendum were allowed to participate. Two attention checks were placed in the survey to better ensure honesty among the respondents. The resulting diagnostic testing of the results demonstrated that respondent were closely reading and answering the questions. Dependent, independent, and control variables were coded from survey answers. The dependent variable measured the voters' referendum choice. The independent variables included trust in Germany, two influence perception variables for Germany and the UK, and a British/EU identity variable. Controls included satisfaction with UK democracy, ideological self-placement, EU knowledge, income, education, party ID, and UK region. Data was analyzed using logit regressions and predicted probabilities regarding exiting the EU were calculated.

Results

Overall, the result support the paper's seven hypotheses. Self-esteem was a critical factor in the Brexit vote and measured by trust and influence.

H₁: Individuals who trust Germany are less likely to vote for Brexit.

The results indicate that trusting Germany decreases the chances of voting for exit by 20.3% (p=0.014). Trust in other countries (France, Italy, and Slovakia) were not statistically significant.

H₂: The higher the perceived of German influence in the EU, the more likely individuals will vote for Brexit.

Perceiving that Germany is highly influential will increase the chances of voting for Brexit by 17.2% (p=0.033), as we move from the lowest perception of influence to the highest.

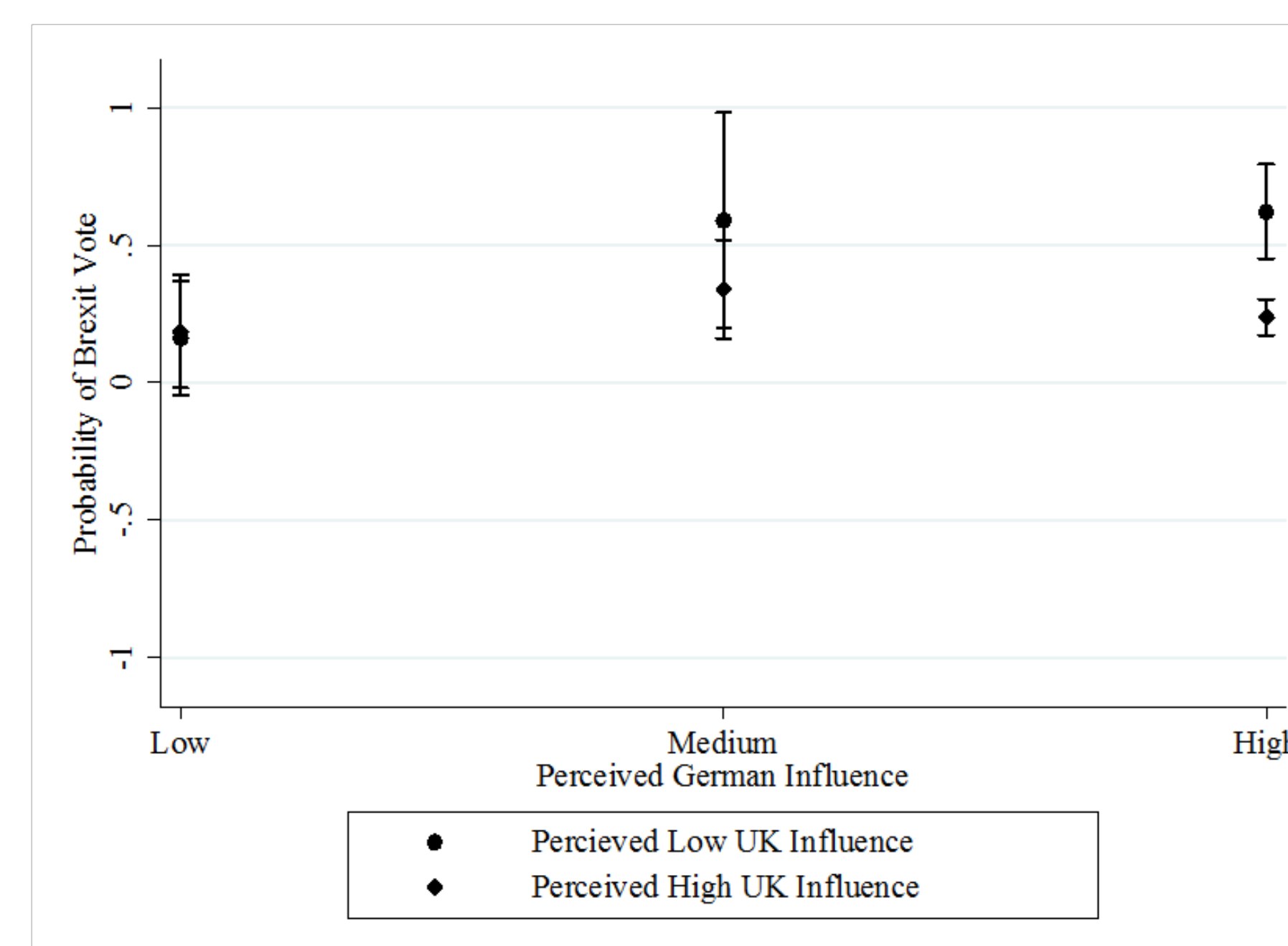
H₃: The higher the perceived British influence in the EU, the less likely individuals will vote for Brexit.

Perceiving that the UK is highly influential lowers the likelihood by much more: 45.2% (p=0.000) when the value goes from its minimum to its maximum.

H₄: The higher the perceived German influence in the EU while British influence is perceived as low, the more likely individuals will vote for Brexit.

Figure 1 shows that when both German and UK influence are perceived as high the likelihood of a Brexit vote drops below 50% (23.8% to be exact, p=0.000). However when German influence is perceived as high while UK influence is low, the chances of voting for an EU exit is at 62.4% (p=0.000).

Figure 1. Predicted Brexit Vote Probabilities with Perceived German and UK Influence Levels (95% CI)



H₅: Individuals that trust Germany and perceived high German influence in the EU are less likely to vote for Brexit.

Table 1 shows that at a perceived low German influence, individuals that trust Germany are not likely to vote for Brexit (the likelihood is basically zero). The difference between perceived mid-level and high level influence is small, as is the actual values. At the highest end of the confidence interval, we

see a low value of 34.2%. Note that at high perceived German influence, those that do not trust Germany have a higher likelihood to exit.

Table 1. Predicted Probabilities of Individual Brexit Vote using German Trust and Perceived German Influence.

German Trust/German Influence	Predicted Probability	95% Confidence Interval	
No Trust/Low	0.233*	0.0440	0.422
No Trust/Medium	0.380***	0.172	0.588
No Trust/High	0.482***	0.377	0.587
Trust/Low	0.000	-0.193	0.193
Trust/Medium	0.211***	0.125	0.298
Trust/High	0.294***	0.246	0.342

*p ≤ 0.050; **p ≤ 0.010; ***p ≤ 0.001; Note: Standard errors in parentheses

H₆: Individuals that do not trust Germany and perceive low British influence in the EU are more likely to vote for Brexit.

As the UK's perceived influence increases among those that do not trust Germany (see table 2), the likelihood of voting for Brexit drops from 64.5% at the low level of UK influence to 36.0% at the high level UK influence. Also, those that trust Germany are still less likely to remain (59.2%), but that likelihood decreases to 20.0% as the perceive UK influence increases.

Table 2. Predicted Probabilities of Individual Brexit Vote using German Trust and Perceived UK Influence.

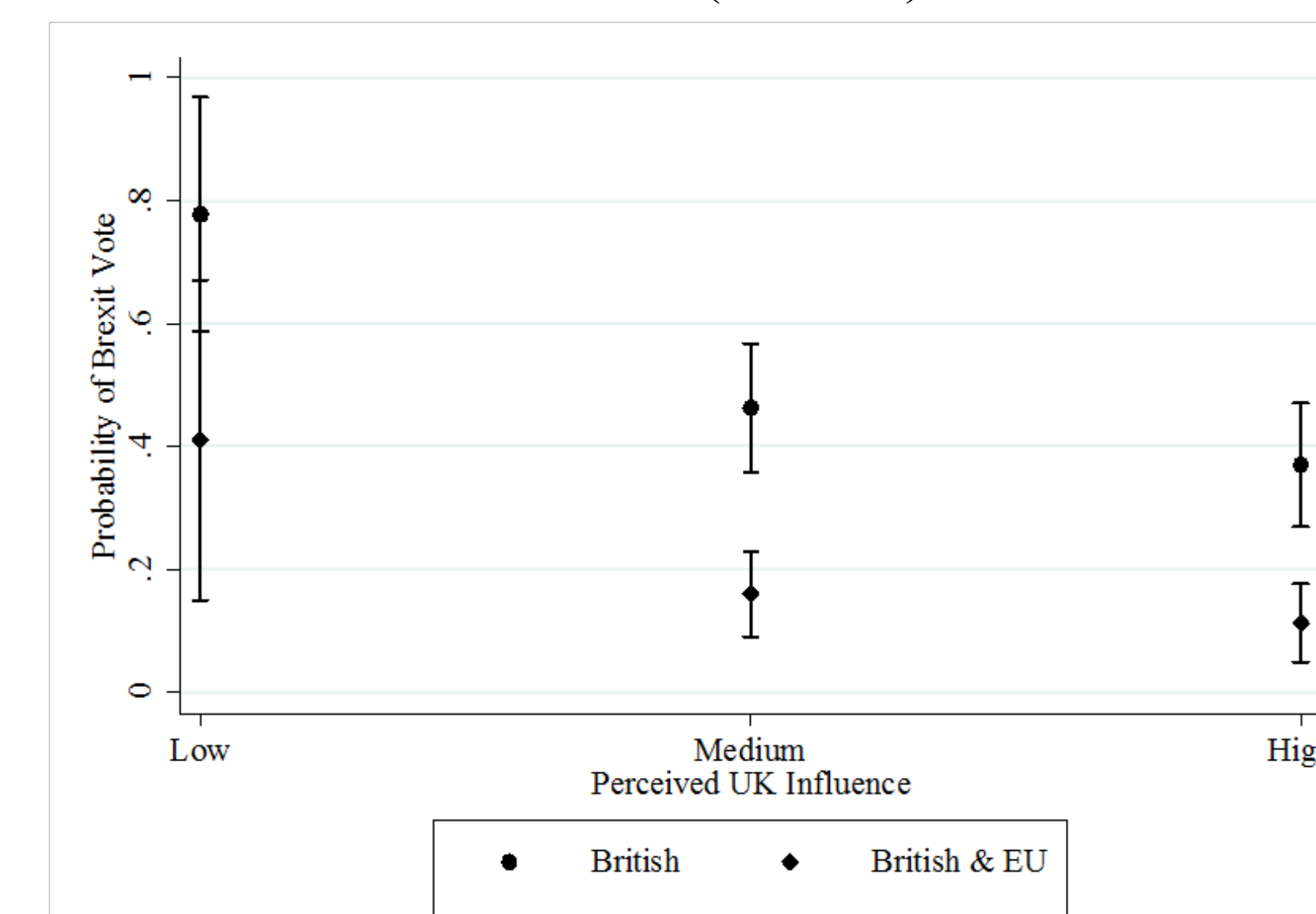
German Trust/UK Influence	Predicted Probability	95% Confidence Interval	
No Trust/Low	0.645***	0.426	0.865
No Trust/Medium	0.501***	0.366	0.636
No Trust/High	0.360***	0.196	0.525
Trust/Low	0.592***	0.397	0.787
Trust/Medium	0.248***	0.180	0.317
Trust/High	0.200***	0.139	0.261

*p ≤ 0.050; **p ≤ 0.010; ***p ≤ 0.001; Note: Standard errors in parentheses

H₇: Individuals that hold an exclusive British identity and perceive a high British influence in the EU are less likely to vote for Brexit.

Among the British-only identifiers, the likelihood in voting for Brexit diminishes as perceived UK influence increases. Nationalists who perceive low UK influence are very likely to vote for an exit (77.7%; p=0.000). Those who perceive high influence are not likely (37.0% p=0.000). Therefore, even nationalists are willing to stay in the EU if the UK is perceived to have high influence.

Figure 2. Predicted Brexit Vote Probabilities with Identity and Perceived UK Influence Levels (95% CI)



Conclusions

This study combined insights from international image and social identity theories to explain why British voters would choose to stay or leave the EU. Images of both external actors and national self-images, as well as intergroup dynamics, produce an explanation based on trust, influence, and individual self-esteem. Trust promotes intergroup cooperation, but distrust is only important predictor if individuals perceive a major rival as having high influence. The survey data also demonstrates that individuals who perceive low UK influence as compared to Germany are more likelihood to vote for Brexit. Last, nationalists are less likely to vote for Brexit if they believe the UK's influence is high. In sum, the Brexit vote was about national self-esteem, which may spillover into the how the public will react to the final withdrawal terms.

Literature cited

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Further information

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