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Brexit spillovers: how British domestic politics affected support for European integration in remaining member states

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Brexit Spillovers

How British domestic politics affected support for European integration in remaining member states

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A large body of research investigates the diffusion of policies and political developments across countries, and analyzes its consequences for mass preference formation and electoral accountability. While we know that voters look at policy outcomes abroad to assess domestic performance, the politics through which policies emerge can also be informative to voters. To understand whether voters learn from observing other countries' domestic political struggles, we analyze the international reverberations of British Brexit politics. We argue that, although it may be too soon to assess the actual consequences of Brexit for the UK, political struggles during the negotiations may have provided information about the political feasibility and desirability of leaving the EU. We analyze three key events in recent British politics that happened during the fieldwork of two surveys, and a natural experiment that leverages random variation in exposure to Brexit-related information. Results confirm both a deterrence and an encouragement effect of Brexit on support for leaving the EU in remaining member states, and provide causal evidence of the benchmarking mechanism. These findings show how news coverage of other countries' domestic politics can simplify voters' decision-making by reducing the uncertainty associated with alternative policy choices. They have implications for theories of EU support and for the prospects of the current backlash against political globalization.

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Introduction

Do voters learn from observing other countries' politics and adapt their preferences and political behavior in line with this information? Answering this question is important, because it allows us to better understand the diffusion of ideas and political developments across countries. Against the backdrop of an emerging wave of globalization backlash, support for populist parties, and challenges to democracy across Western democracies, understanding whether and how developments in one country are perceived and evaluated by the mass public abroad could allow us to not only better distinguish domestic and international sources of these current political changes, but also to better understand the systemic dynamics of these changes.

Existing research suggests that major events in one country can affect mass public opinion abroad. Terrorist events in one country have been shown to negatively affect public opinion on migration in other countries (Böhmelt, Bove, and Nussio 2020). Major “iconic events,” such as the 1917 Russian revolution or the successful protests in Tunisia and Egypt that marked the beginning of the Arab spring have been shown to increase political contention in other countries (Weyland 2010; Hale 2013; Bamert, Gilardi, and Wasserfallen 2015) and had systemic effects by creating waves of democratization (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Weyland 2009). Likewise, highly reported political events with major foreign policy consequences, such as the 2005 rejection of the EU Constitution in France (Malet 2019; Schraff 2020), the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president (Minkus, Deutschmann, and Delhey 2018), or the spring 2019 Brexit chaos that nearly pushed the UK and the EU into a No-Deal Brexit (Walter 2021), have been shown to reverberate among the mass public abroad.

Politics is usually more boring, however. Most political decisions are taken after long and sometimes tedious discussions, and their implications take time to materialize. While the domestic political struggles may seem big for ardent observers, in

comparison to the major events discussed above, they look more like politics as usual. In fact, most important and far-reaching decisions are taken in this less eventful mode. This raises the question whether and to what extent such more normal domestic politics struggles reverberate abroad.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the systemic reverberations of this more regular type of domestic politics abroad. It argues that domestic political struggles abroad can provide information to voters in other countries about the political feasibility and desirability of certain policy proposals. News coverage of other countries' domestic politics can thus simplify voters' decision-making by reducing the uncertainty associated with alternative policy choices. As a result, cross-border information may shape domestic evaluations and preferences of these policy proposals. We examine this argument for the case of Brexit. Given that many euroskeptic politicians across other EU countries have also proposed that their country leave the EU, we argue that British Brexit politics, that is the domestic political struggles surrounding the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from the European Union (EU), provided important pieces of information for the mass publics in other EU countries about the feasibility and desirability of such a policy proposal. To examine the causal effect of information about British Brexit politics on support for European integration in other EU countries, we present two sets of analyses that exploits the co-occurrence of key events in the Brexit negotiations and the fieldwork of two surveys to causally identify how information about the domestic politics of Brexit affected individuals' EU-related opinion.

Our analysis of two key events in recent British politics that happened during the fieldwork of the European Social Survey shows that information about the political difficulties surrounding Brexit in British politics made voters in other EU countries view the EU more positively. In addition to this deterrence effect, we also find encouragement effects of Brexit on support for leaving the EU in remaining member states in instances when domestic Brexit politics seems to be going well. A natural

experiment that leverages exogenous variation in news coverage additionally provides evidence on the causal mechanism. In line with research on international diffusion via elites (e.g., Gilardi 2010), we find that information about the politics surrounding certain policy proposals influence how voters abroad assess the merits of these policies, and this in turn affects their policy preferences for similar policy proposals in their own countries.

The effect of information from abroad on domestic policy preferences

Given the generally low level of political knowledge about national politics, let alone international affairs (Clark and Hellwig 2012; Carpini and Keeter 1996; Gilens 2001), it may seem unlikely that voters directly respond to these less salient political developments in other countries. Yet, existing research suggests that voters do look abroad in order to benchmark domestic policy successes and failures. Studies of economic voting show that voters compare the performance of their national economy with the world economy, thus effectively using the performance of other countries as benchmark (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Kayser and Peress 2012; Aytac, 2017). Likewise, voters have been shown to compare their own country relative to others on indicators such as their own country's economic performance relative to others (e.g., Gärtner 1997; Hobolt and Leblond 2009; 2013), or their satisfaction with their national own political system relative to their assessment of other systems (Rohrschneider 2002; e.g., Anderson 1998; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012) when assessing the merits of EU membership.¹

¹ Voters also respond to elite cues (e.g., Steenbergen, Edwards, and De Vries 2007; De Vries and Edwards 2009; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020), but we focus here on the direct effect of information on voters' attitudes and behavior.

There is also considerable evidence that voters compare the status quo of EU membership to imagined counterfactual scenario of exit (De Vries 2018), and that other countries' experiences with exit can provide powerful information that allows voters to update their priors about this imagined counterfactual (De Vries 2017; Walter 2020; 2021). This confirms previous evidence in the economics literature that people evaluate the performance of their local government by comparing policy outcomes with those of other jurisdictions (Besley and Case 1995).

Although much of this research has focused on policy outcomes as a basis of comparison (Kayser and Peress 2012; Linos 2011; C. De Vries 2018; Hobolt and Leblond 2009), observing the politics through which these policies emerge is likely to be informative to voters, too. After all, these political struggles convey important information about the political pitfalls, difficulties, and opportunities associated with pursuing a certain policy proposal (Saideman 2012; Gilardi and Wasserfallen 2019; Gilardi 2010). We therefore argue that observing another countries' political struggles is equally relevant for voters as observing policy outcomes.

To make meaningful comparisons with the experiences of foreign countries, citizens thus must acquire relevant information and update their prior beliefs in light of the information they receive. However, when scholars have tested to what extent citizens directly make these comparisons and use information about foreign countries to update, the findings have been more mixed. Kayser and Peress (2020) find that voters do not keep track of global economic trends, and that rather, the media pre-benchmark their economic news reporting by attributing positive and negative evaluations to a country's economic performance in relation to the world economy. More generally, media reporting is biased and voters only benchmark policies in countries covered by the media (Linos 2011). Likewise, several studies suggest that Western broadcasts sapped support for communist regimes by enabling Eastern European to compare their living standards as well as their liberties to those of Western citizens (Diamond 1993; Dalton 1994; Rohrschneider 1996; Whitehead 2001).

Yet, a careful study of the effect of West German television in the DDR (Kern and Hainmueller 2009) suggests that foreign media may have accidentally stabilized authoritarian regimes by offering people a source of entertainment. Similarly, Huang and Yeh (2016) show that, after accounting for people’s selective exposure to foreign media outlets, Chinese citizens that read positive news about foreign countries have more positive evaluations of their domestic regime.

How information about foreign political processes helps voters benchmark policy outcomes

Previous research suggests that it is important to disentangle the effects of information obtained by observing policies and politics abroad, and other factors that may drive or interact with this information effect. However, understanding whether and to which extent voters process information about and learn from the political experiences of other countries is difficult because studies of information effects on public opinion are plagued by endogeneity. Individuals tend to expose themselves to political messages they agree with (Bartels 1993; Stroud 2008), to interpret new information in light of their previous beliefs and identities (Taber and Lodge 2006; Walter 2021; Grynberg, Walter, and Wasserfallen 2019), and to respond to elite cues (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). This may obscure the effect of information and can generate the impression that benchmarking does not take place.

To disentangle the informational effect of observing foreign policies and politics, we analyze the impact that political events have on the policy preferences of citizens abroad. We argue that foreign political events can act as information shocks and produce a change in attitudes. First of all, political events have the potential to break into the news of other countries, as the “game of politics” is more newsworthy than performance indicators. In a commercialised media system, journalistic practices such

as horse-race reporting, personalisation, and infotainment, tend to highlight the political contest at the expense of the substantive content of policies (Esser 2013). Given the limited space that national newspapers can devote to media coverage of foreign countries, citizens are more likely to be aware of foreign political processes rather than policy outcomes.

Yet, how does observing foreign political events affect citizens' policy attitudes? The literature on policy diffusion among political elites highlights three potential mechanisms that may be relevant also for voters: competition, emulation, and learning (Braun et al. 2008; Gilardi 2012; Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2006). First, foreign political events may affect policy preferences abroad when countries compete for resources or in the international arena. For example, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president increased support for European integration because its nationalist discourse sparked a rally-round-the flag effect among Europeans (Minkus, Deutschmann, and Delhey 2018). Second, citizen can change their preferences when they observe foreign political events that signal the perceived appropriateness of certain policies. A previous study documents that the 2016 US election increased racist attitudes in Europe as Donald Trump's win signaled a shift in social norms (Giani and Méon 2019). Finally, people can learn from foreign political successes and failures. Previous studies have shown that major "iconic events" such as the 1917 Russian revolution or the successful protests in Tunisia and Egypt that marked the beginning of the Arab spring increased political contention abroad (Weyland 2010; Hale 2013; Bamert, Gilardi, and Wasserfallen 2015), not just because of a process of emulation, but because citizens learned from other countries' experiences about the feasibility and the likely consequences of a revolt against their regime.

In this study, we argue that political events that are certainly less consequential than a revolution can nonetheless signal the success and failure of policy choices and provide information about the political pitfalls and opportunities associated with policy proposals. Learning about the processes that surround the definition and

formulation of a policy can affect peoples' assessments of the feasibility of a policy and their expectations about the desirability of its outcome. Policy-making processes that are marked by high levels of disagreements, long and tedious discussions, and repeated failures, may signal that policy outcomes could be unfavorable too. Conversely, when policies enjoy a large consensus and a smooth approval, political processes may signal that the actual consequences of the policy may be equally positive. Against this backdrop, we argue that by observing domestic political struggles in other countries voters update their assessments of the expected outcome of the policy in that country. In turn, they use these expectations as a benchmark to revise their domestic policy preferences.

Research Design

We examine the causal effect of information about other country's domestic political struggles on voters' attitudes, by focusing on the UK's domestic political struggles during the Brexit process, that is the UK's withdrawal from the EU. After the Brexit vote, British politics entered a new phase of intense political debates over both the concrete implementation of the referendum and the negotiating strategy with the EU. While the actual consequences of leaving the EU take time to materialize, the political debates fueled by the Brexit negotiations represented a clear source of information for citizens of remaining member states. Coverage of these political struggles produced a sort of EU-wide informational campaign about the consequences of leaving the EU.

To study the causal effect of Brexit-related information on EU citizens' attitudes we present two sets of analyses. Both exploit the co-occurrence of certain key domestic political events in the Brexit negotiations and the fieldwork of public opinion surveys in certain EU-27 countries. These analyses allow us to estimate how information about the development of the Brexit negotiations affected support for the EU and EU exit in the remaining member states. Our analyses cover a time window between December

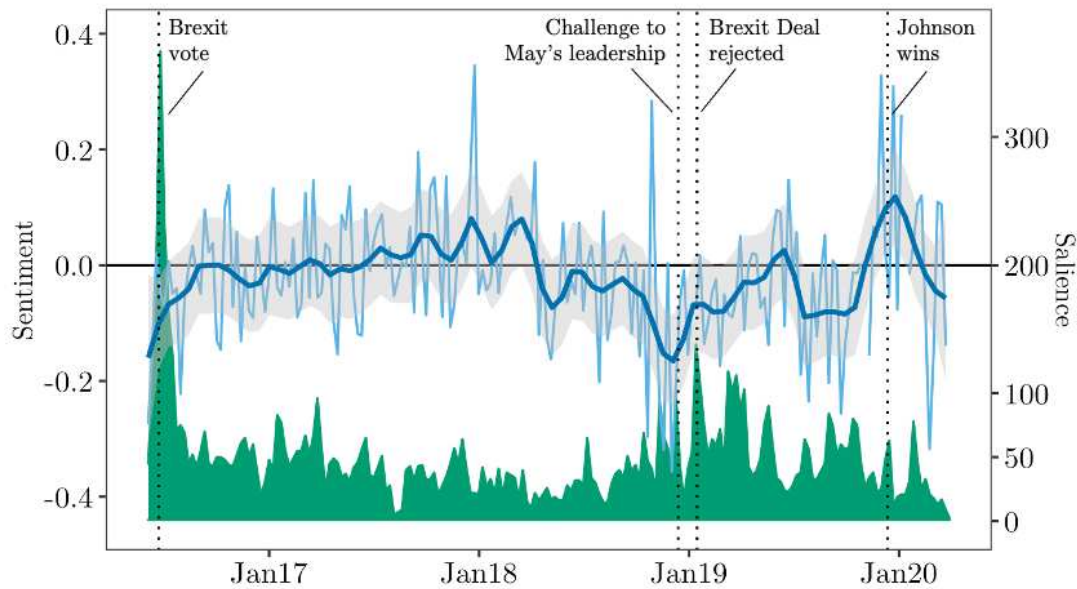
2018 and December 2019, when the Brexit issue became a salient topic in remaining EU countries in light of the struggles of the British government led by Theresa May to find parliamentary support for the Withdrawal Agreement, and later with the election of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister.

Figure 1 shows the salience of Brexit in four German newspapers – *Bild*, *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Handelsblatt* –, as well as the sentiment of the reporting. The green area shows the weekly number of articles that mention the word “Brexit”, our indicator for the salience of the issue. After a high peak in the week of the referendum vote, reporting of Brexit followed an average of around 30 articles per week during the first phase of the negotiations. However, the number of articles devoted to started to increase at the end of 2018 in coincidence as complications started to emerge over the parliamentary approval of the first deal on the divorce settlement. Two peaks in the graph correspond to the fight within the Tory party that led to the first challenge to Theresa May’s leadership and the first parliamentary rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement. Another peak occurs in the week of the national elections that sanctioned the success of Boris Johnson in December 2019.

Interestingly, the three events we analyze are marked by a distinctive polarity of the words used in the reporting. The sentiment analysis we performed on a subset of titles and leads containing the word “Brexit” shows that, while the struggles of May’s government were reported with clear negative words, Johnson’s electoral success was positively reported. We thus expect the two events that sanctioned the difficulties of the May’s government to increased support for European integration in remaining member states. Conversely, our hypothesis is that Johnson’s win had a negative impact on people’s EU attitudes.

Figure 1 – Media coverage of Brexit in Germany

Sentiment and salience of UK's withdrawal from the EU on BILD, Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Handelsblatt



Note: Salience is measured as the weekly number of articles that mention the word 'Brexit'. Sentiment is the polarity of the words used in a subsample of 5100 titles and leads.

Analysis 1: Brexit-struggles during May's government

In a first analysis, we examine the effect of two Brexit-related episodes on support for the EU in several EU-27 countries. These episodes were domestic political events and did not have an immediate effect on EU-UK relations or the Brexit negotiations, but were covered intensely in the European media. Importantly, they highlighted the difficulties associated with Brexit. The first event occurred when the British PM, Theresa May, survived a no confidence vote in her leadership of the Tory Party, but was forced to promise to step down before the next election (December 13, 2018). Three days earlier, May had postponed the first vote in the House of Commons on the Brexit withdrawal agreement negotiated by her government, because she was faced with the prospect of a defeat after massive opposition within her own party. The second episode happened one month later, on January 15, 2019, when the House

of Commons indeed rejected the Withdrawal Agreement with 432 votes against the deal and only 202 in favor (the largest defeat for a government motion in UK’s history since the introduction of the universal suffrage). The same day, May survived another vote of no confidence in her party leadership. As shown in Figure 1, the two events we study increased the salience of the Brexit debate in other European countries.

We exploit the fact that these events happened during the fieldwork of the European Social Survey (ESS). Our identification strategy relies on the quasi-random nature of the political events mentioned above relative to the timing of interviews in the ESS. Hence, our identifying assumption is that the Brexit negotiations did not interfere with the implementation of the survey (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2020). The first postponement of the vote on the Brexit Deal and the challenge to May’s party leadership occurred during the survey fieldwork of fifteen EU member states, while the analysis of the first parliamentary rejection in January 2019 is restricted to fourteen countries.²

Following previous studies (Depetris-Chauvin, Durante, and Campante 2020; Giani and Méon 2019; Mikulaschek, Pant, and Tesfaye 2020), we base our main analysis on an interval of ± 15 days before and after each of the two episodes: the 13 December 2018 challenge to May’s leadership, and the 15 January 2019 rejection of the Agreement. This bandwidth mitigates the risk that other events confound the estimation of the impact of Brexit events on public attitudes. At the same time, it allows us to retain a large enough number of observations, given that the ESS is based on face-to-face interviews that require long fieldworks. Figures A1 and A2 in the SI show a balance test for several respondent characteristics that may potentially correlate with the timing of the interview and the outcomes of interest, such as gender, education, age, unemployment status in the previous 12 months, the type of

² The December event occurred during the fieldwork of Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Rep., Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and Slovenia. The January event covers also the fieldwork of countries mentioned above plus Italy, but without Austria and Denmark.

community where the respondent lives, and whether he or she voted in the previous national elections. Although differences between the sample of respondents interviewed before and after the two events are relatively small, we use a popular matching technique, entropy balancing (Hainmueller 2012), to adjust inequalities in the distributions of the pre-treatment covariates mentioned above.

As the domestic political events discussed above are inherently linked to the UK’s decision to leave the EU, our outcome of interest is respondents’ support for European integration. We use two items which are part of the ESS questionnaire. The first question asks: “Now thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. Using this card, what number on the scale best describes your position?”. The card displays an 11-point scale from 0 (“Unification already gone too far”) to 10 (“Unification go further”). The second question asks respondents about their support for their country’s EU membership: “Imagine there were a referendum in [your country] tomorrow about membership of the European Union. Would you vote for [your country] to remain a member of the European Union or to leave the European Union?”. Possible answers beyond “leave” and “remain” include “submit a blank ballot,” “spoil the ballot paper,” “would not vote,” and “don’t know”. We regroup all these answers into one category and analyze this question with a multinomial logit model where the absence of a clear opinion on EU membership is the reference category.

Results

We analyze the impact of two episodes in which the chaotic status of British politics during the Brexit negotiation became particularly apparent on respondents’ support for the EU. For this purpose, we compare respondents interviewed in the two weeks after the event with respondents interviewed in the two weeks before the event.

Results in Table 1 show that the Brexit-related domestic troubles of the British governments reverberated in other EU member states and affected respondents' attitudes about the EU. Both episodes under study have a small but statistically significant effect on peoples' support for European integration. People interviewed in the aftermath of the confidence vote on May's leadership were 2-3 percent more likely to think that European integration should be pushed further. We detect a similar effect for people interviewed after the first rejection of May's Withdrawal Agreement in January 2019.

Table 1 – The effect of Brexit-related domestic political struggles in the UK on support for European integration in other EU countries

DV: Support for European integration (0-10)				
	Challenge to May's leadership		First rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	0.255*** (0.090)	0.289*** (0.106)	0.168** (0.083)	0.199** (0.094)
Constant	4.087*** (0.114)	4.098*** (0.154)	5.541*** (0.174)	5.603*** (0.171)
Observations	4,005	3,974	4,345	4,268
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Entropy balancing		✓		✓
Log Likelihood	-9,584.47	-9,815.70	-10,358.86	-10,504.26
Akaike Inf. Crit.	19,200.94	19,663.40	20,747.72	21,038.53

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. OLS models with clustered standard errors in parentheses. Design weights apply. Entropy balancing adjusts the distribution of the pre-/post-event samples by age, age squared, gender, education, type of community, unemployment status, and turnout in the previous election.

Table 2 – The effect of Brexit-related domestic political struggles in the UK on support for EU membership in other EU countries

	Dependent variable: Support for EU membership (3 categories)							
	Challenge to May's leadership				First rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement			
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain
Treatment	0.229 (0.160)	0.314** (0.131)	0.303 (0.192)	0.396** (0.156)	-0.030 (0.126)	0.088 (0.099)	-0.030 (0.126)	0.088 (0.099)
Constant	0.445** (0.179)	1.942*** (0.150)	0.417* (0.220)	1.880*** (0.180)	1.168** (0.472)	3.484*** (0.418)	1.168** (0.472)	3.484*** (0.418)
Observations	3665		3629		4425		4342	
Country FE	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Entropy balance			✓				✓	
AIC	5,069.488				6,505.431			

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Multinomial logit models (reference category: spoilt vote/abstain/don't know). Design weights apply. Entropy balancing adjusts the distribution of the pre-/post-event samples by age, age squared, gender, education, type of community, unemployment status, and turnout in the previous election.

Table 2 present the analysis of people's vote intentions in a hypothetical referendum on their country's EU membership. The results are interesting for two reasons. First, they show that the increase in support for European integration translated into a change in vote intentions in the case of the challenge to May's leadership (models 1-2), but not in the case of the rejection of the Framework Agreement (models 3-4). The absence of a significant effect of the second event may suggest that, as people update their preferences in a cumulative way, successive events may have a weaker informative value than similar previous events. Second, models 1 and 2 give us some indications of the type of attitude change that foreign political events generate. Indeed, the increase in the probability to vote in favor of remaining EU member does not come at the expenses of the probability of voting "leave." Instead, after the event, it is the probability to abstain, spoil the ballot, or answering "don't know" that

decreases. In the absence of panel data that would allow a more sound inference about the previous attitudes of those who learned from British Brexit politics, these results suggest that negative events increased support for European integration among people without strong preferences, rather than persuading euroskeptic voters.

Our analysis rests on the assumption that the timing of the survey interview does not affect the outcome through any other channel except for the event of interest (excludability). In the SI we present some falsification tests to corroborate this assumption. First, we exclude that the effect we detect is due to the mere increase in salience of EU issues by analyzing the effect of another Brexit-related event without negative connotations and with clear foreign policy implications, the agreement between the British government and EU leaders on November 15, 2018. This event had no significant effect on European voters' support for EU integration (see table A1). Second, we show that the events we study have no effect on other placebo outcomes such as satisfaction with the economy, left-right placement, immigration attitudes (table A2). These results lend support to our identification strategy as they show that the timing of the survey interview does not affect the outcome through other channels such as simultaneous events or unrelated time trends.

Analysis 2: Johnson's electoral success

In a second analysis, we study the effect of the electoral victory of the Conservative Party in December 2019. As the 2017 election had resulted in a minority government, after the replacement of Theresa May, the new PM Boris Johnson called a snap election to increase the parliamentary support for his Brexit strategy. The campaign mainly centered around the new withdrawal agreement he had negotiated with the EU, and for which he was now asking the British electorate a parliamentary majority.

We leverage the fact that the election results came out during the fieldwork of the Eurobarometer survey 92.4. The British elections took place on December 12, exactly

in the middle of the fieldwork that lasted from December 6 to December 19. The analysis of the Eurobarometer thus covers all 27 EU member states.

Although the EB 92.4 was devoted to investigate people’s environmental concerns, the questionnaire also asked a couple of questions about the EU. The first question asks respondents to rank their perception of the EU from 1 (a very negative image) to 5 (a very positive image). The second question asks: “At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?”.³ This question follows an identically worded question that asks about how things are going at the national level. We can thus compare answers to these two questions.

Table 3 – The effect of Johnson’s victory on people’s perceived EU image and evaluations of the EU’s current direction

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Image of the EU (1-5)		EU in the right direction (0-1)		Own country in the right direction (0-1)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment	0.016 (0.011)	0.009 (0.012)	-0.013* (0.006)	-0.018** (0.008)	0.001 (0.006)	-0.0001 (0.007)
Constant	3.281*** (0.027)	3.270*** (0.033)	0.385*** (0.016)	0.378*** (0.017)	0.525*** (0.015)	0.517*** (0.018)
Observations	26,085	25,204	22,948	22,303	24,428	23,667
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Entropy balancing		✓		✓		✓
AIC	67,303.80	66,877.35	32,939.20	34,473.71	34,047.76	35,357.19

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Entropy balancing adjusts the distribution of the pre-/post-event samples by age, age squared, gender, education, type of community, social status, and profession.

³ Spontaneous answers that said “neither of the two” were also coded. In a robustness test, these are treated as middle option and modelled in an ordinal logistic regression (see Table B1 in the appendix).

There is no effect of Johnson’s victory on people’s perceived image of the EU. However, people were two percent less likely to say that things were going in the right direction in the EU after the British elections. No effect is found on people’s rating of the current direction of their own country.

Models 3 and 4 are replicated using a shorter time window in Table B1 the appendix (+/- 3 days from the elections). The effects are slightly stronger and achieve higher statistical significance. This further corroborates our research design. Treated and control group show no significant difference on a common placebo outcome such as left-right self-positioning.

Analysis 3: Testing the benchmarking mechanism

In a third analysis, we investigate the role of the media in conveying information about foreign domestic politics in more detail, and its effect on people’s ability to use this information as a benchmark for their EU support. For this purpose, we exploit the fact that we had a public opinion survey in the field just after Theresa May’s decision to postpone the vote on the Withdrawal Agreement and her promise to step down before the following elections on 13 December 2018. The survey was part of a tracking survey by which we surveyed respondents in all EU-27 countries on Brexit- and EU-related issues in six-month intervals throughout the Brexit withdrawal negotiations (July 2017- December 2019, for details, see Walter 2021). The December 2018 wave was fielded between December 14 and December 21, 2018.

We leverage that the first postponement of the parliamentary vote on the Withdrawal agreement and the confidence vote on Theresa Mays’ party leadership (December 10 and 13, 2018) happened at the same time of the final round of the group stage of the main Europe-wide football championships (December 11-13, 2018). We assume that in regions where the local team played a match of either the Champions League or the Europa League, soccer coverage dominated the news, giving less space to coverage

of other countries' political struggles. This allows us to explore the quasi-random variation in news coverage of Brexit difficulties in the European media and its effect on support for EU exit. Following Eisensee and Strömberg (2007), who show that countries that experience a natural disaster during the Olympic games receive less attention and thus less financial support, we argue that respondents with local soccer teams in the championships have received less information about Brexit. We focus on Germany where support for football teams has a clear regional pattern.

We construct a binary treatment indicator, called *Higher Exposure (no game)*, that measures whether (one of) the region's local football teams played in the Champions League or Europa League's group stage. This variable takes the value of 0 if the local team played in a match, meaning that media coverage was pre-occupied with soccer-related news, and 1 if the local did not play, leaving more space for coverage of the UK's internal Brexit struggles.

Two outcomes are of interest. First, we analyze respondents' evaluation of the effect of Brexit on the UK. The question asks: "*Five years from now on, do you think Brexit will make the UK much better off, somewhat better off, neither better nor worse off, somewhat worse off, or much worse off?*". Responses are marked on a five-point scale ranging from (1) much worse off to (5) much better off. Second, we analyze respondents' support for their own country's exit from the EU. The question asks: "*If Germany were to hold a referendum on leaving the EU today, how would you vote?*". Respondents could choose four options from (1) "I would definitely vote to remain the EU" to (4) "I would definitely vote to leave the EU".

We use the participation of the local team to one of the two football competition as a random source of regional variation in exposure to Brexit-related information and investigate the effect of exposure to Brexit-related news in a difference-in-differences setting by comparing respondents answers in the December 2018 and July 2018 survey

waves.⁴ We include wave and region fixed effects and a number of pre-treatment covariates (gender, age, age squared, education, and whether the respondent lives in an urban or rural community). We estimate OLS models both with and without covariates.

We expect evaluations of Brexit to become more negative between July and December for all respondents, but especially for those in regions where the local team did not play a football match as these respondents were more exposed to negative information about Brexit. Accordingly, we also expect people in these regions to become less supportive of Germany's exit from the EU.

Results

Results in Table 4 show that in regions that were more exposed to new information because their local soccer team was not playing in the final round of the European championships, voters updated their attitudes three times more compared to people in regions where the local team played in the round of European football leagues. The higher exposure brought voters to evaluate the effects of Brexit on the UK more negatively, and to become less supportive of a German exit from the EU. The effect size is substantial. The decline in Brexit evaluations is equal to -0.14 for less exposed respondents, and -0.34 for more exposed respondents. This means that people that received more information were 9 percent more likely to have negative evaluations of the effect of Brexit on the UK compared to people interview six months earlier in the same regions, while the effect for respondents which were less exposed to new information is reduced to a 3-percentage point change. These results confirm that the British struggles over Brexit provided new information to people in other European countries about the political consequences of leaving the EU. Those who were more exposed to this information were more likely to update their evaluations of Brexit and their support for leaving the EU.

⁴ The third wave was fielded between June 22 and July 2, 2018.

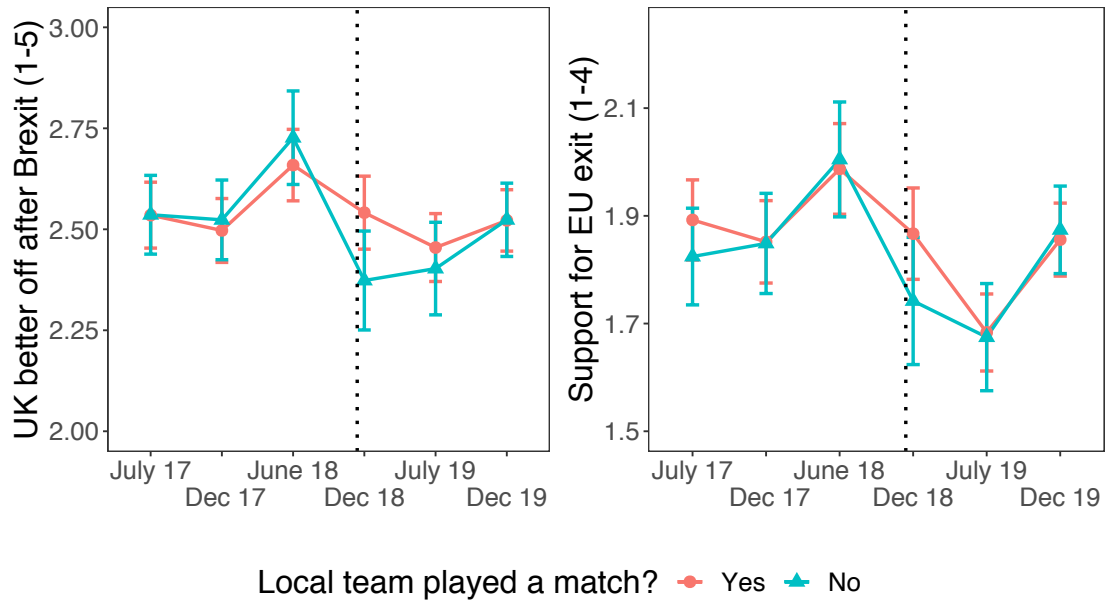
To probe the plausibility of our identification assumption, Figure 2 shows the trends in Brexit evaluations and support for EU exit from July 2017 and December 2019 for German regions where the local team played a European football match in December 2018 and for regions where no football team participated. Before the December 2018 wave, there is no significant difference in Brexit evaluations and in support for EU exit between the two groups of regions identified by the participation of their football team to the round of European championship. Interestingly, there is also no significant difference between the two groups in the following waves. The effect that we identify is necessarily short-lived as people that were less exposed to the new information in December are likely to have received additional information from following Brexit-related events (including the 15 January rejection of the Brexit deal analyzed above), either directly as we have shown in our case study, or mediated by the discourse of German political elites.

Table 4 – Difference-in-differences models: Germany

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Positive evaluation of post-Brexit UK (1-5)		Support for EU exit (1-4)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Higher exposure (no game)	-0.240** (0.106)	-0.208** (0.105)	-0.186* (0.100)	-0.205** (0.099)
December wave	-0.117* (0.064)	-0.136** (0.066)	-0.118* (0.061)	-0.094 (0.062)
Constant	2.503*** (0.258)	2.929*** (0.305)	1.621*** (0.253)	1.361*** (0.341)
Observations	3,016	2,960	3,002	2,950
Adjusted R ²	0.014	0.044	0.017	0.053
Region FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓		✓

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Clustered standard errors in parentheses. Post-stratification weights apply. Demographic controls include age, age squared, gender, education, rural/urban community.

Figure 2 – Parallel trends in Brexit evaluations and support for EU exit



To further check whether public opinion in regions with and without a football team in one of the two European championships followed similar trends prior to the event, we conduct a falsification test and estimate a placebo difference-in-differences regression with a similar specification for the previous waves of our survey (see Table C1 in the SI). We also estimate the same models presented in Table 4 with two placebo outcomes such as respondents’ satisfaction with the position of the German government in the Brexit negotiations, and their evaluations of Brexit effects on Germany (Table C2 in the SI). The absence of significant treatment effects on these two placebo outcomes lend support to our identification strategy, by excluding the possibility the other unrelated events affected our outcome of interest.

We next explore the causal mechanism in a mediation analysis. The identification of a causal mechanism requires the specification of an intermediate variable that lies on the causal pathway between the treatment and the outcome variable. In our case, we test whether and to what extent the change in Brexit evaluations mediate the decline in support for exit produce by the higher exposure to Brexit-related information. The

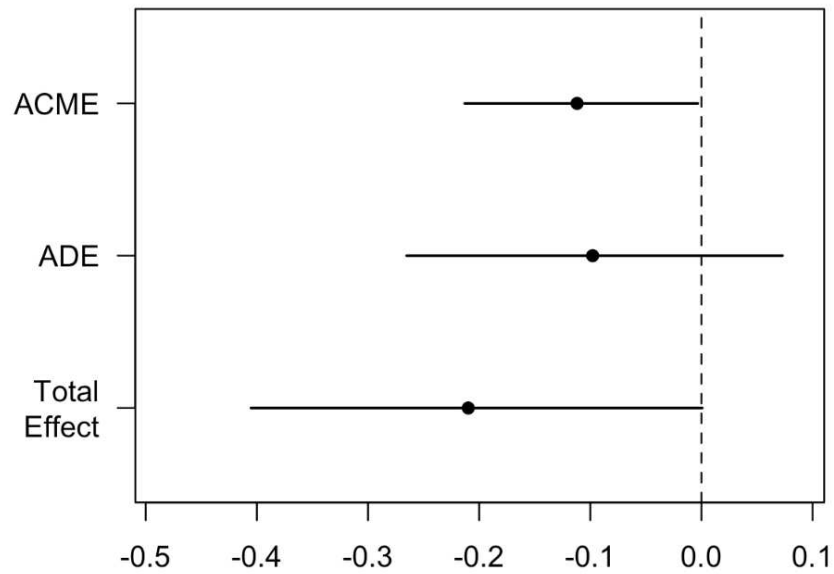
results in Table 5 confirm that a higher exposure to Brexit information has no significant direct effect on support for EU exit, while the average causal mediation effect is equal to -0.037. The decline in Brexit evaluations account for 53 percent of the total effect of higher exposure on decline in support for EU exit.⁵

Table 5 – Mediation analysis

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
ACME	-0.112	-0.213	0.00	0.044**
ADE	-0.098	-0.265	0.07	0.258
Total effect	-0.210	-0.405	0.00	0.051*
Prop. mediated	0.533	-0.297	2.00	0.078*

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05. Nonparametric Bootstrap Confidence Intervals based on 10'000 simulations. Sample size used: 2769.

Figure 3 – Direct and indirect effects



Note: ACME is the average causal mediation effect, ADE is the average direct effect.

⁵ Figure C1 in the SI shows the results of a sensitivity analysis.

Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the causal effect of information about the struggles of the British government during the Brexit negotiations on EU-related preferences of voters in remaining EU member countries. The results show that two events that signaled the demise of the Brexit aspirations – the challenge to Theresa May’s leadership within the Conservative Party, and the first parliamentary rejection of the Brexit Deal – increased public support for European integration abroad, while a positive event – Johnson’s electoral success – made people’s evaluations of the current direction of the EU more negative. Even in the absence of observable policy outcomes that could inform citizens in remaining member states about the actual effects of leaving the EU, people learned from domestic events of British politics about the political consequences of Brexit. Based on a diff-in-diff design that exploits random variation in exposure to information among German voters, we have provided causal evidence of the existence of this specific type of cross-national learning. We further tested the benchmarking mechanism via a mediation analysis. When the difficulty of the British government became evident abroad, German voters started to have more negative views of the consequences of Brexit for the UK, and in turn this brought them to update their preferences for a German exit. Not only do these findings confirm previous arguments about a deterrence effect of negative Brexit events (de Vries 2017, Walter 2020, Walter 2021), they also highlight a potential encouragement effect of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, thus contributing to our understanding of the systemic reverberations of the backlash against international institutions.

At the same time, the fact that voters are able to gather information about the domestic politics of foreign countries and to apply it in their own political evaluations has important normative implications. On the one hand, cross-country comparisons may provide a corrective for people’s strong status quo bias (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) by reducing the uncertainty associated with alternative policy choices. On the other hand, the possibility to learn from other countries’ successes and failures could

help voters to hold politicians accountable for policy pledges and outcomes. Foreign countries' policy failures could warn voters against ill-conceived policies, while the success of a policy in another country could enable voters to distinguish potential flaws in their own country's policy design. This suggests that a higher coverage of international news may improve citizens' political decisions.

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Supplementary Information

Figure A1 – Balance plot (December window)

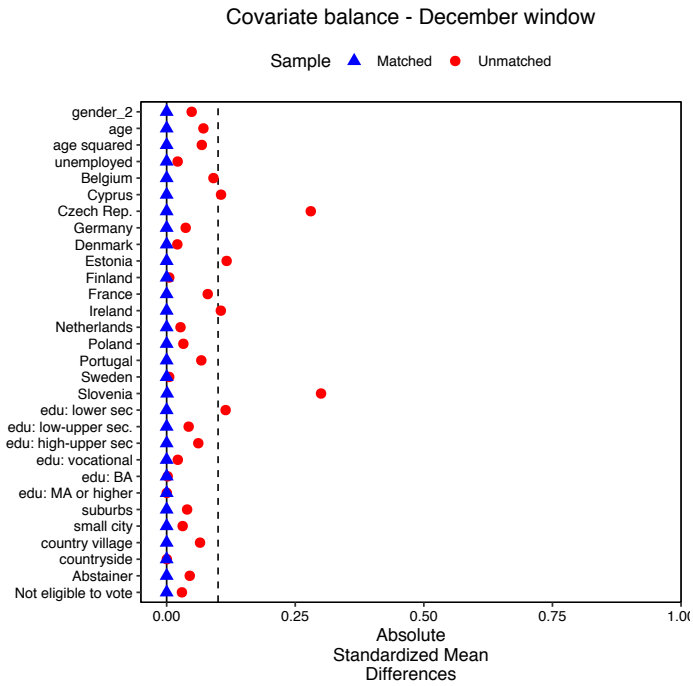


Figure A2 – Balance plot (January window)

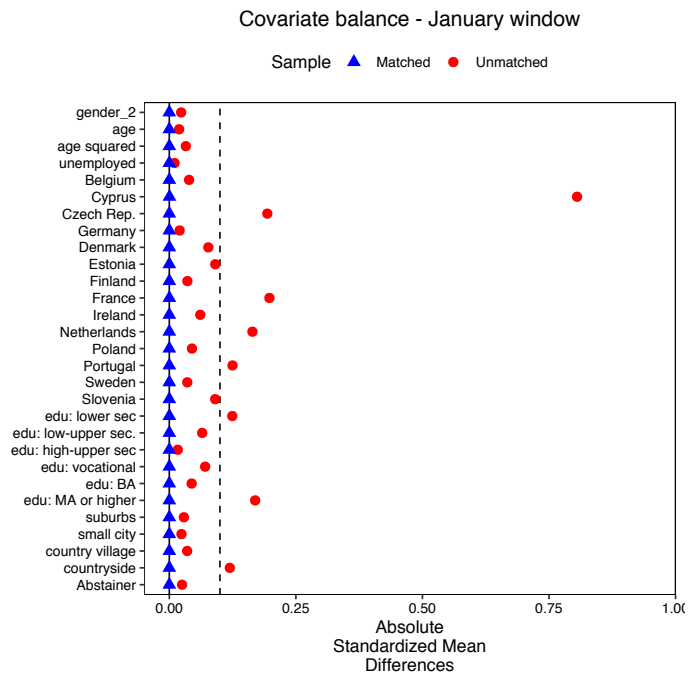


Table A1 – Falsification test ESS: placebo date

	<i>Support for EU integration (1-10)</i>	
	(1)	(2)
Placebo (post 15.11.18)	0.077 (0.073)	0.094 (0.080)
Constant	4.506*** (0.111)	4.533*** (0.143)
Observations	5,140	5,077
Country FE	✓	✓
Entropy balancing		✓
Log Likelihood	-12,215.730	-12,166.290
Akaike Inf. Crit.	24,459.450	24,360.590

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Data: ESS.

Table A2 – Falsification test ESS: placebo outcomes

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Economic satisfaction		Left-right		Immigration (culture)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment 1 (post 13.12.18)	0.022 (0.078)		-0.007 (0.090)		0.086 (0.101)	
Treatment 2 (post 15.01.19)		0.089 (0.073)		-0.053 (0.081)		0.106 (0.087)
Constant	6.894*** (0.087)	5.382*** (0.112)	4.746*** (0.103)	4.818*** (0.143)	5.030*** (0.134)	6.065*** (0.141)
Observations	4,100	4,450	3,784	3,947	4,068	4,442
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Entropy balancing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Log Likelihood	-8,993.428	-9,890.425	-8,506.759	-8,927.307	-9,806.792	-10,748.040
Akaike Inf. Crit.	18,018.860	19,810.850	17,045.520	17,884.610	19,645.580	21,526.090

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure B1 – Study 2: Balance plot

Covariate balance - Eurobarometer December 2019

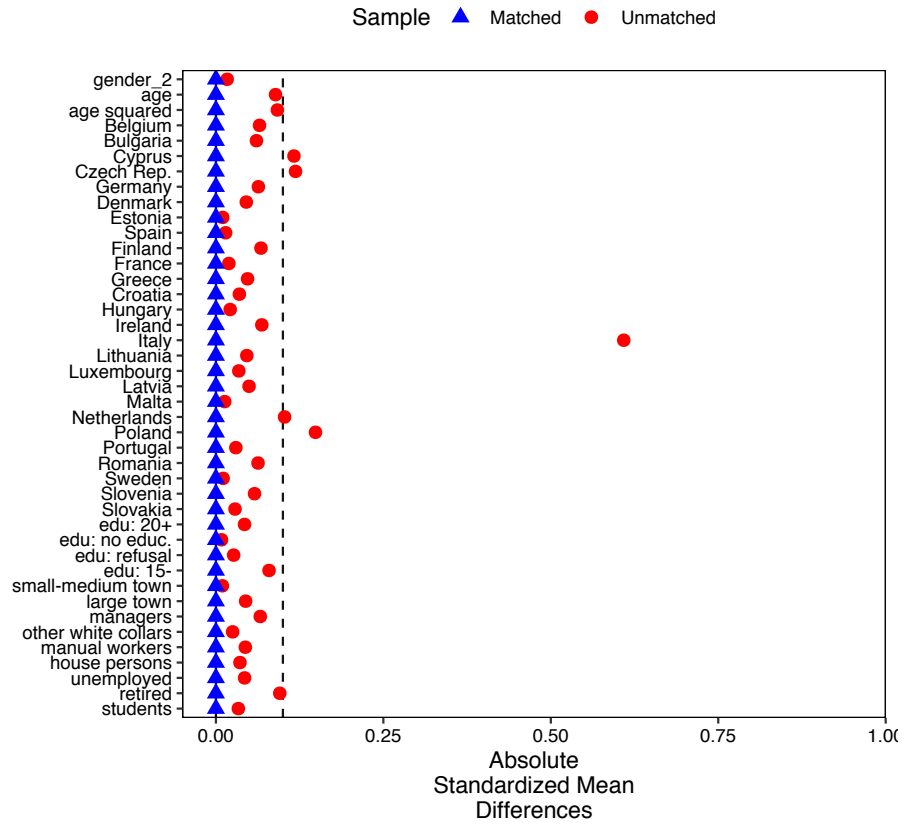


Table B1 – Robustness tests for study 2: Johnson’s election victory

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	EU in the right direction (0-1) ± 3 days		EU in the right direction (1-3) – Ordered logit		Placebo outcome: left right (1-10)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment	-0.024*** (0.008)	-0.024** (0.010)	-0.046* (0.027)	-0.050** (0.020)	-0.037 (0.030)	-0.016 (0.035)
Constant	0.372*** (0.019)	0.368*** (0.021)			5.015*** (0.069)	4.980*** (0.080)
Intercept 1 2			-0.232*** (0.061)	-0.215*** (0.045)		
Intercept 2 3			0.353*** (0.061)	0.370*** (0.045)		
Observations	14,158	13,737	22,948	22,303	21,702	21,222
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Entropy balancing		✓		✓		✓
AIC	20,194.85	21,513.50	44,029.87	77,379.84	96,077.76	96,512.65
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01					

Table C1 - Falsification test of the diff-in-diff design (Germany)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Positive evaluation of post-Brexit UK (1-5)		Support for EU exit (1-4)	
	July 2017 – Dec. 2017	Dec. 2017 – July 2018	July 2017 – Dec. 2017	Dec. 2017 – July 2018
No game	0.053 (0.091)	0.043 (0.097)	0.058 (0.084)	0.059 (0.091)
Wave (Dec. 2017)	-0.063 (0.058)		-0.045 (0.053)	
Wave (July 2018)		0.183*** (0.060)		0.127** (0.058)
Constant	1.709*** (0.226)	1.995*** (0.240)	0.505** (0.201)	1.078*** (0.235)
Observations	2,749	2,738	2,797	2,764
Adjusted R ²	0.019	0.037	0.048	0.042
Region FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dem. controls	✓	✓	✓	✓

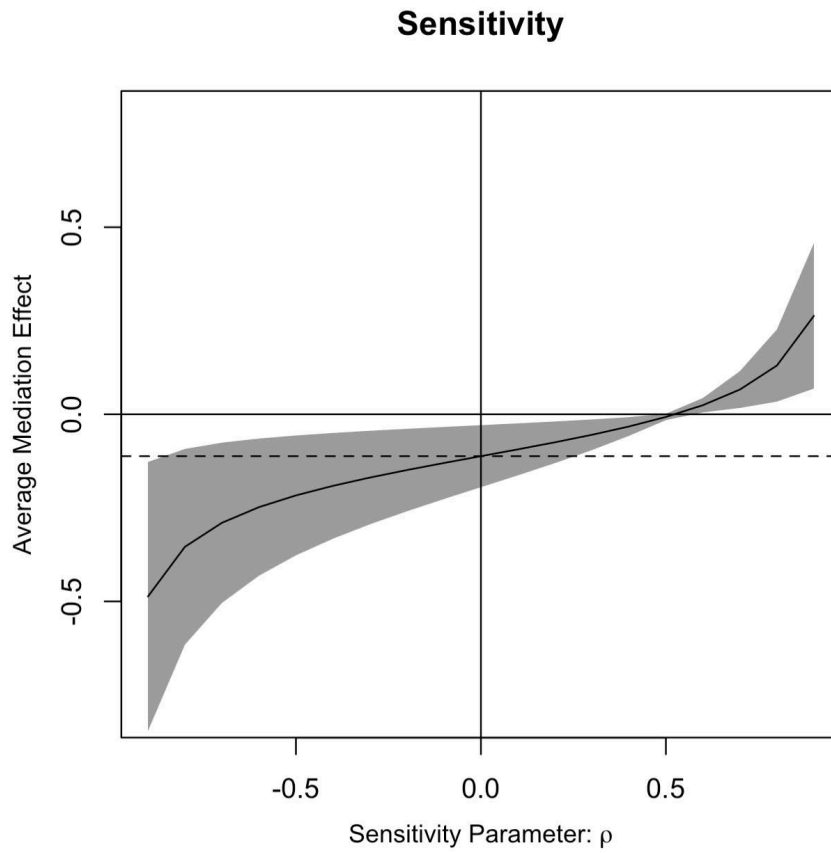
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table C2 - Diff-in-diff design (Germany): Placebo outcomes

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Support government's Brexit strategy		Evaluation of Brexit effects on Germany	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Higher exposure	0.099 (0.094)	0.049 (0.094)	0.065 (0.081)	0.056 (0.082)
Wave (Dec. 2018)	-0.011 (0.056)	0.0002 (0.057)	0.142*** (0.052)	0.144*** (0.054)
Constant	3.121*** (0.191)	2.598*** (0.275)	2.806*** (0.111)	3.009*** (0.242)
Observations	3,007	2,950	3,050	2,990
Adjusted R ²	0.004	0.030	0.011	0.016
Region FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dem. controls		✓		✓

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure C1 - Mediation sensitivity analysis



We choose as the sensitivity parameter the correlation ρ between the residuals of the mediator and outcome regressions. If there exist unobserved pre-treatment confounders which affect both the mediator and the outcome, we expect that the sequential ignorability assumption is violated and ρ is no longer zero. The sensitivity analysis is conducted by varying the value of ρ and examining how the estimated ACME changes. The results show that for the point estimate of the ACME to be 0 the correlation between the residuals of the mediator and outcome regressions must be approximately 0.5.