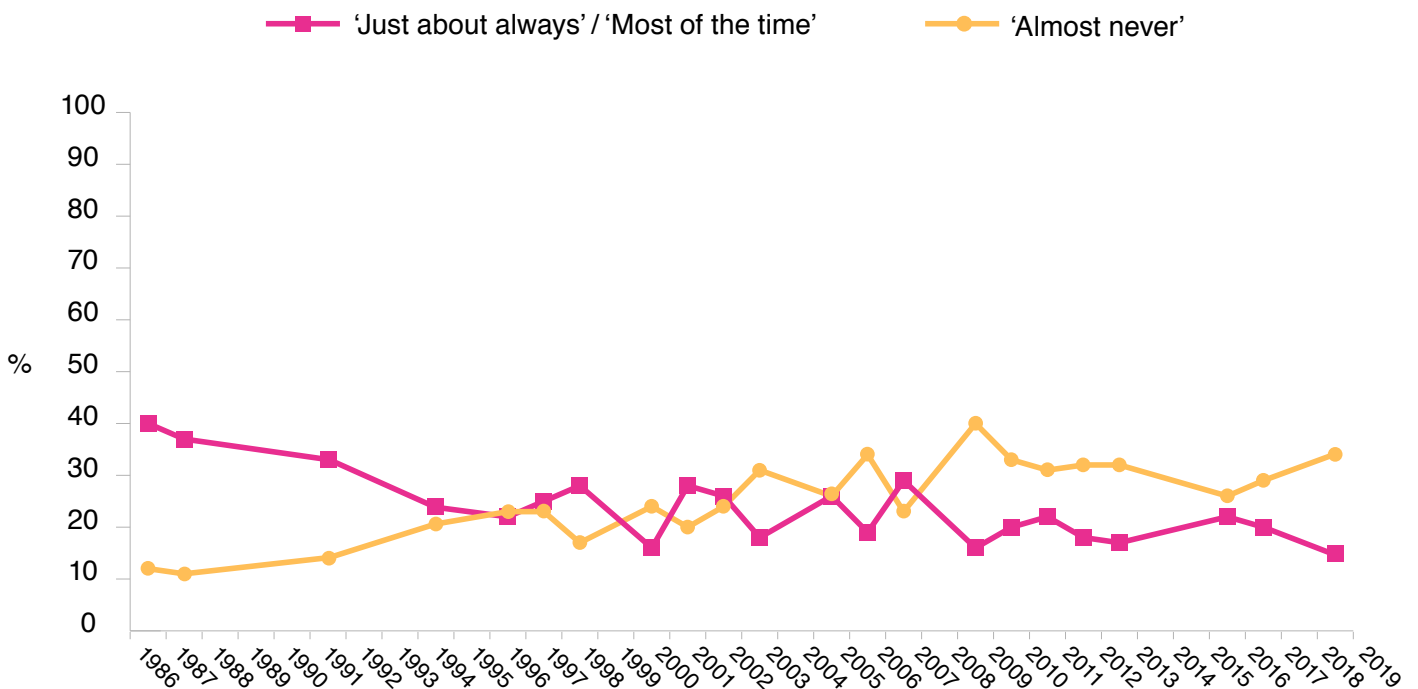# Political consequences of Brexit

Has Brexit damaged our politics?

The Brexit stalemate that gripped Britain in 2019 appeared to be a perfect recipe for stimulating disenchantment among voters. In this chapter, we examine the impact of that stalemate on people's attitudes towards how Britain is governed. We look at whether trust and confidence in how Britain is governed has fallen in the wake of the Brexit debate, and what, if anything, has happened to people's sense of political engagement. At the same time, we consider whether any impact is more in evidence among Leavers or more apparent among Remainers.

Spotlight

Shortly after the EU referendum the public had appeared somewhat more trusting of government than they had for some time. However, by the time the Brexit stalemate was coming to a conclusion the level of trust in government had fallen away quite noticeably.

Level of trust in British governments, 1986–2019

Overview

Britain is more divided about the consequences of Brexit than before the EU referendum

Since the EU referendum people have been more likely to feel that leaving the EU will have either beneficial or damaging consequences, and less likely to feel that it would not make much difference either way.

- Europhiles have become markedly more pessimistic about the economic consequences of leaving the EU; 80% feel it means the economy would be worse off, an increase from 56% in 2015.

- While Eurosceptics are also a little more pessimistic about the economic consequences of leaving the EU, the increase – from 34% in 2015 to 42% now – has been much smaller. Consequently, the gap between the two groups is as wide now as it has ever been.

- In 2015, 31% of all voters said that leaving would not make much difference to the economy. The figure is now just 22%.

- In 2015 44% said that leaving the EU would not make much difference to the level of influence that Britain is able to exercise in the world. This now stands at 37%.

Trust and confidence in government have fallen to record lows

Levels of trust and confidence in government are among the lowest ever recorded.

- 79% believe that the system of governing Britain could be improved either 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal', an increase from 63% in 2014 and the highest figure ever.

- Just 15% - a record low - say they trust governments 'most of the time' or 'always'. More than twice as many (34%) say they 'almost never' trust governments, a figure that has been exceeded only once before.

- Leave and Remain supporters are equally likely to have become more critical of how the country was being governed. Between 2016 and 2019 there was an eight-point increase in the proportion of Leave supports who 'almost never' trust British Governments, similar to the nine-point increase registered among Remain voters.

Interest in politics has increased

Rather than encouraging people to switch off from the world of Whitehall and Westminster, the Brexit process appears to have helped stimulate interest in the political process.

- The proportion who say that they have either 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics now stands at 39%.

- Between 1986 and 2013 the proportion averaged 31% and was never more than four points above or below that figure.

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Introduction

The period between 2017 and 2019 was one of the most dramatic and unstable in modern British politics. It was heralded by a general election in June 2017 that was called by the then-Prime Minister, Theresa May, in the hope that the outcome would furnish her with a large overall majority and thereby enable her to secure parliamentary approval for the agreement on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union that she was about to negotiate. In practice, it resulted in a hung parliament in which the Conservatives were reliant on the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland for their continued tenure in office (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018). Meanwhile, how to secure the UK's withdrawal from the EU single market and customs union without reintroducing a supervised border on the island of Ireland soon became a major sticking point in the EU negotiations – the government's proposed solution was not only opposed by the Democratic Unionists but also by many Conservative MPs, and especially by those seeking a clean break with the EU. As a result, Mrs May was repeatedly unable to secure parliamentary approval for her deal – but at the same time it also proved impossible to secure a Commons majority for any alternative course of action, including for a proposal promoted by many of those opposed to Brexit that the deal be put to voters in another referendum. Eventually Mrs May found herself seeking an unwanted extension to the two-year period for concluding an agreement with the EU, and thereafter in the summer of 2019 made way for a successor as Conservative leader and Prime Minister, Boris Johnson (O'Rourke, 2019).

But that was far from the end of the political drama. Within weeks of becoming Prime Minister, Mr Johnson sought to stop parliament from sitting for an extended period – only to have his decision dramatically overturned by the Supreme Court. In the meantime, the usual rhythm of parliamentary procedure was disrupted when those opposed to Brexit succeeded in wresting control of the parliamentary timetable and – against the government's wishes – passed legislation that would require the government to seek a further extension of the Brexit negotiating period if it failed to secure parliamentary approval for a deal. No less than 21 Conservative MPs who had supported this legislation were expelled from the party. Although Mr Johnson succeeded in renegotiating the terms of the agreement with the EU (in respect of the controversial provisions for Northern Ireland) and thereby managed to repair much of the division among Conservative MPs, in October the government was still unable to secure full formal parliamentary approval for this revised deal, and as a result was forced by the legislation that had been passed earlier to seek a further extension to the negotiating period (Russell, 2020). The stalemate was only resolved when Liberal Democrat and SNP MPs opted to acquiesce to the government's proposal that the issue should be put to the public in another general election – for fear that otherwise Mr Johnson would eventually be able to secure Britain's withdrawal from the EU without having agreed a deal (Elliott, 2020).

These developments were a far cry from how British politics often works (Jones et al., 2018; Moran, 2017). Post-war governments have typically been single party administrations that have, thanks to the single member plurality system, enjoyed a safe overall parliamentary majority. Such a system is often defended on the grounds that it makes for 'strong' governments which, although answerable to parliament, are not frustrated by it (Norton, 1997; Renwick, 2011). However, in this instance a government that lacked an overall majority and whose own supporters were internally divided was unable to deliver its principal policy-making objective, while, at the same time, there was apparently no parliamentary majority for any alternative course of action (Uberol, 2019). Instead of enjoying 'strong government', the country appeared to be suffering from a bout of 'immobilisme' not dissimilar to that which characterised the politics and government of France in the immediate post-war period (Williams, 1954).

The sight of seemingly divided, ineffective government might itself be thought to have undermined public confidence in the country's politicians and political institutions. But these developments also had a sharp ideological edge to them. The debate about whether the UK should be leaving the EU, and, if so, on what terms, was one on which the country was evenly and in some instances passionately divided – much like Parliament itself (Curtice, 2018, 2019; Curtice and Montagu, 2019). The government's handling of Brexit and the efforts of some MPs to influence and even stall the progress of the country's withdrawal were often portrayed and viewed through a partisan lens (Curtice, 2020). Those who supported leaving the EU argued that MPs were trying to frustrate the 'will of the people' as reflected in the majority vote in favour of leaving the EU in the June 2016 referendum. Even government ministers claimed that the House of Commons had become a 'zombie' parliament that had 'no moral right to sit on these green benches' (Cox, Sept 2019), and that if it were to continue to frustrate Brexit it would seriously damage the trust and confidence of Leave voters in how they were being governed (see, for example, May, 2019). Meanwhile, those on the other side of the argument argued that the majority vote in favour of leaving the EU was obtained in the absence of any detailed prospectus of what Brexit would mean. Consequently, they argued, the details of withdrawal that had been negotiated should now be put to the people in another referendum, so that voters had the opportunity to make an informed rather than an (allegedly) uninformed decision about whether the UK should leave the EU. Denial of such a ballot, it was suggested, would be 'undemocratic', though the call also seemed to be motivated by a belief that a second ballot would vote to reverse the original decision (Kellner, 2019; Wren-Lewis, 2019; Young, 2019).

Thus, during 2019 those on both sides of the Brexit debate might be thought to have had particular reason to be unhappy about the way Britain was governed. Neither Leave voters nor Remain supporters could be sure that Brexit would turn out as they had hoped. Leave

voters could not be sure that Brexit would happen while it was far from clear that the second ballot for which many Remain voters had hoped would ever take place. Given the intensity of the views held by many on both sides of the debate, it could well be the case that both Remainers and Leavers had come to hold a negative view of how Britain is being governed.

That said, we should not assume that the Brexit debate was necessarily having a negative impact on the health of democracy in Britain. The perceived importance, passion and drama of the Brexit debate could have served to persuade people of the importance of politics, and of the need for them to become involved in the political process. Perhaps this experience encouraged people to take a greater interest in politics – and thus maybe to become more politically active. Maybe too, this means that Brexit was not as corrosive of people's trust and confidence in how they were being governed as we have so far suggested. An engaged electorate might be more understanding of the politics of the procedural manoeuvring that dominated much of the 2017–19 parliament.

In this chapter, we examine people's attitudes during the second half of 2019 towards how Britain was being governed, just as the Brexit debate was reaching its height. By using measures that have been asked on previous British Social Attitudes surveys, we aim to ascertain whether trust and confidence in the governance of the country had indeed fallen to relatively low levels in the wake of the Brexit debate, and what, if anything, happened to people's sense of political engagement. At the same time, by comparing the pattern and trajectory of attitudes among those who voted Remain and those who backed Leave, we can ascertain whether any such development was more in evidence among those on one side of the debate than on the other. In particular, was there any evidence, at this point at least, to support the claim that Leave voters were especially likely to react adversely to the continued delay in the implementation of Brexit?

We begin our analysis by assessing public attitudes towards Brexit itself in the second half of 2019. Was it still the case that many people were strongly committed to their side of the Brexit debate – and that since 2016 relatively few people had changed their mind about the merits or otherwise of exiting the EU, leaving the country still largely divided down the middle? At the same time was it still the case that Remain and Leave voters had very different views of what Brexit would mean? Having thus updated our picture of public attitudes towards Brexit, we examine whether levels of trust and confidence in how Britain is governed did fall during the Brexit stalemate that dominated politics between 2017 and 2019 – and whether there is any evidence that any growth in disaffection was more widespread among those on one side of the Brexit divide than the other. At the same time, we also assess what has happened to people's sense of political engagement.

Identity

One of the striking trends during the last half-century has been a marked decline in the proportion of people who identify with any of the country's political parties. Whereas once many would say, 'I'm Labour', or 'I'm a Conservative', now few acknowledge that they feel that way with any degree of commitment (Curtice and Montagu, 2019; Sanders 2017). At the same time – and seemingly as a result – fewer people vote the same way from one election to the next (Fieldhouse et al., 2019). Nevertheless, more than one survey, including BSA, has found that many people do identify strongly as either a 'Remainer' or a 'Leaver' (Curtice and Montagu, 2019; Hobolt et al., 2020). It has appeared that Brexit generates the kind of passion and emotional commitment that the country's political parties used to attract – but no more.

Our latest survey confirms these impressions. It suggests that just 7% now feel 'very strongly' attached to one of the country's political parties, equalling the previous low recorded on BSA. Meanwhile, this time around as many as 45% said that they were either a 'very strong' Remainer or a 'very strong' Leaver, up five points on the proportion we uncovered in 2018. Another one in three (33%, similar to 2018 (34%)) said that they were a 'fairly strong' Remainer or Leaver. One in ten (10%, also similar to 2018 (12%)) rejected the idea that they were a 'Remainer' or a 'Leaver' at all.

The increase since last year in the proportion who report a very strong attachment occurred entirely among Leavers. In 2018, 41% of Leavers said they felt very strongly attached to that identity; now the figure stands at 50%. In contrast, the position among Remainers – 51% of whom were very strong identifiers in 2018 and 50% now – has not changed significantly. As a result, it now appears that voters on both sides of the argument are equally strongly attached to their point of view – and thus were perhaps equally keen to see their side emerge victorious from the Brexit stalemate. In any event, given this evidence it would seem unlikely that many voters will have changed their minds about the merits of Brexit.

Preference

This is indeed the case, although our data suggest that Remain voters may have been a little less likely than Leave supporters to have changed their minds. Asked how they would vote now in response to the question that appeared on the 2016 ballot paper, 'Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?', as many as 92% of those who state they voted Remain in 2016 say they would vote the same way again, while 82% of those who voted Leave indicate that they would back that option once more. Just 5% of 2016 Remain voters and 12% of Leave supporters report that they would now vote the opposite way. In short voters have for the most part been remarkably faithful to the view that they expressed in 2016.

Not that the outcome of a second referendum held in 2019 would necessarily have been the same as it was in 2016. Apart from the fact that Leave voters are somewhat more likely than Remain supporters to have changed their minds, those who say they did not vote in 2016 were nearly twice as likely (40%) to say that they would now vote Remain as they were to indicate that they would back Leave (23%). Between them these patterns suggest that, as many of those campaigning for another ballot anticipated, a second referendum might well have generated a narrow lead for Remain. Even so, it is clear that the country was still more or less evenly divided on the merits of Brexit, just as it had been three years previously.

Consequences

Brexit continues then to divide Britain into two more or less evenly-sized camps, both of which are strongly committed to their side of the argument. From this we might anticipate that voters are also polarised in their perceptions of what the consequences of Brexit will be. Indeed, our previous analysis has suggested that supporters and opponents of Brexit had come to disagree more sharply with each other on this issue than they had done before the referendum (Curtice and Tipping, 2018; Curtice and Montagu, 2019). That still appears to have been the case as the Brexit debate continued to rage during 2019.

This polarisation is apparent in two ways. First of all, voters have become rather more likely to state that leaving the EU will either be beneficial or damaging, and less likely to feel that it would not make much difference either way. This is certainly the case when they have been asked whether Britain's economy would be better off or worse off as a result of leaving the EU, and whether such a step would result in Britain having more or less influence in the world (see Table 1). Back in 2015, 31% said that leaving would not make much difference either way to the economy, a figure that had fallen to around a quarter in 2017 and 2018, and now in our most recent survey is as low as 22%. Similarly, in 2015 as many as 44% said that leaving the EU would not make much difference to the level of influence that Britain is able to exercise in the world, whereas in 2019 the figure stood at a more modest 37%.

Table 1 Perceptions of the impact of leaving the EU on Britain's economy, and on Britain's influence in the world, 2015–19

As a result of leaving the EU Britain's…	2015	2017	2018	2019
… economy will be	%	%	%	%
Better off	24	26	25	23
Not much different	31	25	26	22
Worse off	40	45	45	51
… influence in the world will be	%	%	%	%
More	17	26	22	24
Not much different	44	38	39	37
Less	36	35	36	36
Unweighted base	*1105*	*1025*	*958*	*1088*

Meanwhile, we might note (see Table 2) that relatively few voters have ever been neutral on the question of whether being part of the EU 'undermines Britain's distinctive identity'. Even in 2015 only one in five (20%) expressed that view, though that figure has now edged up to one in four (25%). At the same time, the proportion who 'neither agree nor disagree' with the proposition that being an EU member 'undermines Britain's right to be an independent country that makes its own laws' has always been less than one in five, though here we do not have a reading from before the referendum. All in all, it looks as though the predominant mood during the course of the Brexit stalemate has been that being in or out of the EU makes a difference – and to that extent the outcome of the debate was likely to have mattered to voters.

Table 2 Perceptions of the impact of EU membership on British identity and sovereignty, 2015–19

EU membership undermines Britain's...	2015	2017	2018	2019
...distinctive identity	%	%	%	%
Agree	47	41	35	36
Neither	20	20	21	25
Disagree	30	38	41	37
...ability to make its own laws	%	%	%	%
Agree	n/a	54	53	51
Neither	n/a	17	18	19
Disagree	n/a	27	27	28
Unweighted base	*1105*	*1025*	*958*	*1088*

n/a = not asked

The second way in which the polarisation of voters on Brexit manifests itself lies in the fact that Remain voters and Leave voters hold very different views about the consequences of being in or out of the EU – and that the gap between them has been wider since the referendum was held. However, to demonstrate that this is the case we need to use a different measure of people's attitudes towards the EU than how people voted in 2016 – after all, this information is not available for the period before the EU referendum was held. Instead we use a measure of how people have responded when they have been asked to choose between five options for Britain's future relationship with the institution, options that range (as detailed in Table 3) from leaving the EU to working for the formation of a single European government. Asked as it has been on a regular basis since the 1990s, the responses to this question have chartered how Britain became a more Eurosceptic country in the run-up to the 2016 referendum and has largely remained so since.

Table 3 Attitudes towards Britain's relationship with the EU, 1992-2019

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Leave the EU	10	11	11	14	19	17	14	13	17	14	15	15
Stay but reduce EU's powers	30	27	25	23	39	29	36	43	38	38	35	32
Leave things as are	16	22	20	20	19	18	23	20	19	21	23	27
Stay and increase EU's powers	28	22	28	28	8	16	9	11	10	10	12	11
Work for single European government	10	9	8	8	6	7	8	6	7	7	7	6
Unweighted base	*2855*	*1461*	*1165*	*1227*	*1180*	*1355*	*1035*	*1060*	*2293*	*1099*	*3435*	*2293*

	2004	2005	2006	2008	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Leave the EU	18	16	15	20	30	26	24	22	41	36	34	36
Stay but reduce EU's powers	38	36	36	35	37	39	38	43	35	33	33	33
Leave things as are	23	24	27	24	16	19	18	19	16	19	20	21
Stay and increase EU's powers	7	10	9	9	9	6	10	8	4	4	4	2
Work for single European government	5	4	4	3	2	3	4	3	2	3	3	3
Unweighted base	*3199*	*4268*	*1077*	*1128*	*1103*	*2147*	*971*	*1105*	*1965*	*2009*	*2926*	*1088*

Source: 1992 British Election Study

However, our principal interest here lies in the fact that we can use the question to divide voters (both before and after the referendum) into those that we might regard as 'Eurosceptics' and those whom we can classify as 'Europhiles'. The former group comprises those who say either that Britain should leave the EU or that it should stay in the EU but seek a reduction in its powers. Europhiles, in contrast, consist of those who would leave things as they are, or try to increase the EU's powers, or work for the formation of a single European government.

Table 4 shows what these two groups of voters thought the implications of Brexit would be both in 2015 and in the three most recent years since the referendum. It shows how their attitudes are more divergent now than they were before the referendum was held. Europhiles have become markedly more pessimistic about the economic consequences of leaving the EU; in 2015, less than three

in five (56%) felt that the economy would be worse off as a result, whereas in our most recent survey, as many as four in five (80%) express that view. Although there has also been some increase – from 34% in 2015 to 42% now – in the proportion of Eurosceptics who are pessimistic about the economic consequences of leaving the EU, the gap between the two groups is now as wide as it has ever been.[1]

Table 4 Perceptions of the impact of Brexit on Britain's economy and on Britain's influence in the world by attitudes towards the EU, 2015–19

As a result of leaving the EU Britain's...	2015		2017		2018		2019	
	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile
... economy will be	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better off	32	9	34	5	34	7	32	3
Not much different	31	33	26	20	26	19	24	15
Worse off	34	56	37	72	37	72	42	80
... influence in the world will be	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
More	21	9	33	8	28	9	32	7
Not much different	46	41	39	31	41	30	39	27
Less	40	49	27	60	29	59	27	64
Unweighted base	*723*	*315*	*753*	*230*	*657*	*243*	*772*	*261*

Eurosceptic: Britain should leave the EU or try to reduce its powers
Europhile: Things should be left as they are or Britain should try to increase the EU's powers/work for a single European government

Meanwhile, Europhiles have also become more inclined to the view that leaving the EU will result in Britain having less influence in the world; in contrast, the balance of opinion among Eurosceptics has moved in the opposite direction. In 2015, just under a half (49%) of Europhiles said that Britain would have less influence in the world, whereas now almost two-thirds (64%) take that view. In contrast, the proportion of Eurosceptics who think that Britain will have less influence has fallen from two in five (40%) in 2015 to just over a quarter (27%) in our most recent survey. Indeed, it appears that contrary to the position in 2015 rather more Eurosceptics now think that Brexit will result in Britain having more influence than believe it will have less influence.[2]

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1 As we might anticipate, the difference is even greater if we compare those who voted Remain in 2016 and those who supported Leave. Whereas 79% of Remain voters believe that the economy will be worse off as a result of Brexit, just 18% of Leave voters feel that is the case. The difference between the two groups has changed little since 2017.

2 Sixty per cent of Remain voters believe that Britain will have less influence as a result of leaving the EU, while nearly a half (49%) of Leave voters express the opposite view. These figures have changed little since 2017.

Table 5 Perceptions of the impact of EU membership on British identity and sovereignty by attitudes towards the EU, 2015–19

EU membership undermines Britain's…	2015		2017		2018		2019	
	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile
… distinctive identity	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	62	20	50	17	48	9	48	12
Neither	15	29	22	14	21	18	22	26
Disagree	23	48	27	69	31	73	29	62
… ability to make its own laws	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	n/a	n/a	65	24	68	20	66	17
Neither	n/a	n/a	15	21	14	24	15	23
Disagree	n/a	n/a	18	53	16	56	18	58
Unweighted base	*723*	*315*	*753*	*230*	*657*	*243*	*772*	*261*

n/a = not asked
For definition of Eurosceptic and Europhile see the note to Table 4

That said, Table 5 suggests that Eurosceptics and Europhiles have both shifted their attitudes on the implications of EU membership for Britain's distinctive identity in the same direction. While Europhiles are more likely now (62%) to disagree that EU membership undermines that identity than they were in 2015 (48%), equally Eurosceptics are less likely to agree (48%) than they were in 2015 (62%). Even so, this still leaves the two groups more or less as far apart as they were in 2015. (This is in contrast to the position in 2018, when, with 73% of Europhiles disagreeing, it appeared that the gap between the two groups was widening.[3]) Meanwhile, we can see that the two groups have remained far apart so far as the implications of EU membership for Britain's ability to make its own laws is concerned; two-thirds (66%) of Eurosceptics agree that it undermines this ability, while nearly three-fifths (58%) of Europhiles disagree.[4]

Trust and confidence

We have seen then that while the Brexit stalemate was paralysing Parliament, voters remained divided and polarised on the issue, and that many on both sides of the argument had become strongly attached to their point of view. This suggests that both Remainers and Leavers might have felt disenchanted with how they were being

3 We should note that on this issue too the difference of outlook between Remain and Leave voters is even sharper than the gap between Eurosceptics and Europhiles shown in Table 5. In our most recent survey 70% of Leave voters agreed that EU membership undermines Britain's distinctive identity, whereas 67% of Remain voters backed the opposite view. These figures have changed little since 2017.

4 Eighty-five per cent of Leave voters agree that EU membership undermines Britain's ability to make its own laws, compared with just 30% of Remain supporters.

governed – but also that both might have had a strong motivation to become engaged with what was happening politically. But how did voters on both sides of the argument react in practice to the political stalemate that developed at Westminster during the course of 2019?

In some respects at least, quite adversely. Table 6 shows how voters have responded when they have been asked whether or not the system of governing Britain is in need of improvement. The question was first asked in the early 1970s in survey work undertaken for the Royal Commission on the Constitution (commonly known as the 'Kilbrandon Commission'), which had been established in the wake of the first signs of increased support for nationalism in Scotland (Kilbrandon, 1973a, 1973b). The question has subsequently been asked on a number of other polls and surveys and has been included periodically on the British Social Attitudes survey since 1996.

Table 6 Attitudes towards how Britain is governed, 1973–2019

Present system of governing Britain…	1973	1977	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	48	34	33	29	22	35	56	46	48	35
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	49	62	63	69	75	63	42	52	50	62
Unweighted base	*4892*	*1410*	*1034*	*1137*	*1034*	*1180*	*4214*	*2071*	*1060*	*2293*

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2008	2010 (1)	2010 (2)	2011	2014	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	43	38	34	34	37	22	41	35	34	20
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	56	59	65	63	60	74	54	62	63	79
Unweighted base	*1099*	*2287*	*4432*	*2373*	*1128*	*2288*	*1083*	*2215*	*2373*	*1088*

Note that the unweighted base for 1997 includes an over-sample of respondents in Scotland, a feature for which due allowance has been made in the weighting of the sample
Sources: 1973: Royal Commission on the Constitution, Memorandum of Dissent; 1977: Opinion Research Centre Survey; 1991, 1995, 2004, 2010(1), 2014: MORI/ICM/Rowntree Trust State of the Nation Surveys; 1997: British Election Study

Against this very long-term historical backdrop, the figures obtained by our most recent survey are striking. Just one in five (20%) say that the system of governing Britain could not be improved – or at least only in small ways – while nearly four in five (79%) believe it could be improved either 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'. Only twice before has

the balance of opinion been weighted anything like as strongly in favour of the need for substantial improvement. The first of these was in 1995, when an Ipsos MORI poll undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Trust found 22% saying that there was little or no need for improvement, while 75% took the opposite view, a reading that was taken in the wake of a number of financial and sexual scandals that had plagued the then-Conservative government under John Major (Seldon, 1998). The second occasion was in early 2010, when an ICM poll that was conducted for the same institution shortly after the MPs expenses scandal recorded almost exactly the same figures.[5] Otherwise, apart from 1994 the proportion saying that the system was in need of considerable improvement had never risen above 65%, a figure that was recorded in 2003 in the immediate wake of the controversial second Iraq War. In short, while the perception that the country could be governed better has long been relatively widespread, the public have never previously been as critical as they were in the wake of the Brexit stalemate.

That said, we cannot be sure from this evidence that the Brexit debate itself was wholly responsible for the critical mood evident in our most recent survey. Prior to 2019 the question had not previously been asked since 2014. Plenty of political developments other than Brexit occurred during the intervening period, including another year of coalition government (a system with which the country was largely unfamiliar), continued financial austerity, and a referendum on Scottish independence. Perhaps these had taken their toll on how people felt about the system under which they were being governed.

However, we do have more regular recent readings in respect of another question that might be thought a useful indicator of people's feelings about how they are governed. This is a question that attempts to ascertain the level of trust that governments enjoy. It reads:

> *How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?*

As Table 7 shows, this question has been asked on British Social Attitudes on three occasions since the EU referendum, as well as regularly before that. We can thus see both whether the pattern of responses has changed during the time that Brexit has been pursued, as well as ascertain the extent to which more recent findings suggest that trust might now be in especially short supply.

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5   This ICM poll was conducted in January and February 2010. The BSA survey of that year was undertaken in the second half of the year, following the general election in May.

Table 7 Level of trust in British governments, 1986-2019

Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	1986	1987 (1)	1987 (2)	1991	1994	1996	1997 (1)	1997 (2)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	40	37	47	33	24	22	25	33
Only some of the time	48	46	43	50	53	53	48	52
Almost never	12	11	9	14	21	23	23	12
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1410*	*3414*	*1445*	*1137*	*1180*	*1355*	*3615*
	1998	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	28	16	28	26	18	26	19	29
Only some of the time	52	58	50	47	49	47	46	45
Almost never	17	24	20	24	31	26	34	23
Unweighted base	*2071*	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*3299*	*3167*	*1077*	*992*
	2009	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2016**	**2017**	**2019**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	16	20	22	18	17	22	20	15
Only some of the time	42	45	45	49	51	51	48	49
Almost never	40	33	31	32	32	26	29	34
Unweighted base	*1143*	*1081*	*2215*	*1103*	*1063*	*974*	*2986*	*1088*

Source: 1987 (2); 1997 (2), British Election Study
Columns that are shaded indicate they are taken from surveys conducted shortly after a general election. The 2016 survey was conducted after the EU referendum

There appears to have been some erosion of levels of trust in British governments during the course of the Brexit stalemate. In 2016, shortly after the referendum was held, almost as many people (22%) said that they trusted British governments 'just about always' or 'most of the time' as said that they 'almost never' did (26%). Indeed, although the proportion who said they trusted British governments was not especially high in 2016, on balance voters were more likely to trust governments at that point in time than they had been on any other occasion since 2007. However, in our most recent survey more than twice as many (34%) said that they almost never trust governments as said that they do so at least most of the time (15%). Indeed, never before have so few people said that they trusted government most of the time or always – though the proportion saying that they never trusted government had been even higher (40%) in the immediate wake of the MPs expenses scandal in 2009 (Curtice and Park, 2010).[6]

6 We might also note that contrary to what had happened after previous elections, there is no sign of the level of trust having increased in 2017 following the election that was held in June of that year.

In short, whereas shortly after the EU referendum the public had appeared somewhat more trusting of government than they had for some time (albeit still well below the levels that were enjoyed before the word 'sleaze' entered the political lexicon in the wake of the scandals that engulfed John Major's government), by the time the Brexit stalemate was coming to a conclusion the level of trust in government had fallen away quite noticeably.[7]

A somewhat similar picture is obtained if we examine the responses that people have given when they are asked:

> *And how much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner?*

In truth, few voters have ever been inclined to trust politicians when judged by this criterion. Even after the EU referendum in 2016, only 11% said that they trusted politicians 'just about always' or 'most of the time', while as many as 45% said that they never did so. Nevertheless, that latter figure is lower than any previously recorded by BSA since it first asked the question in 1994, and thus to that extent confirms the impression that holding the EU referendum itself may have had some beneficial impact on levels of trust. However, our latest survey finds that just 6% trust politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner either most of the time or always, while 51% say that they almost never do so, figures not untypical of those that were regularly recorded during the two decades before the EU referendum.

7 The increase after the 2016 referendum might be thought to be consistent with the evidence of what happened after previous general elections.

Table 8 Perceived efficacy of the political system, 1974–2019

% strongly agree that…	1974	1986	1987 (1)	1987 (2)	1991	1994	1996	1997	1998
Generally speaking those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly	19	16	n/a	16	16	25	26	n/a	20
Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions	19	19	16	15	16	25	28	16	21
It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same	n/a	n/a	7	n/a	11	16	16	8	17
Unweighted base	*1802*	*1548*	*3414*	*1410*	*1445*	*1137*	*1180*	*3093*	*2071*

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2009	2010	2011	2019
Generally speaking those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly	23	25	28	23	16	22	20	21	20
Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions	26	27	29	25	17	24	22	21	23
It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same	19	18	22	20	12	21	17	17	17
Unweighted base	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*4432*	*3167*	*1143*	*1081*	*2215*	*1088*

n/a = not asked
Source: 1974: Political Action Study. In that study respondents were given a four point scales ranging from 'strongly agree' to ' strongly disagree'. In the subsequent British Social Attitudes studies answers were give on a five-point scale with a mid-point labelled 'neither agree nor disagree. 1987 (2), 1997: British Election Study

However, while the Brexit stalemate may have had some impact on levels of trust and confidence in how the country is governed, on other measures it is far from clear that scepticism about how the country is run is especially widespread now. That at least is the impression given by the figures presented in Table 8, which shows the proportion of people who say that they strongly agree with three propositions that express doubts about the efficacy of the political system, that is, its ability to respond to the needs and wishes of citizens. In truth, most people have always agreed with these statements ever since they were first included in survey research undertaken in the 1970s (Marsh, 1977); for example, back in 1986 as many as 71% said they agreed that generally speaking 'MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly', while just 17% disagreed. However, only a minority ever say that they 'strongly agree' with any of the propositions in Table 8, and thus we use the proportion who do so as a more sensitive indicator of any marked increase or decline in the perceived efficacy of Britain's political system.

On this measure, it is far from clear that there has been a spike in the proportion with severe doubts about the way the country is being run. For example, just one in five (20%) strongly agree that MPs lose touch quickly, a figure little different from that obtained when the question was previously asked in 2011 (21%), or indeed in many years before that (at least from 1994 onwards). Much the same is true of the proportion who strongly agree that 'parties are only interested in people's votes' and that 'it doesn't really matter which party is in power'. A degree of scepticism about the efficacy of the country's system of government may be widespread, but this has long been the case and is not evidently more likely to be intensively felt in the wake of the Brexit process.

Political engagement

But what have been the implications of the Brexit process for people's level of political engagement? The process might have felt frustrating and seemed inefficacious at times, but, as we have seen, the issue is one about which people on both sides of the argument feel strongly. Rather than the Brexit stalemate putting people off, perhaps the perceived importance of the issue and the intensity of the accompanying debate has helped draw people into the political process.

That to some degree at least does appear to be what has happened. Almost every year since its inception, British Social Attitudes has asked people how much interest 'they generally have in what is going on in politics' and offered five possible responses: 'a great deal', 'quite a lot', 'some', 'not very much', or 'none at all'. In Table 9 we show the proportion who say that they have either 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics. Until recently this proportion hardly varied at all from year to year. Between 1986 and 2013 the proportion averaged 31% and was never more than four points above or below that figure. However, immediately after the Brexit referendum the figure increased to over 40% and while it was somewhat lower in 2018 and 2019, it is still only just below that figure. It appears that the drama of the Brexit process helped stimulate people's interest in the political process rather than encourage them to switch off from the world of Whitehall and Westminster.

Table 9 Percentage saying they have a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics, 1986–2019

	1986	1989	1990	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	29	27	29	32	32	34	31	30	29	28
Unweighted base	1548	1516	1397	1445	2302	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143
	2000	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	32	31	29	30	31	33	34	30	35	31
Unweighted base	*2293*	*3287*	*2287*	*4432*	*3199*	*4268*	*1077*	*2022*	*1128*	*1143*
	2010	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
	31	35	35	32	36	42	43	38	39	
Unweighted base	*1081*	*2215*	*1103*	*1063*	*4328*	*2942*	*3988*	*3879*	*3224*	

Further evidence to that effect emerges if we examine the association between the strength of people's identity as a 'Remainer' or as a 'Leaver' and how interested they say they are in politics. No less than 56% of 'very strong' Remainers and 'very strong' Leavers say that they have a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics – compared with just 15% of those who do not identify with either side in the Brexit debate. This gap remains statistically significant even after we also take into account the strength of a voter's party identity (as a Conservative, Labour supporter, etc.) and their level of educational attainment (to control for the fact that graduates are more interested in politics than those without any educational qualifications).[8] It thus looks as though the widespread affective attachment to being a Remainer or a Leaver that the Brexit debate has engendered has helped to heighten some people's interest in the political process.

Moreover, we should not exaggerate the impact that low levels of trust have on people's willingness to participate in politics. In our 2019 sample, those who said they almost never trusted British governments to put the nation's interests first were only a little less likely than those who said they trusted governments at least most of the time to report that they had voted in the European Parliament elections that (as a result of the delay to Brexit) took place in May 2019 – the relevant proportions were 46% and 43% respectively. The claim that was sometimes made during the Brexit debate that delay to the implementation of Brexit could

8 We undertook a logistic regression of whether someone had a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics versus not, in which strength of Brexit identity, party identity, and highest educational qualification were all introduced as categorical variables. Although this analysis showed that the impact of having a very strong Brexit identity is markedly weaker than that of having a very strong party identity, only seven per cent of our sample had a very strong party identity compared with the 45% we have seen report a very strong Brexit identity.

result in a growing disenchantment with the political process, that in turn would discourage people from participating in future ballots (May 2019). This claim was seemingly not upheld, at least by the experience of the European elections that took place as a result of that delay.

Remainers and Leavers

Previous research has suggested that those who voted Leave were less likely to have trust and confidence in how Britain is governed, though once other motivations to vote Leave were taken into account this relationship appeared to be relatively weak (Curtice, 2017). In other words, the greater propensity of Leave voters to be sceptical about how they were being governed was more of an attribute than a distinctive influence on the choice that they made. However, the proposition that we wish to address here is whether there is any evidence that Leave voters were especially likely to have become distrustful and doubtful about how they were being governed in the wake of the delay to the implementation of Brexit, or whether any such trend is as apparent among Remain voters as Leave supporters.

In truth, there is little sign that growing disenchantment was the particular preserve of Leave voters. As Table 10 shows, the decline in trust in British governments' willingness to put the nation's interests first was at least as marked among those who voted Remain as it was among those who supported Leave. True, our most recent survey finds that as many as 40% of Leave voters 'almost never' trust British governments, compared with just 28% of those who backed Remain. However, at eight points, the increase in that proportion among Leaver supporters between 2016 and 2019 was no greater than the nine point increase over the same period amongst Remain voters. A similar trend is also in evidence if we look at attitudes towards whether politicians can be trusted to tell the truth. Meanwhile, so far as perceptions of the system of governing Britain are concerned, the proportion of Leave voters who believe that it could be improved 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' is, at 81%, almost identical to the proportion of Remain voters who take that view (80%).

Table 10 Trust in government 2016–2019 by 2016 EU referendum vote

Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	2016		2017		2019	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	27	18	22	22	14	12
Only some of the time	54	50	53	46	58	48
Almost never	19	32	24	31	28	40
Unweighted base	*386*	*378*	*1163*	*1046*	*402*	*397*

Much the same conclusion is reached if we track attitudes over a much longer time period. To do so, in Table 11 we divide our respondents into Eurosceptic and Europhiles in the same way as we did earlier in this chapter (see Table 4 and Table 5 above). Back in 2003 Eurosceptics were somewhat more likely than Europhiles to say that the governance of Britain could be improved a lot, that they almost never trusted government, and to strongly agree with our negatively worded propositions about the efficacy of the country's political system. However, there is no consistent evidence that the difference between the two groups is any greater now than it was 16 years previously. There is no indication here that Eurosceptic voters' perceptions of how they are being governed have been particularly adversely affected by the Brexit process as a whole.

Table 11 Measures of trust and confidence in government by attitudes towards the EU, 2003 and 2019

	2003		2019	
	Eurosceptic	**Europhile**	**Eurosceptic**	**Europhile**
	%	%	%	%
Governing Britain could be improved quite a lot / a great deal	66	58	80	76
Almost never trust government	31	21	34	35
Strongly agree that MPs lose touch	28	20	24	12
Strongly agree that votes not opinions matter	31	20	24	19
Strongly agree that it doesn't matter which party is in power	24	17	18	13
Unweighted base	*1092*	*996*	*772*	*261*

For definition of Eurosceptic and Europhile see the note to Table 4

Conclusions

The Brexit stalemate that gripped Britain in 2019 was often regarded negatively. Doubts were raised about the damage being done by a political process that seemed incapable of making a decision on a subject on which the country was divided, polarised and committed. It appeared a perfect recipe for stimulating a disenchantment among voters that might discourage them from being involved in politics – and perhaps especially so among Leave voters who were already known to be more critical about how Britain was governed and who might feel a particular frustration with the apparent slowness with which the majority vote in the 2016 referendum was being pursued.

Our analysis suggests that this picture is overdrawn. True, Britain continued to be passionately and deeply divided on the decision to leave the EU. And there are signs that in some respects – though not all – trust and confidence in how the country was being governed fell to a record or

near-record low. Yet, at the same time, it looks as though the Brexit debate served to stimulate voters' interest in politics rather than foster a wish to disengage from it. Moreover, there is little evidence that Leave voters in particular were especially likely to have become more critical of how the country was being governed – that trend was just as evident among those who backed Remain. How Leave voters would have felt if Britain had not left the EU is, of course, another question – but equally, we cannot assume that the decision to do so has not had implications for levels of trust and confidence among those who were opposed to the decision (Jennings et al., 2020). But what does seem clear is that the Brexit stalemate itself – fraught though it often was – helped draw voters into politics even if they were sometimes critical of what they were witnessing. Intensity and passion may sometimes make for uncomfortable political viewing, but at least it means that citizens are taking notice.

Acknowledgements

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