The referendum 28 months on.

Dr. Chris Hanretty, Royal Holloway, University of London

Introduction

In June of 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union.

28 months have passed since then, and public opinion has changed.

The referendum was counted, not in Westminster constituencies, but in local authority areas.

Just looking at counting areas in England, Scotland and Wales, around seven in ten local authority areas voted to leave, or 263 in total.

How would that look if we re-ran the referendum now?

We can use a tool called multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) to answer that question. This tool models the opinions of respondents to a large national survey – in this case, a survey of around 20,000 people.

Those opinions are linked to people's demographic characteristics – things like their age, their highest educational qualifications. Using the census, it's possible to look up how many people of each type live in each area, and make predictions about how each type thinks. By adding up the predictions for each type, we get an estimate of how each area might vote. It's not infallible, but it's our best guide to local opinion.

Using that tool, how would the results of the referendum look now? Well, according to this analysis, the average support for Leave across Great Britain, looking just at those who would be likely to turnout to vote, would be 45.6% – some seven points down on the figure from 2016.

That means that far fewer local authority areas would be likely to vote leave: around 158, or closer to four in ten areas.

That seems like a radical shift – but a lot of these changes in opinion are gradual. The places that most supported Leave in 2016 are still the places that most support leave now. You can see that in Figure 1, which shows the support for Leave in 2016 along the horizontal axis, against support for Leave in a hypothetical referendum held today.

2016 vote and current vote are associated
... but support for Leave has dropped
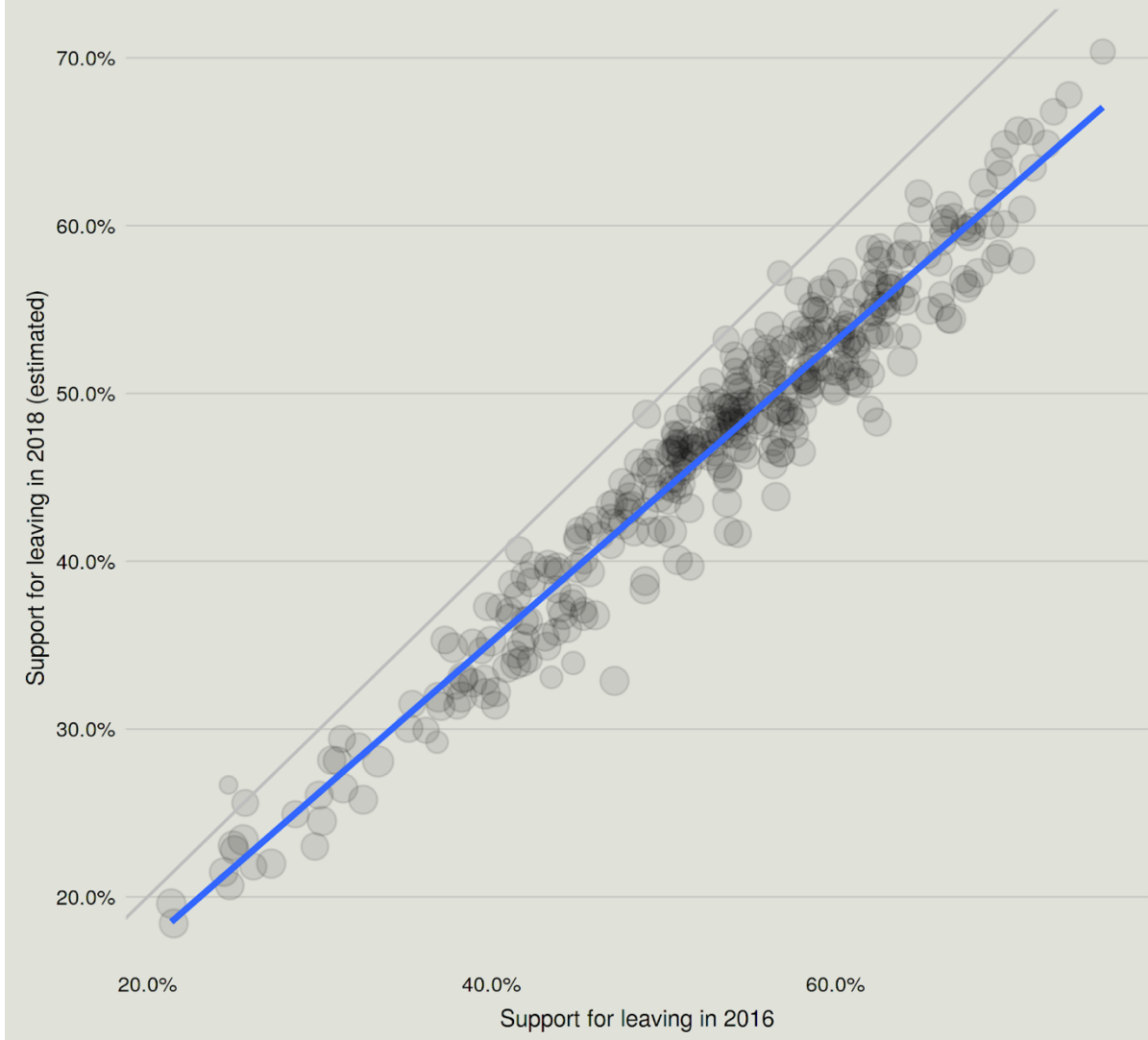
Support for Leaving, then and now. Each dot represents a local authority area in Great Britain. The blue line indicates the line of best fit. The solid line shows how the lines would fall if no one changed their mind.

The blue line in the figure is a trend line. It runs pretty close to the solid line (which shows what would happen if nothing changed), but it is slightly flatter. That means that Remain voting areas stay as Remain as they ever were, whilst Leave-voting areas are actually switching at higher rates.

This can be seen in Figure 2, which rather than plot support for Leaving today, plots the estimated change in the Leave vote share between 2016 and 2018. The largest panel, on the left hand side, plots the relationship between the Leave vote in 2016 and the change. The relationship is negative: the bigger the Leave vote in 2016, the more the area has swung round to Remain, even if it started from a Leavier starting point.
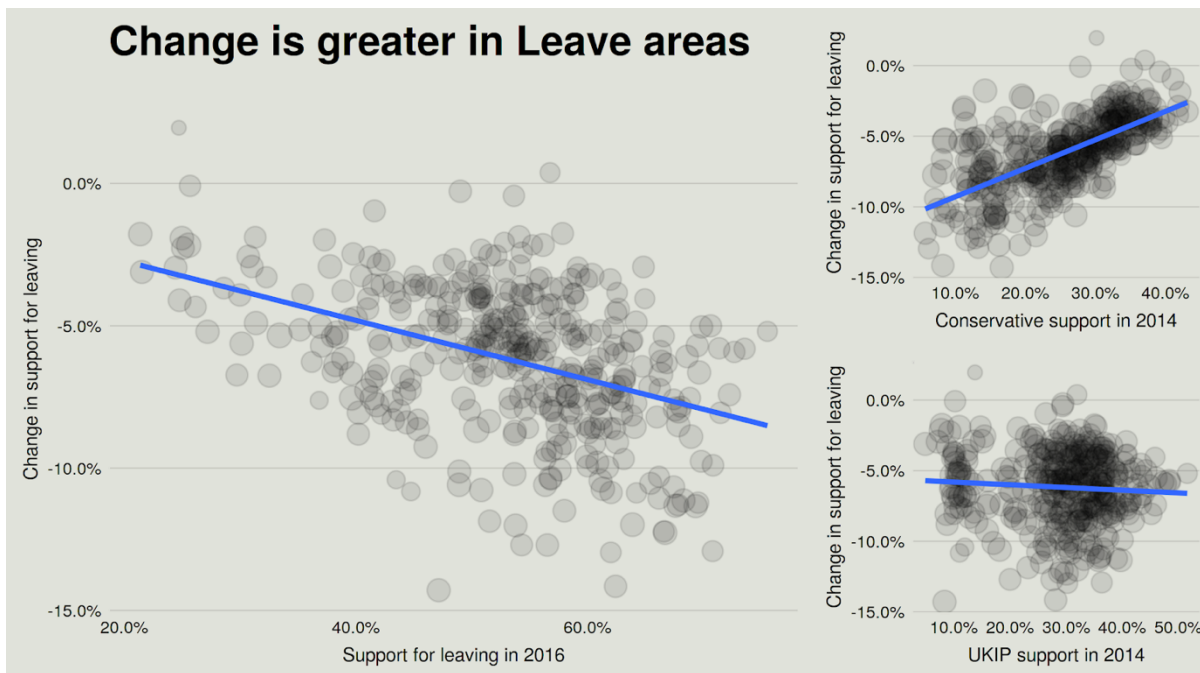
Three patterns of change. Switches away from Leave are greater the stronger the initial support for Leave (left-hand panel). Switches away from Leave are weaker the stronger in areas that voted Conservative in the 2014 EP elections (top-right panel). There's no simple relationship with the UKIP vote (bottom right panel).

The top right hand panel of Figure 2 shows the patterns of change according to Conservative support in the 2014 European Parliament elections. We're using the 2014 European Parliament elections because these too were counted at the local authority level. As the plot shows, the switch away from Leave is smaller the better the Conservatives did. Conservative-voting areas are more likely to stick with Leave – or, conversely, Labour areas are more likely to switch.

The bottom right hand panel shows the same figure but for UKIP support in 2014. Here, the relationship is essentially flat: there's no simple relationship. However, because UKIP support in 2014 was such a strong predictor of the Leave vote, this means that if we *control for* the Leave vote, we find that areas which were stronger beds of support for UKIP are, just like Conservative voting areas, more likely to stick with Leave.

Change in support for Leaving by region. The red dot gives the average change by region.

You might wonder whether these estimates are robust. Do they change much if we change some of the assumptions?

If we ignore questions of turnout, and assume that everyone votes in a fresh referendum, then the figures don't change much. We go from 45.6 percent to 45.9 percent - a tiny difference.

What about our confidence in the estimates for each place – can we summarize these estimates in a single figure, or do we need a range of figures?

If we'd conducted a standard poll in each area, then the margin of error for each local authority would be plus or minus three percent. But because we haven't conducted 380 thousand interviews, we have to settle for something less – plus or minus five percent in each case.

That means that although we know a lot of areas have switched, we can only be really very confident about a much smaller group. Here are the areas most likely to have switched:

- Nottingham (40.1% Leave now but was 50.8% Leave then).
- Luton (43.8% Leave now but was 56.5% Leave then).
- Slough (41.6% Leave now but was 54.3% Leave then).
- Southampton (41.8% Leave now but was 53.8% Leave then).
- High Peak (44.3% Leave now but was 50.5% Leave then).

- Watford (43.6% Leave now but was 50.3% Leave then).
- Canterbury (44.6% Leave now but was 51% Leave then).
- Cherwell (44.5% Leave now but was 50.3% Leave then).
- Reigate and Banstead (44.9% Leave now but was 50.5% Leave then).
- Knowsley (39.7% Leave now but was 51.6% Leave then).
- North Tyneside (45.5% Leave now but was 53.4% Leave then).
- Birmingham (41.8% Leave now but was 50.4% Leave then).
- Sutton (44.9% Leave now but was 53.7% Leave then).
- Isle of Anglesey (44.2% Leave now but was 50.9% Leave then).
- Swansea (43.2% Leave now but was 51.5% Leave then).
- Rhondda Cynon Taf (43.5% Leave now but was 53.7% Leave then).

As well as asking how people would vote in a fresh referendum, we also asked how people would view particular proposals, and how they would vote on an eventual deal.

Here were the particular proposals we asked, together with the overall support (not including those that said don't know)

- new checks being introduced on goods crossing the Irish sea between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK (41%)

- UK and EU citizens who wished to do so being able to live and work in each other's countries (76%)

- Limitations on the UK's ability to make trade deals with countries outside the EU (25%)

- Following EU regulations on manufactured goods such as fridges, vacuum cleaners and light bulbs (62%)

- Support for the deal as it stands (43%)

These proposals have very different patterns of support. This is shown in the next figure, which shows how each area voted in 2016, against its current support for each proposal.
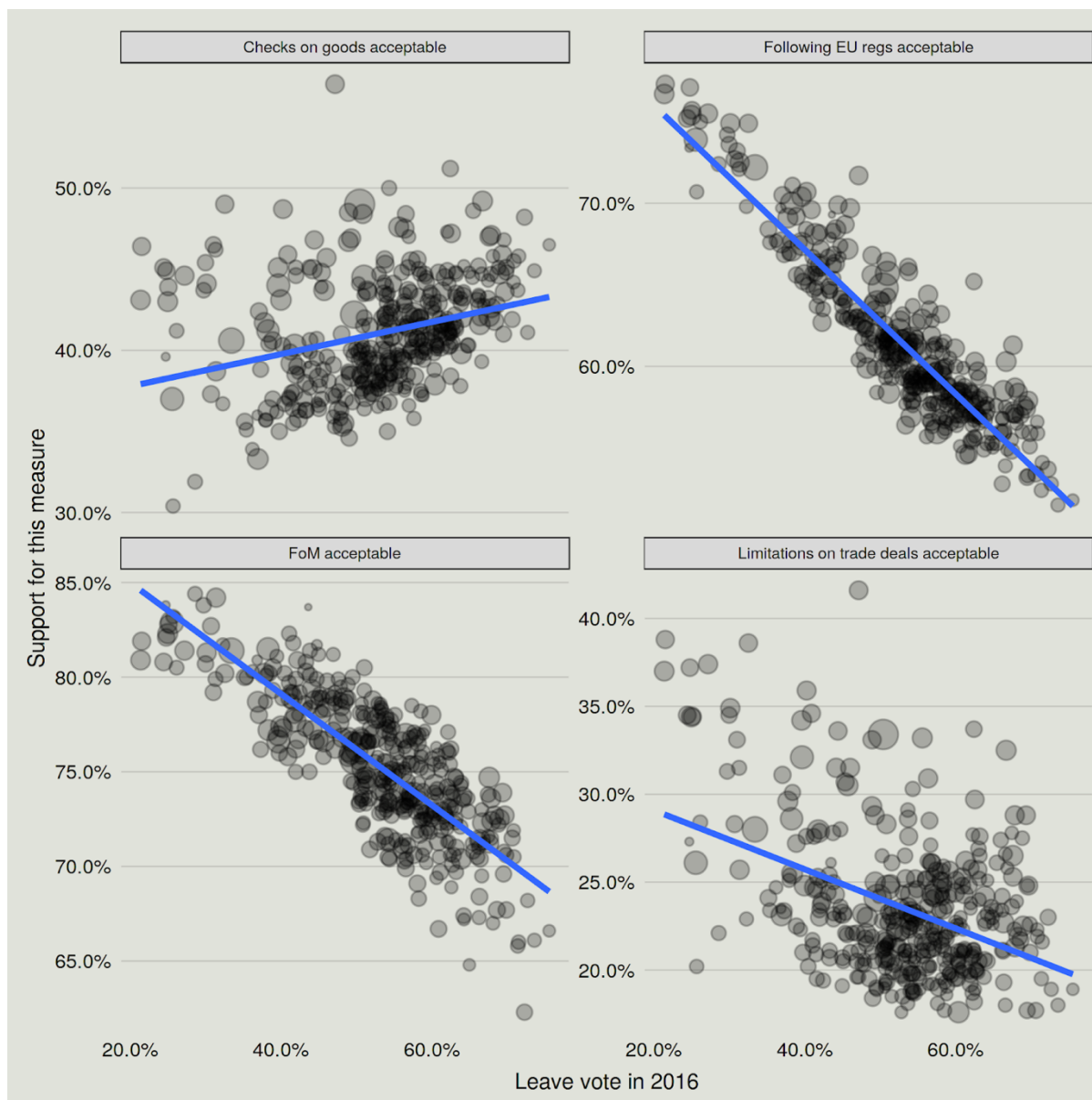
The association between how each area voted in 2016, and how much they would support particular proposals if these were the price of a deal between the EU and the UK
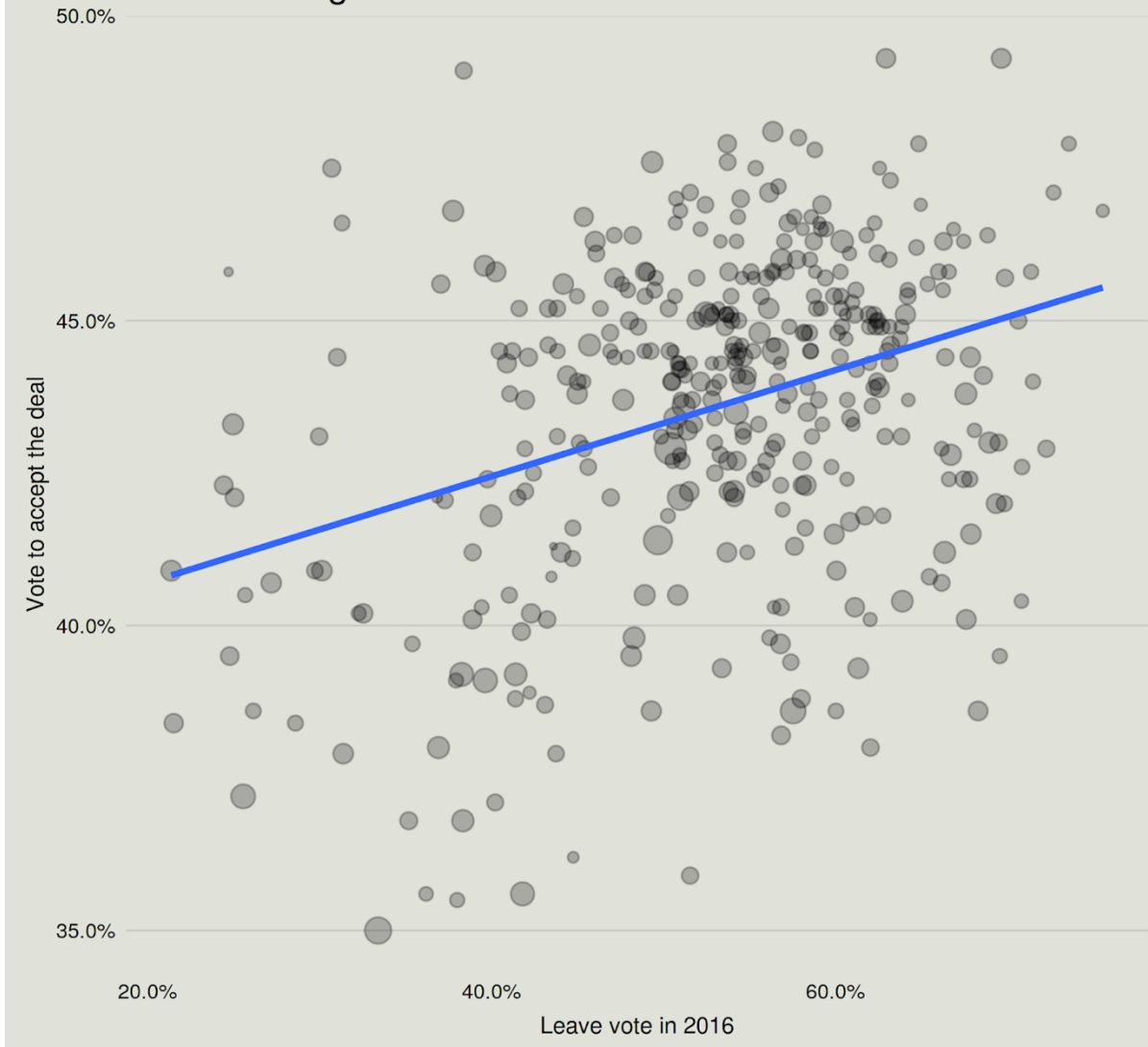
As you can see, the higher the 2016 vote for Leave, the lower the support for continuing freedom of movement, and the lower the support for continuing to accept EU regulations – even if the overall level of support for these proposals is quite high.

The story is quite different for goods checks in the Irish sea, and for limitations on trade deals. These have much lower support, but they're also much less strongly associated with the 2016 Leave vote.

The final plot shows the relationship between how each area voted in 2016, and how they would vote on the present deal, however they understand that.

Support for the current deal.

Surprisingly, it's Leave-voting areas which are more likely to support the deal, even though support is not high. Remain-voting areas may be holding out for something better.

Full data by local authority can be found here:

https://www.survation.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LA-predictions-from-MRP-1.xlsx