

# Media Persuasion in the EU Referendum

My research looked at the ability of Newspapers to persuade their readers to a particular political stance. To do this, I looked at The Times' coverage of the EU Referendum to find patterns in its readers' support.

Charlie Hetherington

**Understanding** the ability of the media to persuade and push public opinion is of obvious public interest. We all assume that the Media has enormous power to shape public opinion: one only needs to think of the lengths that politicians go to get favourable coverage. Yet despite this, formal studies find it surprisingly difficult to detect evidence of media persuasion [1]. While some scholars argue that the media in fact has little sway over public opinion, others point to four methodological barriers that confound studies:

- A lack of variation in message: *nothing new to persuade readers of!*
- Poor means to determine exposure to a media source: *who is being persuaded?*
- Self-Selection: *consumers choosing media outlets whose views they already agree with*
- Media sources *following* the views of their readers

In the 1997 British General election however, there was a rare alignment of circumstances that meant these problems could be bypassed. A number of newspapers suddenly and unexpectedly switched from supporting the Conservatives to advocating for a Labour government. By comparing the voting choices of the readers of newspapers that switched sides to readers that maintained a constant stance, Ladd and Lenz found evidence of significant media persuasion [1].

The 2016 EU Referendum where voters were asked whether they wanted to 'Remain' in the European Union, or instead 'Leave' it presented similar circumstances, with a newspaper taking a stance at odds with its historical position. The Times has flirted with Euroscepticism since the signing of the Maastricht treaty in 1992, yet surprisingly advocated for a Remain vote on the 18th June [2][3]. If this declaration is interpreted as a sudden shock then the impact of the editorial might be seen in the outlook of Times' readers: *evidence of media persuasion.*

**To check this**, I used British Election Study panel data; in this survey, the same representative sample of the British public is asked their political preferences over separate 'waves' [4]. There are multiple waves spread over multiple years, allowing changes in opinion over time to be tracked. Wave 8 of this study was conducted over the campaigning period for the EU referendum and went further still: it recorded the day a respondent answered the survey and so allows us to track the change in support day by day. When we check using a  $\chi^2$  statistical test whether more Times' readers surveyed after the 18th intend to vote 'Remain' than before (when compared against the newspaper reading population at large), we find that this isn't the case. **Figure 1**

shows this graphically. Here, the y axis represents the percentage of readers who reported they would vote for Leave on a given date (i.e. A value of 40% would mean that 60% would vote for Remain). After The Times declared its stance, there is no shift towards Remain (downwards on the graph) when compared to the newspaper reading population at large. **Nonetheless**, it is curious that Times' readers appear to lean more towards Remain than the population at large, even though the newspaper does have a Eurosceptic tilt. This raises the question whether the eventual Remain position of The Times affected its coverage of the entire EU issue: did the Times coverage skew to favour Remain before the 18th June? Was this reflected in the outlook of its readers?

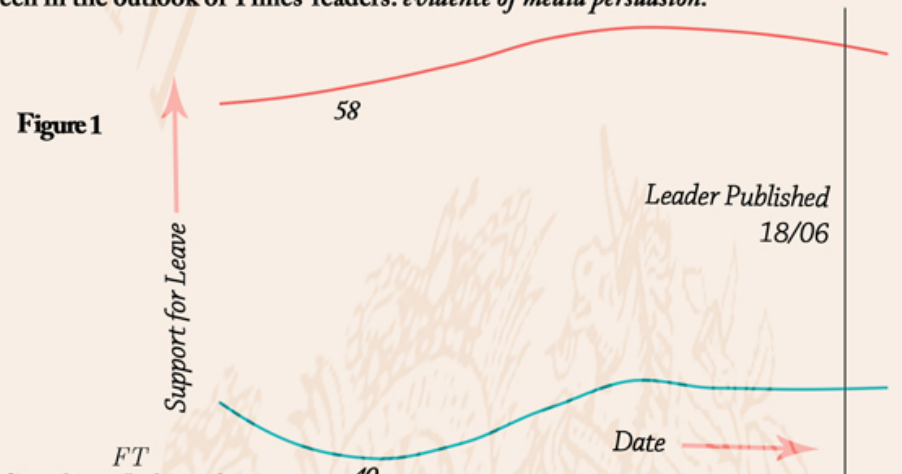


Figure 1

**To answer this**, it is necessary to look at a longer time period. Wave 6 of the BES was conducted in the aftermath of the May 2015 General Election and Wave 7 was conducted just under a year later, just before the official EU campaign period. Between these two dates the European issue steadily rose in prominence, driven by events like the Migrant crisis, the Paris terror attacks, confirmation that an EU referendum would take place in 2016 and David Cameron's attempted renegotiation of Britain's membership.

Figure 2 shows the support for 'Leave' & 'Remain' from Wave 6 onwards, as well as percentage of responders saying they wouldn't vote, or are not sure how to. I created two control groups of readers of broadsheet newspapers that have a constant Remain tilt - The Financial Times, Guardian & The Independent - and readers of The Daily Telegraph which has been steadfastly Eurosceptic [2].

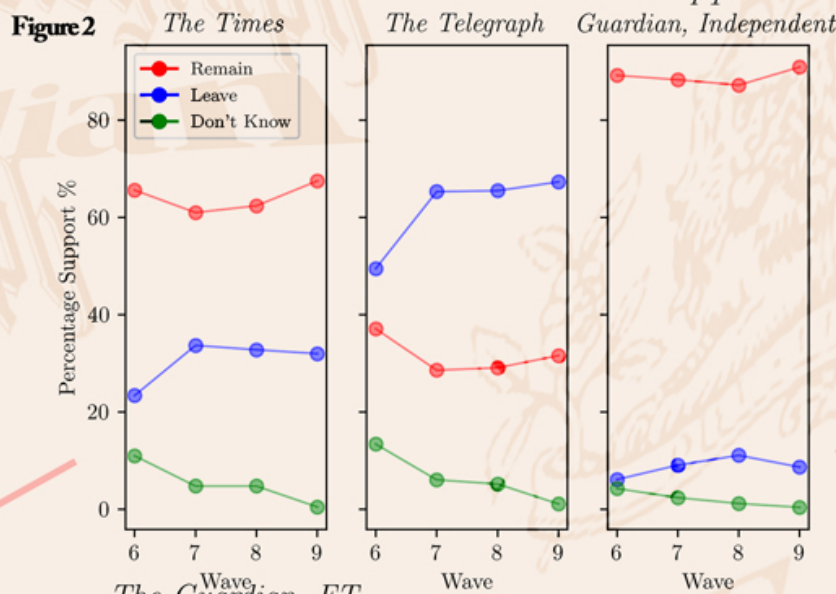


Figure 2

We see that voters switch to reporting 'Leave' from 'Remain' & 'Not Sure' in general, but with a different magnitude of changes between the three control groups.

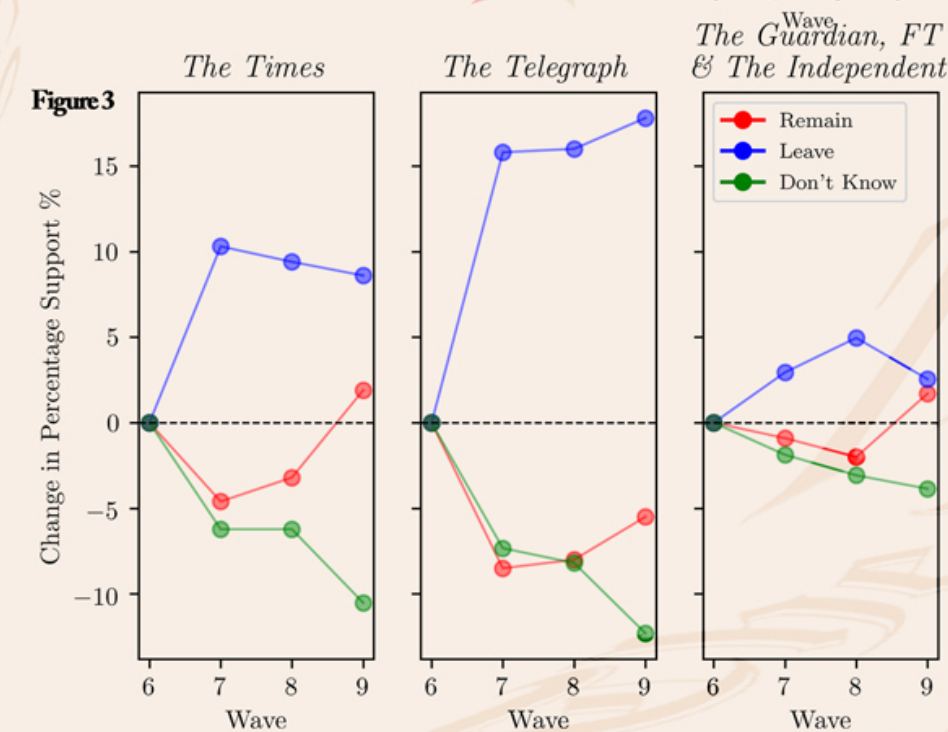


Figure 3

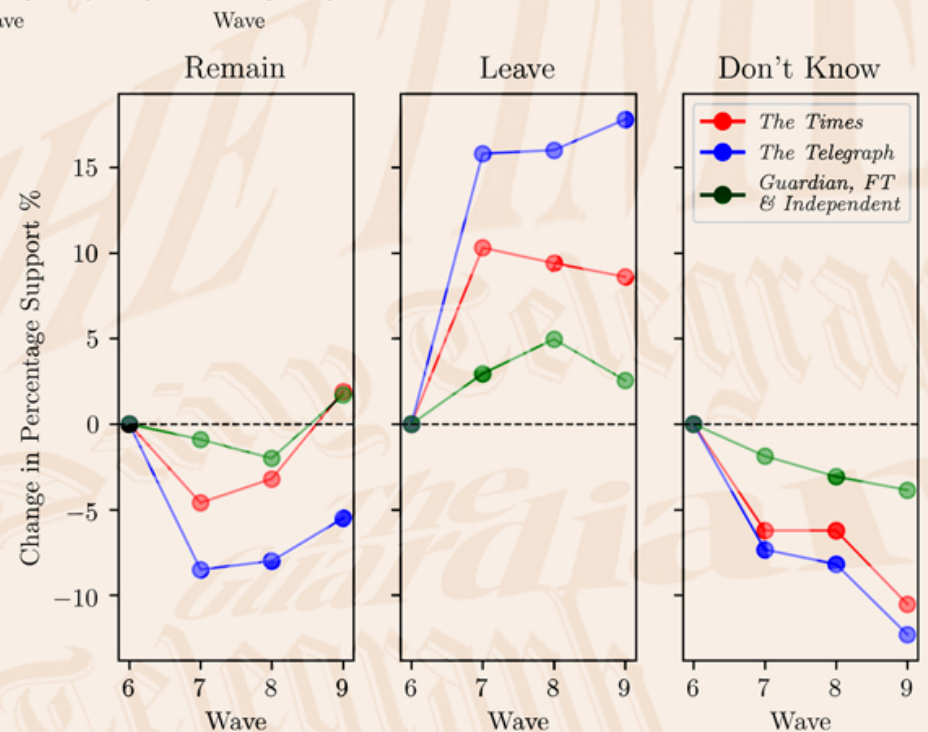


Figure 4

We see that voters switch to reporting 'Leave' from 'Remain' & 'Not Sure' in general, but with a different magnitude of changes between the three control groups. This is shown most starkly in Figure 3, which shows percentage shifts from Wave 6. Times' readers do show a swing towards voting Leave overall, but this is far smaller in magnitude than the switch shown by Telegraph readers, suggesting that The Times' coverage of the 'Remain' option prevented a larger than swing in the opinions of its readers than there would otherwise have been.

Figure 4 shows the same data arranged by different voting option and the same pattern emerges. When looking at the swing towards 'Leave', Times readers sit about midway between the Eurosceptic Telegraph and the Remain supporting control group. Looking at changes in support for 'Remain', it falls a similar amount for Times readers as it does for readers in the Control group - both much less than readers of the Telegraph. This again implies that something about The Times' coverage made its readers less susceptible to the overall shift towards 'Leave' that occurred between 2015 and 2016; in other words, reading the Times made people less likely to vote Leave.

**To test this**, we can check the choices of former Times' readers: voters stopped reading The Times before the end of Wave 6. We can assume these readers broadly resemble other Times readers too, meaning the comparison is fair.

If there was a pro-Remain effect from reading The Times between Wave 6 & 7, these people will not have been subjected to it. Figure 5 shows former Times readers had a stronger shift towards 'Leave' than those who continued reading the newspaper. On the face of things, this suggests that reading the Times during this period did have a persuasive effect towards 'Remain'. There are confounding factors against this. The Times, as a broadsheet, presented both sides of the debate in its 'Opinion' section; unlike tabloids like The Sun, a political stance is unlikely explicitly colour its reporting. In addition, this approach is vulnerable to self-selection. These readers may have wanted to read a paper that better supported their 'Leave' views, so accounting for their bigger swing. **Nevertheless, it does provide some evidence of media persuasion.** In the rest of my research I go on to analyse the articles of the Newspaper themselves, trying to understand similarities and differences in the language used and topic covered.

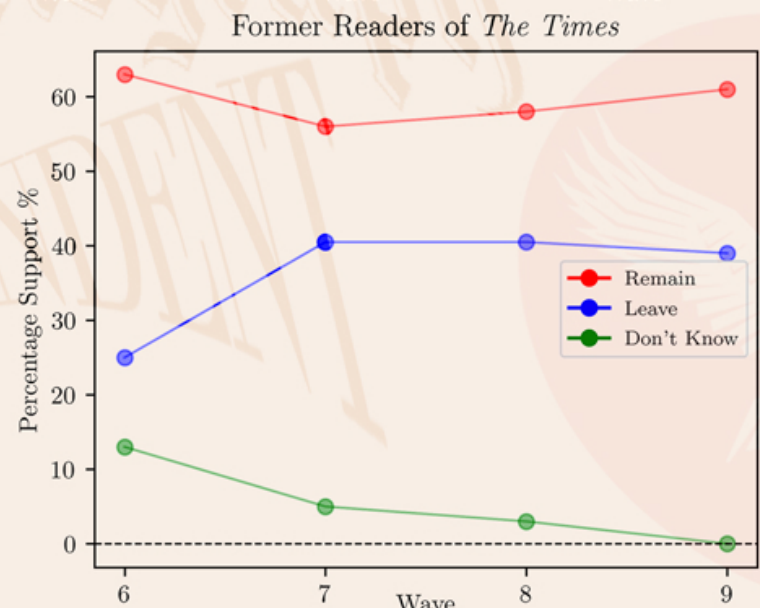


Figure 5

[1] Ladd, Jonathan McDonald, and Gabriel S. Lenz. "Exploiting a Rare Communication Shift to Document the Persuasive Power of the News Media." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2009, pp. 394-410. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25548125.  
 [2] Daddow, Oliver. "The UK Media and 'Europe': from Permissive Consensus to Destructive Descent." *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), vol. 88, no. 6, 2012, pp. 1219-1236. www.jstor.org/stable/23324911.  
 [3] Startin, Nicholas. "Have We Reached a Tipping Point? The Mainstreaming of Euroscepticism in the UK." *International Political Science Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, June 2015, pp. 311-323. doi:10.1177/0192512115574126.  
 [4] Fieldhouse, E. J., Green, G., Evans, J., Mellon, C., Prosser, R., de Geus, J., Bailey, H., Schmitt, and C. van der Eijk. (2020) British Election Study Internet Panel Waves 1-20.

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