

Members of Parliament (“MP”) Party Affiliation: How it Influenced Constituents’

Votes in the EU Referendum

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Abstract

When UK citizens voted via national referendum to leave the European Union, there was an international reaction. While there have been many studies on the regional and demographic variables that have influenced voter behavior, there are not currently any studies on if Members of Parliament political party affiliation influenced their constituents voting behavior in the EU referendum. This paper looks at if and how MPs political affiliation influenced individuals in the Brexit vote by looking at individual level data that's already been collected, with a proposal for additional data to be gathered and compared. I argue that constituents were not influenced by their MP's party affiliation in the Brexit vote and that there is a serious issue with effective MP representation of their constituency.

Members of Parliament (“MP”) Party Affiliation: How it Influenced Constituents’ Votes in the EU Referendum

On June 23, 2016, UK citizens voted for the UK to leave the European Union. The EU referendum (“Brexit”) sparked international debate and there have been many studies into the demographic causal mechanisms that influenced voting behavior in the Brexit vote. I would like to look at this question from an alternative perspective: Did Members of Parliament (“MP”) political party affiliation influence constituents voting behavior in the Brexit vote? I believe that constituents are not influenced by their MPs political affiliation nor political campaigns, and rather they vote based on their own individual situation. This topic is important to explore because it can reflect if constituents are being adequately and effectively represented by their MP. If constituents aren’t having their wishes fulfilled by their MP but their MP continues getting re-elected, then this could demonstrate a new crisis of parliamentary democracy.

Background

History of the European Union

The European Coal and Steel Community (“ECSC”), European Economic Community (“EEC”), and European Atomic Energy Committee (“Euratom”), were the beginning organizations of the EU (Treaty of Rome 1957). The ECSC, EEC, and Euratom were incorporated into one body under the EU officially in 1993 by way of the Maastricht Treaty of 1991 (Treaty on European Union 1952). This coordination of European countries is intended to promote trade by eliminating trade barriers and having a common external trade policy. It also promotes labor by allowing the free movement of citizens throughout the EU.

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The Treaty of Lisbon, (effective December 1, 2009) amended the Treaty of Paris and Treaty of Rome, creating the constitutional basis of the EU (The Lisbon Treaty 2007).

United Kingdom within the EU

The United Kingdom joined the EEC in 1973. The UK's membership of the EU does not apply to the UK's overseas territories, with the exception of Gibraltar. This referendum on the UK's EU membership was previously voted in 1975, shortly after the UK joined the EU (David Butler and Kitinger 1976). The UK's Office of National Statistics reports that the UK government's net contribution to the EU in 2016 was £9.4 billion, with an initial gross contribution of £18.9 billion.

Timeline of EU Referendum

Prime Minister ("PM") David Cameron and the Conservative Party call for referendum on the UK's membership in the EU (Walker 2018). The referendum was held on June 23, 2016, in which the majority of constituents voted to Leave (Walker 2018). PM David Cameron announces resignation upon the release of the referendum results (Walker 2018). On March 29, 2017, the new PM, Theresa May, notifies the EU that the UK is triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which provides for the exit of a Member State from the EU (The Lisbon Treaty 2007; Walker 2018). Currently, negotiations between the UK and the EU are still ongoing.

Review of Literature

Euroscepticism

Britons sentiments regarding the UK's status within the EU have been in a state of turmoil well before the 2016 EU referendum vote, more commonly known as "Brexit" (Figgins 2013; Goodwin and Heath 2016). Political parties use Euroscepticism as a party philosophy in order to obtain constituent support (Figgins 2013). The British Election Study

conducted a study in May 2015 which showed that about a quarter of the population thinks that European unification has already progressed too much, indicating that portion of the population is “very likely to support Brexit in the referendum and less likely to be influenced by campaigns” (Vasilopoulou 2016).

There are two primary schools of thought surrounding Euroscepticism and the perceived advantages it is presenting to Eurosceptic parties. First being that because blatant Eurosceptic parties are gaining unparalleled support, this is preparing the UK to enter into a new era of Euroscepticism (Figgins 2013). The second is that although the right-wing had a surge in accumulated votes in the 2015 election thanks to the UKIP¹ party, this reflection of voter increase was not proportionally represented in Parliament (Seymour 2015; Williams 2018).

There have been a significant number of studies on the driving effects behind the monumental Brexit vote, which present a spectrum of schools of thought regarding constituent voting behavior. One of the prevailing causal factors of the voting behavior behind Brexit is Euroscepticism. Not surprisingly, the conclusions drawn from the study of Euroscepticism and the driving influence it had on the Brexit vote aren't synonymous.

In a study presented in the European Journal of Political Economy, there were many associations found with the Leave vote, determined from over 13,000 individual respondent's survey data in *Understanding Society*² which included the question, “Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?” (Alabrese et al. 2018). The authors of this

¹ UK Independence Party – Eurosceptic, right wing populist political party

² Largest household survey in the United Kingdom

study found that pro-Leave votes are closely associated with many other factors: older age, white ethnicity, low education, infrequent use of smartphones and internet, recipients of various types of governmental benefits, adverse health, and low life satisfaction (Alabrese et al. 2018). England is a mostly Eurosceptic-centered nation, but party affiliation causes a significant spectrum of opinion on the topic (Jeffery et al. 2014). Other literature concurred with this by observing that while “prediction accuracy is geographically heterogeneous across UK regions,” when similar socioeconomic characteristics are controlled for, Labour (pro-Remain) and Conservative (pro-Leave) party supporters are likely to stick within their respective party lines (Alabrese et al. 2018). These party regional strongholds are easier to predict than their heterogeneous regional counterparts (Alabrese et al. 2018). Some of these associated factors were also seen in Figgins (2013) analysis of the variables correlating with Eurosceptic voting, such as low education, high unemployment rates, and low population density.

Vasilopoulou (2016) disagrees with the conclusion that Labour and Conservative supporters stick within their party voting lines, rather concluding that there is “fundamental ambiguity” in the Conservative and Labour party’s stance on Brexit, but despite this, the influence of political leaders should be taken into consideration when attempting to understand the Brexit vote. Swales (2016) agrees with Vasilopoulou (2016) that in 2015, while there were strong feelings against Europe, the majority felt that remaining in the EU was the best course of action.

Immigration

A fundamental component of the driving purpose behind the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992 is the freedom of movement of citizens and their families to work and reside freely

throughout the EU (Swales 2016). Euroscepticism is the opposition to closer connections between Britain and the European Union. By using data from the *Future of England Survey*³, it was found that amongst other reasons, immigration was a major factor in the Brexit vote (Henderson et al. 2017). In studying the *British Election Study*⁴ survey data, it was found that the negative attitudes towards immigration and enlargement of EU presence correlated with a Leave vote on the EU referendum (Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Fieldhouse et al. n.d.; Swales 2016). Using the *British Election Study* results and literature, Arnorsson and Zoega (2018) found that “fear of immigration does not seem to be fully justified in terms of the literature on the labour market effects of immigrants in the UK.”

Colantone and Stanig (2018) disagree with this conclusion, finding rather that inflow of immigrants in a region is not associated with higher support for the Leave vote. The positive association between a higher regional Leave vote and immigration only occurs when focusing on immigrants from EU accession countries⁵ (Colantone and Stanig 2018). They find that “individual attitudes towards immigration are systematically worsened by the import shock, while they are not related in a clear way to the actual extent of immigration in a region, and overall, poor attitudes towards immigration reflects “economic distress driven by import competition” (Colantone and Stanig 2018).

³ An online survey funded under the Future of the UK and Scotland program of the Economic and Social Research Council conducted from April 11-22, 2014 including 3,705 English, 1,014 Scottish, and 1,027 Welsh respondents.

⁴ 14 waves from February 2014-May 2018, including a total sample size of approximately 30,000 respondents per survey, with 4,191 respondents taking all 14 waves of the survey.

⁵ Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (Check current status - European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission n.d.)

Figgins (2013) finds that the high attention level towards immigration and immigration policy will eventually subside and political parties (such as the BNP⁶) that have gained support from the controversial issue will lose any traction that they may have gained.

Economy

Brexit effects many aspects of the current economic climate. This doesn't only include the post-Brexit effects on the UK and the remaining 27 EU countries in a post-negotiation Europe. It has been found in the literature that the economy was a determining factor in the Brexit vote (Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Colantone and Stanig 2018). The economic concerns weren't necessarily about the UK's payments to the EU⁷ that was the driving force, rather it was about personal financial situation, and that "individuals tend to react to the general economic situation of their region, regardless of their specific situation" (Colantone and Stanig 2018).

Using a cross-sectional theoretical model that included data from previous studies, Colantone and Stanig (2018) find through an empirical analysis that areas more exposed to Chinese import shock⁸ were more likely to vote Leave, not restricted by any specific category of voter and controlling for immigration measures as well as a variety of regional characteristics already shown by previous literature to be significant factors in the Brexit vote.

⁶ British National Party: far-right, fascist political party (Copsey 1994)

⁷ The Office of National Statistics (UK) reports that the UK government's net contribution to the EU in 2016 was £9.4 billion, from the initial £18.9 billion gross contribution (The UK contribution to the EU budget - Office for National Statistics 2017)

⁸ Economic shock to surging imports from China over the past three decades

Socioeconomic Status

It has already been discussed that Alabrese et al. (2018) found that when similar socioeconomic characteristics are controlled for, Labour and Conservative party members tend to vote within party lines, although Colantone and Stanig (2018) disagree with this conclusion.

The underprivileged, working class of Leave voters voted for an outcome that hurts their personal interests (Mckenzie 2017). The significant conceptualization of class difference and class structures highlights the importance of using macro-stage political events, such as the Brexit vote, by taking into account the profound micro-experiences of the people (Mckenzie 2017). Those who view themselves as “working class” and those who are struggling financially with little economic resources were most likely to vote Leave (Swales 2016). It is important to note that Swales (2016) did find that it was a minority (15%) of Leave voters that said economic reasons was the most important issue compared to the majority of Leave voter’s stance on immigration and sovereignty.

The literature indicates that when a campaign is focused on discussing Brexit from an analytical cost-benefit point of view are more receptive to voters, and consequently swing voters, more so than campaigns focused primarily on domestic policy (Vasilopoulou 2016).

Education Level

Education level is a reoccurring variable that is discussed throughout much of the literature surrounding the Brexit vote. It is primarily discussed as a control variable and less of an independent variable. Figgins (2013) concludes that it may be that the less educated and more rural a citizen’s geographic locale, the more likely that they hold a Eurosceptic view.

This could simply be because they may not completely understand economics in general and more particularly, global economics (Figgins 2013).

Figgins (2013) does state that while education only plays a minor role in the combined support for Eurosceptic-aligned parties in general, lower education levels seem to be the most accurate predictor of support for the BNP in every region of Great Britain. In addition, education level is viewed as being a strong determinant in the level of support for right-wing parties, such as the BNP and UKIP (Figgins 2013).

The gap in attitudes towards the EU and the level of Euroscepticism has widened over time between contrasting education levels (i.e., high vs. low education levels) (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Henderson et al. (2017)⁹ concludes that those with university degrees are more likely to say they will vote Remain, although after controlling for additional variables, education level is not a significant predictor in the overall determination of support for Brexit.

Age

Using data from the 2014 Future of England Survey, the Liberal Democrat supporters are very pro-EU while the Labour party supporters are pro-EU but are more moderate. Within the anti-EU realm are Conservative party supporters and “UKIP supporters are almost off the scale in their hostility to the EU” (Jeffery et al. 2014). UKIP supporters are identified as conservative, while moving down the spectrum of conservatism by Conservative, Labour, and then Liberal Democrat supporters (Jeffery et al. 2014).

⁹ Using YouGov survey data from a survey conducted between June 10-21, 2016 (n= 5,103) shaped by the 2016 Future of England Survey. It is note-worthy that while Henderson et al. (2017) references the 2016 FoES, they cite the 2014 FoES data (n=3,705) in the references section.

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Taking further data from the 2014 FoES, the Liberal Democrats have 33% support from the 18-44 age range, while the Labour party is generally proportionally spread across age ranges, with 49% in the age range of 18-44 (Jeffery et al. 2014). The Conservative party is proportionally spread with 40% in the 18-44 age range, though notably not as proportionally spread as the Labour party (Jeffery et al. 2014). Only 26% of respondents make up the 18-44 age range base for UKIP party supporters, leaving right at three-fourths of party supporters being over the age of 44, with 25% alone attributed to the 65+ age group (Jeffery et al. 2014).

The 65+ age group was shown to be a significant indicator of party affiliation and voting behavior in the Brexit vote. Data was collected through 2014 FoES, election results and survey data from the *British Election Study*, *Understanding Society* survey data, *British Social Attitudes* survey data¹⁰, and NatCen Panel surveys¹¹. (Alabrese et al. 2018; Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Jeffery et al. 2014; Swales 2016).

The issue with the data from the 2014 FoES is the inconsistencies with the age group percentages and the lack of information on party support for the remaining respondents within the age groups. In the 18-34 age range, 95% of respondents in that age group identify with one of the four above-mentioned parties, with 54% in the 35-44 age range, 61% in the 45-54 age range, 102% in the 55-64 age range, and 89% in the 65+ age range (Jeffery et al. 2014). This leaves room for discussion on the margin of error and what the actual data values were for each age range. This also brings about the question of if a respondent didn't support

¹⁰ n ≈ 3,000

¹¹ n ≈ 4,000

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one of the four major parties in the survey, what party, if any, do they identify with? There are currently at least 10 different political parties represented in Parliament, so there are additional parties that need to be considered. Also, is the 102% value in the 55-64 age group due to error in rounding or for some other reason?

Despite the questions about the data, there is evidence through the literature that shows that age is a factor that needs to be taken into account in looking at not only voting behavior in the EU referendum, but also in the levels of party support across the varying age groups (Alabrese et al. 2018; Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Henderson et al. 2017; Jeffery et al. 2014; Swales 2016). Of all other variables, only age exerts a significant effect (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Henderson et al. 2017).

Members of Parliament

In the structure of the UK's government, the House of Commons members are elected officials from the 650 constituencies. Typically, an MP is directed on how to vote by their respective political party, but occasionally there are votes introduced in which an MP may vote however they like (Hibbing and Marsh 1987). This voting structure doesn't allow for the direct vote/input of the constituents on specific issues. The literature discusses how many different variables, including constituencies characteristics, may influence MP's voting behavior, but doesn't touch on how MP's influence their constituents vote (Hibbing and Marsh 1987). Some variables discussed in the literature are: religion, age, region, education, marginality, lobbying, constituent's view of the degree of relationship between themselves and their MP, and the level of challenge to the MP's re-election (Auel and Umit 2018; Carman 2006; Giger and Klüver 2016).

There have only been 11 UK-wide referendum since 1973 (Referendums held in the UK n.d.). This doesn't indicate much direct voter input on how they would like a proposed policy to be handled by the government. It is worth noting that "legislators who have strong local ties and individual support bases are more likely to... break party unity in parliament" and those who have local-level political experience are strongly correlated to being a swing-vote in Parliament (Tavits 2009).

Another significant factor to consider is the proportion of how many seats each political party holds in Parliament. In the May 2015 election, the UKIP party increased their voter support base by 9.5% since 2010, and they accumulated approximately 4 million of the votes cast in the 2015 general elections (SEYMOUR 2015). The Conservative Party and UKIP made up about half of the votes in the 2015 election (SEYMOUR 2015). Therefore, one would expect that the UKIP party would be proportionally represented in Parliament, but this is not the case. If the electoral system was proportional, then UKIP would hold approximately 83 seats, but only one seat is held by a UKIP MP (SEYMOUR 2015). It is important to notate that there are issues within the electoral system, but that is a topic in and of its own, of which I will not be researching.

Constituency Influencing MPs

As career politicians within the House of Commons becomes a highly competitive career choice within the UK, MP's have placed re-election as one of their driving forces, and an inevitable counterpart of that is constituent demands (Auel and Umit 2018; Carman 2006; Hibbing and Marsh 1987). Therefore, constituent's expectations of their MPs increase and rarely will an MP put constituency preference above party stance (Auel and Umit 2018;

Carman 2006; Hibbing and Marsh 1987). Interestingly, constituents tend to blame the party rather than the MP when an MP's vote doesn't align with constituency wishes (Carman 2006).

Political Parties and Brexit

Within the Brexit vote, there was a division within the Labour and Conservative parties, as well as lack of unity within the "Leave" campaign (Vasilopoulou 2016). Despite this lack of unity within the "Leave" campaign, there was a higher voter turn-out in the pro-Leave areas (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Also shown in the literature is that past support for UKIP, arguably the most Eurosceptic political party in the UK, aligned closely with support for the Leave vote (Goodwin and Heath 2016).

Theory/Argument

Currently, there is quite a bit of information on how constituents influence MP voting, but there is no information on how MP's influence constituents. The literature does state that when other socioeconomic characteristics are controlled for, voters remained within party lines in the Brexit vote (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Henderson et al. 2017). The literature also discusses how constituents tend to blame the party rather than the MP when an MP's vote doesn't align with constituency wishes (Carman 2006). In relation to this point, it is interesting that MPs will vote within party lines (when able) rather than vote in line with the wishes of their constituents (Auel and Umit 2018; Carman 2006; Hibbing and Marsh 1987).

Another piece of information that is interesting and has influenced my perception of the project is that while there was a lack of unity within the "Leave" campaign, the pro-Leave areas had a higher voter turn-out (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Based on this information and the literature, it is my theory that voters will vote against their MP (and therefore their respective political party) but would not view it as voting against the MP, but rather the

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political party. I also theorize that constituents are insignificantly influenced by political campaigns and when given the opportunity to vote on an issue, they will vote based on their individual and regional circumstances. I believe that this could be studied not only by looking at data from the EU referendum, but also the other 10 referendums held in the UK as well as any future referendums.

My independent variable is MP political party affiliation while my dependent variable is constituent voting behavior in Brexit. Some variables I would control for include: age, education level, religion, and national identity. I would also control for the Buckingham constituency. The Buckingham constituency is somewhat of an anomaly within the UK because their MP is John Bercow, the Speaker of the House of Commons. He is an independent, unaffiliated MP and has no vote in legislative matters unless it's to break a tie. Out of respect for his position, no political party introduces competition in his constituency. I would collect data from the constituency, but I consider it important to keep in mind that these slightly disenfranchised voters may feel differently than the other 649 constituencies.

It is possible that my theory is only correct when looking at referendum votes and not general elections. It would be imperative to compare the evidence between attitudes in referendum voting and general elections. If there is a difference, there are many alternate hypotheses that could be drawn, depending on what the data reflected.

Data/Evidence

In this research proposal there is quite a bit of individual level data that has already been gathered, which would help in the study of this question. The first of those data sources that I would use include the 2014 Future of England Survey. This was an online survey funded under the Future of the UK and Scotland program of the Economic and Social Research

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Council conducted from April 11-22, 2014 including 3,705 English, 1,014 Scottish, and 1,027 Welsh respondents. The second data source I discern as a valuable reference is the *Understanding Society* household panel survey. *Understanding Society* is the world's largest household panel survey and it is UK-based. There were surveys conducted pre- and post-Brexit. I think this is a useful tool because you may be gathering data from a different or perhaps a larger demographic group than the previous data source covered.

The third and most substantial data source worthy of research includes the data collected by the British Election Study. The British Election Study has been in place since 1964 and the study collects data at a minimum of every general election in the UK, but many times it is more frequently than that. It is one of the longest-running election studies in the world. I would look at the 14 waves of the study from February 2014 through May 2018. There were roughly 30,000 respondents per wave, and 4,191 respondents completing all 14 waves of the survey. Looking at all of the waves is important because it reflects how attitudes may have changed because of the time period covered. These waves began after PM David Cameron announced in 2013 that he would like a referendum on the future of the UK-EU relationship and continue to the present where we will see reflections of attitudes during the Brexit talks.

If I were to actually conduct a study on my research question, I would look at the above data, in conjunction with two other pieces of data that I would collect myself. First, I would compare individual votes in each constituency with how the MP of that constituency is voting on the Brexit talk votes, as well as the MP's stance on the issues surrounding Brexit that they may have put in their manifestos. This data is already available, but it hasn't been compiled.

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I've yet to find a source that breaks the data down into the 650 constituencies, and the furthest I've seen the data broken down is by the 382 voting areas.

The second set of new data that I would collect includes a random sample of constituents from each of the 650 constituencies. I would want to find out demographic information such as age, sex, race, socioeconomic status, citizenship background (i.e., born in the UK or assimilation immigration?), and religion. I would also want to find out the constituents' stance on particular issues such as immigration, economic status of the UK, etc. The major part of the new data that I would like to collect would be the perceived relationship between MP and constituent, as viewed by the constituent and whether or not they are feeling adequately represented by their MP.

Conclusion

If my theory is correct that constituents were not influenced by their MP themselves nor their MP's political parties in the Brexit vote, and if this theory can be generalizable to both referendum votes and general election votes, then this reflects two significant potential issues. First being that constituents are not being effectively or adequately represented by their MP. The second, which is based off the first issue, is that if constituents aren't being appropriately represented, then is this a crisis of parliamentary democracy?

If my theory is wrong, then there are no significant implications. This would mean that constituents are influenced by their MP and their MP's party and both the constituents and the MP's have the same voting behavior on particular issues. Additionally, this may infer that constituents are being appropriately represented by their MP and that is the best you can hope for from your elected representatives.

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I believe that based off the findings of this study, follow-up research could be done to determine where the errors within the UK voting system are, and how those errors affect representation of UK constituents. I believe it would also be worth looking into why MPs vote against their constituencies wishes. If you can understand what is influencing MPs and what is influencing voters, then you can compare the two and see if there is any disconnect between MP and constituent attitudes and voting behavior.

This research question has many different subsequent questions that new studies could research and determine how all the factors interplay with one another. This will bring us a better understanding of the British political sphere and how MPs may better represent their constituencies.

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