Final Research Paper written for Political Economy Seminar, Fall 2021 at NYU

Commonalities Between Trump and Brexit Supporters

Abstract:

The success of Donald Trump winning the 2016 US Presidential Election and the UK voting to leave the European Union in the 2016 Brexit Referendum shocked the world. But by comparing these two elections, the outcomes appear less surprising, as both symbolized departures from these countries' prior political status-quos (MacWilliams, 2016; Dennison, Davidov, and Sedding, 2020). This essay examines who supported these elections and what motivated individuals' vote choice for Trump or Brexit. First, the role of authoritarian right-wing populism in both campaigns will be highlighted. Then, using survey and polling data, I find that the same core group voted for Trump and Brexit -white, older, men, without a college degree. And, the issue of immigration, specifically the anti-immigrant and racist sentiments these campaigns depicted, was a key motivator for voters to support Trump and the Leave vote.

Introduction:

The 2016 US Presidential Election marked an important choice for American voters between the traditional and highly experienced first female Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Or, the Republican candidate, Donald Trump - a highly successful businessman and celebrity with no prior political experience who ultimately won the election (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). Similarly, on June 23rd, 2016, the UK held a national referendum asking voters to choose if the nation should remain in the European Union or leave. After 43 years of being a member of the

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EU, British voters decided the UK would exit the Union (Dennison, Davidov, and Sedding, 2020).

This paper seeks to explain who supported Trump and Brexit and what motivated voters to do so, focusing specifically on the role of immigration. First, I will define authoritarian right-wing populism and highlight the key values and rhetoric associated with this ideology. I will then elaborate on the assumption that the Trump and Pro-Leave campaigns' values and rhetoric aligned with those of authoritarian right-wing populism. Followed by a literature review, this will highlight the main demand-side explanations for why voters support right-wing populist parties and politicians in developed democracies. The empirical section will use exit poll survey data to examine who supported Trump and the Leave Vote. Revealing that white, older, men, without a college degree were the main demographic that supported both Trump and Leave. Turning to what motivated voters' vote choice, I will enlist opinion survey data measuring attitudes towards immigration and anti-immigrant/racist sentiments. This data will highlight that Trump and Leave supporters held strong anti-immigrant and racist beliefs that aligned with the respective campaigns' promises and values. These findings suggest that authoritarian right-wing populist values, specifically related to immigration, played an important role in both campaigns' success.

Background and Assumptions:

While there are various types and degrees of populism (Rodrik, 2018), this paper focuses specifically on authoritarian right-wing populism. Authoritarian right-wing populism is anti-

establishment by nature, meaning the legitimacy and power held by the elite is constantly in question. Common targets of the establishment include politicians, the traditional media, and mainstream political parties (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). This can lead to us vs. them rhetoric – which pits ordinary people against the elite establishment and outsiders (Cox, Lienesch, and Jones, 2017). This ideology also focuses on perceived threats to society related to the rise of nontraditional values and security concerns, often targeting foreigners and outsiders. The final important aspect of this ideology is the need for a strong leader to protect the people (McWilliams, 2016).

Trump's 2016 presidential campaign meets all the indicators of authoritarian right-wing populism. One of his key campaign slogans – *Make American Great Again*, clearly showed his belief that the country had become corrupt and needed saving. He presented himself as the figure who could protect Americans and "drain the swamp" of corrupt politicians and lobbyists in American politics —epitomizing the us vs. them rhetoric at the core of authoritarian right-wing populism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 4). Trump pointed to many perceived threats to society and stirred up fear with comments such as our "enemies are getting stronger and stronger ... and we, as a country, are getting weaker" (McWilliams, 2016, p. 716). He promised to return the country to its glory days when traditional values were dominant, and blue-collar factory workers had reliable jobs (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 349). He also campaigned on commitments to limit foreigners' entry into the US, specifically Mexicans, claiming immigrants stole hard-working Americans' jobs, disrupted the cultural status-quo, and threatened national security (Cox, Lienesch, and Jones, 2017).

The Brexit campaign depicted authoritarian right-wing populist values as it emphasized the need for the country to take back control from politicians in Brussels (Evans and Tilley, 2017). It viewed the diplomatic alliance and cooperation necessary to being an EU member negatively, resulting in Eurosceptic views. In terms of immigration, the campaign depicted immigrants and asylum seekers as huge drains on the country's economy and welfare system (Dennison, Davidov, and Sedding, 2020). UKIP (a key pro-Leave party) appealed to individuals 'left-behind' due to increasingly post-materialist cultural and economic norms. The campaign specifically focused on representing those they claimed were most negatively affected by EU membership - factory workers from poor households with limited education and high unemployment rates (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Nigel Farage is often viewed as a key figure in the Leave campaign. He was head of the UKIP party and used his platform to publicly promote these authoritarian right-wing populist values (Dennison, Davidov, and Sedding, 2020). He claimed he was "the people's voice" in this fight between "big government, big banks, and big businesses" who were "strangling national identities" (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 224).

Having established that the Trump and Brexit campaigns represent authoritarian right-wing populism, by extension, I claim that those who supported these campaigns also held authoritarian right-wing populist values. This linkage will be further highlighted in the empirical section. (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Rodrik, 2018; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Obschonka et al., 2018; Colantone and Piero, 2018).

Literature Review:

This literature review focuses on the key arguments related to why individuals generally support right-wing populist parties and politicians. Within this demand-side explanation, there are two key groups. One argues that people affected by cultural grievances respond by increasingly supporting right-wing populist parties. The other group points to those affected by economic grievances as motivating support for this type of politics. Some authors claim that it is a combination of economic and cultural factors, but they usually highlight one side as the dominant cause.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) are the leading authors for the cultural argument. Their Cultural Backlash Theory says there has been a shift from traditional materialist values to post-materialism in industrialized societies since the 1960s-70s. These new values celebrate cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, freedom of expression, environmental protectionism, and human rights. As individuals with more traditional values feel left behind by the rise of post-materialist values and see their status within society decline, they align more with right-wing populist values, parties, and politicians. Bobo (2017) and Hooghe and Dassonneville (2018) extend this cultural argument and pinpoint immigration as a key cause of status threat and a key factor in growing support for right-wing populism.

How do economic grievances contribute to the rise of right-wing populism? The economic argument usually points to the effects of globalization and how it relates to rising inequalities, which can push voters towards supporting right-wing populist parties and politicians (Cox, Lienesch, and Jones, 2017). Some authors point to specific factors of globalization that are especially important. Milner (2021) specifies that individuals affected by globalization,

specifically in the form of trade and technology, are the most likely to support right-wing populism.

Margalit (2019) and Autor, Dorn, and Hanson (2013) highlight the role of import shocks, specifically from low-income countries and China, as a key factor of globalization that contributes to the rising support of right-wing populism. This type of economic shock can cause outsourcing, high unemployment rates, and lower wages among locals as goods and services are cheaper abroad. These authors find that when people are exposed to import shocks, they experience negative economic outcomes and growing insecurities about their status in society. As mainstream parties do not address these concerns, these individuals turn to right-wing populist parties. Within this literature, there is a debate about the level of import shocks necessary to translate to right-wing populist vote support. Hays, Lim, and Spoon (2019) and Colantone and Piero (2018) find that individuals respond to changes in the status of the economy in their country or region. Meaning, import shocks must affect entire regions or communities to trigger right-wing populist voting responses, as seen in the example of Calais, France, and the lace industry in the early 2000s. In comparison, one of Milner's (2021) findings is that individuals personally affected by import shocks in advanced industrialized countries are more likely to support right-wing populism.

The last group of authors point to a combination of economic and cultural factors to explain rising support for right-wing populism. Gidron and Hall (2017) claim that economic and cultural declines affect how individuals perceive their own social ranking. And the lower one's ranking is, the more likely they are to support right-wing populism. They call this the subjective social

status argument and find that economic shocks have greater effects than cultural ones on how individuals perceive their status. This is because one's job, income level, or education largely determines their social status. Hays, Lim, and Spoon (2019) find that economic shocks, specifically import shocks, can have cultural effects. They claim that economic shocks can trigger pre-established subjective beliefs such as anti-immigrant sentiments, causing largely cultural responses opposed to solely economic concerns.

Empirical Analysis:

Having highlighted the various explanations of why individuals support right-wing populism, we turn to the case of Trump and Brexit. First, we examine which key demographics supported these campaigns regarding age, race, gender, and education levels. Then, we turn to what motivated this core group to support these right-wing populist campaigns', focusing specifically on immigration.

i. **Who Supported Trump and Brexit:**

To establish which demographics supported Trump in the 2016 presidential election, I will examine exit poll survey data from CNN. This survey was administered to a small percentage of voters who had just voted at polling stations. Researchers then used this data to predict voting trends for the population. Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of white voters reported supporting Trump, at 58% - also the largest racial group that voted for him. In comparison, only 8% of black respondents reported supporting Trump. Turning to age, Figure 2 shows voters aged

50-64 and 65+ made up the most significant portion of Trump's supporters. There is a clear trend showing that older age groups increasingly supported Trump. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hillary Clinton won 56% of the youngest age group, 18-24.

In terms of gender, shown in Figure 3, men hold the lead for supporting Trump at 53% compared to 42% of women who reported voting for him. It is important to note that this sample has missing data, as the sum of men and women does not add up to 100. Nonetheless, with the given data we can see men supported Trump at higher rates than women. Figure 4 asked respondents to share their highest level of education. Here, 51% of respondents with a high school degree or less supported Trump. The general trend shows that individuals with higher levels of schooling increasingly endorsed Clinton, and those with lower levels of education were more likely to support Trump.

Turning to the case of Brexit, online survey data helps us understand the core group of Pro-Leave supporters. Using data from Lord Ashcroft Polls, we examine the role of race, age, gender, and education on voting behavior. This survey asked respondents how they voted in the election and was conducted between June 21st-23rd, 2016 (the Referendum took place on June 23rd, 2016). Figure 5 shows 53% of white respondents supported Leave, the largest racial group. Black individuals represented the lowest group to support Leave, at 27%. Figure 6 depicts that the youngest age group, 18-24, was the most likely to support Remain, at 73%. A clear trend shows that as age increases, support for Remain decreases, and support for Leave increases. This is especially evident as 57% of respondents aged 55-64 and 60% in the 65+ group reported voting Leave.

Figure 7 examines gender and shows men were more likely to support Leave (55% of vote share) than women (49% of vote share). Interestingly, this figure shows that men supporting Leave was the largest section of all possible voting outcomes. Using online and telephone panel survey data by NatCen, Figure 8 shows a general correlation between lower education/certificate attainment and higher support for Leave. As shown in the no qualifications column, 65% of respondents in this group reported that the UK should leave the EU.

This data shows that Trump and Leave supporters consisted of largely the same demographics, white, older, men, with low levels of education, specifically those obtaining less than a college degree. Norris and Inglehart (2019) and Gidron and Hall (2017) confirm these trends as they also identify a similar core group that often supports authoritarian right-wing populist politics. One important note is that these authors include working-class individuals as a demographic in their analysis. I have chosen to omit this demographic for this paper because it is difficult to accurately obtain this information with survey data. As this essay also focuses on comparing these core groups across US and UK voters, comparing class groupings across countries is too complex for the sake of this essay. I ran into a similar problem finding data that used similar categories in the US and the UK for the education demographic. But since education is an important demographic to examine due to the underlying socio-demographic and economic factors it depicts, it was essential to include this demographic (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). And, as this analysis focuses more generally on comparing voting preferences for those at the higher and lower ends of the education spectrum, I did not believe the nuanced difference in education categories between countries was a significant problem.

What Motivated Vote Choice for Trump and Brexit:

To examine the issue of immigration and how personal values related to vote choice for Trump, I utilize data from Wave 8 of the 2016 PRRI/Brookings Immigration Survey. Figure 9 depicts which issues voters felt were most important when voting in the 2016 US presidential election grouped by political party identification data from a previous question. By examing differences in criticality between these issues, shows significant variance between Democrats and Republicans, specifically for immigration. For example, the vast majority of Republicans, 85%, listed terrorism as a critical issue. Compared to 60% of Democrats who agreed. Looking at immigration, 59% of Republicans considered this a critical issue compared to only 35% of Democrats. These party differences demonstrate the significance of immigration to Republicans relative to Democrats in the 2016 presidential election.

For Figure 10, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the American way of life needed protection from foreign influence. The results show that 21% of all Americans completely agreed that American life needed protection from foreigners. This number increased to 35% when examining respondents who identified as Republicans. Honing in on just Trump supporters, there was a 10-point difference between Republicans and Trump supporters who completely agreed with this statement. These findings represent how truly salient the issue of immigration was for Trump's supports. This is made further evident as 83% of Trump supporters either completely or mostly agreed with this statement compared to 55% of all Americans who completely or mostly agreed.

Examining racist beliefs by political party, Figure 11 asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that it bothers them when immigrants they encounter do not speak English or speak very little. 50% of all Americans agreed with this statement, and 49% disagreed. Almost an even split. More significant differences arise when examining how Republicans responded to this question, with 66% agreeing and 33% disagreeing. Looking just at Trump supporters, the vast majority, 77%, agreed with this statement, and only 23% disagreed. These findings suggest that Trump supporters held highly racist views. For scholars who argue that partisanship played an important role in why voters supported Trump, not anti-immigration and racist values, figures 10 and 11 provide strong evidence that Trump supporters held fundamentally more extreme values than Republicans. Both graphs show that Trump supporters report much higher anti-immigrant and racist values than Republicans. This finding is also supported by Fortunato, Hibbing, and Mondak (2018), who studied how Trump's campaign, personality, and personal values were fundamentally different compared to other Republican candidates in the 2016 election.

Looking at Brexit, Figures 12 and 13 examine how anti-immigrant and racist values were important to those who supported the Leave vote. Both figures use data from a Lord Ashcroft survey that targeted people who recently voted in the Referendum. For Figure 12, respondents were asked to rank by order what issues were most important in deciding how they voted. Looking specifically at why Leave voters voted Leave, all three groups listed wanting decisions about the UK to be made by the UK as the most important issue to them. They all listed

regaining control over immigration and their borders as their second priority, regardless of party identification. Even though immigration was not the most important issue for Leave voters, we can still conclude that it was a major concern.

Figure 13 examined how opinions related to salient issues affected vote choice by party identification. For this graphic, respondents were asked if they viewed each 'force' as being good, ill, or mixed in nature. Of Remain voters, 71% and 79% considered multiculturalism and immigration a positive force. In drastic comparison, 81% and 80% of Leave voters felt multiculturalism and immigration were negative forces. These findings suggest the Leave party strongly attracted voters who held anti-immigrant sentiments.

Using data from Wave 8 of the 2016 British Election Study Internet panel conducted by YouGov, we can examine the extent to which Leave or Remain voters negatively or positively viewed immigration. Figure 14 represents a combination of four questions from the survey that asked about immigration. In this sample, 53% of Leave voters reported being intensely opposed to immigration in general, compared to just 12% of Remain voters who agreed. Critics could argue that these views were not based on purely anti-immigrant or racist sentiments but instead reflected responses to economic concerns. However, this argument loses weight when examining the second grouping in this graphic, which shows that 72% of Leave voters agree that immigration undermines culture. These findings solidify that Leave supporters held fundamentally anti-immigrant and racist views beliefs.

As the data represented in these figures are from survey data, a potential problem could be that respondents provided bias responses. These surveys asked highly personal questions about salient issues, meaning respondents could have intentionally misreported their beliefs and values due to embarrassment or desire to follow what they believed to be the status quo. Even with these concerns, there are limited alternatives to gathering data on individuals' beliefs and attitudes across an entire country without using survey data. We press on, evaluating the overall findings of this data but acknowledge potential limitations due to the nature of the collection mode.

This data highlights the importance of anti-immigrant and racist values in explaining voting preferences for Trump and Leave - the literature confirms these findings. Norris and Inglehart (2019) and McWilliams (2016) examine the role of these beliefs in both campaigns. They find that Trump and Leave focused on extremely negative beliefs towards immigrants and outsiders, depicting anti-immigrant and racist values in their campaigns. Looking specifically at Trump, leading up to the 2016 election, he repetitively labeled Mexicans as criminals and rapists, accused Muslims of being terrorists, and stereotyped African Americans. His campaign promises relied on similar racist values as he pledged to build a wall along the entire US-Mexico border and deport millions of illegal immigrants if he won the election.

The Leave Campaign strongly empathized the UKs need to take back control of its borders by drastically limiting the number of immigrants and asylum seekers entering the country (Evans and Tilley, 2017). The campaign framed this issue by eliciting fear towards immigrants and blaming them for security and economic-related issues. So much so that it became known as

'Project Fear' due to its values and rhetoric (Clark, 2021). One of the most outwardly racist depictions in the campaign was when the leader of the UKIP party, Nigel Farage, unveiled a poster featuring a group of immigrants captioned "BREAKING POINT the EU has failed us" (Stewart and Mason, 2016). The Leave vote was important to voters with anti-immigrant views because, if successful, the UK would withdraw from the EU travel agreement - legally restricting foreigners from living, working, or studying in the UK (Dennison, Davidov, and Sedding, 2020; Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005).

Conclusion:

This paper sought to compare Trump and Brexit supporters to understand who supported these authoritarian right-wing populist campaigns and what issues and values motivated voting outcomes. I examined authoritarian right-wing populism and demonstrated both campaigns depicted this ideology based on the values and rhetoric they promoted. The literature review provided a general recap of demand-side explanations for why voters support right-wing populist parties and politicians. Then, I fleshed out how key demographics voted in both campaigns using exit poll survey data. Highlighting that white, older, men, without a college degree were the main demographics to support these authoritarian right-wing populist campaigns. I demonstrated the importance of immigration, specifically anti-immigrant and racist beliefs, in motivating voters to support these campaigns using opinion survey data. While immigration and anti-immigrant sentiments were important in both campaigns, this essay in no way argues that this was the most important issue in either campaign. Additional research would be necessary to make this claim.
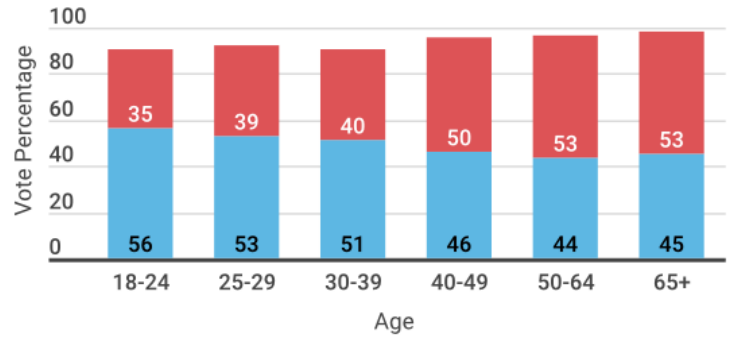
Figure 1 - US Presidential Election 2016 Exit Polls: Percentage of Votes by Race
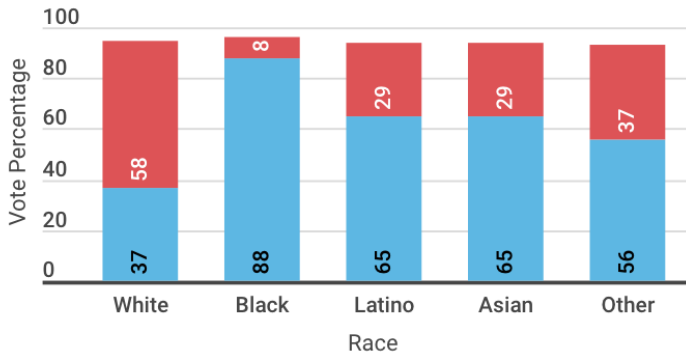
Data Source: CNN, n=24,537, survey period November 9, 2016.

Figure 2 - US Presidential Election 2016 Exit Polls: Percentage of Votes by Age

Data Source: CNN, n=24,537, survey period November 9, 2016.

Figure 3 - US Presidential Election 2016 Exit Polls: Percentage of Votes by Gender

Data Source: CNN, n=24,537, survey period November 9, 2016.

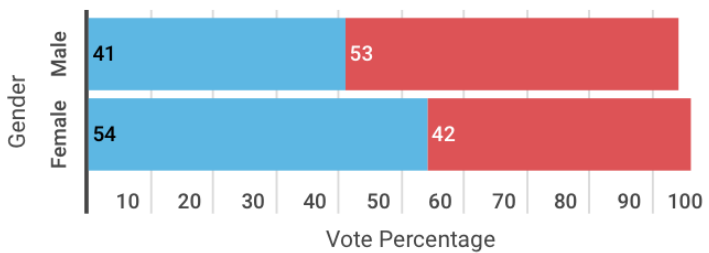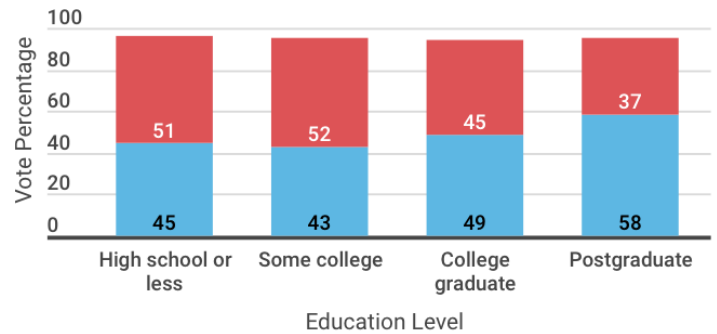**Figure 4** - US Presidential Election 2016 Exit Polls: Percentage of Votes by Education Level

Data Source: CNN, n=24,537, survey period November 9, 2016.

Figure 5 - Online Survey Data Brexit Vote: Percentage of Voters by Race
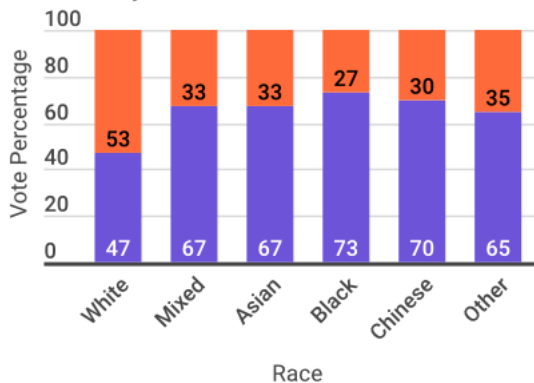
Data Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls, n=12,369, survey period June 21-23, 2016, age group 18+.
Question: Which way did you vote in the/today's referendum?

Figure 6 - Online Survey Data Brexit Vote: Percentage of Voters by Age

Data Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls, n=12,369, survey period June 21-23 2016, age group 18+.
Question: Which way did you vote in the/today's referendum?

Figure 7 - Online Survey Data Brexit Vote: Percentage of Voters by Gender
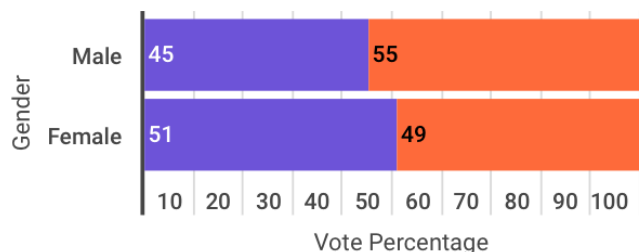
Data Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls, n=12,369, survey period June 21-23, 2016, age group 18+.

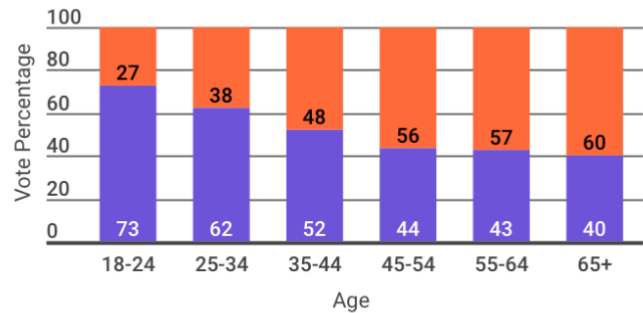Question: Which way did you vote in the/today's referendum?

Figure 8 - Online Panel Survey Data Brexit Vote: Percentage of Voters by Education Level
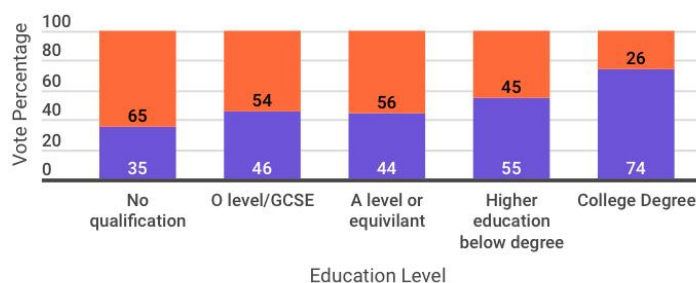
Data Source: NatCen, n=1,077, survey period June 2016, age group 18+.

Question: Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?

Figure 9 - US Immigration Survey Data: Percentage Say Critical Issue by Party Affiliation
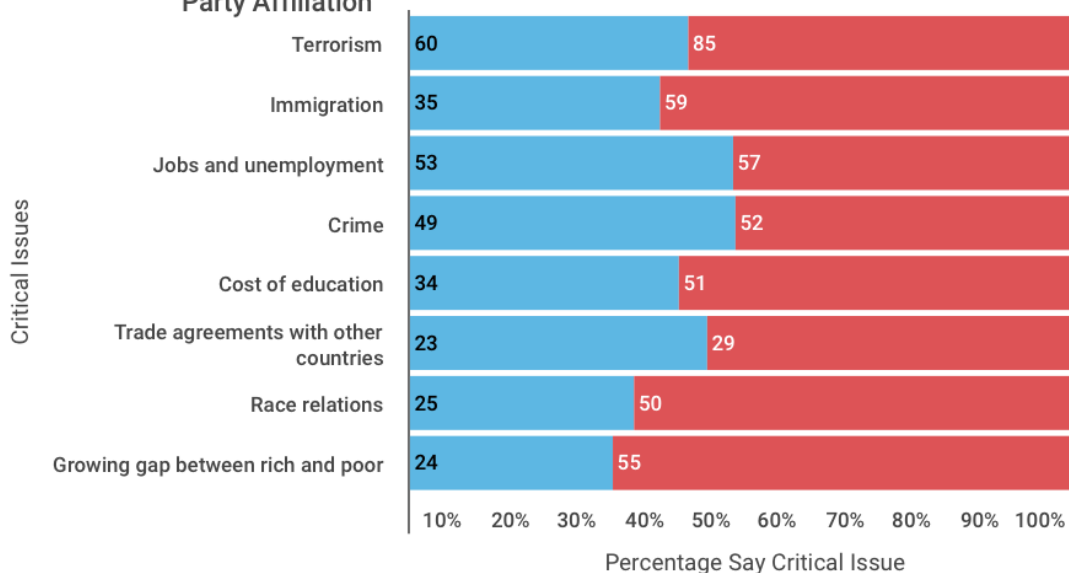
Data Source: PRRI/Brookings 2016 Immigration Survey Wave 8, n=2,607 (2,146 online, 261 telephone), survey period April 4-May 2, 2016.

Question: How important are the following issues to you personally?

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Figure 10 - US Immigration Survey Data: Percentage Say American Way of Life Needs Protection From Immigrants by Party Affiliation
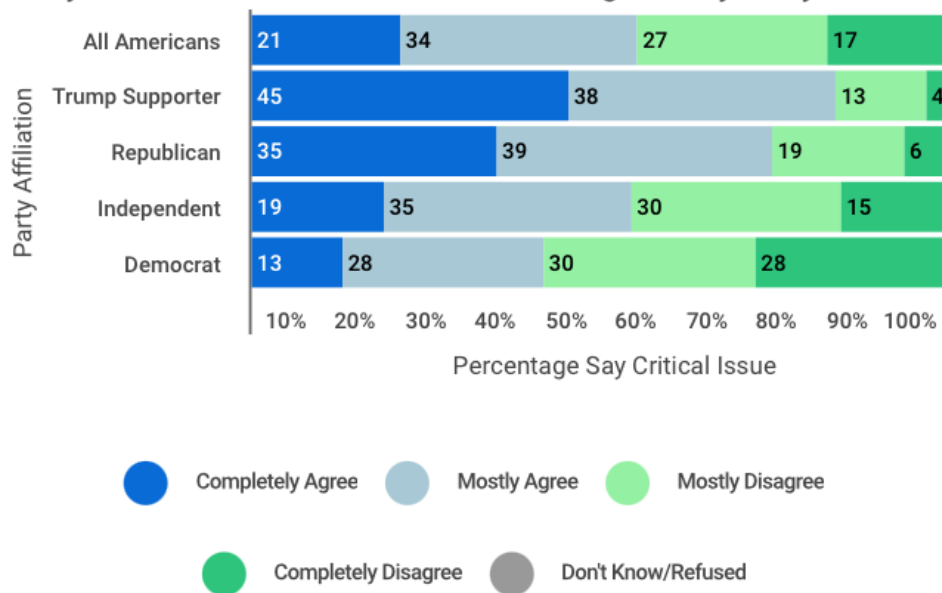
Data Source: PRRI/Brookings 2016 Immigration Survey Wave 8, n=2,607 (2,146 online, 261 telephone), survey period April 4-May 2, 2016.

Question: Please say if you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree or completely disagree with each one. The American way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence.

Figure 11 - US Immigration Survey Data: Percentage Say it Bothers Them when Immigrants Don't Speak or Speak very Little English

Data Source: PRRI/Brookings 2016 Immigration Survey Wave 8, n=2,607 (2,146 online, 261 telephone), survey period April 4-May 2, 2016.

Question: Please say if you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree or completely disagree with each one. It bothers me when I come in contact with immigrants who speak little or no English.

Figure 12 - Brexit Vote Survey Poll: Ranking Important Issues by Party Affiliation

Why Remain voters voted Remain

Overall UK

1 — The risks of voting to leave the EU looked too great when it came to things like the economy, jobs, and prices

2 — Access to the EU single market, while out of the Euro and no-borders area, giving best of both worlds

3 — A feeling that we would become more isolated by leaving

Conservative Voters

1 — The risks of voting to leave the EU looked too great when it came to things like the economy, jobs, and prices

2 — Access to the EU single market, while out of the Euro and no-borders area, giving best of both worlds

3 — A feeling that we would become more isolated by leaving

Labour Voters

1 — The risks of voting to leave the EU looked too great when it came to things like the economy, jobs, and prices

2 — Access to the EU single market, while out of the Euro and no-borders area, giving best of both worlds

3 — A feeling that we would become more isolated by leaving

Why Leave voters voted Leave

Overall UK

1 — The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK

2 — Voting to leave offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders

3 — Remaining meant little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership or powers

Conservative Voters

1 — The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK

2 — Voting to leave offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders

3 — Remaining meant little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership or powers

Labour Voters

1 — The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK

2 — Voting to leave offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders

3 — Remaining meant little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership or powers

Data Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls, n=, survey period June 21-23, 2016.

Question: Please can you rank the following in order of how important they were in your decision?

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Figure 13 - Brexit Vote Survey Poll: Percentage Report Issues being a Good or Bad Force by Party Affiliation

How the people who thought the following were ill forces voted?

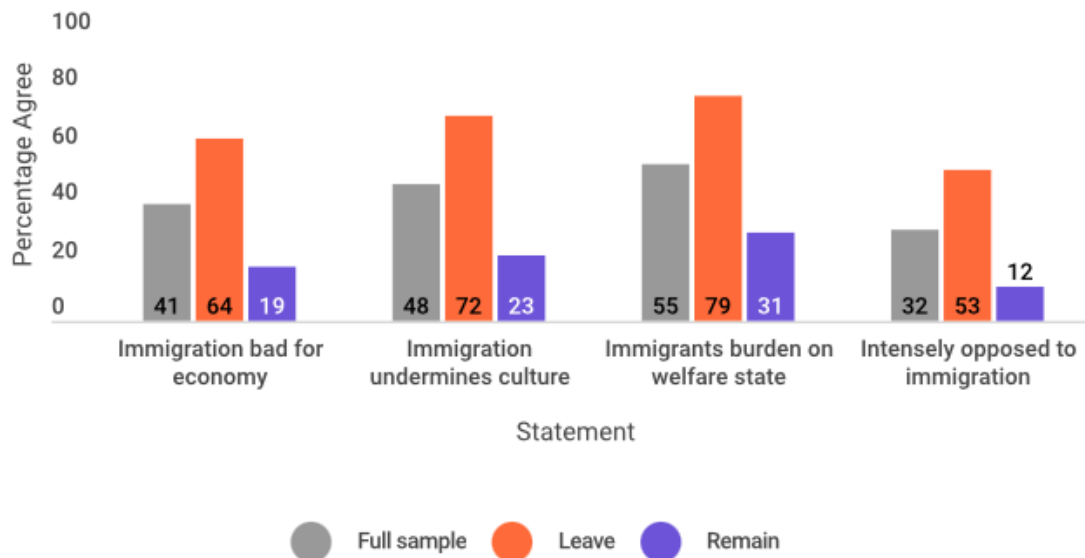| Types of Forces	Remain	Leave
Multiculturalism	19	81
Social Liberalism	20	80
Feminism	26	74
The Green…	22	78
Globalization	31	69
The Internet	29	71
Capitalism	49	51
Immigration	20	80

Percentage Agree

How the people who thought the following were good forces voted?

	Remain	Leave
	71	29
	68	32
	60	40
	62	38
	62	38
	51	49
	49	51
	79	21

Percentage Agree

● Remain ● Leave

Data Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls, n=, survey period June 21-23, 2016.
Question: Do you think of each of the following as being a force for good, a force for ill, or a mixed blessing?

Figure 14 - Brexit Immigrant Sentiment Survey Data: EU Vote Choice and Anti-Immigrant Perceptions

Statement	Full sample	Leave	Remain
Immigration bad for economy	41	64	19
Immigration undermines culture	48	72	23
Immigrants burden on welfare state	55	79	31
Intensely opposed to immigration	32	53	12

● Full sample ● Leave ● Remain

Data Source: 2014-2017 British Election Study Internet panel Wave 8, Conducted by YouGov, n =27,555, survey period May 6-June 22, 2016.
Respondents were asked a wide range of questions designed to capture their attitudes on key issues including the economy, cultural values, the welfare state, and immigration combined with party identification data.

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Evans, G., and Tilley, J. (2017). Postscript: Brexit as an expression of the 'democratic class struggle.' In Oxford University Press (Ed.), *The new politics of class. the political exclusion of the British Working Class.*
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