


# The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent

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## The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent

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### ABSTRACT


The outcome of the British referendum on European Union (EU) membership sent shockwaves through Europe. While Britain is an outlier when it comes to the strength of Euroscepticism, the anti-immigration and anti-establishment sentiments that produced the referendum outcome are gaining strength across Europe. Analysing campaign and survey data, this article shows that the divide between winners and losers of globalization was a key driver of the vote. Favouring British EU exit, or 'Brexit', was particularly common among less-educated, poorer and older voters, and those who expressed concerns about immigration and multi-culturalism. While there is no evidence of a short-term contagion effect with similar membership referendums in other countries, the Brexit vote nonetheless poses a serious challenge to the political establishment across Europe.

**KEYWORDS** Brexit; Britain; Euroscepticism; populism; referendum; voting behaviour

There was a sense of shock and disbelief in the early morning hours of 24 June 2016, both in Britain and across European capitals, when it became clear that a small majority (51.9 per cent) of British voters had cast their ballot in favour of leaving the European Union (EU). Markets reacted quickly to the Brexit vote: the British pound plummeted to a 31-year low against the dollar and over 2 trillion dollars were wiped off shares globally. The political ramifications were almost as immediate and dramatic, as the British Prime Minister David Cameron resigned, the main opposition Labour Party fought a bruising internal leadership battle, and the Scottish First Minister signalled Brexit could mean the break-up of the United Kingdom (UK). Even the leaders of Leave camp seemed surprised by the outcome as they admitted they had no plan for what 'Brexit' would look like. Meanwhile leaders of other EU member states called for Britain to invoke Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty so that exit negotiations could begin immediately.

In many ways, however, the outcome of the UK's referendum on EU membership was not surprising. First, the British public has consistently been the

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most Eurosceptic electorate in the EU ever since the UK joined in 1973, and opinion polls had suggested that this referendum would be a very close race. Second, in stark contrast to the pro-EU position held by most other EU governments, leading figures in Britain's governing Conservative Party are fiercely opposed to the EU, thus bringing the Eurosceptic message into the mainstream (De Vries and Edwards 2009). Third, it is well-established that referendums on European integration are highly unpredictable, and that voters often reject the proposals put to them by the government, even when supported by a consensus among mainstream political parties and experts (e.g., Franklin *et al.* 1994, 1995; Hobolt 2009). Finally, the anti-establishment message that made the Brexit Leave campaign so effective has also led to electoral successes of populist parties across Europe in recent years, generally fuelled by worries about immigration, lack of economic opportunities and anger with the political class (Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Kriesi *et al.* 2012).

Hence, on the one hand, the outcome of the Brexit referendum is a unique event, since no other member state<sup>1</sup> has ever decided to exit the European Union. Yet, on the other hand, the sentiments that led to this outcome are by no means a distinctively British phenomenon. The analyses presented in this article show that British Leave voters were motivated by anti-immigration and anti-establishment feelings. They also reveal stark demographic divides, as the less well-educated and the less well-off voted in large majorities to leave the EU, while the young graduates in the urban centres voted to stay. This divide between those who feel left behind by the forces of globalization and mass immigration and those who welcome such developments is also a driving force behind the increasing support for Eurosceptic parties on the radical right and left across Europe (see Kriesi *et al.* 2012; Teney *et al.* 2014). Concerns about the cultural and economic threats of globalization, immigration and European integration are effectively mobilized by parties, especially on the populist right, that have been gaining ground in national and European elections (see Hobolt and De Vries 2015, 2016b; Van Elsas *et al.* 2016). The challenge that the EU faces thus go beyond the loss of a major member state, and the economic and political ramification that follows from that. Perhaps more significant is the fact that many voters across Europe see the EU as part of the problem rather than the solution when it comes to protecting ordinary citizens from the challenges of an ever more globalized and integrated world.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the background of the British EU referendum and describes the campaign leading up to the vote. Second, the article presents an analysis of voting and survey data to explain the main divisions in the British electorate and the attitudes that explain support for Brexit. Finally, I consider some of the implications for European politics, with a particular focus on the likelihood of a domino effect with

other EU membership referendums across Europe and the electoral successes of Eurosceptic parties.

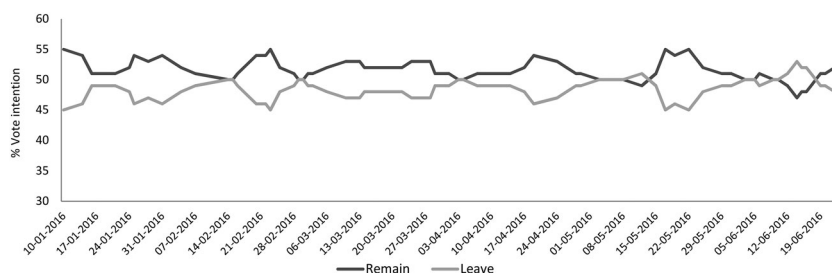
## The Brexit referendum campaign

The Brexit referendum came about as the culmination of decades of internal division in the British Conservative Party on the issue of European integration. To appease the Eurosceptic wing of the party and to avoid a flight of voters to the populist right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto included a pledge of a 'straight in-out referendum of the European Union by the end of 2017' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015: 32). Hence, as with many other EU referendums, this referendum was called for domestic party political and electoral reasons (Prosser 2016). After the Conservative Party won an outright majority in the May 2015 General Election, Cameron set out to negotiate a 'new settlement' for Britain in Europe, promising to win a host of concessions from Brussels. On 20 February 2016, Cameron finalized that deal with 27 other European leaders and set the June date for the EU membership referendum. The deal included the power to limit EU migrants' in-work benefits, a treaty change so the UK would not be bound by 'ever closer union', and the ability for the UK to enact 'an emergency safeguard' to protect the interests of the City of London and British businesses (Jensen and Snaith 2016). Yet this much-heralded 'new settlement' was widely derided by the British press for amounting to very little, and the announcement of the deal even led to a boost for the Leave side in the polls (YouGov 2016). The deal subsequently played a very minor role in the referendum campaign.

Despite the failure to win over voters with a new settlement for Britain in the EU, the government nonetheless felt confident that it could win the referendum. All the major parties in Parliament were in favour of remaining in the EU, including the major opposition party, Labour. The Remain side also had the major business interests and trade unions on its side, as well as most foreign leaders and international organizations. The governing Conservative Party itself, however, was openly divided in the campaign with several cabinet members, including the charismatic former mayor of London (and now foreign secretary) Boris Johnson campaigning to leave the EU. The newspapers were split when it came to recommending an In or Out vote. A media study of the campaign by Loughborough University shows that Conservative politicians dominated media coverage on both sides of the campaign, accounting for almost two-thirds of all referendum-related media appearances, with David Cameron the most prominent In campaigner (mentioned in 25 per cent of news items) and Boris Johnson the most prominent Out campaigner (mentioned in 19 per cent of news items). In contrast, the Labour Party led a more lacklustre campaign (its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was only

mentioned in 6 per cent of news items) (see Loughborough University 2016). The 'poll of polls', shown in Figure 1, reveals a very close race with slight lead for the Remain side during most of the campaign, but with some fluctuation in the last month of the campaign, when several polls indicated a Leave majority.

There were two official campaign organizations, 'Britain Stronger in Europe' and 'Vote Leave'.<sup>2</sup> From the outset of the campaign, the battle lines were starkly drawn up by the two sides: the economy versus immigration. The messages were clear: vote Remain to avoid the economic risk of a Brexit ('A leap in the dark') or vote Leave to regain control of British borders, British law-making and restrict immigration ('Take back control'). On both sides, the campaign rhetoric was largely negative with the In camp focusing on the threat of economic disaster in the case of Brexit vote (dubbed 'Project Fear' by the Leave camp) and the Out campaign mobilizing people's fears of immigration (referred to as 'Project Hate' by the Remain camp). The Remain side was hopeful that the economic uncertainties associated with Brexit would ultimately persuade voters to choose the status quo option, since there was an overwhelming consensus among experts that a Brexit outcome would have negative economic consequences for Britain. In contrast, the Leave camp presented the referendum as a unique opportunity to regain control of British law-making, borders and restrict immigration. The media analysis of the campaign reveal that both camps were successful in setting the agenda, since the economy and immigration clearly dominated the news coverage. In the first three weeks of the campaign economic issues received considerably more attention than immigration, to the benefit of the Remain camp. There was, however, a shift towards immigration as the dominant issue in the latter weeks of the campaign, which may have benefited the Leave campaign (Loughborough University 2016). Interestingly, other issues, such as sovereignty, security, democracy and devolution, were much more marginal issues in the media coverage of the referendum.



**Figure 1.** Referendum vote intention Poll of Polls. Source: Poll of Polls of referendum vote intention, compiled by Prof. John Curtice and NatCen Social Research, available at <http://whatukthinks.org>.

This picture of a simple choice between the economy and immigration is also reinforced by survey evidence. According to one YouGov poll, 84 per cent of Leave voters thought that there would be ‘less immigration into Britain’ if we left the EU, compared to only 27 per cent of Remain voters. The same survey asked about whether Britain would be worse or better off economically following Brexit, and only 4 per cent of Leave voters thought Britain would be worse off, despite a broad consensus among experts that this would indeed be the case. In contrast, 78 per cent of ‘remainers’ thought Britain would be worse off economically (YouGov/Times 20–22 June 2016). To explore voters’ reasoning further, Christopher Wratil and I designed a survey where a representative sample of over 5,000 British citizens were asked to think about the arguments they have personally heard during the referendum campaign and summarize the main argument in their own words (Hobolt and Wratil 2016). When analysing these thousands of open-ended responses, we find that immigration and the economy emerge as the main arguments. The analysis identifies around nine distinct arguments mentioned by voters that centre on immigration, sovereignty, the economy, lack of information, and distrust in the government, as summarized in Table 1. Similar to the media analysis, we find that a number of other issues often central to the debate on European integration, notably democracy and environmental protection, do not appear as prominent arguments for or against membership in the minds of voters in this referendum debate.

The British public was clearly sharply divided in what it considers to be the main issue of the referendum. As Table 1 shows, the two key arguments that resonate more with Remain voters than with Leave voters relate to the economy, specifically the loss of economic stability in the event of Brexit and the economic benefits of EU membership, while Leave voters highlight mainly concerns about immigration as expressed by one respondent: ‘Immigrants flooding into the country if we don’t regain control of our own borders.’

Another key argument for Leave voters is lack of trust in David Cameron and his government. Hence, the Leave side successfully mobilized not only

**Table 1.** Main arguments for Remain and Leave voters.

Main referendum arguments:	Mentioned mainly by	
	Leave voters	Remain voters
Immigration control	X	
No trust in Prime Minister/Government	X	
Cost of EU membership	X	
Security implications	X	
Lack of knowledge and trust	X	
Lack of information	X	X
Economic risk of Brexit		X
Economic stability in the EU		X
Economic benefits from the EU		X

Source: Original poll by Sara B. Hobolt and Christopher Wratil conducted by YouGov between 9 and 11 May 2016. See Hobolt and Wratil (2016) for more details.

salient concerns about immigration but also anti-establishment attitudes, portraying the vote as a chance for ordinary citizens to 'take back control' from the élites in Brussels. The analysis of vote choice below shows that such anti-élite sentiments appealed to many Leave voters.

## Explaining the Brexit vote

While the Brexit referendum was only the second membership referendum in an existing member state (the first being the British EEC referendum in 1975, where 67 per cent voted to remain), there have been over 50 referendums on other aspects of European integration, mainly accession and treaty ratification (Hobolt 2009). Consequently, there is a large literature on how voters decide in such referendums. Much of the scholarly debate has focused on whether voters decide on the basis of their attitudes towards the EU (the issue-voting approach) or whether they use the referendum to express their dissatisfaction with the government (the second-order approach). The first approach focuses on individuals' values and beliefs and argues that voting behaviour in EU referendums reflects people's underlying, broad attitudes towards European integration (Garry *et al.* 2005; Siune *et al.* 1994). The alternative explanation of voting behaviour in EU referendums is inspired by the 'second-order' theory of elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980), where voters are thus expected to use their vote as a means of signalling their dissatisfaction with the government, or the domestic political class more generally (Franklin *et al.* 1994, 1995). Other work on referendums has argued that these approaches are not mutually exclusive, but that the nature of the referendum campaigns influences how voters decide. For example, Hug (2002) argues that punishment strategies (second-order voting) are more likely to occur when governments employ referendums in an attempt to shore up support and when the outcome is legally non-binding. Other studies have examined how the salience of the issue of European integration affects attitudes and reception of élite cues and, in turn, influences patterns of voting behaviour in referendums (see Franklin 2002; Hobolt 2009). When salience is high, and voters have a greater interest in European affairs, they are more likely to rely on their attitudes towards European integration and less likely to treat the referendum as a 'second-order election'.

As the Brexit referendum was clearly a high salience referendum with a long and intense campaign and high turnout (72.2 per cent), we would expect that issue-specific attitudes (Euroscepticism) to matter, but importantly we also want to examine from where such opinions originate. The literature on Euroscepticism outlines three main approaches to explaining variation in support for, and opposition to, European integration: 'utilitarian', 'identity' and 'cue-taking' approaches (see Hobolt and de Vries 2016a). The basic

proposition of the utilitarian approach is that since European trade liberalization favours citizens with higher levels of human capital (education and occupational skills) and income, such individuals will be more supportive of European integration (Gabel 1998; Gabel and Palmer 1995; Tucker *et al.* 2002). Moreover, a growing literature has shown that a divide has emerged between the so-called winners and losers of globalization and that these groups have coherent and distinct attitudinal positions towards issues such as international co-operation, European integration and immigration (e.g., Azmanova 2011; Evans and Mellon 2016; Kriesi *et al.* 2012; Teney *et al.* 2014). In a nutshell, the 'winners' of globalization – the young, well-educated professionals in urban centres – favour more open borders, immigration and international co-operation, whereas the 'left behind' – the working class, less educated and the older – oppose such openness. There is consistent evidence to suggest that socioeconomic factors shape attitudes towards European integration, and recent work even reveals that education has become a more important determinant of EU support over time, as the less educated are becoming less supportive of the integration project (Hakhverdian *et al.* 2013). Similarly, in the Brexit referendum I would expect that those who are less educated would hold more Eurosceptic and anti-immigration attitudes and be more likely to vote to Leave.

Demographics may tell part of the story about Euroscepticism, but more deep-seated attachments have also been found to drive such attitudes. Scholars have argued that European integration is not only, or even primarily, about trade and the single market, but also about a pooling of sovereignty that potentially erodes national self-determination and blurs boundaries between distinct national communities (Carey 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2005, 2009; McLaren 2006). Not surprisingly, therefore, individuals' attachment to their nation and their perceptions of people from other cultures influence their attitudes towards European integration. Carey (2002) has shown that people with strong national identity are less supportive of European integration. There is also evidence in studies by McLaren (2002, 2006) and others that Euroscepticism is closely related to a general hostility towards other cultures, such as negative attitudes towards minority groups and immigrants (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Hobolt *et al.* 2011). Hooghe and Marks (2005) have demonstrated that individuals who conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are likely to be considerably more Eurosceptic than those who have multiple nested identities. Hence, my expectation is that strong national identity, especially English identity, to be associated with the Leave vote, while voters with a European identity would be much more likely to vote to remain in the EU.

Yet, as we know from the second-order election literature on referendum behaviour, vote choices are not always driven by identities or attitudes towards the issues at stake, but also by feelings about the political



establishment more generally and the government in particular. The literature on Euroscepticism has also shown that citizens rely on 'cues' and proxies when forming opinions about the EU (Anderson 1998). Since citizens generally pay more attention to the national political arena than European politics, it makes sense that they employ domestic cues to form opinions about European integration. The recommendations provided by national political parties are crucial cues (Hobolt 2007; Lupia 1992). These are also likely to have mattered in the Brexit referendum, especially when the parties were united in their position on the referendum. As already discussed, the governing Conservative party was openly divided during the campaign, and cue-taking could thus have worked in both directions. Yet attitudes toward the political élite may also play a very different role in referendums, as voters used the ballot to punish the political establishment. Indeed, the Leave campaign sought to frame the referendum as a battle between ordinary people and the political establishment, in line with the populist idea of a fundamental division between the 'the pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde 2007). Hence, I would also expect that the Brexit vote was, at least in part, driven by such 'populist attitudes' and a general disaffection with the political class.

### Analysis of vote choice

To summarize the discussion above, I expect that four sets of factors shaped vote choices: socioeconomic factors; geographical identities; feelings about the domestic political establishment; and, finally, policy attitudes. These factors are of course highly interrelated. Following the Michigan model of voting behaviour (Campbell *et al.* 1960), we can think of these predictors as a 'funnel of causality' where sociodemographic factors and identities are causally prior to, and shape, political attitudes that in turn are the proximal cause of vote choice. Hence, each of these models is estimated separately to test the association with vote choice, but the analysis here does not allow us to disentangle the complex causal mechanisms that link these factors together.

To test each of the explanatory approaches I analyse the rich data contained in the 7<sup>th</sup> Wave of the British Election Study. This wave constitutes the pre-campaign 'Panel Survey Study of the 2016 EU Referendum', conducted prior to the referendum.<sup>3</sup> The dependent variable is thus Leave vote intention in the referendum, where respondents were asked: 'If there was a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union tomorrow, how do you think you would vote?' There is very considerable stability in the predictors of vote intention and actual vote choice. The advantage of this particular dataset is not only the impressive sample size (30,895 respondents), but also the number of variables included in the questionnaire that allows us to investigate all of the hypothesized factors.

Starting with the utilitarian model that focuses on how an individual's sociodemographic position influences her attitudes towards the EU, and in turn, vote choice, we examine the impact of level of education, household income, and age. The model also includes individual perceptions of changes in personal economic conditions in this model.<sup>4</sup> The second model is the identity model, also discussed above. This includes measures of European identity as well as the strength of British and English identity.<sup>5</sup> The expectation is that people who feel strongly European would be more likely to remain in the European Union. In contrast, a stronger national identity is expected to be associated with the Leave vote.

The third model focuses on how people's attitude towards the domestic political class can shape referendum outcomes. Following the second-order election approach, the expectation is that attitudes towards the domestic political élite matter. However, this can lead to two contrasting expectations: cue-taking and punishment. On the one hand, we know that people take cues from their preferred party when forming opinions on complex issues such as EU membership. Hence, the model includes a variable that indicates which party the respondents would vote for.<sup>6</sup> The expectation is that if a party recommends a Remain vote, voters who feel close to this party would be more likely to also vote Remain, and vice versa for Leave. However, as already mentioned, the parties were not all united in their approach. The Conservative Party in particular was internally divided, the Labour Party less so, while the Liberal Democrats were united for Remain and UKIP united in their opposition to membership. On the other hand, voters may also use referendums as an opportunity to punish the political establishment and vote against the status quo. I therefore include a scale of items that captures individuals' agreement with this populist message,<sup>7</sup> as well as their general distrust in politicians<sup>8</sup> and their (dis)approval of the government's performance.<sup>9</sup>

The final model is the classic issue-voting model that assumes that voters base their choices on relevant policy preferences. The model thus includes a number of items that capture attitudes towards salient issues discussed by each camp in the campaign, including EU immigration (should more or fewer be allowed to come to Britain?), parliamentary sovereignty (should the UK Parliament override EU laws?), trade with Europe (good or bad for Britain?), and views on whether the EU has made Britain more prosperous, undermined Britain's distinctive identity, and helped prevent wars. Given that so much of the debate was focused on what would happen in the event of Brexit, the model also includes variables capturing the respondents' assessments of whether Brexit will lead to more or less trade and more or less immigration. The results are shown in a series of logistic regression models in [Table 2](#).

Model 1 in [Table 2](#) lends support to the utilitarian model of support for the EU. In line with our expectation, I find that those who have benefitted from

**Table 2.** Explaining the Brexit vote.

	(1) Sociodemographics			(2) Identity			(2) Anti-elite and cue-taking			(4) Attitudes			Marginal effects %	
	Coef.	SEs	Sig.	Coef.	SEs	Sig.	Coef.	SEs	Sig.	Coef.	SEs	Sig.	One SD $\Delta$ (one unit $\Delta$ for 0/1)	(Model #)
Constant	0.45	0.09	**	0.94	0.12	**	-2.32	0.17	**	-14.99	0.26	**		
Gender	-0.08	0.03	**	-0.24	0.03	**	0.00	0.03		-0.13	0.05	**	-2	(1)
Age	0.02	0.00	**	0.03	0.00	**	0.02	0.00	**	0.01	0.00	**	11	(1)
Education	-0.40	0.01	**	-0.19	0.01	**	-0.30	0.01	**	-0.08	0.02	**	-13	(1)
Income	-0.04	0.01	**	-0.05	0.01	**	-0.07	0.01	**	-0.05	0.01	**	-2	(1)
Personal econ. eval. (positive)	-0.10	0.02	**										-2	(1)
European identity				-0.80	0.01	**							-37	(2)
English identity				0.18	0.01	**							10	(2)
British identity				0.13	0.01	**							5	(2)
Lack of trust in politicians							0.24	0.01	**				9	(3)
Government disapproval							-0.02	0.02					-1	(3)
Populist attitudes							0.08	0.01	**				4	(3)
Conservative supporter							0.49	0.05	**				12	(3)
Labour supporter							-0.99	0.04	**				-25	(3)
Lib Dem supporter							0.00	0.08					0	(3)
SNP/PC supporter							-0.83	0.07	**				-21	(3)
UKIP supporter							3.55	0.12	**				88	(3)
EU has not made UK more prosperous										0.93	0.04	**	23	(4)
EU has not helped prevent war										0.55	0.03	**	15	(4)
Free trade bad for UK										0.47	0.03	**	8	(4)
UK Parliament to override EU law										0.42	0.03	**	12	(4)
EU has undermined British identity										0.80	0.03	**	24	(4)
Anti-EU migrants										0.13	0.01	**	8	(4)
Brexit will not reduce trade										1.07	0.04	**	24	(4)
Brexit will lower immigration										0.56	0.03	**	13	(4)
N	23, 914			23, 914			23, 914			23, 914				
Pseudo R-squared	0.09			0.35			0.27			0.64				

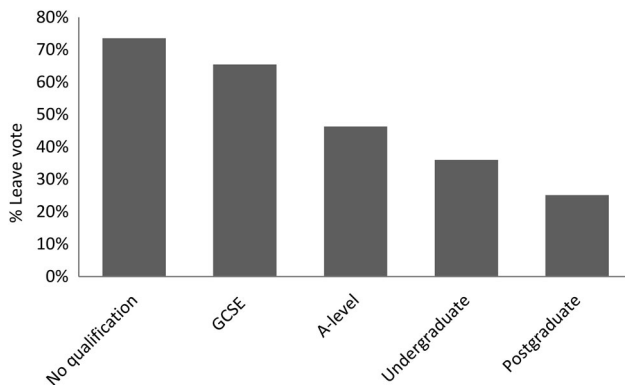
Note: Logistic regression models with Leave vote as dependent variable. Non-voters/don't knows excluded. \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Source: BES Online Panel Wave 7.

increased international co-operation and trade – the better educated, the young and the well-off – are less likely to vote for Leave compared to those who are ‘left behind’ – the low-skilled, the old and the poor. Simple descriptive statistics reveals a clear educational divide in the Brexit vote. [Figure 2](#) shows that that only a quarter of people with a postgraduate degree voted to leave, whereas over two-thirds of those with no qualifications did so.

This impact of education on vote choices is also highly significant in the multiple logistic regression models. As log odds are not straightforward to interpret, the last column in [Table 2](#) shows the marginal effect of one standard deviation change in each of the explanatory variables on the probability of voting Leave. This shows the strongest effect for education and age. Going from A-level education to an undergraduate degree reduces the probability of voting Leave by about 10 percentage points, all other things being equal. Similarly, a 50 year old is 10 percentage points more likely to support Brexit compared to a 33 year old voter. Men are slightly more likely to vote Leave (2 percentage points), as are those with lower incomes and those who feel that their financial situation has deteriorated. These are very substantial differences, especially when it comes to the generation and education gaps; however, the overall model fit is modest (pseudo R-squared of 0.09).

The model fit is much improved when the subjective assessments of identity are included in Model 2 (pseudo R-squared of 0.34). Unsurprisingly, European identity in particular is a powerful predictor of the Remain vote. A standard deviation increase in ‘Europeaness’ reduces the probability of voting Leave by as much as 37 percentage points. In comparison, a one standard deviation increase in English identity increases the likelihood of voting Leave by 10 percentage points and 5 percentage points for British identity. It makes sense that we find a greater effect for English national identity compared to the more ‘inclusive’ British identity, since English nationalism is often associated with the defence of national sovereignty in opposition to transfers



**Figure 2.** The education gap. Source: BES Online Panel Wave 7.

of powers both upwards (to the EU) and downwards (to devolved nations) (see Wellings 2012). Overall, the results show that deep-seated identities matter when it comes to vote choice. But what about attitudes towards the political class?

Model 3 demonstrates that parties matter, but not necessarily as expected. While the Conservative-led government advocated Remain, Conservative supporters are 12 percentage points more likely to vote for Brexit compared to people without a preferred party. Labour voters were more in favour of Remain (25 percentage points), while we find no statistically significant effect for Liberal Democrats supporters. The largest effect is found among UKIP supporters, who were 88 percentage points more likely to be Brexiteers – unsurprising given that opposition to EU membership is the main policy goal of the party. Supporters of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Welsh Plaid Cymru are more likely to be Remainers. So party cues matter, especially when they are united in the cause. But for many voters, this referendum was also an opportunity to vote against the political class in its entirety. There is a strong impact of lack of trust in politicians on the Leave vote: one standard deviation increase in distrust leads to a 9 percentage point increase in the probability of a Leave vote. Similarly, a standard deviation change in populist attitudes leads to a 4 percentage point change in the Leave likelihood. Interestingly, however, disapproval of the performance of the government has no effect on the Leave vote, at least not when controlling for preferred party. So the Brexit vote cannot be interpreted as a straightforward punishment of the Cameron government. Overall, this anti-establishment and cue-taking model explains about as much variance as the identity model.

Finally, turning to the attitudes model we see even greater explanatory power, as we would expect, since EU issue attitudes should be the most proximal cause of vote choice in such a high intensity referendum campaign (Hobolt 2009). As anticipated, the results show that the issues mobilized in the campaign – the EU's effect on the economy and immigration – are highly correlated with vote choice. Both economic perceptions and cultural concerns had a substantial impact on vote choices. Those who felt that the EU had undermined the distinct identity of Britain were much more likely to vote to leave, whereas the view that the EU had made Britain more prosperous had a similarly sizeable effect. Attitudes towards immigration also mattered: individuals who thought Britain should have many fewer EU migrants were 32 percentage points more likely to vote for Brexit compared to those who wanted more migrants. Equally, expectations about the consequences of Brexit had very significant effects. Voters convinced by the argument that Brexit would reduce trade and employment were much more likely to vote to remain compared to those who were not convinced about the negative impact on the economy. Similarly, anticipation about changes to immigration post-Brexit mattered to voters (although the effect size is about half).

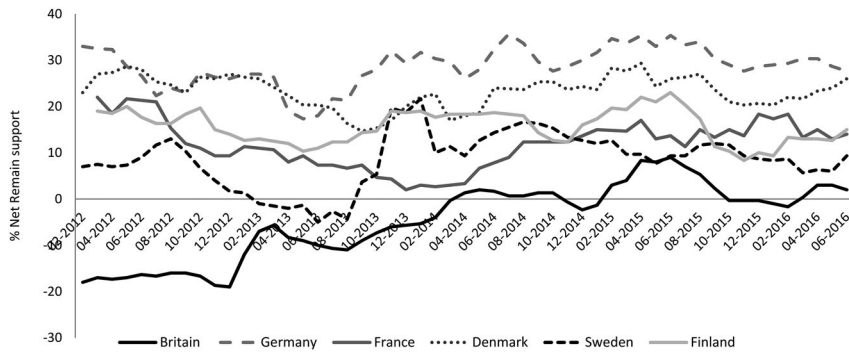
In sum, the analysis shows that EU issue attitudes were mobilized during this referendum campaign and helped to shape vote choices. Traditional concerns about sovereignty and the economic benefits of membership were important, but equally salient were identity concerns related to the impact of immigration and European integration on Britain's cultural identity. Are such concerns unique to Britain or can we expect similar revolts against the pro-EU élites in other member states?

### **Is Britain an outlier?**

One of the primary concerns in European capitals following the British referendum was the risk of contagion. While the EU may well be able to survive the exit of Britain – always a recalcitrant member state – the worry was that this could trigger a domino effect with referendums in other countries. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, several leaders of populist Eurosceptic parties called for their own EU membership referendums, including in France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and Sweden. However, unlike in Britain, where the governing Conservative party called a referendum owing to internal divisions on the issue, most mainstream parties in Western Europe are staunchly pro-EU. Even the most successful Eurosceptic parties in Western Europe, such as the Danish People's Party and the Dutch and Austrian Freedom parties, would need to form a coalition with pro-EU parties in order to gain office, and they would find it hard to muster a parliamentary majority to call a referendum on EU membership. This makes membership referendums less likely in other countries, although far from impossible, given pressure from insurgent populist right-wing parties. But even if the Eurosceptic right succeeds in their calls for more membership referendums, it is far from certain that the outcome would be another exit vote. Despite growing Euroscepticism in the wake of the eurozone and migrant crises, opinion polls have consistently shown that Britain is an outlier when it comes to support for leaving the European Union. [Figure 3](#) shows the 'Remain in' lead in response to the question 'If there was a referendum on your country's membership on the European Union, how would you vote?' since 2012.

It clearly shows that the UK is the only one of the member states surveyed where there has been public support for leaving the EU for most of the period since 2012. In contrast, the net gap between those wanting to stay in and those wanting to leave the EU is well above 20 percentage points in favour of staying in both Germany and Denmark, and also above 10 percentage points in France and Finland, with greater fluctuation in support in Sweden.

Yet that is not to say that the Brexit vote represents a uniquely British phenomenon. Indeed, it can be argued that it reflects the same sentiments that drive increases in support for populist Eurosceptic parties across Europe in recent years, especially in the aftermath of the eurozone crisis. In



**Figure 3.** Support for EU membership across Europe. Source: YouGov EuroTrack, 3-months rolling average.

the 2014 European Parliament elections, such parties won around 30 per cent of the seats (Hobolt and De Vries 2016b; Treib 2014). In national elections populist right-wing parties opposed to the EU, such as Geert Wilders's far-right Freedom Party, the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats, have gained electoral support in the recent decade (Hobolt and Tilley 2016). These challenger parties also effectively use populist rhetoric that pits 'ordinary people' against the political establishment. Recent studies have shown that the rise in support for these challenger parties reflect similar divides to those identified in the Brexit campaign, with higher levels of support for Eurosceptic parties among the less educated, people adversely affected by the eurozone crisis, and among those who oppose immigration and multiculturalism (see Hobolt and De Vries 2016b; Hobolt and Tilley 2016). There is a growing divide, both economically and culturally, between those who feel left behind by the forces of globalization and those who feel they have benefitted from it. The former group favours a 'drawbridge up' policy of less European integration, closed borders and fewer migrants, whereas the latter group are in favour of greater openness and international co-operation. The eurozone crisis and the Mediterranean migrant crisis have only served to deepen these divides.

## Conclusion

Since the Danes rejected the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, referendums on European integration have often had élite-defying consequences. Yet the Brexit referendum is arguable the most significant in the EU's history. The exit of a member state from the EU is unprecedented, and the political and economic consequences are likely to be considerable and prolonged, not only for Britain but for the EU as a whole. It is convenient to see the outcome of the Brexit referendum as yet another example of British exceptionalism. After all,

Britain has always been a reluctant partner standing on the side lines of the European project. As the French President De Gaulle noted as early as 1963: 'England is in effect insular ... She has, in all her doings, very marked and very original habits and traditions.' (Franks 1964: 70)

But this referendum cannot be dismissed as just a sign of English insularity. Whereas public and party political Euroscepticism is more pronounced in Britain than in the rest of the EU, the sentiments that led a majority of voters to opt for Brexit are gaining strength across the continent. Concerns about immigration and the loss of a distinct national identity were important to many who favoured Brexit, and they were issues that clearly divided the Leave and Remain camps. Such fears of immigration and multiculturalism are more pronounced among voters with lower levels of education and in a more vulnerable position in the labour market. Such voters also voted most decisively for Leave, whereas the 'winners' of globalization – the younger and highly educated professionals – were overwhelmingly in favour of Remain. The results of the Brexit referendum portray a deeply divided country, not only along class, education and generational lines, but also in terms of geography. Generally the Remain side did better in the larger multicultural cities (especially in London) and where there were more graduates, whereas the Leave side was strongest in the English countryside and in the post-industrial north-eastern towns with larger working class populations. It also divided the nations of the UK: while both England and Wales voted 53 per cent Leave, Northern Ireland and Scotland voted Remain (at 56 and 62 per cent respectively).

Across Europe we find similar divisions between the so-called winners of globalization and those who feel left behind. While the former tend to embrace European integration and multiculturalism, the latter feel threatened by the changes that globalization and European integration have brought about. Such divisions have been successfully mobilized by populist parties across Europe, especially on the right, who give a voice to the fears of 'ordinary, decent people' in opposition to a political establishment that has often failed to listen. We see this expressed not only in referendums, but also in the electoral successes of populist Eurosceptic parties, such as Front National in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party in Denmark and the Freedom Party in Austria. While the British experience may make membership referendums less likely in other EU countries, as it has starkly illustrated the risks associated with such plebiscites, the rise of populist Eurosceptic parties nonetheless presents a significant challenge to the EU. Gone are the days when élites could pursue European integration with no regard to public opinion. There has been a move away from the 'permissive consensus' of the early period of integration towards a period where the EU is an increasingly contested and politicized issue in the domestic political arena. The future of the EU hinges more than ever on citizens' support for



the European integration project. The challenge for European leaders, both domestically and at the European level, is to find a way of addressing the concerns of the many citizens who have not felt the economic benefits of free trade and globalization, and who feel that their distinct national identity and culture is under threat from immigration and European integration.

## Notes

1. There is one precedent to the Brexit vote. In 1982, Greenland, part of Denmark, voted by 52 per cent to secede from the EEC, but Denmark remained within the EEC. That referendum had limited consequences for the EU as a whole, given Greenland's small population and its relationship to Denmark.
2. There were also other campaigning groups notably on the Leave side, such as Leave.EU and Grassroots Out with clear anti-immigration and anti-establishment messages.
3. Wave 7 was conducted online by the survey organization YouGov between 14th April 2016 and 4th May 2016 (Fieldhouse et al. 2016).
4. The respondents were asked: 'How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago?'
5. Respondents were asked to place themselves on seven-point scales in terms of the strength of their 'Europeanness', 'Britishness' and 'Englishness'.
6. 'And if there were a UK General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?'
7. The cumulative scale (with an alpha scalability score of 0.84) consists of responses to the following five items: 'The politicians in the UK Parliament need to follow the will of the people'; 'The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions'; 'I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician'; 'Elected officials talk too much and take too little action'; and 'What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles'.
8. 'How much trust do you have in Members of Parliament in general?'
9. 'Do you approve or disapprove of the job that each of the UK government is doing?'

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