



The EU referendum

John Curtice

The result explained

Professor Curtice explains the demographic and geographical differences in the level of support for remaining and leaving, why these differences arose and how the supporters of the various parties across the UK were divided

Whether Britain should or should not be a member of the European Union (EU) and, if so, on what terms, has long been a disruptive and divisive issue in British party politics. In 1975 it occasioned the first ever UK-wide referendum. In the 1980s it helped split the Labour Party and in the 1990s gave rise to serious tensions in the governing Conservative Party. Most recently, it has disturbed the normal rhythms of postwar English electoral politics with the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

It was the rise in UKIP support — and continuing tensions inside the Conservative Party — that persuaded David Cameron to promise in January 2013 that, should the Conservatives win an overall majority in the 2015 general election, he would, after renegotiating Britain's terms of membership, hold a second referendum on Britain's EU membership. In an implicit acknowledgement of the inability of the country's mechanisms of representative democracy to resolve the European question, it was back to the tactics of the 1970s.

Except that this time the result was very different. On 5 June 1975, in a ballot in which, at 65% turnout was lower than was then the norm for a general election, 67% voted 'Yes' to staying in what was then commonly known as the Common Market. Just 33% voted 'No'. But on 23 June 2016, in a ballot in which 72% voted, more than had done so at any UK-wide ballot since 1992, the UK voted

Exam context

This article is essential reading for AS students. It focuses on the following aspects of the specifications:

Edexcel

Unit 1 Democracy and political participation

AQA

Unit 1 Electoral systems

OCR

Unit F851 Electoral systems and referenda

narrowly, by 52% to 48%, in favour of leaving the EU. As a result, Cameron immediately announced his intention to resign as prime minister while the UK government faced dealing with the consequences of an outcome that it had not sought.

Demographic differences

Not that the UK voted as one. Rather, there were some deep demographic and geographical differences in the level of support for remaining and leaving. The key demographic differences are outlined in Tables 1 and 2.

First, younger people were relatively keen on remaining in the EU, while, in contrast, older voters tended to want to leave (Table 1). Indeed, it appears that a majority of those aged under 45 voted to remain, while most of those aged 45 and over opted for leaving.

Second, university graduates voted by at least two to one in favour of remaining, while those whose highest

qualification (if any) was one normally obtained at age 16 voted at least as heavily in favour of leaving. This latter difference overlaps with social class — university graduates are more likely to be in middle-class jobs — but of the two it is education that distinguishes more sharply between supporters of Remain and those backing Leave.

There was also one other demographic difference of note. Those from a black or ethnic minority background were much less likely to vote to leave than were those who considered themselves to have a white background. According to a very large poll conducted on polling day for Lord Ashcroft, only 32% of those from a black or ethnic minority background voted to leave, while 68% preferred to remain. The equivalent figures among those from a white background were 53% and 47% respectively.

THERE WERE SOME DEEP DEMOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR REMAINING AND LEAVING

Table 1 Referendum vote by age group

Age group	Remain (%)	Leave (%)
18–24	73	27
25–34	62	38
35–44	52	48
45–54	44	56
55–64	43	57
65+	40	60

Source: Lord Ashcroft

Table 2 Referendum vote by educational attainment

Highest qualification	Remain (%)	Leave (%)
Degree	68	32
Higher qualification below degree	48	52
A-level or equivalent	50	50
GCSE or equivalent	30	70
Other/don't know	45	55

Source: YouGov on the day of poll weighted to actual result



The results were projected onto BBC Broadcasting House

Geographical division

These demographic differences were reflected in how different parts of the country voted. Table 3 summarises the geographical division of the vote by showing how each of the four parts of the UK voted, and how the outcome varied across the government office regions into which England is officially divided. London's population has by far the youngest age profile of any part of the UK, the highest proportion of graduates and the most ethnically diverse character. This explains why it voted by almost three to two in favour of remaining. In contrast, all of the rest of England together with Wales voted to leave, and especially so in the North and the Midlands where graduates are least numerous.

The link between the demography of an area and the way in which it voted is even clearer if we look at how the results varied between local authorities (which was the

Table 3 How the UK divided

	Remain (%)	Leave (%)	Turnout (%)
London	59.9	40.1	69.6
South East	48.2	51.8	76.6
South West*	47.4	52.6	76.7
Eastern	43.5	56.5	75.7
East Midlands	41.2	58.8	74.1
West Midlands	40.7	59.3	72.0
Yorkshire & Humber	42.3	57.7	70.7
North West	46.3	53.7	70.0
North East	42.0	58.0	69.3
England	46.6	53.4	73.0
Wales	47.5	52.5	71.7
Scotland	62.0	38.0	67.2
Northern Ireland	55.8	44.2	62.7
United Kingdom	48.1	51.9	72.2

* includes Gibraltar

Sources: Electoral Commission/Sky News/BBC News

level at which the count was conducted). On average in England and Wales the vote to leave was just 42% in those areas where more than 32% of the adult population has a degree (as recorded by the 2011 Census) compared with as much as 64% in those places where less than 22% have such a qualification. Equally, support for leaving averaged just 48% in those local authorities where less than 15% of the population is aged 65 or more, but 57% in those places where more than 20% fall into that category.

However, the overall demography of the vote cannot account for all of the geographical variation. Scotland's population is not especially highly educated, young or ethnically diverse, yet it voted more strongly in favour of remaining than any other part of the UK. Equally, Northern Ireland, the only part of the UK to share a land border with another EU country, also voted quite clearly to remain. We will return to this feature of the result later.

The economy and immigration

Why did these demographic and geographical differences arise? According to voters' own self-report, the most important issues in the referendum were the perceived economic consequences of leaving and the implications of EU membership for the level of immigration into the UK. According to an Ipsos MORI poll conducted just before polling day, 32% said the most important issue for them in deciding which way to vote was 'the number of immigrants coming into Britain', while 31% referred to 'the impact on Britain's economy'. No other issue was mentioned by more than 16%.

But which issue mattered most to voters depended on which way they were inclined to vote. Leave supporters were more likely to mention immigration while Remain supporters referred more often to the economy. Table 4, based on the final poll conducted by YouGov shortly before polling day, makes clear why this was the case. A plurality of voters believed that leaving the EU would mean that Britain was economically worse off. At 78%, this perception was especially common among Remain voters — indeed, on no other issue did they regard the consequences of leaving

so negatively. At the same time, a majority of all voters reckoned immigration would be better (that is, lower) if we left, and this was the beneficial consequence cited most often by Leave supporters themselves.

Young voters and graduates took a very different view of these two central issues than did older voters and those with few, if any, educational qualifications. According to YouGov's final poll, those aged 18–24 were almost twice as likely (59%) as those aged 65 or more (30%) to feel that Britain would be economically worse off if it left the EU. An earlier YouGov poll revealed that as many as 54% of graduates felt that leaving would make Britain economically worse off, compared with 24% of those with an age 16 qualification.

Equally, according to YouGov's final poll, only 43% of those aged 18–24 reckoned that immigration would fall if we left the EU, compared with 61% of those aged 65 or older. Only 45% of graduates felt that immigration would drop if we left, compared with 68% of those whose highest qualification (if any) is one normally obtained at age 16.

Social change

Why did these differences of perspective emerge? For a start, immigration is one of those social issues on which differences of outlook by age and educational background have long been in evidence. Older voters are more likely to regard the social change that immigration can bring as a challenge to the culture and ways of doing things to which they have become accustomed. Graduates, in contrast, have often been encouraged by their educational experience to think more widely and to accept that people may engage in different cultural customs and ways of doing things.

These two groups are also inclined to view differently the economic effects of the greater mobility that has come with a more global world. University graduates typically have the skills required to compete in, and even profit from, a world in which people can freely seek employment in another country. Those with few, if any, educational qualifications, in contrast, are more inclined to feel that the presence of foreign workers reduces wage rates and job security.

Party support

These social divisions cut across the kinds of people who typically support Britain's two largest parties. While the Conservative Party tends to be more popular among graduates working in the private sector, it also tends to win more votes among older people. Although Labour is relatively popular among working-class voters who typically have relatively few educational qualifications, it also performs relatively well both among younger and among ethnic minority voters together with graduates working in the public sector.

Consequently, both parties' supporters were heavily divided on polling day. While Lord Ashcroft's poll found that 67% of those who voted for Labour 12 months earlier did follow the party's recommendation to vote to Remain, that still meant 37% backed Leave. Cameron had even less success in persuading Conservative voters to follow his lead — just 42% of them voted to Remain while 58% backed

Table 4 The perceived consequences of leaving the EU

	All voters		Leave voters	Remain voters
	Better (%)	Worse (%)	Better (%)	Worse (%)
Influence in world	16	38	33	73
Economy	23	40	48	78
Jobs	22	36	44	72
Terrorism	19	17	39	33
NHS	35	24	69	49
Immigration	53	3	84	5

Source: YouGov 20–22.6.16

Leave. Not only did the referendum expose some key social divisions but it also proved highly disruptive (once again) of the regular patterns of British party politics.

BOTH PARTIES' SUPPORTERS WERE HEAVILY DIVIDED ON POLLING DAY

Scotland and Northern Ireland

Indeed, even the SNP, still riding high in the polls in Scotland, could not bring all of its voters with it, despite the fact that the party's vision of independence for the last 25 years or so has been very firmly one of 'independence in Europe'. Only 64% of SNP supporters voted to Remain while 36% voted to Leave. Still, because the SNP is currently so dominant north of the border, winning 50% of the vote in the 2015 general election, even that modest success was enough to ensure that Scotland, unlike England, voted to Remain.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland the two main nationalist parties, Sinn Fein and the SDLP, also argued in favour of remaining, not least because the EU was regarded by them as providing an important underpinning to the Good Friday Agreement under which nationalists and unionists share power in the province. That argument was evidently highly persuasive — according to polling by Lucid Talk, no less than 87% of nationalist voters supported Remain.

Scotland and Northern Ireland, then, voted differently from the rest of the UK because of the distinctive way in which the question of EU membership is debated and regarded in those parts of the UK. It is seen as a way of helping to realise nationalist aspirations for independence (in Scotland) or all-island governance (in Ireland). Now that their wishes to remain in the EU have been thwarted, perhaps the next potentially disruptive question British politics will face is whether Scotland and/or Northern Ireland should leave the UK. Either way, the ramifications of the EU referendum are likely to be felt for a long time.

Exam focus

Using this article and other resources available to you, answer the following question.

Why was there a majority for the UK to leave the EU?

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