

Understanding Brexit

Digging Deeper: what divides Leavers and Remainers?
Early findings from *Understanding Society*



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Overview

- Geographical mobility was one of the behavioural signifiers of the 'cosmopolitan' Remain supporters.
- Subjective sense of financial struggle was a stronger predictor of pro-Brexit attitudes than objective economic hardship.
- Longer exposure to economic difficulties contributed to higher Euroscepticism more than the 'snapshot' of the current economic situation.
- The politically engaged and satisfied voters were the ones that showed the highest increase in support for Leave over time.
- Ethnic minorities showed a non-negligible level of support for Leave, which was twice as high amongst Indians as amongst other minority groups.
- Looking into the future, the EU Referendum result had positive consequences on financial expectations and life satisfaction for Leavers and the opposite was true for Remainers.

Background

The decision to leave the European Union is the most important political change in the UK of our times and will have major consequences on people's lives for generations. Understanding factors that contributed to this decision, and monitoring its' ongoing impact on people's lives, is vital to social science and to government policy.

In April 2017 Understanding Society provided early access to Wave 8 data that asked respondents whether or not the UK should leave the EU. Understanding Society, thanks to its multi-topic content, enables researchers to conduct detailed individual-level analyses of pro- and anti-Brexit attitudes, illuminating the possible effects of Brexit on individual wellbeing and financial expectations, among other factors. Uniquely, Understanding Society has a probability sample, which includes face-to-face interviews, and has been collecting data over a longer time span compared to other panels. The large boost samples of immigrant and ethnic minorities as well as geo-coded individual level data enables researchers to look into the nuances of the Brexit support in more detail compared to other general population surveys. This evidence briefing summarises the main findings from the early access EU Referendum research projects with the focus on the longitudinal and intra-household perspectives.

Demographic characteristics

Demographic differences, especially in relation to age and education, have been some of the most commonly cited dividing factors between 'Leavers' and 'Remainers'. In line with previous studies, the evidence from *Understanding Society* shows that people with higher educational attainment, younger age, non-white British ethnicity, and professional/managerial jobs were more likely to support Remain than Leave (Alabrese et al.; Chan et al.; Doebler; McAndrew et al.). *Understanding Society* boost sample of immigrants and ethnic minorities (IEMB) provided a unique opportunity for analysing nuances of Brexit support amongst different ethnic groups. Research by Martin et al. showed that although all non-white British groups were more pro-Remain than the white British, this masks significant variation – Indians were almost twice as likely to support Brexit than other non-white groups.

Families and political identities

Most analyses of Brexit support have focused on individual level perspective. The evidence from *Understanding Society* reminds us about the importance of taking into account family context, especially the dynamics between partners and between parents and children, for researching political attitudes. As shown by Carabat et al., the vast majority of couples (79%) shared the same view on the EU referendum, especially those over 65, who we might assume have been living together for a longer period of time. Unsurprisingly, UK-born individuals in partnerships where one partner was born in another EU country were overwhelmingly in favour of remaining in the EU – although one-quarter of those in UK-EU partnerships did support leaving the EU (Falkingham et al.). The findings also revealed the importance of parents' political views for their offspring; young adults whose mothers were highly Eurosceptic, were more likely to be Eurosceptic themselves, especially if the mothers were highly politically engaged. It has been also noted that politically disengaged parents were more likely to have Eurosceptic children, although this might be explained through the transmission of general political disengagement rather than Eurosceptic attitudes in particular (Fox et al.).

The studies that looked into the importance of political identities revealed that those who considered politics an important part of their personal identity were more likely to favour remaining in the EU (McAndrew et al.). In contrast, those who believed that they had little say in what government does, were uninterested in politics and did not consider themselves qualified to participate in politics were more likely to support Leave (Doebler; Janmaat et al.). Evidence based on *Understanding Society* also provided new insights into the factors associated with the fluctuation of Brexit support. The research by Janmaat et al. showed that the politically engaged and satisfied were the group most likely to show an increase in support for Leave over time. Perhaps highly engaged and generally satisfied voters were more likely to embrace the referendum result due to 'losers consent', or to trust the assurances of political parties who promised that exiting the EU will be done in an orderly manner

Economic drivers beyond objective factors

Much has been made of the impact of economic struggle and the role of economically 'left behind' social groups in determining the referendum result. *Understanding Society* data generally confirms the notion that both individual-level economic struggles and local-level economic decline were important drivers of pro-Brexit attitudes, but the detailed longitudinal analyses throws more light on this complicated relationship. First, it appears that people's subjective perception of their own finances was more important than their objective economic situation (Alabrese et al.; Doebler, Liberini et al.). Second, the duration of economic hardship appeared to be particularly salient; those who had lived in low-income households and in areas of high unemployment for a longer time were more likely to support Brexit than those who were exposed to economic deprivation for a

shorter period (Doebler). It has been suggested that the subjective sense of financial difficulties might lower people's sense of political agency, making them more likely to support Leave as an expression of protest against the status quo. Similar economic relationships with support for Brexit were evident among ethnic minorities; economically 'left behind' minority voters were more supportive of Brexit, whilst immigrants who believed that they could 'get ahead' in the UK were more supportive of Remain (Martin et al). Thanks to the availability of data collected over time, the researchers were also able to look into the immediate consequences of the Brexit vote on people's financial expectations and behaviour. The study by Rabe and Schmidpeter revealed that the referendum result had a positive impact on future financial and employment expectations for Leavers, and the opposite was true for Remainers, who subsequently reduced how much they saved each month and started contributing more to their pension.

Social and cultural identities and social capital

The debate on socio-cultural divisions between Leavers and Remainers has often focused on issues around national identity and localism vs cosmopolitanism.

The new research based on *Understanding Society*, enabled to add more fine-grained understanding of the nature of these cultural divides. Although it has been confirmed that stronger attachment to British national identity was associated with higher likelihood of supporting Brexit, the studies showed that those who embraced a broader British identity, rather than sub-national English identity, were more likely to support Remain (Chan et al., McAndrew et al., Janmaat et al.). Furthermore, self-identified white British people who felt that their ethnic or racial identity was important for 'who they are' were more likely to support leaving the EU – but this relationship was not applicable to people from other ethnic backgrounds (McAndrew et al.). Intriguingly, the cultural divides were also associated with types of culture Leavers and Remainers like to consume. Chan et al. showed that cultural omnivores (those who consume many different types of cultural genres) were much more likely to support Remain than univores (those whose cultural consumption is more limited). The cultural basis of the EU Referendum result has been sometimes framed around the divide between 'anywheres' (cosmopolitan, rootless individuals) and 'somewheres' (socially rooted in their close locality). The former have been commonly believed to be more likely to favour remaining in the EU than the latter, but the findings based on *Understanding Society* do not seem to confirm this narrative. People with stronger attachment to their neighbourhoods were more likely to support Remain, as were those who were involved in voluntary associations, suggesting that Remainers are not socially less rooted than Leavers (Chan et al.; McAndrew et al.) It is possible of course that 'somewheres' might be socially rooted in their locality in qualitatively different ways, which were not possible to capture with the available data.

Geographical mobility

Despite the attention given to the distinction between 'anywheres' and 'somewheres', no research to date was able to look into one of the main behavioural indicators of 'cosmopolitanism' – geographical mobility. The new research based on geo-coded over-time data by Lee et al. showed that people living in the same county as when they were born (the 'geographically immobile') were indeed more likely to want to leave the EU, especially if they lived in an area that experienced economic decline or an increase in the immigrant population. However, at the same time, the research did not find any significant relationship between white British Leave support (associated with stronger opposition to diversity) and their preference for living in more homogenous neighbourhoods (Kaufmann). This suggests that the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes to Brexit is a complex one and cannot be reduced to unidimensional dichotomy between rootless 'anywheres' and socially rooted 'somewheres'.

Mental health and well-being

A different perspective on Brexit comes from researchers focussing on mental health and wellbeing. Innovative interdisciplinary research by Bernardi and Johns uses Brexit to look at how clinical depression affected attitudes to Brexit. Highlighting the far-reaching implications of status quo bias (which is a common characteristic of clinical depression), their results show that people who suffered from clinical depression appeared to be substantially more likely to favour remaining in the EU prior to the voting date, but then were more likely to support Leave after the referendum result was known. Turning to the impact of Brexit on wellbeing, those who had a preference for exiting the EU enjoyed a life satisfaction rise immediately after the referendum, whilst those expressing a preference for remaining suffered a drop in life satisfaction (Powdthavee et al.).

Conclusions

Quick fire analysis after the referendum revealed a wide range of factors that have shaped political thinking on this matter. Some of the demographic characteristics such as education, occupation, and generation were key dividing lines in opinions on Brexit. However, the more detailed individual-level information available in *Understanding Society*, combined with its panel structure (interviewing the same people over time) and a possibility of linking individual-level data with information about their local areas, has permitted novel insights.

Socio-cultural factors such as residential mobility, volunteering, the types of leisure activities people engage in, all put more flesh on the bones of the debate about 'anywheres' or 'somewheres' and illustrates the cultural dividing lines in the UK today.

Detailed information about household finances and economic circumstances combined with attitudinal measures show us that subjective feelings are just as important – if not more so – than objectively-identifiable hardship. Importantly, the data also clearly illustrates that individuals' political decisions are shaped by how they were brought up and by those who they currently live with.

Finally, the non-negligible level of support for Brexit among ethnic minority individuals and households, including members born elsewhere in the EU, shows that opinions in global Britain are more complex than simple assumptions would suggest. Understanding support for leave and remain in 2016 helps us understand the coalitions of voters that politicians now need to satisfy during the Brexit negotiations – but more importantly, this research gives us important clues about the future dividing lines of UK electoral politics.

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