

Don't mention this around the Christmas table: Brexit, inequality and the demographic divide

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A great deal of research has already been conducted on why the UK voted to leave the EU and which groups of voters were most likely to back leave and remain. [Danny Dorling](#), [Ben Stuart](#) and [Joshua Stubbs](#) present a comprehensive analysis of the vote, writing that although there is generally a stark age divide amongst voters concerning the European Union, the same can also potentially be said for divides in the spread and centralisation of wealth across the UK.



There has been no shortage of debate in relation to who voted which way in the UK's EU referendum and why. Research published to date has concentrated on the high probability of voting 'Leave' among households living on less than £20,000 a year. However, low income is confounded by household age and size. Single pensioner households are very likely to fall within this category, but often having lower housing costs this group is not necessarily the poorest, but it is one of the oldest.



The [same research](#) highlights that "other things being equal, support for leave was 30 percentage points higher among those with GCSE qualifications or below than it was for people with a degree". But other things are not equal and it is not possible to devise a statistical technique to make them equal because hardly any elderly people have university degrees. The few older people with university degrees in the UK are extremely atypical.



What we will highlight in this post is straightforward: according to Lord Ashcroft's [polling data](#), differences in voting patterns appear to divide along the lines of age (above all else), then by social attitudes, and then by education, with older, socially conservative and less well-educated voters more likely to vote to leave the EU than younger, socially liberal and better educated voters.

However, a large proportion of votes to leave the EU might be understood to be a visceral reaction from those who have felt increasingly powerless as a result of globalisation, widening economic inequalities and a failure of successive UK government administrations to redistribute income and wealth more equitably for more than thirty, almost forty years. This is a reaction that it is easier to have if you are older enough to remember more equitable times, when it was possible to find a home and start a family in your twenties or early thirties and when full employment was a reality.

Who voted?

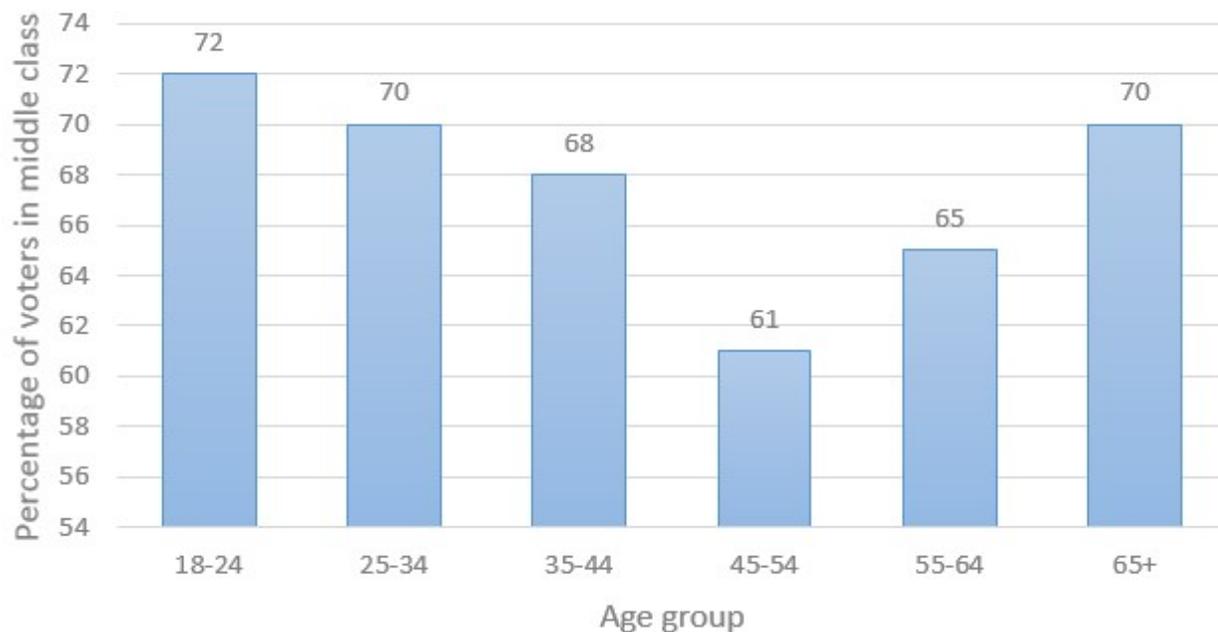
There has been considerable contention surrounding the proportion of the population who participated in the referendum. Initial Sky polling data suggested that a meagre 36% of 18-24 year olds participated in the vote, set against 81% of 55-64 year olds and 83% of those aged 65 years old and over. However, the initial Sky polling data has since been challenged by [Opinium](#), who have suggested that the number of young people who participated in the vote is more than double that which had originally been thought.

Still, Opinium polling data continues to illuminate a clear trend: the older the individual, the more likely they are to have voted. This reflects a dichotomy established long before the UK's 2015 general election, when those aged 65 years old and over were found to have been the highest turnout group, raising fundamental questions surrounding the nature of political participation in the UK, with a 'democratic deficit' detectable among the young.

There are also some indications of a class divide in turnout. It has become commonplace in some mainstream circles to increasingly disregard the prevalence of class in Britain today. The EU referendum, at least based on the Ashcroft data, challenges this. It would be more appropriate to suggest that there is a class ceiling firmly in place. As Figure 1 demonstrates there is a highly disproportionate middle class representation among those polled, across all ages. In contrast, the working class voice is diminished.

The 18-24 age group highlights this paradox perfectly. Of this group who indicated they voted, approximately 72% were in social groups A, B and C1. This raises an important question: what are the views of the remaining 28% on EU membership? Such evidence suggesting that young people are so often of higher social classes also flies in the face of conventional wisdom (you tend to rise up the class scale later in life, not earlier).

Figure 1: Percentage of those indicating they voted in the EU referendum who were from higher social classes (by age group)



Note: Data from Lord Ashcroft polling.

This raises questions about two key assumptions. First, it has been assumed that a despondent working-class vote drove Britain from EU membership. Secondly, it has also been taken for granted that the young were overwhelmingly Europhile. Given the Ashcroft data, it could be suggested that the poorest in British society simply did not turn out to vote, whilst the loudest voices in favour of EU membership amongst the young were those more affluent. There are limitations with any data set and such an assertion will require greater research.

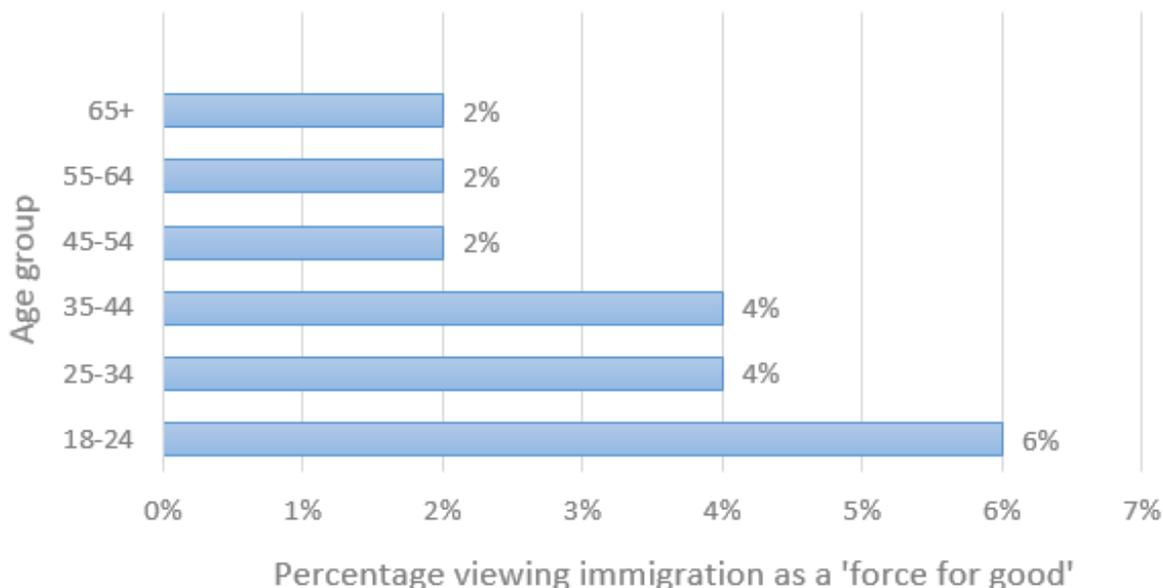
Social conservatism vs social liberalism

With this generational divide in political participation established, what are the possible differences in generational world-views? Lord Ashcroft's polling data appears to confirm the suggestion that the vote to leave the EU represented a strong impasse in world-views between two divergent age groups. As the age variable increases, so does the tendency for the individual to hold more socially conservative attitudes, and vice-versa.

Those aged 18-24 years old, as Figure 2 highlights, were the most likely to perceive immigration to be a benign entity. When the age variable increased, support for immigration declined, with those aged 25-34 years old demonstrating considerably less support for immigration. This suggests that attitudes towards immigration do not

differ simply between the young and old, but between those aged 24 years old and younger and those aged 25 years old and older. This strengthens the argument that, in an atmosphere of austerity and increased labour-market precarity following the financial crisis of 2008, immigration, and the *perceived* pressure that it places on housing, wages and public services, has become a mainstream concern.

Figure 2: Decline in the percentage of individuals viewing immigration as a 'force for good' as age increases



Note: Compiled by authors.

Furthermore, when turning to attitudes toward multiculturalism, this same trend re-emerges, with older groups of people expressing more socially conservative attitudes. The youngest hold the most positive attitudes toward multiculturalism: 20% of 18-24 year olds agree that it is a positive thing, but after this support begins to rapidly deplete to just 14% among 25 – 34 year olds and eventually 4% among those aged 65 and over.

Another age-related pattern emerges when attitudes toward economic security are examined. The young are most likely to perceive economic security to be found within the EU, with 75% of those aged 18-24 agreeing with this statement. Support for this statement then begins to deplete thereafter, with 66% of 25-34 year olds supporting it and eventually, 44% of those aged 65 years old and over.

Lord Ashcroft's polling data also appears to demonstrate an educational divide: the better educated the individual, the more likely they are to have voted to remain in the EU. For example, 44% of those with a university degree or equivalent qualification voted to remain in the EU compared to 31% who voted to leave. This pattern is repeated again when the individual holds a higher university qualification (e.g. doctorate or MBA), with 19% voting to remain in the EU compared to 10% voting to leave. However, for those whose education ended at secondary school, 56% voted to leave the EU, with 33% voting to remain. But as we say above, average levels of educational attainment are so strongly confounded with age that it is very hard to compare qualifications over time. A master's degree in 2016 may be the equivalent of gaining good A levels in 1946!

To conclude, what Lord Ashcroft's polling data appears to demonstrate is that those aged 18-24 years old are the most likely to hold socially liberal views, with a drop off in support for social liberalism and an increase in support for social conservatism as the age variable increases. This pattern correlates with the likelihood of the individual supporting membership of the EU: as the age variable increases, the likelihood of the individual supporting membership of the EU decreases. Equally, Lord Ashcroft's polling data also appears to demonstrate that the better

educated the individual, the more likely they are to have voted to remain in the EU, and vice versa.

The role of class

It is important to consider that the above dislocation in the propensity to vote in Brexit, between the young and old, is not taking place in an isolated vacuum. There is a contentious literature concerning, namely, the drivers and influences towards voting. A discussion of the role of class is illuminating in this context.

Shortly after he became prime minister, Tony Blair foolishly declared that “the class war is over”; it is, rather, still present and guiding the trajectory of politics in an inexorable manner. But it has largely gone unnoticed. Indeed, a system whose very fabric is built on hyper exploitation and trickle-up economics is not going to admit the existence of the very divisions it thrives off. Just as inequality, despite rising, was off the agenda during the Blair years, so too Britain became a ‘classless society’ in the popular imaginary. Since the 1980s, with the great divergence of class and the rise in economic injustice, class has become, perhaps, *even more* present in the propensity to vote.

As [Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley](#) demonstrate, the post-industrial world is one in which, rather than the decline of class divisions, there has instead been ‘a supply-side contraction in the choices presented to voters’. This has culminated in the ‘declining political relevance of redistributive values’, and thus ‘the class basis of party choice’, rather than the diminishing effect of class relations.

This presents a paradox. If parties, increasingly converging on policy and rhetoric, no longer provide an outlet for class expression, this would suggest that class derived tension will fester beneath the surface. Akin to a pressure valve waiting to burst, it will surely find novel ways of escaping. Just because class is not as observable in political life, it does not mean its insidious effects are playing out beneath the surface.

In accordance with [Mike Savage’s analysis](#), class is being expressed in a new organic totality in Britain, in contrary to the consensus on voting behaviour. The generational divide, therefore, to leave The European Union cannot be divided from the economic dislocation that has taken place in the United Kingdom since the 1980s. The complexities of engagement, as well as the differentiation of values of the young and old, can very much be seen as part of this present conjuncture.

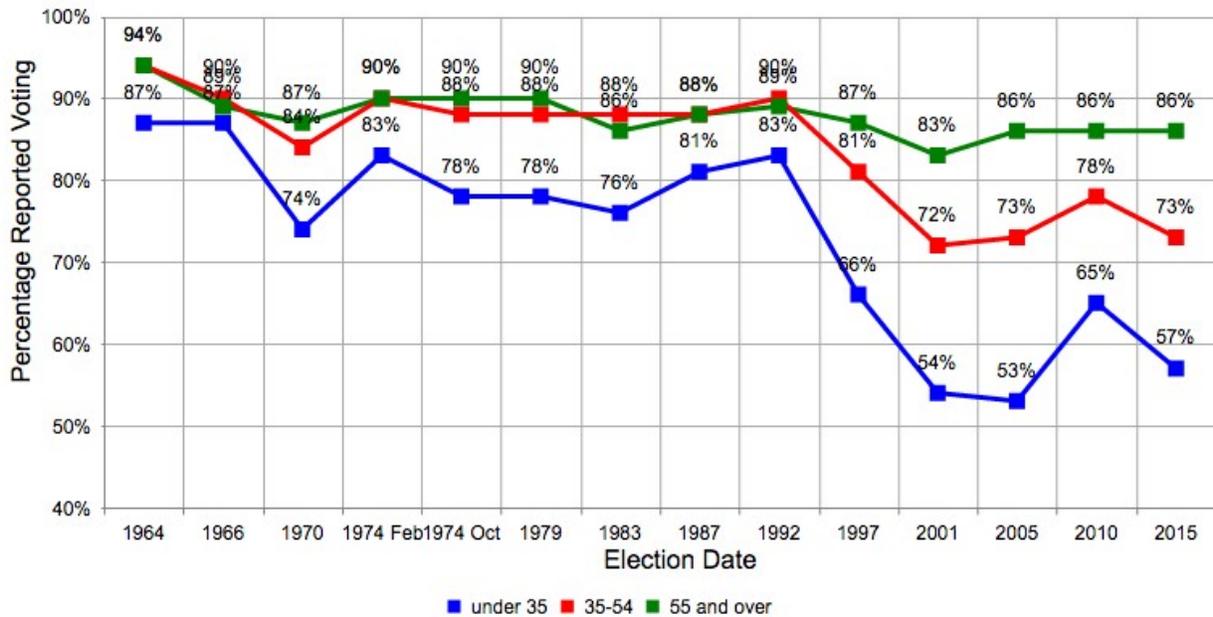
Inequality and Brexit

This link between the propensity to vote and the dynamic of equality can be demonstrated with a short time-travel back in history. In 1964 Bob Dylan famously sang ‘The Times They are a-changin’’. And they certainly were – on both sides of the Atlantic. The economy, stimulated by state interventionism, was dynamic, combining high and *increasing* levels of income equality with strong growth. Social attitudes were becoming liberalised, The Beatles dominated the airwaves and homosexuality was decriminalised.

Whilst there was a long way to go on these issues, there was an intrinsic sense of momentum towards a fairer, more tolerant society. As Andy Beckett has demonstrated in [When the Lights Went Out](#), an assessment of the following decade, this social dynamism had created a framework within which high democratic participation – whether through trade union membership, or at the ballot box – could occur. Very recently Ben Fountain told a [similar story](#) for the United States.

In the 1960s, as shown by figure 3, voter participation among the young was as high as it ever had been. This is extremely pertinent when assessed against the wider trends of voting in the UK during the 1960s; there was an *equalisation* of voting amongst all age groups. For example, in the year 1966 the lowest turnout (under 35) was an astonishing 87%; this increased with age to 89% and 90%. Whilst this reflects current thinking concerning increasing voter participation with age, the difference here is insignificant. This compliments the *Rational Choice Theory* of voting, whereby voters will participate in elections, so as long as the benefits outweigh the costs.

Figure 3: Percentage of citizens who indicate they voted in the most recent general election (by age group)



Note: British Election Studies Information System, 2015. The general trend of this graph is clear. During the ‘Post War Consensus’, a time of great equality and equalised prosperity, the voter turnout was also exceptionally high. The period between 1964 and 1979, turnout between young and old was at its highest. This is a trend which is reversed as the effects of neoliberalisation set in. From 1987 onwards a ‘democratic deficit clearly emerges’. Democracy and equality, it seems, are congruous.

This trend was disrupted, however, following a decade of increasing free-market policies, job insecurity and economic inequality. Following the imposition of the infamous ‘Poll Tax’ in 1992, voter participation, across all age groups, would never realign with the heady days of the Sixties. This is a trend which is most prevalent amongst the young; who, as we can see in the Brexit turnout, remain democratically tentative and at best ambivalent, feeling that their vote does not count towards a greater purpose. By the time of New Labour’s landslide victory in 1997, a mere 54% of the young turned out to vote, a 34% decline from 1964.

Rising inequality in voter turnout by age is not a phenomenon taking place in isolation; it is being actively facilitated by political parties who do not see the cost-benefits of formulating policies to be aimed at the young. This is the politics of short-termism. And, as time as shown, short-termism only leads to disaster. Ultimately this has resulted in the collapse of voter turnout of the most important generation – the supposed ‘future’. With a percentage turnout of 54% in the 2005 general election, this is more reminiscent of the Nineteenth Century electoral system, when suffrage had not even been extended to the vast majority of adults. We appear, sadly, to be heading back to this century – not just economically but politically and democratically. It is those who are members of an elite class who are highly active and politically organised and situated in the South East; after all, they have the most to preserve from globalisation.

The Brexit vote, therefore, did not taken place in a vacuum. It was open to these socio-political and economic trends, which ultimately resulted in path dependency amongst the voting age groups. It seems logical, therefore, to suggest that decades of inequality and electoral mistrust has culminated in such a cataclysmic event.

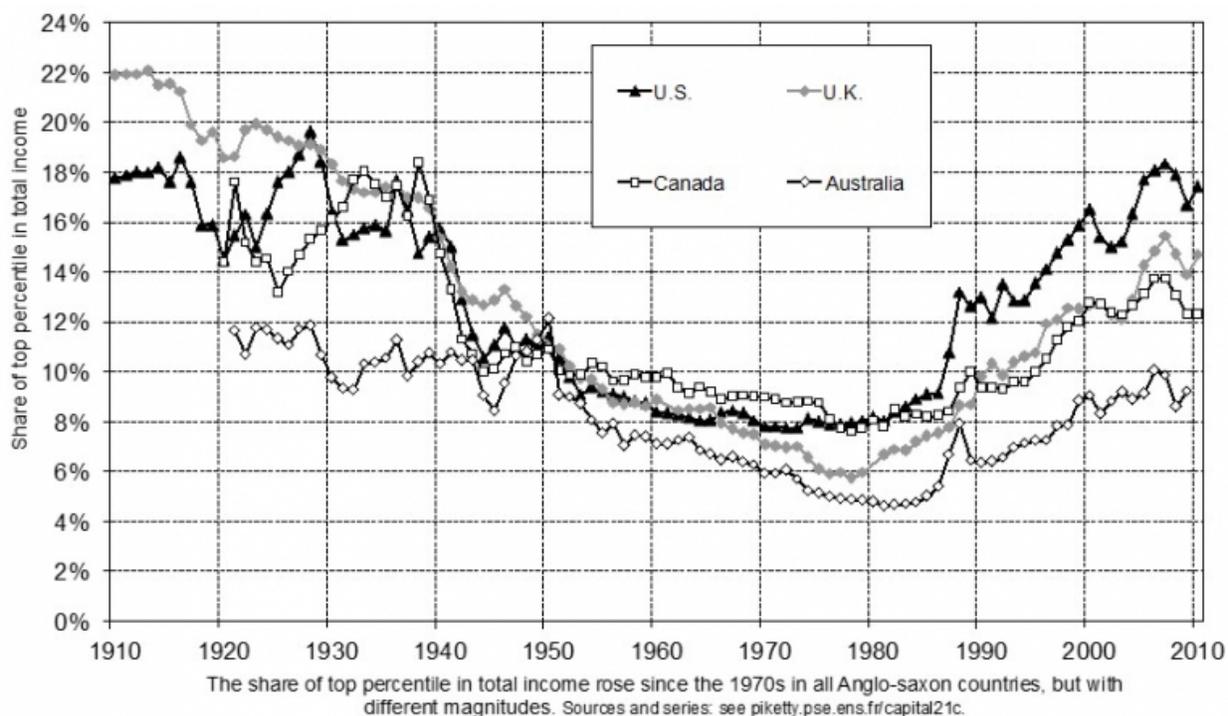
The dynamics of inequality

Economic inequality, which has continued to widen in the UK for the last thirty, almost forty years, is a possible driver of differentiation. Those who are better educated might perceive the EU to be beneficial to them, both in terms

of opportunities in other EU nation-states as well as in relation to the availability of research funding and access to the single market which makes more well-paid jobs in the service industry available to them (but not to the less-well educated, who feel as though they have to compete with people from across other nation-states who move to the UK in search of low-skilled work).

In contrast, those who are older might associate the EU with a stagnation or decline in their living standards, as the UK has been a member of the EU for roughly the same period of time that economic inequality in the UK has worsened, as shown in the work of Thomas Piketty, illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Inequality in the Western World



Note: Reproduced from *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty.

Indeed, there is some credence in the sentiments expressed, but towards structural changes in the British economy, rather than EU membership. With the move to a service sector and the increasing power of capital through deregulation, inequality has soared in comparison to the post-war benignity. Moreover, some communities have never recovered from such reforms. Such events run alongside increasing integration into the European Union, alongside an increasingly prevalent media-based immigration discourse. These factors combined could allow a vote to leave based on economic inequality.

Moreover, inequality of wealth and opportunity could be having an impact on the low turnout of the young. Faced with rising student debt, a precarious housing market dominated by the private rented sector and low wages, the young may be voicing their discontent by not participating in elections. Indeed, when contrasted with the opportunities of the old, the difference is stark. 'Baby Boomers' (1945-65) typically spent £9,000 on rent prior to turning 30. Millennials (1981-2000) will have spent £53,000. There is also a compounding generational divide with income. In British history there has, on average, been a trend of increased earnings as each generation comes of age. Not in the twenty-first century; Millennials are set to earn £8,000 less in their twenties than the previous generation. Such generational stagnation could explain the democratic-deficit amongst the young.

There could therefore be a double-movement of inequality based on age. The old, remembering more prosperous

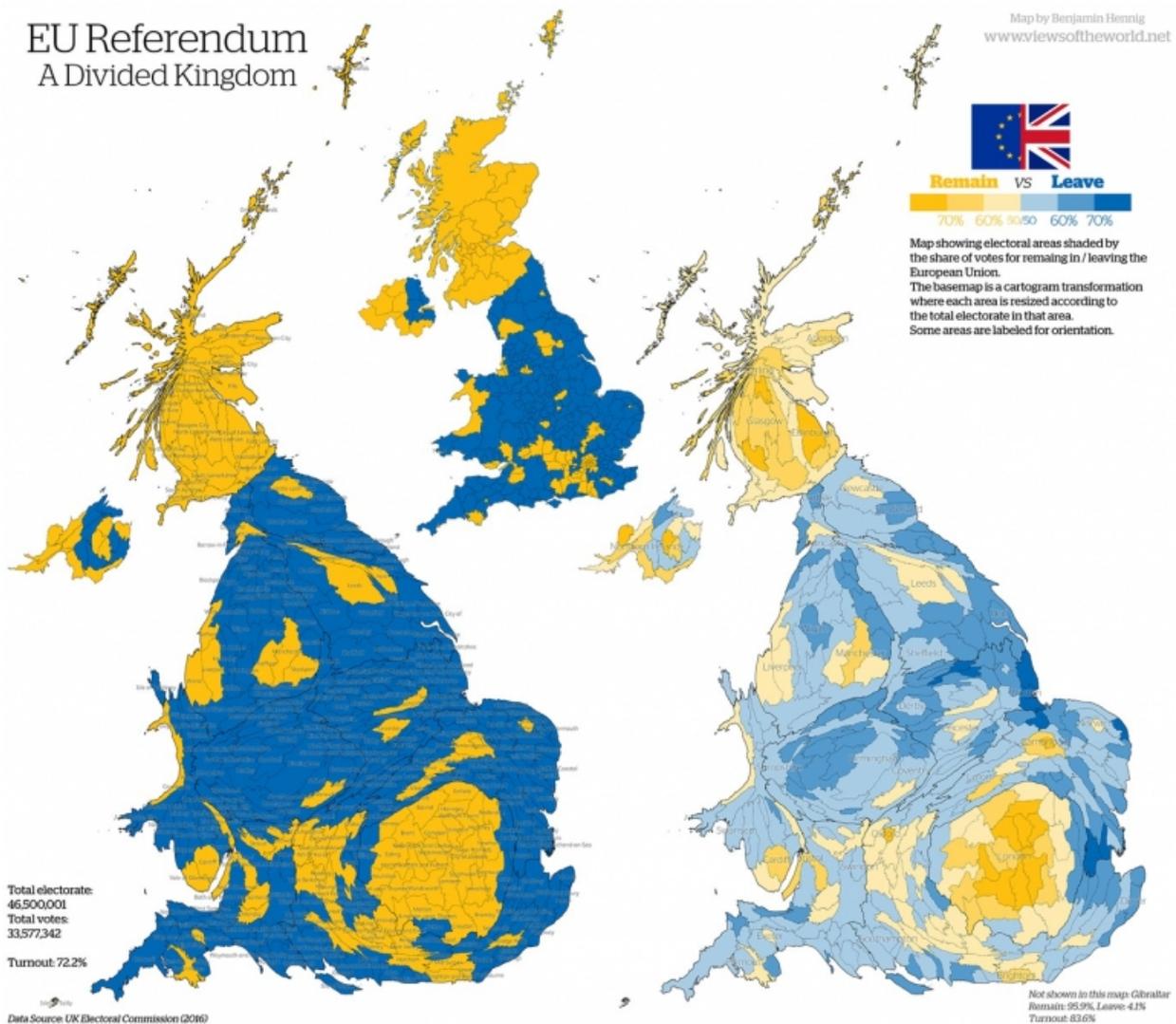
and equal times during the Post-War boom, collectively express such discontent through a vote to leave. Meanwhile the young, being equally discontent with levels of inequality which buck the trend of generational improvement, express such sentiments with a lower propensity to vote; but when they voted they were much more likely to vote Remain as they did not hold the EU at fault for where they find themselves today.

Furthermore, antipathy towards immigration could be explained for two reasons. First, on the basis that it is perceived to be a threat to national identity. Second, on the basis that it is perceived to be placing pressure on wages, housing and public services, as well as depleting the bargaining power of trade unions as surplus workers are available. Greater economic equality and a higher basic standard of living might have prevented a vote to leave the EU, and even if it could not, it should now become a priority. Greater inequality tends to be associated with more immigration because there are many more 'jobs at the bottom' in a more unequal country (such as the UK and United States).

Voting and the geographical centralisation of wealth

The potential centrality of economic inequality in Brexit increases with a comparison of the regional distributions of wealth and the spread of the vote in the referendum. As Figure 5 demonstrates, the propensity to vote remain increased dramatically in areas including affluent parts of the South East, South West and most of London. Wales and the North on average meanwhile display a slimmer cartographical shape, indicating they had fewer voters.

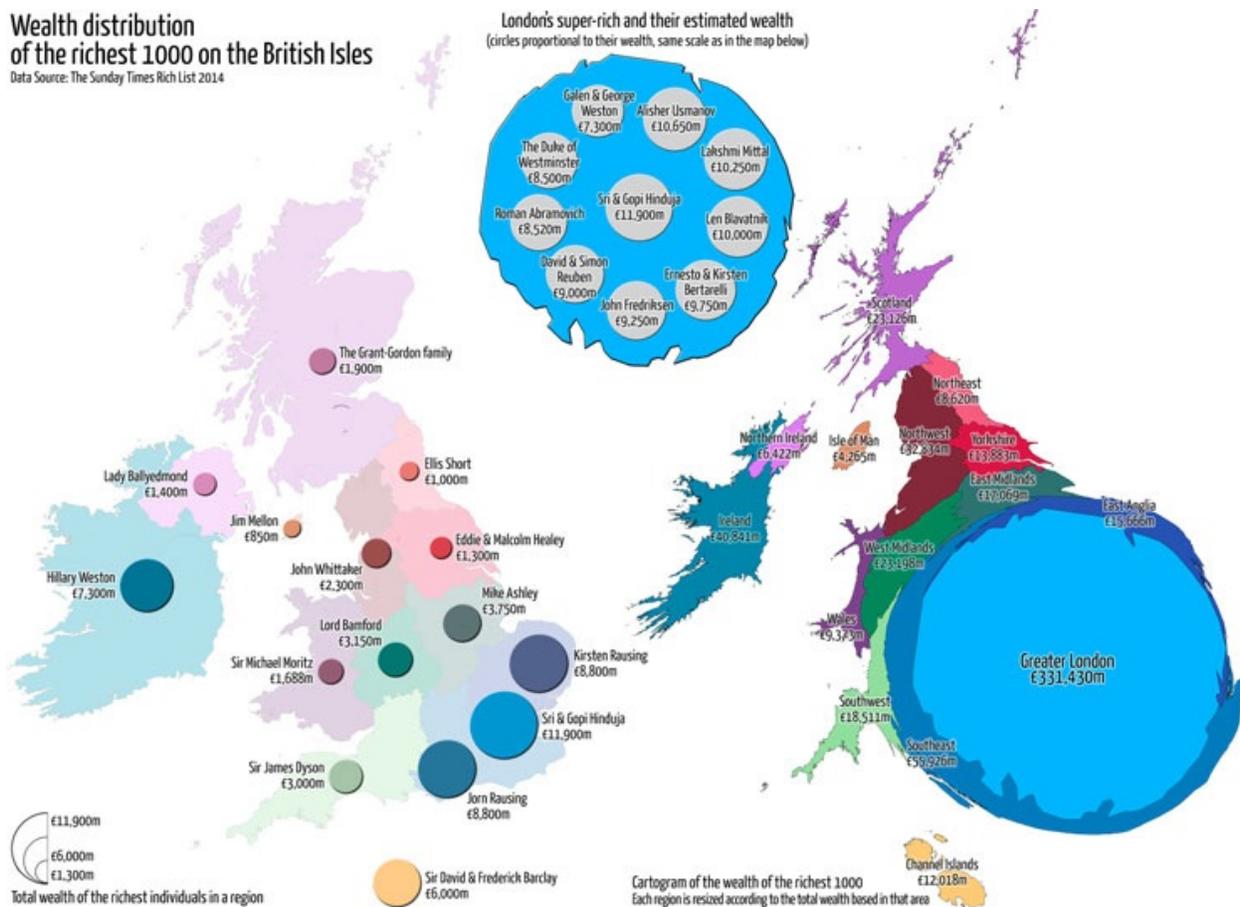
Figure 5: Geographic distribution of Remain and Leave votes



Note: From Benjamin Henning, 2016. A cartogram depicting the distribution of the ‘Remain’ and the ‘Leave’ votes in the European Union Referendum, 23 June 2016. With the exception of Scotland there is a clear ‘South’ and the rest divide. London and the surrounding area, a key benefactor from Globalisation, voted staunchly in favour of remain. The same can be said of Northern cities which have had increased European funding over the past decade. Wales, the North West, the North East and the Midlands, all areas which have declined since de-industrialisation, gave their support to Brexit.

One might be forgiven for mistaking Figure 6 as being very similar to Figure 5. It is not. The subject of Figure 6 is [wealth distribution](#). There is therefore a clear relationship between a regional centralisation of wealth and a vote to remain. The South East, West and London, on average strong supporters of the EU, have a disproportionate share of all wealth in the United Kingdom. The more ‘North’ one goes, the share of wealth decreases – and so does the regional share of the remain vote. Areas including Wales, Sunderland and Yorkshire, all with a reduced share of wealth, were on average strong advocates for leaving the European Union.

Figure 6: Wealth distribution of the richest 1,000 in the British Isles



Note: From Dorling and Henning, 2016. The Sunday Times Newspaper provided a geographical spread of wealth in the UK and Ireland for 2014. The right hand cartogram depicts a clear salience; the further south one travels on average the greater the centralisation of wealth. Greater London, it is clear, takes its fair share from its services sector and various high net-worth individuals. Such cartographic shape is a mirror image of figure image of figure 5. There is a clear relationship between the centralisation of wealth in the UK and the vote to remain. Those areas which are, on average wealthier, possess more of a Eurocentric outlook. Areas on the other hand including the North East and Wales, with considerably less wealth, have a much lower affection for the European Union. There may well be therefore a relationship between wealth and EU sentiment.

There is something to be said therefore for wealth distribution and changing attitudes towards the European Union. The net regional score of immigration *as a force for good* in the Ashcroft data follows this distribution of wealth. London, the South West and the South East, all wealthier areas, have much more positive views of immigration (at 45%, 35%, 35%) in contrast to the underfunded regions. The North West possess a rating of 32%, the North East 29% and the East Midlands 30%. Once more, when assessing economic security by remaining in the EU, the more affluent London agrees by 59%, alongside 51% and 52% for the South East and West. This is held in stark contrast with the much lower 48% and 47% found in the North East and Wales respectively.

It is important to consider the above argument in the context of the Coalition Government's Austerity programme. Following the implosion of the financial sector between 2007-2010, the mantra since has been centred around the importance of deficit reduction and 'household' fiscal prudence. However, as the [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) has recently demonstrated, such cuts have fallen in a disproportionate manner on those areas already 'more reliant on central government grants'.

Despite the median cut value being 22.9%, cuts have varied from 6.2% for Lincolnshire to the larger levels of the North East and North West. The number of Sure Start centres declined from 3,631 to 3,019 between April 2010 and June 2015, whilst overall government spending on social care fell by 13.4% by the end of the Coalition. The poorest areas, and the poorest families, have been hit the hardest. It is highly plausible, therefore, that the impact of austerity has strengthened a framework within which the leave campaign's message could have gained credence and resonance.

Conclusion

Whilst many factors will have contributed to the Brexit vote, there is some sense in the phrase follow the money. Although there is generally a stark age divide amongst voters concerning the European Union, the same can potentially be said for divides along the lines of the spread and centralisation of wealth. The EU referendum has brought deep divisions in Britain to the surface – it appears economic inequality and its accompanying despondent effects on democracy were some of those. Perhaps if the trajectory beginning in the late 1970s of a society based around capital had been reversed with wealth redistribution and investment led growth instead of austerity, the current course of history may have been different.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the authors

Danny Dorling – *University of Oxford*

[Danny Dorling](#) is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford.

Ben Stuart – *University of York*

Ben Stuart is a final year history and politics student at the University of York. He has previously carried out research work on food poverty for MP Frank Field and participated in a graduate scheme position with JP Morgan.

Joshua Stubbs – *University of York*

Joshua Stubbs is a final year education student at University of York.

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