



BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Brexit: what will it mean for Britain? Findings from British Social Attitudes 2015

NatCen
Social Research that works for society



E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

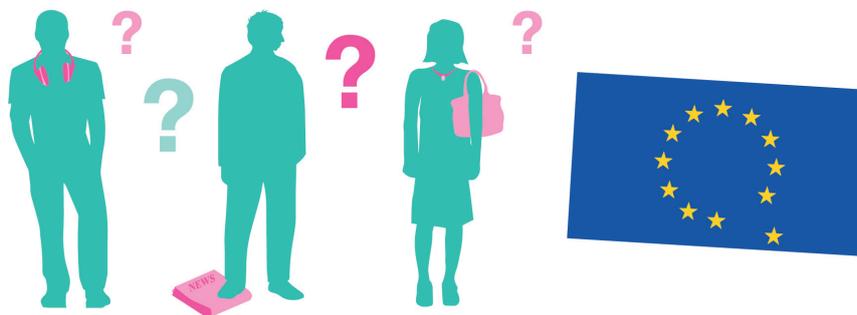
Brexit: what will it mean for Britain?

Findings from British Social Attitudes 2015

Uncertainty about implications of Brexit

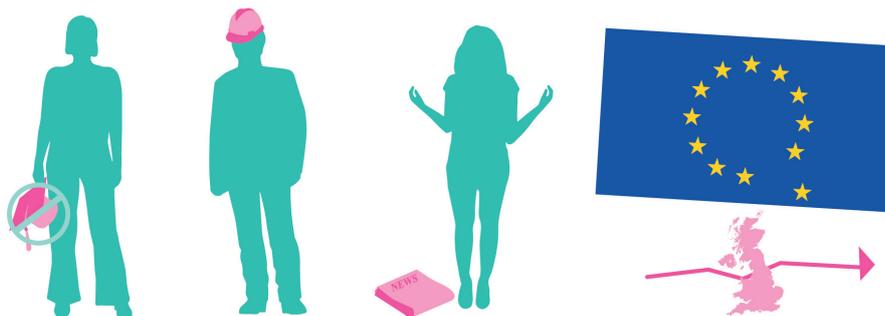
There are considerable levels of uncertainty about what will happen if Britain leaves the EU.

- 69% are unsure what will happen if Britain leaves the EU; 14% are “very unsure”.
- The youngest, those with no interest in politics and women are the most likely to say they are unsure.



Substantial minorities think leaving the EU will not make much difference

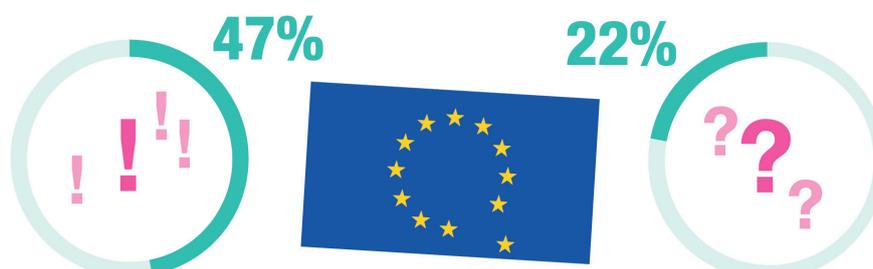
- 44% think Britain’s influence in the world would be “not much different” if she were to leave the EU. 31% think leaving the EU will not make much difference to Britain’s economy
- Those with no educational qualifications, from a lower social class and who have no interest in politics are more likely to think, in general, leaving the EU will not make much difference.



Expectations influence likely voting patterns

Expectations for Brexit link with views on whether Britain should remain in the European Union.

- 47% of those who are sure what will happen if Britain leaves the EU would prefer for Britain to withdraw, compared with 22% of those who are unsure what would happen.



Authors

Elizabeth Clery, Research Director,
NatCen Social Research and
Ian Simpson, Senior Researcher,
NatCen Social Research

Introduction

With the referendum on whether Britain should remain a member of the European Union (EU) due to take place on 23rd June, this paper explores the public's expectations of what would happen in the event of a vote to leave the EU. First of all, we consider levels of certainty about the potential impacts of leaving the EU and what people think will happen, if this scenario were to take place, in relation to a number of the key areas on which the Remain and Leave campaigns have focused. Second, we explore how attitudes and expectations vary across the population as a whole. Specifically, we examine whether views vary by age, sex, level of education, social class and interest in politics – five characteristics which are known to be linked with wider attitudes to the EU or which, conceptually, we might expect to inform attitudes to Brexit. Finally, we consider how attitudes and expectations for Brexit relate to, and may influence, likely voting patterns – and what this might mean for the Remain and Leave campaigns as they enter the final month of campaigning.

The data on which this paper is based was collected as part of the 2015 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. Carried out annually since 1983¹, BSA is an authoritative, high quality source of data on the views of the British public. It uses random probability sampling to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in Britain. The 2015 survey included a set of questions about attitudes to the EU, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the 'UK in a Changing Europe' initiative.

The fact that interviewing took place between July and November 2015 means that these data cannot be used to obtain a contemporary picture of voting intentions in relation to the forthcoming referendum. Rather, they can be analyzed to explore broad expectations regarding the implications of Brexit and how these are likely to vary across the public and link with and inform voting behaviour.

How certain are we about what will happen if we vote to Leave?

It is important to consider the certainty with which the public holds its views about the likely impacts of Brexit, as well as the precise nature of these views. It has been argued by some that the larger the proportion of the public that is uncertain about the implications of Britain leaving the EU, the higher the chances of Britain voting to remain in the EU.² This line of argument draws on the experience of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, where some believe

¹ Apart from in 1988 and 1992 when its core funding was used to fund the British Election Study series

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35685656>

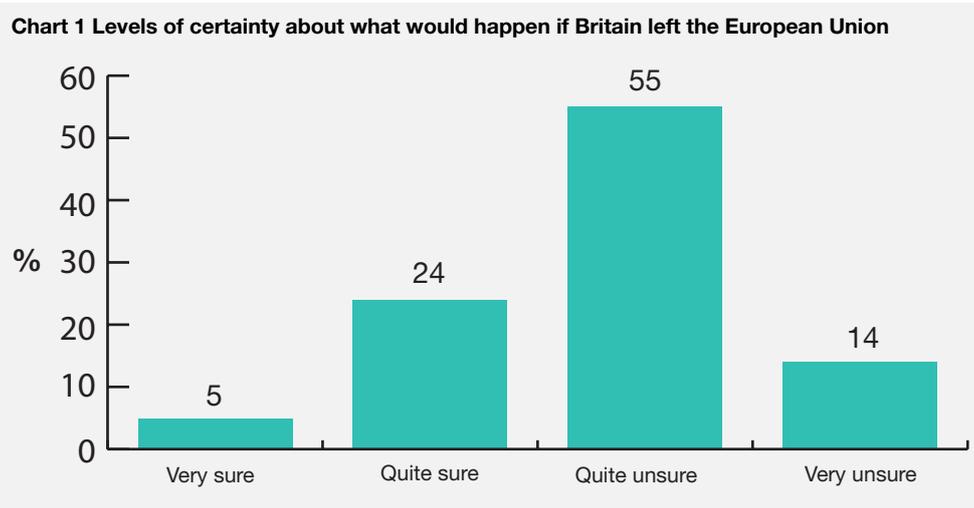
that the ‘Yes’ campaign failed to provide persuasive enough answers on such questions as what currency an independent Scotland would use and whether an independent Scotland could automatically join the EU.³ According to this view, the element of doubt about what would happen in the event of a change to the status quo was a powerful factor in the ‘No’ side securing victory.

To explore levels of certainty about the implications of leaving the EU, we explained to respondents:

Some people say they are sure what would happen - either good or bad - if Britain were to leave the European Union. Others say they are unsure.

How about you? Which of the phrases...best describes how you feel about what would happen if Britain left the EU?

As shown in Chart 1, over two-thirds of the public are unsure about what would happen if Britain were to leave the EU, with more than one in 10 being “very unsure”. Of the three in 10 who say that they are sure about what would happen, the majority indicate that they are “quite sure” with just one in 20 stating they are “very sure”. Interestingly, data from the 2014 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey, indicated that Scots had similar levels of certainty about what would happen in the event of a vote for an independent Scotland; specifically, 32% of Scots were sure about what would happen and 60% were unsure (ScotCen, 2014⁴). If the narrative set out above is accurate then, these data could potentially make concerning reading for the Leave campaign.



Unweighted base: 1105

Levels of certainty about what will happen if Britain leaves the EU vary significantly among groups defined by three of the five socio-

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29223984>

⁴ ScotCen (2014), Has the Referendum Campaign Made a Difference?, available at <http://scotcen-what-scotland-thinks-chart-images.s3.amazonaws.com/files/62d0afd9-d75b-46ba-887c-a384017007b7/ssa-2014-launch-jc-briefing-final-2pdf>

Those in the youngest age group, aged 18-34, are most unsure about what will happen.

demographic characteristics we examined. Those in the youngest age group, aged 18-34, are most unsure about what will happen; this is the case for 79%, compared with between 60% and 71% of each other age group. Around two-thirds (65%) of those aged 65+, for example, express this view. Women are also more likely to be unsure as to what would happen in this scenario (76%, compared to 63% of men). This reflects a more general tendency for women to report lower levels of certainty or confidence than men in relation to a wide range of issues. Unsurprisingly, those with “no interest” in politics are more likely to be unsure (72%, compared with 59% of those with a “great deal of interest” in politics). However, despite these variations, it should be emphasized that considerably more than half of each section of the public we considered indicated that they were unsure what would happen, were Britain to leave the EU. Interestingly, we did not detect any significant variation for groups defined by levels of education or social class; this is somewhat surprising given that more general attitudes to the EU have been shown to closely link to levels of education in particular.

What will happen if we vote to Leave?

Against this backdrop of widespread uncertainty, we next consider what the public thinks will happen if Britain were to leave the EU. We examine four areas which have played a part in campaigning to date, to greater and lesser extents: the economy in general (and unemployment specifically); immigration; and Britain’s role in the world.

Specifically, the Leave campaign argues that a vote to withdraw from the EU would: allow Britain’s economy to flourish (by enabling independent trade deals with other countries and the cutting of regulations applicable to business); reduce immigration into Britain because free movement of people would no longer apply; and that Britain would have just as much influence in the world as a strong, independent nation.⁵ How far is the public inclined to agree with these suppositions? To assess this, we asked respondents whether they thought Britain leaving the EU would result in: Britain having more or less influence in the world; there being more or less immigration into Britain; Britain’s economy being better or worse off; and there being more or less unemployment in Britain.

Strikingly, as shown in Table 1, for each of these questions a significant proportion of people believe that a British exit from the EU “wouldn’t make much difference”. Over two-fifths of people think this wouldn’t make much difference to Britain’s influence in the world and a similar proportion think this in relation to the level of unemployment in Britain. However, when asked whether an EU exit would make Britain’s economy better off or worse off, slightly less than one-third say that it would not make much difference – the same proportion who say this when asked about the impact of leaving the EU on levels of immigration into Britain.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20448450>

Table 1 Expectations if Britain were to leave the EU

	All
If Britain were to leave the EU, Britain's economy would be...	%
Better off	24
Not much different	31
Worse off	40
If Britain were to leave the EU, immigration into Britain would be...	%
Higher	9
Not much different	31
Lower	57
If Britain were to leave the EU, Britain's influence in the world would be...	%
More	17
Not much different	44
Less	36
If Britain were to leave the EU, unemployment in Britain would be...	%
Higher	25
Not much different	46
Lower	24
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1105</i>

57% think immigration would be lower if Britain were to leave the EU, compared with 9% who think it would be higher.

For the two issues where a higher proportion of people think that Britain leaving the EU *would* make a substantial difference, opinion would appear to favour the Remain campaign on one and the Leave campaign on the other. About a quarter think that Britain's economy will be better off if she were to leave the EU, while two-fifths think that it would be worse off (as argued by the Remain campaign). There is a greater consensus in expectations for the impact of Brexit on immigration into Britain. One in 10 think that immigration would be higher if Britain were to leave the EU while nearly three-fifths think it would be lower (as argued by the Leave campaign).

In terms of Britain's influence in the world, less than two in 10 think that Britain will have more influence after an EU exit, whereas more than one-third think she will have less influence. Around a quarter think that unemployment will be lower after an exit from the EU, almost identical to the proportion who think that it would be higher. Clearly, the public feel differently about the impact of leaving the EU on unemployment specifically (where opinion is very balanced), compared to the economy more generally (where opinion favours Remaining).

Previous research has indicated that older people and those with lower levels of education are more likely to have negative feelings about the EU than younger people and those with higher levels of education (Curtice, 2015).⁶ Given this, we might expect to see variation in public expectations for Brexit, with the expectations of younger better-educated groups being less positive than those of older, less well-educated groups.

⁶ A more recent analysis on this topic is available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/can-we-really-not-predict-who-will-vote-for-brexit-and-where/>

Table 2 Views about what would happen if Britain were to leave the EU, by highest educational qualification

	Degree	A Level/ Higher education below degree	O Level or equivalent	No qualifications	All
If Britain were to leave the EU, Britain's economy would be...	%	%	%	%	%
Better off	15	21	27	33	24
Not much different	19	30	36	44	31
Worse off	65	44	31	16	40
If Britain were to leave the EU, immigration into Britain would be...	%	%	%	%	%
Higher	6	9	8	13	9
Not much different	34	27	35	31	31
Lower	60	61	52	53	57
If Britain were to leave the EU, Britain's influence in the world would be...	%	%	%	%	%
More	11	15	15	26	17
Not much different	33	45	51	49	44
Less	56	37	30	19	36
If Britain were to leave the EU, unemployment in Britain would be...	%	%	%	%	%
Higher	36	19	20	26	25
Not much different	39	50	48	47	46
Lower	22	25	26	21	24
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>260</i>	<i>293</i>	<i>280</i>	<i>248</i>	<i>1105</i>

As shown in Table 2, this is indeed the case for expectations relating to Britain's economy in general, levels of unemployment specifically, and Britain's influence in the world. Almost two-thirds of those with a degree expect Britain's economy to be worse off if she leaves the EU, compared with less than one-fifth of those with no educational qualifications. Indeed, those with no qualifications are unique in being more likely to think that Britain's economy will get better rather than worse, if Britain leaves the EU. Similarly, more than one-third of those with a degree think that unemployment in Britain would be higher if she were to leave the EU, compared to around one-quarter of those with no educational qualifications. A more pronounced pattern is evident in relation to Britain's influence in the world. Over half of those with a degree think an EU exit would result in Britain having less influence in the world, compared with one-fifth of those with no qualifications. Again, those with no qualifications are the only group more likely to think an EU exit would give Britain more, rather than less, influence in the world. Interestingly, however, there are no significant differences by level of education in the views of

People with no educational qualifications are the only group more likely to think an EU exit would give Britain more, rather than less, influence in the world.

what would happen to immigration to Britain in the event of an EU exit. Over half of all groups defined by education levels think that immigration to Britain will be lower if Britain were to leave the EU. Although our data does not indicate whether people think that lower levels of immigration would be a good, bad or neutral development, it does provide evidence that the association of being a member of the EU with relatively high levels of immigration cuts across all groups defined by their level of education.

Age is also related to expectations regarding the impact of an EU exit on Britain's economy and its place in the world, though to a lesser degree than was the case for levels of education. Almost half (47%) of the youngest age group (aged 18-34) think that Britain's economy would be worse, were she to leave the EU, compared with nearly one-third (31%) of the oldest age group (aged 65+). Similarly, four in 10 (41%) of the youngest age group think Britain would have less influence in the world in the event of an EU exit, compared with less than three in 10 (26%) of the oldest age group. As was the case for levels of education, there are no significant differences between different age groups in their expectations for the impact of Brexit on immigration levels; in this instance, this is also the case for expectations relating to levels of unemployment.

Interest in politics also links with expectations of how leaving the EU would affect Britain, with those with a great deal of interest in politics tending to have more negative expectations than those with lower levels of political interest. So, we see that over half (56%) of those with a great deal of interest in politics think that Britain's economy is likely to get worse if Britain leaves the EU, compared with less than two-fifths (19%) of those with no interest in politics. Similarly, those with a great deal of interest in politics are almost three times as likely to think that Britain will have less influence in the world after an EU exit, compared with those with no interest in politics (49% and 17% respectively) and almost twice as likely to think that unemployment levels will be higher in this scenario (34% and 18% respectively). Interestingly, we also find an association between levels of political interest and expectations for immigration, in the event of an EU exit. Over two-thirds (69%) of those with a great deal of interest in politics think that immigration will be lower, compared with over one-third (38%) of those with no interest in politics.

In terms of the final two socio-demographic characteristics we examined, social class was found to significantly link with expectations for an EU exit in relation to each of the four areas we asked about – with those from a higher social class being more likely to hold 'negative' expectations for an EU exit (in terms of Britain's economy, unemployment levels and level of influence in the world) as well as being significantly more likely to anticipate lower levels of immigration. Men and women hold distinct expectations for an EU exit in relation to Britain's economy, and levels of unemployment and immigration – with men being more likely than women to expect

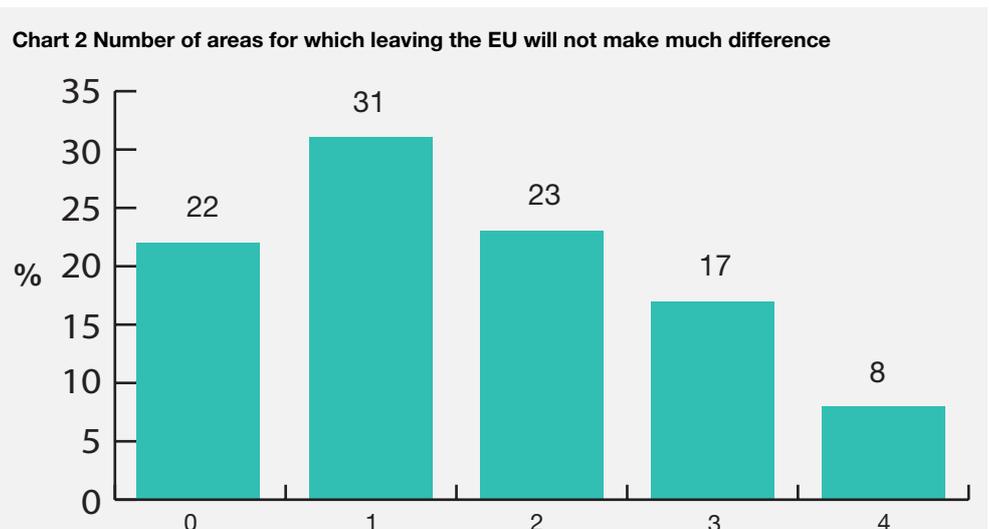
Britain's economy to be worse off, unemployment levels to be higher and immigration levels to be lower post-Brexit.

Clearly then, expectations about what would happen in the event of an EU exit vary substantially across the public – although it would be over-simplistic to conclude that younger better-educated sections of the population routinely hold views consistent with the Remain campaign, and vice versa. Most notably, expectations for the impact of Brexit on levels of immigration to Britain vary significantly by political interest, sex and social class, but not by age or level of education.

As noted previously, substantial minorities of between one-third and slightly less than half think that leaving the EU would not make much difference in relation to each of the four areas asked about. We consider next whether a general perception that leaving the EU will not make much difference is particularly prevalent in certain sections of the population, as this may be impacting on the proportions, reviewed above, who anticipate a more substantial change in each of the areas, albeit positive or negative.

Who thinks that leaving the EU will not make much difference?

To ascertain how far individuals feel that leaving the EU will not make much difference in general, we calculated for each respondent a total number of areas (out of a possible four) where they held this view. As depicted in Chart 2, we find that slightly more than half (53%) think that leaving the EU will not make much difference in relation to 0-1 of the areas asked about, around a quarter think this in relation to two areas, while a similar proportion (24%) think this in relation to 3-4 areas.



Unweighted base: 1105

We might anticipate a relationship between uncertainty as to what would happen if Britain were to leave the EU and the perception that, in general, this would not make much difference – given that those who hold specific views about the direction of the impact might be more likely to have a degree of certainty about them. This is indeed the case; 16% of those who are sure what will happen in the event of Britain leaving the EU think that a British exit would not make much difference in relation to 3-4 areas; this is the case for 27% of those who say that they are unsure about what would happen in the event of Britain leaving the EU. In other words, those whose convictions about the impacts of Brexit are less strong are more likely to think that, in general, it would not make much difference.

The expectation that, in general, leaving the EU would not make much difference is much more prevalent among those with fewer educational qualifications, who are from a lower social class and who have less interest in politics. Just over one in 10 (14%) of those with a degree think leaving the EU will not make much difference in general, compared to around three in 10 (29%) of those with no qualifications. More markedly, this is the case for 14% of those with a great deal of interest in politics, compared with 39% of those with no interest in politics. Sex and age, however, do not appear to make a difference in this instance.

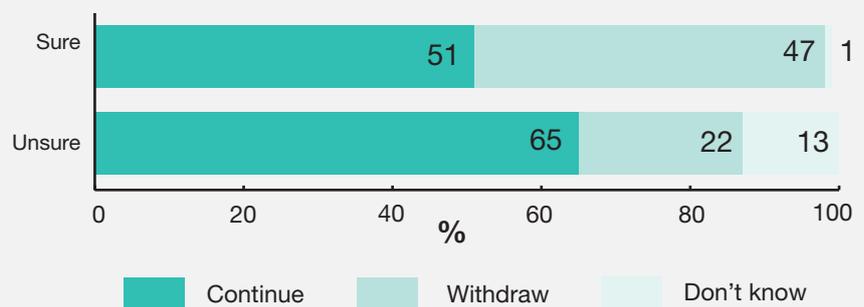
How expectations link to likely voting patterns

We finally consider how the attitudes and expectations reviewed so far may inform voting behaviour in the referendum on Britain's EU membership on June 23rd⁷.

As set out previously, there is a widely-held perception, drawing on the experiences of the referendum on Scottish Independence, that the greater the level of uncertainty regarding what would happen in the event of Brexit, the greater likelihood that the public will vote to Remain. Our data appears to endorse this view, as depicted in Chart 3. As certainty about the implications of leaving the EU increases, people are significantly more likely to say they would prefer to leave the EU. So we see that 22% of those who are unsure what would happen in the event of an EU exit are in favour of Britain withdrawing from the EU, compared with 47% of those who report being sure what would happen in this scenario.

⁷ The 2015 BSA survey included a question asking respondents "Do you think that Britain should continue to be a member of the European Union or should it withdraw?". While we cannot use the data collected to accurately assess voting intentions (both because of the timing of the survey and the question), we can use this question to explore the general links between expectations for Brexit and likely voting patterns.

Chart 3 Certainty about what would happen in the event of Britain leaving the EU, by preference for Britain's membership of the EU



Unweighted bases
 Sure: 313
 Unsure: 765

As we would logically expect, we also see that those with ‘positive’ expectations of what would happen in the event of Brexit are more likely to favour Britain withdrawing from the EU than those with neutral or ‘negative’ expectations. While 30% overall express the view that Britain should withdraw from the EU, this is the case for 65% of those who think that Britain would have more influence in the world outside of the EU, 42% of those who think that unemployment in Britain would be lower and 72% of those who think that Britain’s economy would be better off. While we cannot presume whether respondents regarded higher or lower levels of immigration as a positive development for Britain, those who associate Brexit with lower levels of immigration are more likely to favour withdrawing; this is the case for 38%. More detailed analysis of these data in relation to likely voting behaviour has concluded that expectations for Britain’s economy are more important than those for immigration levels in informing preferences for Britain’s future relationship with the EU (Curtice, 2016).

Finally, the perception that leaving the EU would, in general, not make much difference does not link with significantly higher levels of support for withdrawing from the EU. Unsurprisingly, however, those who think that leaving the EU would not make much difference in relation to 3-4 of the specific areas asked about are significantly more likely to say that they “don’t know” what their preference would be for Britain’s membership of the EU (this was the case for 15%, compared with 9% of those who thought leaving the EU would not make much difference to 0-2 areas).

Public expectations for Brexit can be seen as being characterized by a lack of strong conviction.

Conclusions

Public expectations for Brexit are underpinned by a considerable degree of uncertainty. The only area where there is majority agreement as to the likely impact of Brexit is immigration, where almost six in 10 think this will lead to lower levels of immigration. The most popular view about Britain's economy, were she to leave the EU, is that it would be worse off (held by four in 10). However, the most popular standpoints in relation to Britain's influence in the world and levels of unemployment are that leaving the EU would not make much difference (more than four in 10 express this view in each case). Indeed, almost half the public think that leaving the EU will not make much difference to at least two of the four areas asked about. Arguably, therefore, public expectations for Brexit can be seen as being characterized by a lack of strong conviction.

Expectations regarding what would happen, were Britain to leave the EU, vary considerably across different sections of the public. Clearly, it is too simplistic to assume that expectations for Brexit can always be primarily explained by age and education – in fact, we encountered quite distinct patterns in relation to the various issues examined. Most notably, expectations for levels of immigration do not vary markedly by age or level of education – but do significantly relate to sex, social class and interest in politics.

What does this mean for the referendum on 23rd June, given that the Remain and Leave campaigns are currently reported as being neck-and-neck?⁸ Logically, we would expect increases in the proportions of the public who expect Brexit to have particular positive or negative impacts to affect levels of support for the Leave and Remain campaigns respectively, although detailed analysis of these data suggests that expectations regarding Britain's economy would have the greatest effect in this regard (Curtice, 2016). However, it might also be the case that the Leave campaign needs to reduce the substantial uncertainty that exists as to what would happen if Britain were to leave the EU, in order to increase its support. Moreover, both sides may need to combat the assumption, held by considerable minorities of the public, that the outcome of the Referendum would not make much difference in relation to particular areas. It remains to be seen how the public's expectations for Brexit will inform their voting behavior in one month's time.

⁸ <http://whatukthinks.org/eu/?gclid=COB8q-mY7MwCFRUTGwodWnsGEO>

References

Barford, Vanessa, *Scotland votes 'No': How the 'No' side won the referendum*, BBC News, 19 September 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29223984>

BBC News online (29th February 2016), *EU referendum: Row over '10 years of uncertainty' claim*, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35685656>

Curtice, J. (2015) *Britain divided? Who support and who opposes EU membership*, available at <http://whatukthinks.org/eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Analysis-paper-1-Britain-divided.pdf>

Curtice, J. (2016) *How deeply does Britain's Euroscepticism run?*, NatCen, available at <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39024/euroscepticism.pdf>

Johnston, R., Jones, K., Manley, D., LSE, British Politics and Policy, *Can we really not predict who will vote for Brexit, and where?* Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/can-we-really-not-predict-who-will-vote-for-brexit-and-where/>

NatCen Social Research, *What UK thinks EU*, available at <http://whatukthinks.org/eu/?gclid=COB8q-mY7MwCFRUTGwodWnsGEQ>

ScotCen (2014), *Has the Referendum Campaign Made a Difference?*, available at <http://scotcen-what-scotland-thinks-chart-images.s3.amazonaws.com/files/62d0afd9-d75b-46ba-887c-a384017007b7/ssa-2014-launch-jc-briefing-final-2pdf>

Wheeler, B. and Peter, L. (14th May 2013), *UK and The EU: Better off out or in?* BBC News online, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20448450>