

CSI Brexit 3: National Identity and Support for Leave versus Remain[†]

29th November, 2017

Summary

- Scholars have long emphasised the importance of national identity as a predictor of Eurosceptic attitudes. And according to several recent studies, national identity played a significant role in the UK's vote to leave the EU.
- Analysis of data from the Centre for Social Investigation's longitudinal Brexit survey confirms that national identity is indeed likely to have played such a role.
- When asked to choose their primary national identity, about 56% of people say "British" and about 28% say "English", whereas only 2.5% say "European".
- People who see themselves primarily as "English" were much more likely to have backed Leave in the referendum. Those who see themselves primarily as "European" were overwhelmingly likely to have backed Remain.
- Consistent with previous work, the effects of national identity on support for Leave versus Remain persist after taking other factors into account.

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Introduction

This report begins by summarising previous work on the relationship between national identity and Eurosceptic attitudes, and the role that national identity may have played in the UK's vote to leave. Using data from the first wave of the Centre for Social Investigation's longitudinal survey^{1,2} on attitudes to Brexit, it proceeds to describe the distribution of Britons by national identity, and to explore how national identity relates to support for Leave versus Remain.

Previous work on national identity, Eurosceptic attitudes, and the UK's vote to leave

Scholars have long emphasised the importance of national identity as a predictor of Eurosceptic attitudes.^{3,4,5,6} For example, Sean Carey analysed data from the Eurobarometer survey, and found that—all else being equal—Europeans who feel more attached to their country, and who feel greater pride in their nationality, are more likely to oppose EU membership.³ In addition, the present author collated evidence suggesting that lack of European identity among citizens of rich EU member states may explain their comparatively weak support for policies like Eurozone bank bailouts and fiscal transfers to poorer member states.⁶

According to several recent studies, national identity played a significant role in the UK's vote to leave the EU.^{7,8,9,10} To begin with, Sara Hobolt has demonstrated that Britons with a strong sense of European identity were substantially less likely to vote for Leave, holding other factors constant.⁷ Furthermore, James Dennison and the present author have shown that percentage of the population with an exclusively national (as opposed to European) identity is higher in Britain than in all other member states, which they attribute to specific aspects of Britain's history and geography.⁸ Similarly, John Curtice has shown that the percentage of Britons identifying as European remained remarkably low over the 24 years of Britain's EU membership from 1992 to 2016.⁹ Ailsa Henderson and colleagues go further, arguing that specifically English identity was what underpinned the UK's vote to leave. They demonstrate that support for Leave far exceeded support for Remain among those identifying as “English, not British”, and that the impact of English identity on support for Leave persists after taking other factors into account.¹⁰

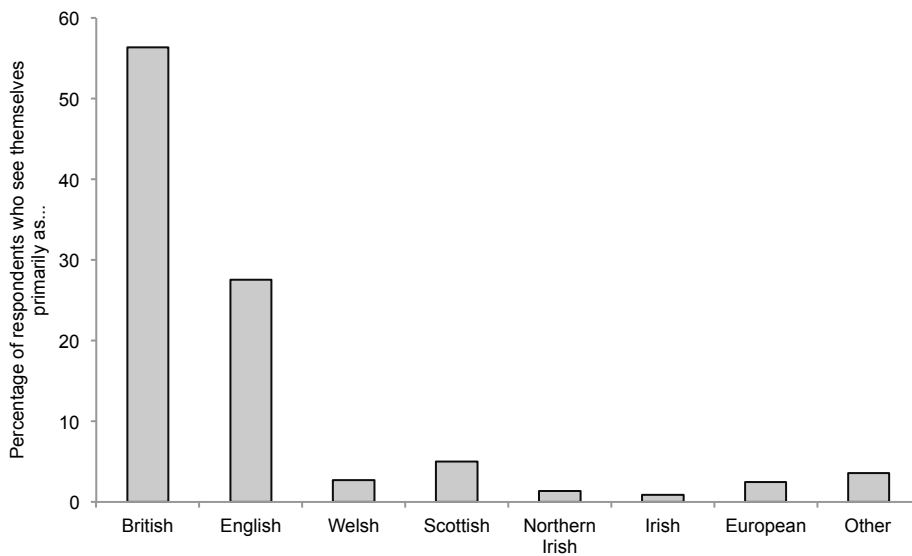
How national identity relates to support for Leave versus Remain in the CSI data

As noted previously^{1,2}, ~5,300 respondents were surveyed online between 10th July and 2nd August by the polling company Kantar. They answered questions about their demographic characteristics, social identities, knowledge of the EU, a few general political issues, and certain aspects of the Brexit negotiations.

As to national identity, respondents were asked, “Which, if any, of the following describes the way you think of yourself? a) British, b) English, c) European, d) Irish, e) Northern Irish, f) Scottish, g) Ulster, h) Welsh, i) Other”. They were asked to “choose as many or as few as apply”, and were also given the option to say, “I don't think of myself in this way” or “I prefer not to say”. 20% of respondents gave a dual or triple national identity (i.e., chose more than one of the preceding options). An additional question was put to these respondents, namely: “And if you had to choose, which one best describes the way you think of yourself?” The information from the two preceding questions allowed each respondent's primary national identity to be ascertained.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of respondents by primary national identity. Note that the category “Other” comprises the very small number of respondents who answered “Ulster” or “Other” to the second of the two questions, as well as the small number of respondents who answered “I don't think of myself in this way” or “I prefer not to say”. (A small number of respondents were excluded from the sample prior to analysis. See Appendix A for further details.) 56% of respondents see themselves primarily as British, which is the modal category. And a further 28% of respondents see themselves as English. Interestingly, only 2.5% of respondents see themselves primarily European, which is consistent with evidence from previous work that Britons have a relatively weak sense of European identity.^{8,9}

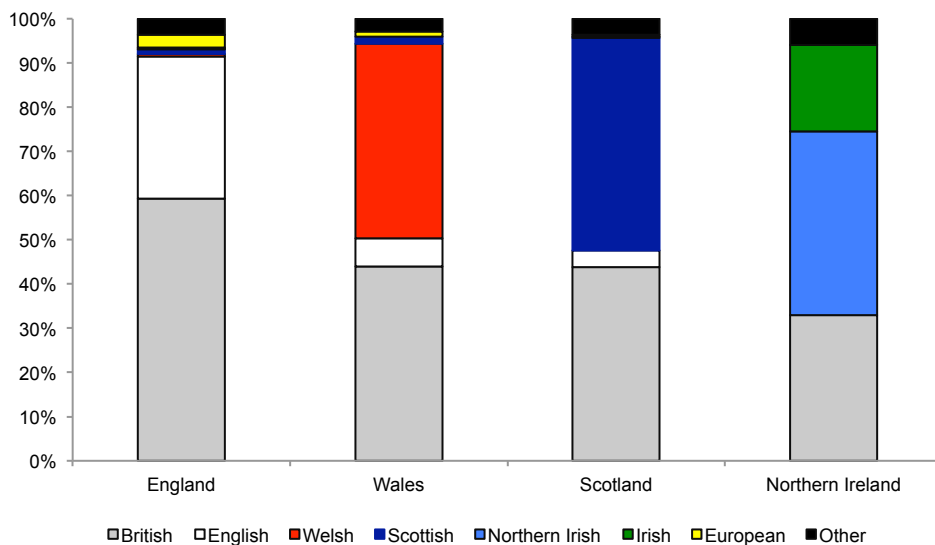
Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by primary national identity.



Notes: Sample weights were applied. Across the eight categories of national identity, the percentages sum to 100.

Figure 2 displays the breakdown of primary national identity within each of the UK’s four constituent countries (defined by residence). In England, 59% of people see themselves primarily as British, and a further 32% see themselves primarily as English. In Wales, 44% of people see themselves primarily as British, and a further 44% see themselves primarily as Welsh. In Scotland, 44% of people see themselves primarily as British, and a further 48% see themselves primarily as Scottish. In Northern Ireland, 33% of people see themselves primarily as British, a further 42% of people see themselves as primarily Northern Irish, and a further 20% see themselves primarily as Irish. The percentage of people who see themselves primarily as European as negligible in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which is somewhat surprising given that Remain won by a sizable majority in both those jurisdictions. (Note that the distributions of national identity were similar when allowing those with a dual or triple national identity to belong to multiple categories. For further details, see Appendix B.)

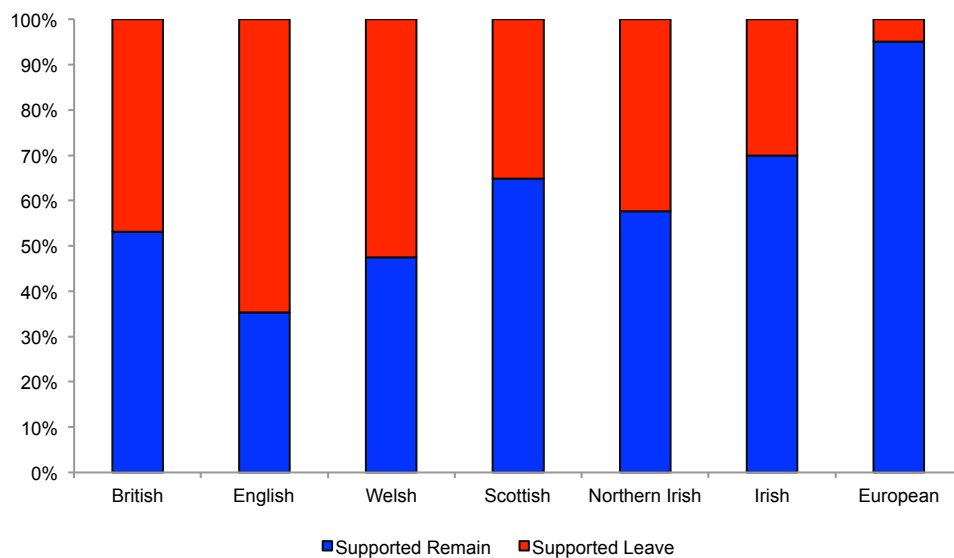
Figure 2. Breakdown of primary national identity within England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.



Notes: Sample weights were applied. Percentages sum to 100 within each country. The colour for Northern Ireland was taken from the Northern Irish Assembly’s flag.

Figure 3 displays the breakdown of support for Leave versus Remain by primary national identity. Leave supporters were defined as those who either voted Leave in the referendum or said they would have done so if they had voted. (Remain supporters were defined in the same way.) 47% of those who see themselves primarily as British supported Leave in the referendum. A full 65% of those who see themselves primarily as English supported Leave, which is consistent with the work of Ailsa Henderson and colleagues.¹⁰ 52% of those who see themselves primarily as Welsh supported Leave, along with 35% of those who see themselves primarily as Scottish, 42% of those who see themselves primarily as Northern Irish and only 30% of those who see themselves primarily as Irish. Interestingly, among those who see themselves primarily as European, only 5% supported Leave; the other 95% supported Remain! (Note that the breakdown of support for Leave versus Remain is highly similar when excluding those who did not vote in the referendum. See Appendix C for further details.)

Figure 3. Breakdown of support for Leave versus Remain by primary national identity.

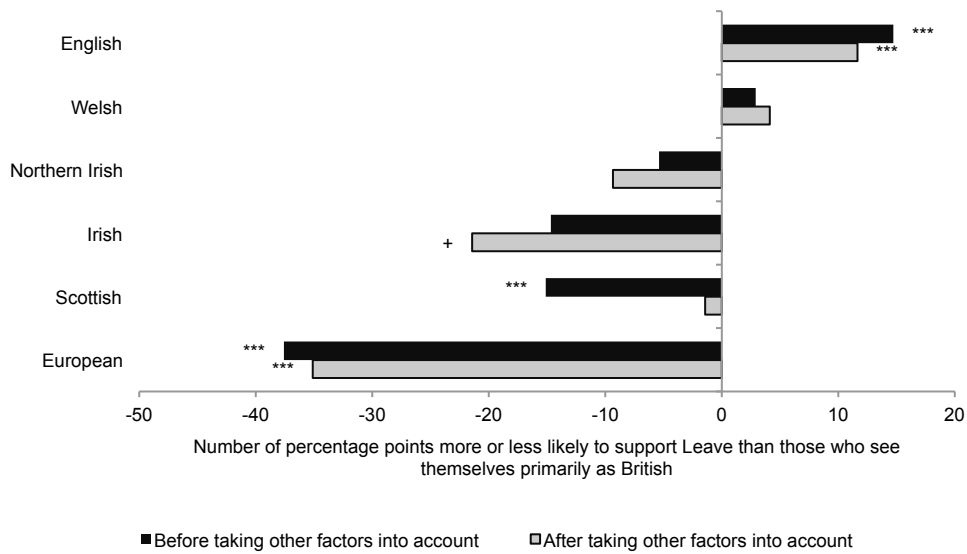


Notes: Sample weights were applied.

Do the effects of national identity on support for Leave versus Remain persist after taking into account factors such as age, education, country of residence and EU citizenship? One can get an answer to this question by employing a method called multiple regression, which quantifies the effects¹¹ of various predictor variables on a certain outcome variable, whilst holding other predictor variables constant. Figure 4 displays results from such an analysis. Each bar in the chart can be interpreted as the number of percentage points more or less likely people in the relevant category were to support Leave than people who see themselves primarily as British. For example, the very top bar indicates that, all else being equal, people who see themselves primarily as English were 15 percentage points more likely to support Leave than those who see themselves primarily as British. And the three asterisks denote statistical significance at the 1% level, indicating that the difference is very unlikely to have arisen by chance.

The grey bars corresponding to ‘English’ and ‘European’ are only slightly shorter than the black bars corresponding to these identities, which indicates that some effects of national identity on support for Leave versus Remain do persist after taking into account factors such as age, education, country of residence and EU citizenship. (Appendix D provides full results for the statistical analyses on which Figure 3 is based.)

Figure 4. The relationship between national identity and support for Leave, before and after taking other factors into account.



Notes: Sample weights were applied. The following factors were statistically controlled: sex, age, ethnicity, country of birth, level of education, social class, country of residence, Irish citizenship, Commonwealth citizenship, EU citizenship, and party identity. Significance levels: + 10%, * 5%, ** 1%, *** 0.1%. For further details, see Table D1 in the Appendix.

Conclusion

This report began by summarising previous work on the relationship between national identity and Eurosceptic attitudes, and the role that national identity may have played in the UK’s vote to leave. Using data from the first wave of the Centre for Social Investigation’s longitudinal survey on attitudes to Brexit, it proceeded to describe the distribution of Britons by national identity, and to explore how national identity relates to support for Leave versus Remain.

Scholars have long emphasised the importance of national identity as a predictor of Eurosceptic attitudes. And according to several recent studies, national identity played a significant role in the UK’s vote to leave. Analysis of data from the Centre for Social Investigation’s longitudinal Brexit survey confirms that national identity is indeed likely to have played such a role.

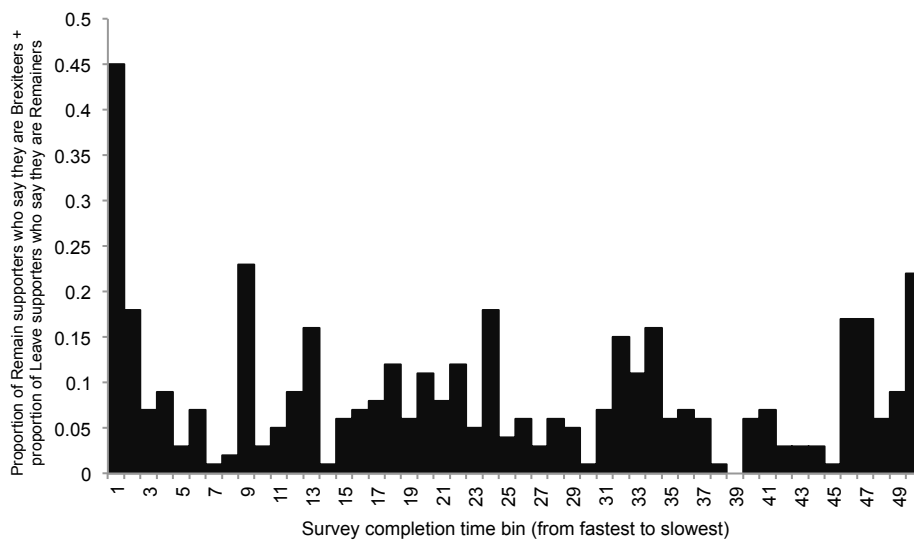
When asked to choose their primary national identity, about 56% of people say “British” and about 28% say “English”, whereas only 2.5% say “European”. People who see themselves primarily as “English” were much more likely to have backed Leave in the referendum. Those who see themselves primarily as “European” were overwhelmingly likely to have backed Remain. Consistent with previous work, the effects of national identity on support for Leave versus Remain persist after taking other factors into account.

Appendix A

Three small groups of respondents were excluded from the sample prior to analysis. The first group comprises those who were among the quickest 2% of responders. These individuals were excluded on the basis of evidence that they may have rushed through the survey, and hence not filled it out very carefully. Respondents’ survey completion times were heavily right-skewed, with a median of 10:28, a minimum of 02:16, and a maximum of 23:27:17 (presumably representing someone who left the survey and came back to it). One way to find out whether respondents with very fast completion times did in fact rush through the survey is to divide the sample into a relatively large number of completion time bins, and then to examine the within-bin relationship between two variables that one would expect to be very closely associated. If respondents with very fast completion times did rush through the survey, these two variables should be less closely associated within bins comprising the quickest responders than within all other bins.

The two variables selected for this purpose were: support for Leave versus Remain in the referendum; and identification as a Brexiteer or Remainer. Both of these are binary indicators (respondents who did not express a preference or give an identity were excluded). The sample was divided into 50 equally sized completion time bins. One would expect the vast majority of those who supported Leave to identify as Brexiteers, and the vast majority of those who supported Remain to identify as Remainers. Therefore, in order to measure the deviation from the expectation of perfect correspondence, the following quantity was computed for each bin: Proportion of Remain supporters who say they are Brexiteers + proportion of Leave supporters who say they are Remainers. Figure A1 displays the distribution of this quantity across all 50 completion time bins. The deviation from perfect correspondence is substantially larger in the first bin than in all other bins. In fact, the difference in proportions between the quickest 2% and the slowest 98% was significant at the 0.1% level. This constitutes fairly strong evidence that respondents with very fast completion times did rush through the survey. Excluding them resulted in 109 individuals being removed from the sample.

Figure A1. Distribution of deviations from perfect correspondence between support for Leave versus Remain and identification as a Brexiteer or Remainer.



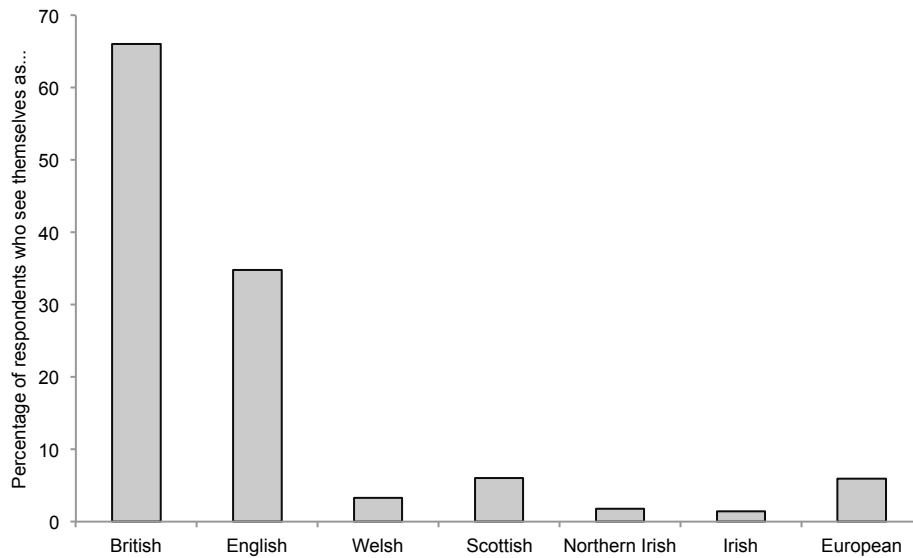
Notes: Bin 1 comprises the quickest 2% of responders; bin 50 comprises the slowest 2% of responders. Sample weights were applied.

Two other groups of respondents were excluded from the sample prior to analysis: first, those who were not eligible to vote in the EU referendum (i.e., individuals who are not citizens of the UK, Ireland or a Commonwealth country), which resulted in 135 individuals being removed from the sample; and second, those who did not express a preference for either Leave or Remain, which resulted in a further 163 individuals being removed from the sample. The final sub-sample amounted to 92% of the original sample.

Appendix B

Figure B1 displays the distribution of respondents by national identity, allowing those with a dual or triple national identity to belong to multiple categories. Overall, the distribution is highly similar to the one displayed in Figure 1, except for slightly higher percentages in the categories “British”, “English” and “European”. In fact, the Pearson correlation between the two distributions, rounded to the second decimal place, is equal to 1.00 ($p < 0.001$). 66% of respondents see themselves as British, which is again the modal category. And a further 35% of respondents see themselves as English. Only 6% of respondents see themselves as European.

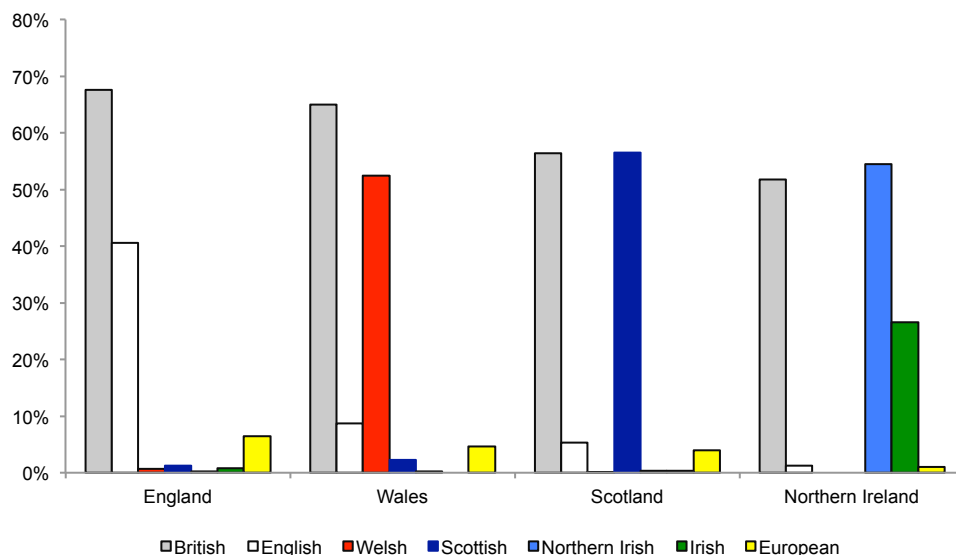
Figure B1. Distribution of respondents by national identity, allowing those with a dual or triple national identity to belong to multiple categories.



Notes: Sample weights were applied. Percentages do not sum to 100.

Figure B2 displays the distribution of respondents by national identity, allowing those with a dual or triple national identity to belong to multiple categories, for each of the UK's four constituent countries. In England, 68% of people see themselves as British, and 41% see themselves as English. In Wales, 65% of people see themselves as British, and 52% see themselves as Welsh. In Scotland, 56% of people see themselves as British, and 57% see themselves as Scottish. In Northern Ireland, 52% of people see themselves as British, 54% see themselves as Northern Irish, and 20% see themselves as Irish. The percentage of people who see themselves as European is once again highest in England at 6%, and is negligible in Northern Ireland.

Figure B2. Distribution of respondents by national identity, allowing those with a dual or triple national identity to belong to multiple categories, for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

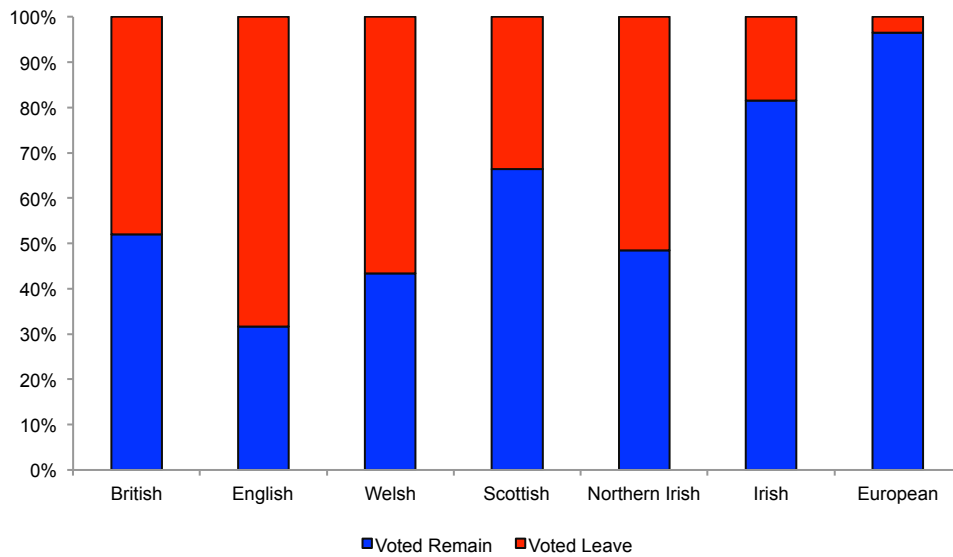


Notes: Sample weights were applied. Percentages within each country do not sum to 100. The colour for Northern Ireland was taken from the Northern Irish Assembly's flag.

Appendix C

Figure C1 displays the breakdown of voting for Leave versus Remain by primary national identity. It is largely identical to the breakdown displayed in Figure 2. 48% of those who see themselves primarily as British voted Leave in the referendum. A full 68% of those who see themselves primarily as English voted Leave. 57% of those who see themselves primarily as Welsh voted Leave, along with 34% of those who see themselves primarily as Scottish, 52% of those who see themselves primarily as Northern Irish and only 19% of those who see themselves primarily as Irish. Among those who see themselves primarily as European, only 4% voted Leave.

Figure C1. Breakdown of voting for Leave versus Remain by primary national identity.



Notes: Sample weights were applied.

The numbers in Figure C1 (combined with the corresponding distribution by primary national identity) allow some interesting hypotheticals to be tested. For example, one can ask, ‘How many people would have to switch from a primary national identity of “British” to a primary national identity of “European” in order to flip the referendum result?’ The answer is 5 percentage points. In other words, holding all else constant, if 5 percentage points of those who see themselves primarily as British instead saw themselves primarily as European, then the percentage of votes for Remain would have exceeded 50%. Likewise, one can ask, ‘How many people would have to switch from a primary national identity of “English” to a primary national identity of “English” in order to flip the referendum result?’ The answer is 11 percentage points. In other words, holding all else constant, if 11 percentage points of those who see themselves primarily as English instead saw themselves primarily as British, then the percentage of votes for Remain would again have exceeded 50%.

Appendix D

Table D1 displays estimates from linear probability models of support for Leave rather than Remain. Overall, the results are highly consistent with those of Sara Hobolt’s analysis⁷: older age, white ethnicity, lower education, lower class, non-European identity and support for UKIP all predict support for Leave. Note that the effects¹¹ of national identity are quite substantial relative to the effects of other factors. For example, the difference in support for Leave between those who see themselves primarily as European and those who see themselves primarily as British is more than twice as large as the difference between those with a university degree and those without any qualifications. Likewise, the difference in support for Leave between those who see themselves primarily as English and those who see themselves primarily as British is about three quarters as large as the difference between those with a university degree and those without any qualifications.

Unsurprisingly, being a UKIP supporter is the single strongest predictor of supporting Leave; although seeing oneself primarily as European is a relatively close second. (Note that the non-linear effect of age is consistent with the results of another recent study.¹²)

Table D1. Estimates from linear probability models of support for Leave rather than Remain.

	Supported Leave rather than Remain	Supported Leave rather than Remain	Supported Leave rather than Remain
<i>National identity (ref. = British)</i>			
English	0.15***	0.14***	0.12***
Welsh	0.03	0.01	0.04
Scottish	-0.15***	-0.05	-0.01
Northern Irish	-0.05	-0.12	-0.09
Irish	-0.15	-0.28*	-0.21+
European	-0.38***	-0.39***	-0.35***
<i>Sex (ref. = Male)</i>			
Female	0.03	0.03	0.02
<i>Age group (ref. = 18-24)</i>			
25-34	0.12**	0.12**	0.10*
35-44	0.20***	0.20***	0.16***
45-64	0.21***	0.21***	0.17***
65+	0.21***	0.21***	0.17***
<i>Ethnicity (ref. = Non-white)</i>			
White	0.14***	0.15***	0.11**
<i>Country of birth (ref. = Born abroad)</i>			
Born in UK	0.00	0.01	0.02
<i>Level of education (ref. = No education)</i>			
Secondary	0.00	0.00	-0.01
Post-secondary	-0.08+	-0.08+	-0.07+
Degree	-0.17***	-0.18***	-0.16***
<i>Social class (ref. = Routine or semi-routine)</i>			
Intermediate occupation	-0.08***	-0.09***	-0.09***
Manager or higher grade professional	-0.04	-0.05	-0.08*
<i>Country of residence (ref. = England)</i>			
Scotland		-0.13**	-0.11**
Wales		0.01	0.00
Northern Ireland		0.06	0.01
<i>Irish citizenship (ref. = Not a citizen...)</i>			
Citizen of Ireland		0.06	0.06
<i>EU citizenship (ref. = Not a citizen...)</i>			
Citizen of any other member state		0.16	0.14
<i>Commonwealth citizenship (ref. = Not a citizen...)</i>			
Citizen of another Commonwealth country		0.14	0.13+
<i>Party identity (ref. = Labour)</i>			
Conservative			0.21***
Liberal Democrat			-0.08*
United Kingdom Independence Party			0.44***
Scottish National Party			0.02
Observations (unweighted)	4,904	4,904	4,904

Notes: ‘ref.’ denotes the reference category for each variable. The estimates corresponding to some categories (e.g., “Other party”) are omitted for the sake of brevity. Standard errors are also omitted for the sake of brevity. Sample weights were applied. Significance levels: + 10%, * 5%, ** 1%, *** 0.1%.

Notes and References

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And see Carl, N. (2017). Listening to the Experts on European Monetary Integration: Comment on Waltraud Schelkle's Response. *The Political Quarterly*, early view.

⁷ Hobolt, S.B. (2016). The Brexit vote: A divided nation, a divided continent. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23, 1259-1277.

⁸ Dennison, J. & Carl, N. (2016). The ultimate causes of Brexit: history, culture and geography. *LSE British Politics and Policy*, July 18th, published online.

And see Carl, N., Dennison, J. & Evans, G. (2017). European, but not European enough: An explanation for Brexit. *Working paper*.

⁹ Curtice, John. (2017). Why Leave won the UK's referendum. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55, 19-37.

¹⁰ Henderson, A., Jeffrey, C., Wincott, D. & Jones, R.W. (2017). How Brexit was made in England. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1-16.

¹¹ Note that "effect" should be interpreted to mean "statistical effect" or "association", not "causal effect".

¹² Liberini, F., Proto, E., Oswald, A.J. & Redoano, M. (2017). Was Brexit Caused by the Unhappy and the Old? *IZA Discussion Paper No. 11059*.