

Young people in a changing Europe: British youth and Brexit 2016



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In recent years, the relationship between young people and British democracy has become increasingly complex and fragile. In particular, Government austerity policies introduced in 2010 placed a disproportionate burden on young people who have arguably suffered more than any other social grouping from deepening spending cuts in welfare and public services (Birch, Lodge and Gottfried, 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, the perceived failings of the political class to champion the interests of young people has left today's youth feeling especially ignored and marginalised, and has exposed a widening gap in aspirations between the generations. It has also translated into continued abstention from formal electoral politics (Henn and Oldfield, 2016). In the run-up to the 2016 EU Referendum, a key challenge for the political class was therefore to activate the youth vote in a contest that in time will almost certainly radically re-shape Britain's relationship with itself and the rest of continental Europe.

Against this back-drop, we worked with young people to co-produce a project called 'Me and EU' to place accessible, timely and peer reviewed information in the hands of young people with just one click. The digital platform connected users to research and events organised by contributors to the ESRC-funded "UK in a Changing Europe" project. Critically, 'Me and EU' was designed to better help young people in their decision-making on whether and how to vote. This was important for two critical reasons. Firstly, although they represented a huge potential voting bloc, the UK's Electoral Commission identified that they were nonetheless massively under-represented on the electoral register in advance of the EU Referendum. Our project aimed to encourage young people to register to vote, and included a link that enabled them to do that.

Secondly, young people had a particular take on the EU Referendum and a vision on Britain's relationship with Europe that were distinct from those of their older contemporaries. For instance, using YouGov polling data collected in the months leading up to the Referendum, Fox (2016) tracked a strong correlation between attitudes to EU membership and age. The polls revealed that when compared with older age groups, young people were less hostile to the EU, more tolerant of immigration, and more likely to feel that the EU had been successful in securing peace across the continent. Importantly, the data from YouGov's May 2016 poll indicated that the under 25's were overwhelmingly most likely to support the Remain option, while the over-60s backed leaving the EU. As Table 1 (opposite) demonstrates, this generational gap was ultimately reflected in the final vote, with 73 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds voting to remain in the EU while the country at large voted to leave by a margin of

51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent.

In our 'Me and EU' research project, we asked respondents what underpinned their support to either remain in, or to leave, the European Union. Figure 1 summarises their responses. The majority of young people prioritised broadly "Remain" responses (shaded). The primary issue for this group was a concern that Brexit would have a negative impact on the economy, trade and employment. However, these young people also stressed the positive aspects of continued membership of the EU, including the benefits to be gained by offering collective approaches to such matters as global environmental sustainability, security and human rights. By way of contrast, a significant minority of respondents emphasised the benefits to be gained from leaving the EU in terms of strengthening national political sovereignty, re-directing investment from the EU towards the UK, and greater control over immigration. However, a sizeable group of respondents (16 per cent) expressed a lack of certainty about the claims and counter-claims of both the Leave and Remain campaigns. This supports previous research (Henn and Foard 2014) that young people found politics in general to be confusing and difficult to engage with. Typical responses (typed word-for-word by respondents) included:

- *I don't know enough about the consequences of voting to stay in or leave Europe. I don't think anyone truly knows the consequences... I don't think anyone can trust what the newspapers are reporting on it because they all have their own agenda and are completely biased.*
- *Nobody knows what will happen if we do leave.*
- *I honestly have no clue on the benefits of leaving the EU or staying in.*

The decision of the UK population to support the Brexit option at the 2016 EU Referendum will have significant economic, social, political and cultural consequences - and none more so than for the futures of young people. However, the outcome would appear to be at odds with the instincts and preferences of the majority of young people who have indicated their broad support for the European project and who voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. Conceivably, the growing inequalities between the generations provides a significant challenge of our time. For a youth generation that has borne the brunt of recent austerity politics and which already feels poorly served by the political class, the Referendum outcome may serve to deepen the ongoing dissatisfaction that young people feel in relation to democratic processes in the UK.

Table 1 - Vote by age at the 2016 UK Referendum on membership of the European Union (%)

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Leave	27	38	48	56	57	60
Remain	73	62	52	44	43	40

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls (2016)

Figure 1 - Main reasons for wanting the UK to either remain in the European Union or to leave the European Union (%)

