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# Britain, the European Union and the Referendum: What Drives Euroscepticism?

## Summary

- Britain, currently on course for a referendum on its EU membership, has a long and entrenched tradition of Euroscepticism. Its voters have been consistently less likely than their continental neighbours to think positively about EU membership and the EU more generally.
- While British attitudes towards EU membership have often been volatile, a significant proportion of the population has consistently expressed a desire for Britain to leave the EU or fundamentally reform the terms of its membership.
- Our analysis of around 30,000 Britons reveals that, broadly, those who would vote to leave the EU tend to have left school before their 17th birthday, to have few or no advanced academic qualifications, to be over 55 years old, and to work in less secure, lower-income jobs. In contrast, those who want Britain to remain a member of the EU tend to be younger, to be more highly educated, and to have more financially secure and professional jobs.
- These two groups think fundamentally differently about the EU and about the issues that feed into the debate on Europe. Those who are currently planning to vote to leave the EU are motivated mainly by their dissatisfaction with how, in their view, democracy is working at the EU level, and also by their strong concerns over immigration and its perceived effects on Britain's economy, culture and welfare state.
- In the context of the ongoing refugee crisis and the accompanying debate over immigration in Britain, it is likely that the salience of these concerns over immigration and the functioning of EU democracy will increase. The anti-EU 'leave' camp – or 'outers' – will need to mobilize these concerns at the ballot box, while for the pro-EU 'remain' camp – or 'inners' – much will depend on its ability to ease voters' concerns over immigration and seemingly distant EU institutions.



### Introduction

In 2013 Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. The outcome of the 2015 general election, at which his Conservative Party secured a parliamentary majority, has put the country on course for a 'remain-or-leave' vote by the end of 2017, after an intended renegotiation of the terms of Britain's membership. The referendum will have a major impact on domestic politics, and will profoundly influence the country's role in Europe and the world. Recent surveys and polls suggest that a majority of the public will vote to remain in the EU, but also indicate that between around a third and nearly half of the population intend to vote to leave. More recently, however, amid the escalating refugee crisis and with economic performance in the eurozone lagging behind Britain's current economic trajectory, evidence has emerged that the referendum race has tightened.

### The referendum will have a major impact on domestic politics, and will profoundly influence the country's role in Europe and the world.

These factors underscore the need to explore British Euroscepticism in more depth; hitherto, the subject has attracted much interest, but it remains under-researched.<sup>1</sup> Euroscepticism is defined here as expressing the idea of contingent or qualified opposition to the EU, as well as outright and unqualified opposition to the further economic and/or political integration of EU member states.<sup>2</sup> But how widespread is Euroscepticism in Britain, and what considerations are likely to drive the 'leave' vote at the referendum? Is this vote driven mainly by concerns over the perceived economic costs to Britain of EU membership, by public dissatisfaction with how democracy appears to be functioning in the EU, or by anxieties over perceived threats to national identity and the native group from the free movement of EU migrant workers and as a result of immigration more widely? This briefing addresses these questions by analysing data from the British Election Study (BES) on more than 30,000 members of the public, collected around the time of the 2015 general election, to explore the drivers of Euroscepticism.

### Britain's Eurosceptic tradition

Unlike many other European states, Britain has a long and entrenched tradition of Euroscepticism. This historical sense of Britain being different and distinct from the continent is perhaps best summed up by Winston Churchill's objection, in 1953, to Britain being 'merged in a Federal European system', and his assertion that 'we are with them but not of them'.<sup>3</sup> In a referendum in 1975, nearly seven in 10 voters opted to remain in the European Community (or Common Market), but mass pro-Europeanism was clearly absent. As academics noted at the time, support for membership 'was wide but it did not run deep', and did not result 'in a girding of the loins for a great new European adventure'.<sup>4</sup> The vote had been for the status quo, rather than for a fundamentally new and integrated future.

An instinctive and entrenched Euroscepticism has also shaped the terms of Britain's membership of the EU – including through the negotiation of opt-outs from central aspects of European integration such as the single European currency and the Schengen Area. Euroscepticism has also remained clearly identifiable in public opinion. From the 1970s, the British have consistently been less enthusiastic about what is now the EU and further European integration than most, if not all, of their continental neighbours. This is reflected in survey data. Figure 1 shows the average public net rating of EU membership, calculated by taking the percentage of people who perceive their EU membership to be 'good' and subtracting the percentage of those who view it as 'bad'. Numbers below zero mean that there are more people who think membership is bad than good. The ratings among British respondents have lagged consistently and significantly behind the EU average. The gap was narrowest in 1997, but even then it was still 30 points. Only for a short period in the mid-1990s did the percentage of British respondents who thought EU membership was good exceed that of those who saw it as bad. As public enthusiasm about EU membership began to wane across the continent, the survey stopped asking the question in 2011.

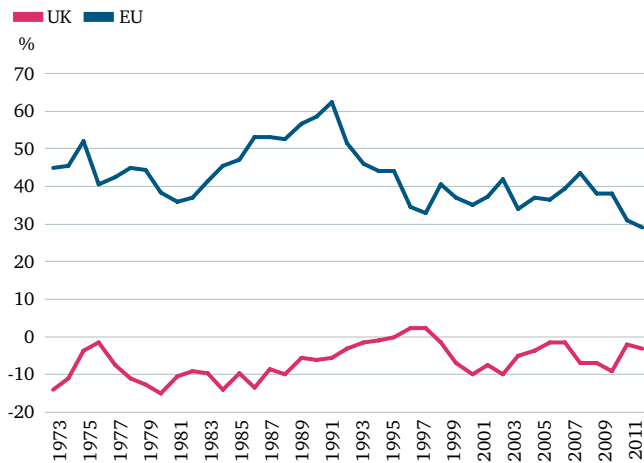
<sup>1</sup> There has been far more research on Euroscepticism in continental Europe. In Britain, there are some notable exceptions, including research on party-based forms of Euroscepticism, for example Ford and Goodwin (2014) and Goodwin and Milazzo (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Following Taggart (1998).

<sup>3</sup> HC Deb 11 May 1953 vol 515 c891.

<sup>4</sup> Butler and Kitzinger (1976), pp. 279–80.

**Figure 1: Net good/bad ratings of EU membership, 1973–2011**



Source: Eurobarometer (annual average).

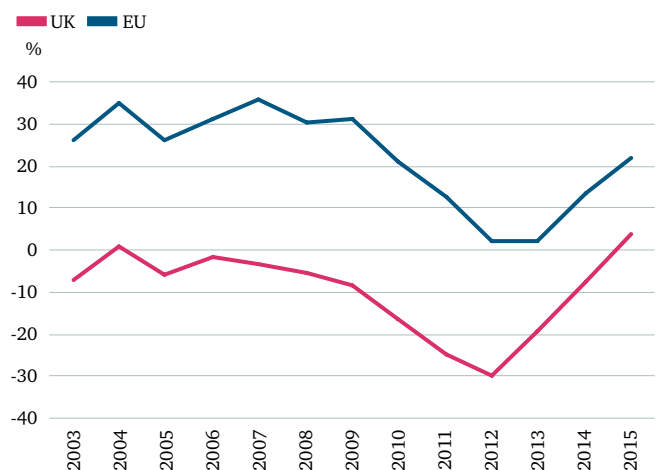
Britain’s Eurosceptic tradition can also be observed by examining the public image of the EU more generally (rather than only opinion of EU membership). Figure 2 presents net differences in the public image of the EU, where again numbers below zero indicate that more people hold a negative image. It shows how in recent years differences between the British and their neighbours have persisted. The British have consistently held a less positive image of the union than the EU average, although the gap has closed more recently. In 2015 the difference between respondents in Britain and the whole of the EU was just 18 points – in sharp contrast to the nearly 40-point difference in 2007. The most recent data also suggest that, following the sharp downturn in ratings of the EU after the financial crisis in 2008, the British have become more favourable towards the EU. However, the net rating remains close to zero – and significantly below the EU average – suggesting that public opinion remains divided on this issue.

**The British have consistently held a less positive image of the union than the EU average, although the gap has closed more recently.**

The British thus remain significantly less enthusiastic than their neighbours about EU membership and the EU more widely. That a large number in Britain share a Eurosceptic outlook can also be seen in their responses to the question of how they intend to vote at the referendum, which should first be situated in broader context. Two changes in the political debate have been especially important.

The first has been the rise of organized Euroscepticism in domestic politics. From 2013, and in the context of the fragmentation of British politics as reflected in weakening attachments to established parties and growing volatility among voters, the openly Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP) has attracted growing support, replacing the Liberal Democrats as the third most popular party in national opinion polls. The rise of UKIP was a major reason David Cameron offered a referendum on EU membership, although this commitment did little to undermine support for a party that was merging concerns over immigration with Euroscepticism. At the 2014 European Parliament elections in the UK, the party won the largest share of the overall vote (and the largest number of seats), mirroring strong results for anti-EU parties across the continent. Support for UKIP’s ‘hard’ form of Euroscepticism came mainly – although not exclusively – from older, white, less well-educated, working-class and self-employed voters, who were driven foremost by concerns over immigration and the EU, and who also felt dissatisfied with the functioning of domestic politics.<sup>5</sup> UKIP emerged from the 2015 general election with only one seat in the House of Commons, but the appeal of its stridently anti-EU, anti-Westminster and anti-immigration message was again underscored by the support of more than 12.5 per cent of the electorate. But this has also been about more than votes and seats: again, electoral pressure from UKIP was a major factor influencing the prime minister’s pledge to hold a referendum on EU membership.

**Figure 2: Net positive/negative ratings of EU image, 2003–15**



Source: Eurobarometer (annual average).

<sup>5</sup> See Ford and Goodwin (2014), and Goodwin and Milazzo (2015).

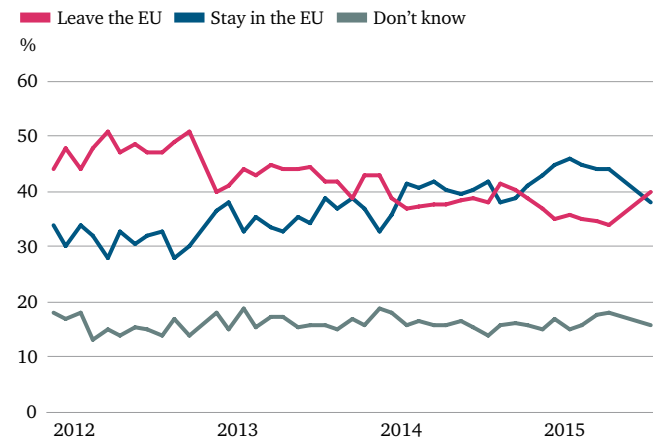


The second development concerns the ‘salience’, or perceived importance, of various issues. Generally, Europe has not been ranked as a highly important issue by voters, even if it excites most grassroots Conservative Party activists. But while the salience of Europe remained low, public anxiety over immigration has been fuelled to new heights since the general election by the acute refugee crisis in Europe arising particularly from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and political instability across the Middle East and North Africa. As of late 2015, according to data published by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, some 900,000 refugees and migrants had arrived in Europe by sea in the course of the year, with more than 200,000 arriving in October alone.<sup>6</sup> The large inflows into EU member states like Germany and Sweden, as well as a more specific crisis at the French port of Calais from where migrants attempt to enter Britain, have produced a far more favourable climate for populist Eurosceptics who aim to conflate identity and security crises with opposition to the EU. Between August and October 2015 more than 50 per cent of the electorate consistently identified immigration as being among the most serious issues facing Britain, setting new records.<sup>7</sup>

**Generally, Europe has not been ranked as a highly important issue by voters, even if it excites most grassroots Conservative Party activists.**

Meanwhile, evidence emerged that the margin between those wishing to leave and those wishing to remain in the EU has narrowed. In 23 polls conducted between May and November 2015, the last shortly before Cameron set out his demands for reform to the EU, the ‘remain’ vote averaged 46 per cent, the ‘leave’ vote 37 per cent, and the ‘undecided’ 17 per cent, indicating that the latter are likely to assume a pivotal role in the outcome of the referendum. Since the summer, however, and amid the refugee crisis, the gap between the two sides narrowed from 14 points to five.<sup>8</sup> Figure 3 provides further evidence that the race has tightened, showing how the gap between the sides has narrowed since 2012. Whereas in earlier years the Eurosceptics enjoyed a convincing lead over those wanting to remain within the EU (a trend that coincided with the lingering eurozone crisis), in more recent months public support for remaining in the EU increased, before declining once again to correspond with the trend outlined above.

**Figure 3: Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?**



Source: YouGov.

Such snapshots should be treated with caution. The opinion polls tell little about the underlying motives that are driving these public attitudes. Voting intentions may also change as the referendum nears and people focus more on the vote. This brings us to several important caveats. First, research on voting behaviour at referendums suggests that, as polling day nears, citizens often become more risk-averse. An analysis of 34 referendums around the world between 1980 and 2013 found that in the final month of the campaign support for the ‘change’ option declined in 23 cases and increased in only 11. The often large falls in support for interrupting the status quo often exceeded the increases that were recorded in a few cases where the change option prevailed.<sup>9</sup>

There is further evidence to suggest that the ‘leave’ camp faces the greater challenge. When voters are asked a more nuanced question about the future of Britain’s relationship with the EU – and one that moves away from a binary ‘remain-or-leave’ scenario – a majority are willing to remain within a reformed EU – which Cameron is hoping to deliver. The British Social Attitudes survey has for many years asked people their views about Britain’s relationship with the EU. Figure 4 shows that hard-core Eurosceptics do not currently represent a majority. On the contrary, when people are asked what should be Britain’s long-term policy regarding the EU, the most popular answer is to remain within but reduce the latter’s power. In seeking to reduce the powers of the EU over Britain’s parliament, Cameron would be following the policy most favoured by the public.

<sup>6</sup> See UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>.

<sup>7</sup> Data taken from the Ipsos MORI Issues Tracker.

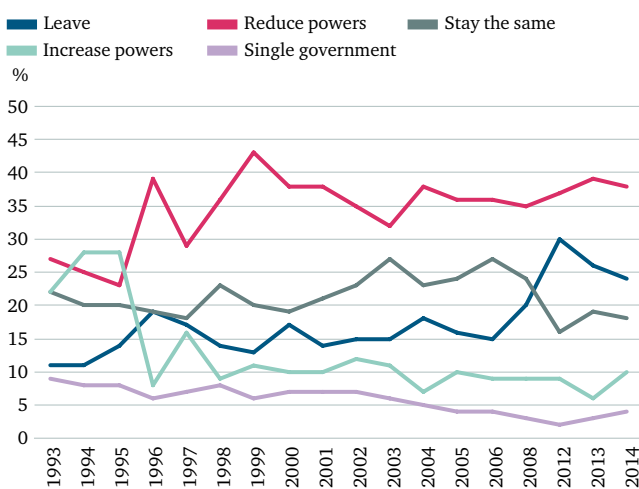
<sup>8</sup> In polls undertaken between 1 September and 1 November the ‘remain’ camp averaged 44 per cent and the ‘leave’ camp 39 per cent, whereas between 8 May and 31 August the ‘remain’ camp averaged 49 per cent and the ‘leave’ camp 35 per cent (authors’ calculations).

<sup>9</sup> See LeDuc (2001) and Renwick (2014).

Much will depend on how successful the prime minister is in framing the outcome of the renegotiation as beneficial for Britain’s economy and society, and in making a persuasive case that the powers of the EU *vis-à-vis* the UK have been curbed. While only a minority of voters endorse the status quo, combining the various responses that are in favour of continuing EU membership (i.e. stay but reduce the powers of the EU; retain the status quo; increase EU powers; or create a single European government) produces a clear majority. As of 2014, just 24 per cent of the public favoured leaving, while 70 per cent favoured remaining in the EU, although the latter might prefer some changes to this relationship.

This is not the only example. In October 2015 Ipsos MORI gave people four options for Britain’s future role in Europe: move towards closer economic and political integration; keep the current relationship; return to being part of an economic community but without political links; or leave altogether. Only 18 per cent wanted to leave altogether, down from 23 per cent in 2012, indicating that the hard-core Eurosceptic vote is typically between one-fifth and one-quarter of the population. However, public support for deeper integration in the EU is also a minority position, endorsed by only 12 per cent. Most respondents opted for staying within the EU but reducing political links (37 per cent) or keeping the current relationship (26 per cent), suggesting that nearly two-thirds are instinctively receptive to staying in a reformed EU.<sup>10</sup> The electorate, therefore, is apparently dominated by a sceptical but pragmatic majority.

**Figure 4: What should Britain’s long-term policy be regarding the EU?**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey, 1993–2014.

### Competing explanations of Euroscepticism

The above evidence points to the conclusion that the ‘remain’ camp holds a clear advantage over those who want to leave the EU. However, it also shows that Euroscepticism remains fairly widespread among the British population. This invites the obvious question of what is driving this Euroscepticism. One useful starting point is the academic research into the factors that motivate these attitudes across Europe. In broad terms, three competing explanations of Euroscepticism have been put forward. Each identifies a different set of concerns as being the core motive: utilitarian or economic drivers; identity or cultural drivers; and political drivers. Each also offers an insight into what will drive people’s vote in the referendum.

According to the utilitarian approach, voters will be influenced by their calculation of the economic costs and benefits that come with EU membership. In member states like Britain, the single market and growing European integration mainly benefits citizens who are well positioned to take advantage of them – the economically secure, more highly educated, highly skilled and socially mobile. Standing opposite are social groups that are distinctly unlikely to perceive the EU as bringing any benefits – the financially insecure, who have few or no qualifications and little flexibility, who are (or feel) more exposed to competition as a result of the single market and the free movement of labour, and who feel under threat from rapid economic change. The Eurosceptic vote, some argue, is driven mainly by the latter group, and in response to these economic considerations.

The identity approach contends that the vote will be driven more strongly by concerns over cultural issues like immigration and perceived threats to identity, culture and values. The argument is that anxieties over European integration are less about trade, regulation and economics than about a pooling of national sovereignty and communities. The EU and its enlargement drives public concerns because it fuels not only the expansion of economic markets, but also the integration of different peoples and national cultures. A large number of studies have underscored the importance of these identity concerns across Europe, showing how perceived ‘threats’ to the native group or national identity are strong drivers of Eurosceptic attitudes, of opposition to the EU and of the possible accession of new countries like Turkey, as well as of electoral support for Eurosceptic parties like UKIP.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> ‘Preferences for Britain’s future role in Europe’, Ipsos MORI, 26 October 2015, <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3381/Preferences-for-Britains-future-role-in-Europe.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> There are numerous studies but see, for example, De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005), Ford and Goodwin (2014) and Lubbers and Scheepers (2007).

The political approach instead contends that voters will not necessarily approach the referendum according to their views about the EU or the actual question on the ballot paper. In reality, they may be influenced more strongly by domestic politics, such as their feelings towards the government of the day.<sup>12</sup> Seen from this perspective, citizens see the referendum as an opportunity not to pass judgment on the EU, but rather to voice their discontent with the incumbent party of government or politicians more generally.

**If Euroscepticism is driven by cultural perceptions about immigration, then external events such as the refugee crisis may lead to changes in public opinion on Britain’s relationship with the EU.**

Clearly, there are overlaps between all three sets of drivers. People with low levels of education have consistently been shown to feel more nationalistic and more anxious about integration and migration. For example, one study in the Netherlands found that citizens with lower levels of education were far more Eurosceptic than the more highly educated; this was associated with a growth of political cynicism and feelings of threat to their ethnic group.<sup>13</sup> But separating the motives out in this way allows for exploration of their relative effects more closely. It also provides insights as to how Euroscepticism may continue to evolve in the months leading up to the referendum. For example, if it is driven by socio-demographic traits like education and class – which are relatively ‘sticky’ – then it may be expected that there will be relatively little change and no dramatic shifts in public opinion. However, if Euroscepticism is driven by cultural perceptions about immigration, then external events such as the refugee crisis may lead to changes in public opinion on Britain’s relationship with the EU.

**Who are the ‘inners’ and ‘outers’?**

The first observation that can be made after analysing the BES data is that there are significant differences between the characteristics of those voters who want to remain in the EU and those who want to leave. On average, those who have said they will vote to remain in the EU (the ‘inners’) tend to be younger, more educated and more likely to work in relatively financially secure occupations. As shown in Table 1, those who support continued EU membership are noticeably more likely than other groups

to work in higher or lower managerial and professional occupations, and less likely to work in lower-income semi-skilled and routine jobs. More than half of the ‘inners’ are in typically more secure and higher-income managerial and professional occupations. They also tend to have more skills and flexibility within the labour marketplace. They are nearly twice as likely as ‘outers’ to have stayed in the education system beyond secondary school or their 18th birthday. They are also more likely than ‘outers’ and the overall sample to be between 18 and 34 years old, although they are spread fairly evenly across different age groups. For instance, nearly one in three of those who currently want to stay in the EU are between 35 and 54 years old and the same proportion are over 55 years old.

**Table 1: Social background of ‘inners’, ‘outers’ and ‘undecided’ voters**

Traits	Inners	Outers	Undecided	Full sample
<b>Social class</b>				
Higher managerial/professional	21	14	14	17
Lower managerial/professional	35	28	29	31
Intermediate occupations	20	23	26	22
Small employers/self-employed	6	7	6	6
Lower supervisory/technical	6	9	6	7
Semi-routine	8	12	12	10
Routine	4	8	7	6
<b>Education (age left school)</b>				
16 or younger	24	48	36	35
17–18	22	24	28	22
19 or older	54	29	37	44
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	53	50	34	49
Female	47	50	66	51
<b>Age</b>				
18–34	35	18	31	29
35–54	31	34	37	33
55+	33	48	31	38
<b>N (Unweighted)</b>	<b>14,490</b>	<b>10,272</b>	<b>4,212</b>	<b>30,027</b>

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study (Waves 4 and 6).  
 Note: Numbers in each column represent the weighted percentage of the ‘inners’, ‘outers’ and ‘undecided’ individuals who belong to a given group.

<sup>12</sup> For example see Franklin et al. (1995), Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) and Marsh (1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Lubbers and Jaspers (2010).

The ‘outers’ are more likely than the ‘inners’ and the population in general to work in less secure and often lower-income lower supervisory, technical, semi-routine and routine occupations. They are also significantly more likely to have left school before their 17th birthday, with many lacking more advanced qualifications that might otherwise enable them to thrive in a more competitive labour market. ‘Outers’ are also much more likely than ‘inners’ and the overall population to be over 55 years old, which means many of them came of political age long before the Maastricht Treaty and the advent of the euro. Many grew up before the onset of increased EU integration, and entered the workplace before university degrees effectively became a prerequisite to employment in many sectors. Yet it is important to note that not all of those who favour Brexit share these characteristics. While a clear majority exhibit this general profile, at least two-fifths are employed in managerial occupations, three in 10 remained within the education system beyond their 19th birthday, and nearly one in five are between 18 and 34 years old.

### Attitudes of the ‘inners’ and ‘outers’

There are also significant differences in how the ‘inners’ and ‘outers’ think about the world around them. As shown in Table 2, in terms of their political ideologies the ‘inners’ tend to be split fairly evenly between those who identify with the left wing and those who place themselves in the centre ground. Only one in five associate themselves with the right wing. By contrast, almost half of ‘outers’ identify with the right wing. Aside from their political identification, these two groups also hold very different views about immigration, about the functioning of democracy within the EU, and about the British economy.

‘Outers’ are fairly united in viewing immigration as having negative effects. Nearly seven out of 10 consider that immigration has been bad for Britain’s economy, a view that is shared by only one in five of the ‘inners’. Nearly eight in 10 ‘outers’ view immigration as a burden on the country’s welfare state, compared with only around one in three ‘inners’. And while nearly three out of four ‘outers’ believe that immigration undermines Britain’s culture, only around one in four ‘inners’ share this view. More generally, six out of 10 ‘outers’ are intensely opposed to immigration – that is, they say that immigration is bad for Britain’s economy and culture, and that migrants are a burden on the welfare state. Only one in 10 of the ‘inners’ subscribes to these views. There are, however, only modest differences between the two groups in terms of economic pessimism. In both, fewer than three in 10 believe that Britain’s economic situation has deteriorated in recent years.

Turning to perceptions of how democracy is, or is not, functioning at the EU level, there are again striking differences. Nearly three-quarters of those planning to vote to leave the EU are, unsurprisingly, dissatisfied with the way democracy functions within the EU. A majority of the ‘inners’ also voice their dissatisfaction with EU democracy, but they feel much less strongly about this issue; this suggests that, while they accept there are problems, they are willing to overlook these when expressing their broader support for continued EU membership.

**Table 2: Attitudes of ‘inners’, ‘outers’ and undecided voters**

Traits	Inners	Outers	Undecided	Full sample
<b>Left-right ideology</b>				
Left	41	14	23	29
Centre	39	37	41	38
Right	20	49	36	32
<b>Dissatisfaction with EU democracy</b>				
Very satisfied	3	1	1	2
Fairly satisfied	21	5	15	20
A little dissatisfied	42	21	44	34
Very dissatisfied	23	72	40	44
<b>Attitudes toward immigration</b>				
Immigration bad for Britain’s economy	21	68	45	42
Immigrants a burden on the welfare state	35	79	61	55
Immigration undermines Britain’s culture	28	73	52	48
All three anti-immigration sentiments	14	57	34	33
<b>Perceptions of the British economy</b>				
Getting worse	25	27	27	46
About the same	29	24	27	27
Getting better	46	49	46	27
<b>N (Unweighted)</b>	<b>114,490</b>	<b>10,272</b>	<b>4,212</b>	<b>30,027</b>

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study (Waves 4 and 6).

Note: Numbers in each column represent the weighted percentage of the ‘inners’, ‘outers’ and undecided individuals who belong to a given group.

In many respects, undecided voters – who may yet decide the outcome of the referendum – look more like the ‘outers’ than the ‘inners’. Table 1 shows they are spread fairly evenly across different occupations, although they also are more likely than the national average to work in intermediate occupations, to be women and to be middle-aged, and to have completed secondary school, while they are less likely to have pursued advanced qualifications. In terms of their political beliefs, the undecided are less likely than the ‘inners’ and the national population to identify with the left



wing, and more likely to view themselves as fairly centrist or right-leaning voters. But they too feel dissatisfied with the way that democracy in the EU works and, while their concerns over the perceived effects of immigration are less intense than those of the ‘outers’, large numbers of them view immigrants as having a negative impact.

### What are the key drivers of Euroscepticism?

Which of these characteristics is likely to have the biggest influence on whether someone will vote for Britain to leave or to remain in the EU? To answer this question, we go beyond these descriptive statistics to explore the relative effect of characteristics simultaneously.<sup>14</sup> The results of our statistical analysis to calculate the probability that an individual with a given characteristic will support leaving the EU, while holding other factors constant, are shown in Table 3. The closer a figure is to 1, the more likely it is that somebody with that trait supports Britain leaving the EU. This allows us to identify the most significant factors, which in turn reveal messages for the wider debate.

Feelings about how democracy works in the EU have the strongest effect on determining whether somebody is likely to be an ‘outer’. Individuals who are ‘very satisfied’ with this are highly unlikely to vote to leave the EU. However, there is almost a 50 per cent likelihood of being an ‘outer’ among those who are highly dissatisfied with the way they perceive democracy to be working in the EU. Ideological preferences also have a strong effect on whether or not people support leaving the EU. Those who see themselves as being on the far left have about a one in 10 likelihood of being an ‘outer’, while for someone on the far right the likelihood is closer to one in two.

After feelings about democracy within the EU and ideology, attitudes toward immigration are the strongest predictor of whether somebody will vote to leave the EU. Those who feel most negatively towards immigration – who simultaneously feel that migration is having negative effects on Britain’s economy, culture and welfare state – have nearly a 50 per cent likelihood of being an ‘outer’. In contrast, those who hold more positive attitudes towards immigration – who simultaneously feel that migration is good for Britain’s economy and culture and is not a burden on the welfare state – have only an 11 per cent likelihood of voting to leave the EU.

It is also worth considering the relative size of these different groups. At the time of the 2015 general election, just one in three of those who said they planned to vote in the EU referendum held all of the three negative attitudes toward immigration. However, another 15 per cent of those who said they planned to vote in the referendum expressed two of the three anti-immigration attitudes. Should public concern over immigration continue to increase in the wake of external events, such as the refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks in Paris, then it is plausible that many of those who express some, but not all, of the anti-immigration sentiments will become even more negative towards immigration. Attitudes to immigration are a strong predictor of likely support for leaving the EU, so the more salient this issue becomes, or the more it concerns voters, the more likely it is that the number of ‘outers’ will rise. Moreover, if the EU response to the refugee crisis has the additional effect of promoting greater dissatisfaction among the British public – not only concerning immigration but also with EU institutions – then it will make the challenge of keeping Britain in the EU that much more difficult.

**Attitudes to immigration are a strong predictor of likely support for leaving the EU, so the more salient this issue becomes, or the more it concerns voters, the more likely it is that the number of ‘outers’ will rise.**

The remaining traits have more modest effects. Someone who believes that the British economy has deteriorated is more likely to support leaving the EU. Those who believe that the economy is getting a lot better have a one-in-five likelihood of being an ‘outer’, while for those who believe the economy is getting a lot worse the likelihood is closer to one in three. Those who strongly identified as English were modestly more likely to support leaving than those who did not express any connection to an English identity. And even when we take into account voters’ preferences on issues, socio-demographics continue to predict support for leaving or remaining in the EU. While there are no longer any meaningful generational differences, those who left school after the age of 18 have a one-in-four likelihood of being an ‘outer’, but for those who left school before the age of 16 the likelihood is more than one in three. There is a similar pattern with regard to social class. Those employed in less financially secure and vulnerable routine occupations have a one-in-three likelihood of being an ‘outer’, while for those in more secure professional jobs it is closer to one in four.

<sup>14</sup> We used the multivariate analysis technique of logistic regression.

**Table 3: The likelihood of voting to leave the EU**

Traits	Probability of being an 'outer'
<b>Social class</b>	
Higher managerial/professional	0.22
Lower managerial/professional	0.25
Intermediate occupations	0.28
Small employers/self-employed	0.29
Lower supervisory/technical	0.34
Semi-routine	0.28
Routine	0.32
<b>Education (school-leaving age)</b>	
16 or younger	0.36
17–18	0.30
After 18	0.26
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	0.23
Female	0.25
<b>Age</b>	
18–34	0.24
35–54	0.25
55+	0.23
<b>Left–right ideology</b>	
Far left	0.10
Far right	0.46
<b>Attitude to EU democracy</b>	
Very satisfied	0.04
Very dissatisfied	0.49
<b>Englishness</b>	
Not at all English	0.20
Very strongly English	0.26
<b>Immigrants a burden on the welfare state</b>	
Strongly disagree	0.10
Strongly agree	0.32
<b>Immigration impact on Britain's economy</b>	
Good	0.20
Bad	0.30
<b>Immigration impact on Britain's culture</b>	
Enriches	0.19
Undermines	0.32
<b>Composite immigration index</b>	
No anti-immigration sentiments	0.11
All three anti-immigration sentiments	0.46
<b>Views of the economy</b>	
Getting a lot better	0.19
Getting a lot worse	0.29

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study (Waves 4 and 6).

Note: Figures represent the likelihood that an individual with the given trait would support leaving the EU, holding all other variables at their medians.

## Conclusions

The UK has a long history of Euroscepticism, and a public that is considerably more hostile to European integration than the EU average. Public attitudes to the EU referendum, although still fluid, have tightened in recent months, and as of late 2015 there is a strong prospect that the eventual vote may be very close. These attitudes are also underpinned by some sharp social divisions. Of those currently intending to vote to leave, a clear picture emerges: these voters tend to be older and to have lower levels of education, and are more likely to have less secure and often lower-income jobs. Those who currently intend to vote to remain tend to be younger and to be more educated, and are more likely to work in relatively financially secure occupations, as well being spread much more evenly across age ranges. The public's attitude towards the functioning of democracy in the EU, alongside views on immigration, is the best predictor of whether or not they will vote to leave.

**Public attitudes to the EU referendum, although still fluid, have tightened in recent months, and as of late 2015 there is a strong prospect that the eventual vote may be very close.**

Of the 'known unknowns' about how the EU referendum campaign will play out over the coming months, two stand out. First, it is not clear how attitudes will be influenced by parties, the media and other opinion-formers. The 'signalling power' of elites has been shown to play an important role in referendums, so there is good reason to expect them to influence the debate. Endorsements by leaders or parties act as cues to behaviour, particularly among voters who have little knowledge about the issue.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen in the results of a question that positions the referendum vote alongside a recommendation from the prime minister. When people are asked to imagine that the government has renegotiated Britain's relationship with the EU and that the prime minister recommends a vote to remain in, and that this is in the national interest, a much larger majority of 'inners' emerges. Such cues have been shown to increase support for remaining in the EU by between 20 and 30 percentage points. Much, therefore, will depend upon the prime minister's ability to frame the outcome of the renegotiation as being in the national interest. If he can do so, public support for remaining in the EU will likely be a firm majority position. Second, given

<sup>15</sup> See for example Hobolt (2007).

that immigration is a significant driver of Euroscepticism, another 'known unknown' is what will be the continuing impact of the refugee crisis and of public anxiety over the rising level of immigration. As set out in this briefing, attitudes toward immigration are a major driver of Eurosceptic opinion. High levels of net migration to the UK, combined with large-scale refugee flows into other European countries and the challenges this poses for EU cooperation, could heighten concerns about migration and negatively affect public perceptions of the EU. Those campaigning to stay in the EU will have to work hard to prevent these sentiments from hardening and widening.

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Cover image: A supporter of the 'Say No To The EU' campaign hands out leaflets in Ramsgate, Kent, on 7 September 2015.

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