

What **UK**
Thinks **EU**

THE TWO POLES OF THE REFERENDUM DEBATE: IMMIGRATION AND THE ECONOMY

John Curtice, Senior Research Fellow at NatCen and
Professor of Politics at Strathclyde University

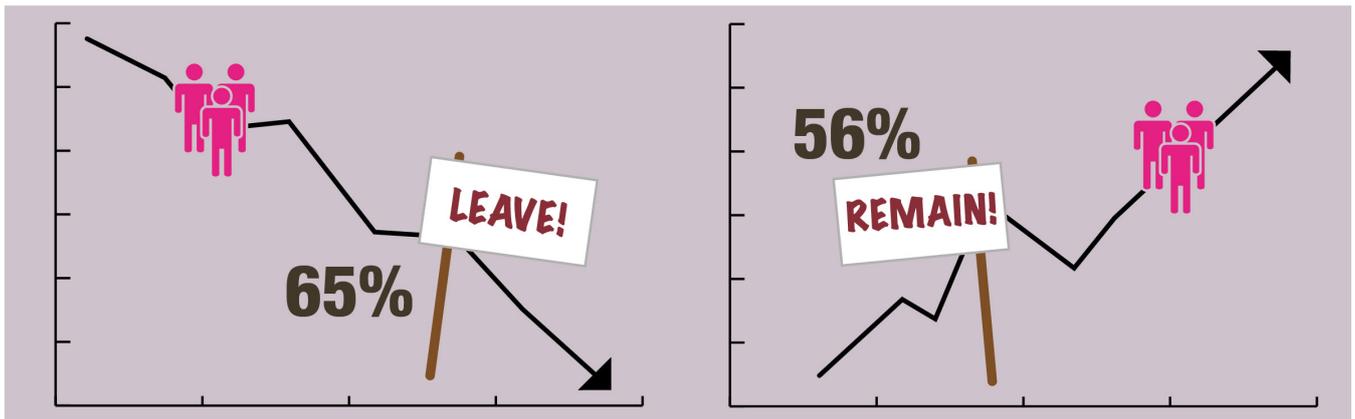
The Two Poles of the Referendum Debate: Immigration and the Economy

What are the issues that matter most to voters in the EU referendum? This paper addresses this question by looking at what, according to recent polls, appear to be the issues that most divide those who wish to Leave and those who would prefer to Remain. We discover that, above all, it is the arguments between the two campaigns about the consequences of being in or out of the EU for the economy and for immigration on which the two sets of supporters most disagree with each other. However, that does not mean they are always as convinced of the arguments being put forward by their own side as perhaps referendum campaigners might wish.

Remain and Leave voters hold very different views on the economic consequences of the EU. Fifty-nine percent of Leave voters think Britain would be better off if we left the EU, but 73% of Remain voters think we would be worse off.



The two sets of voters also hold very different views on what leaving the EU would mean for immigration. Whereas 65% of Leave voters believe we will never be able to control immigration unless we leave the EU, 56% of Remain voters reckon we will not be able to control immigration even if we leave the EU.



However, a significant minority of Leave voters (32%) think that withdrawing would make no difference economically. But Leave voters are more united on immigration. No less than 92% would like to limit EU migration through the introduction of a points system.



INTRODUCTION

In previous briefings in this series, we have examined who is more likely to vote to Remain and who more likely to vote to Leave (Curtice, 2015), how the different component nations of the UK might vote (Ormston, 2015a), and the extent to which how European people feel might make a difference to the way they vote (Ormston, 2015b). What, however, we have not examined much so far is how the public regard the various substantive arguments that are being deployed in by the two sides in the referendum debate. This paper attempts to fill that gap.

Previous research on attitudes towards the European Union – not just in the UK but across all 28 member states – has suggested that there are two main sets of considerations that underlie people's views on the subject (Curtice and Evans, 2015). The first is primarily instrumental. People are inclined to support EU membership if they believe that it is economically beneficial for their country and/or themselves, and are inclined to be critical if they take the opposite view (Anderson and Reichart, 1996; Gabel, 1998; McLaren, 2004). The second set of considerations touches, in contrast, upon people's feelings of culture and identity. They are disinclined to back EU membership if they feel that membership threatens what they regard as their country's distinctive cultural identity, while they tend to be supportive if they are comfortable with a cosmopolitan environment (McLaren, 2002; Sides and Citrin, 2007).

These two sets of considerations are clearly emerging as key themes in the debate between the principal protagonists in the UK's EU referendum debate. On the pro-European side many are arguing that the free trade provisions of the EU give Britain access to a large, tariff-free market that helps make the country an attractive prospect for inward investors, as well as make it much easier for existing British companies to export goods and services to the rest of the EU. Indeed, a leaflet produced by the 'Britain Stronger in Europe' campaign suggests that, all in all, the economic benefits of EU membership are worth £3,000 a year to the average British household (Martin, 2016). In contrast, those in favour of leaving the EU point to how, as a net contributor to the EU budget, membership is relatively costly for Britain, suggest that EU regulation makes British industry less efficient, and argue that the rest of the world is increasingly becoming more important as a destination for British exports than the EU. One of their headline claims, for example, is that membership costs Britain up to £50 million a day (Jowit, 2014).

Immigration appears to be a particular concern for some of those who are campaigning for Britain to leave the EU. They argue that unless it leaves, Britain cannot adequately control how many people come here to live or the kind of people that do so. This, they suggest, is the inevitable corollary of the fact the EU's freedom of movement provisions give any EU citizen the right, should they so wish, to come to Britain to earn a living. In contrast, people from outside the EU who wish to come here, including not least people from English speaking countries in the Commonwealth, face increasingly tight restrictions. Those in favour of remaining, on the other hand, are inclined to argue that migration from the rest of the EU stimulates economic growth, ensures that jobs in vital services are filled, and helps to rebalance what is otherwise an increasingly ageing population. They also argue that a Britain that was outside the EU would still have to accept the EU's freedom of movement provisions as a quid pro quo for continued access to its tariff-free market.



But how persuasive or important are these two sets of arguments in the eyes of voters? In this paper we consider the evidence that can be gleaned from the polls on attitudes towards the EU that have been conducted to date. By persuasiveness or importance we do not simply mean how popular the arguments put forward by the two sides are. Rather we are interested in how divisive they are – that is, in how far those who say they are inclined to vote to Remain in the EU take a different view from those who say they expect to vote to Leave. The bigger the difference between the two sets of supporters, the more it would appear that the issue actually matters to voters when it comes to deciding which way to vote.

It will, though, be evident from our summary of the arguments on both sides that not all of them are positive ones. Those who want to remain warn of the supposedly adverse economic consequences of leaving. Those who want to leave suggest that Britain faces the prospect of further ‘high’ levels of immigration. What both these arguments (and others that are deployed by both sides) attempt to do is to portray the alternative option as a ‘risk’. Perceptions of risk often seem to play an important role in referendums, whatever the matter at hand, so we also look to see whether there is any evidence that one of the options is currently regarded as the riskier one to take (Nadeau et al., 1999; LeDuc, 2001).

METHOD

Given our wish to compare the relative importance of the arguments about economics and immigration, ideally we would like to find one or more polls that asked people similarly structured questions that address both their views on the economic implications of EU membership and/or withdrawal and their perceptions of the consequences of these two options for the level of immigration. That would enable us to compare directly the size of the attitudinal gap between the two sets of supporters in respect of the economic issues with the size of the equivalent gap so far as the immigration issues are concerned. Alas to date, no such poll (or indeed any other kind of survey) appears to have been published. Thus, for example, while a very large internet panel survey conducted on behalf of the academic British Election Study contains a number of questions about immigration (albeit not necessarily with specific reference to the EU), on the economy it only asked people whether they thought it was getting better or worse at present. There is no obvious reason why people's answers to that question should necessarily be a reliable indication of what they think of the economic consequences of being in or out of the EU. Thus, while in analysing these data Goodwin and Milazzo (2015) are able to affirm that people's views about immigration are reflected in their attitudes towards the EU, they are not left particularly well placed to assess the relative importance of the two sets of arguments.

However, while no single poll has adequately covered both sets of considerations, evidence on attitudes towards both the economic and immigration arguments in the referendum debate are to be found in different polls. So while there is a risk that in comparing the pattern of responses to different questions on different polls we cannot be sure that any differences we identify reflect differences between the surveys rather than in attitudes towards the subject matter, this, at present, is the best that we can do. As it happens we are still left with some rather interesting evidence.

THE ECONOMIC DEBATE

Let us then first consider how voters on the two sides of the debate view the economic arguments about the European Union. Here our best guide comes from a pair of questions that have been asked regularly by YouGov, most recently in November last year. One asks people whether they think leaving the EU would leave Britain better or worse off economically, the other whether they think leaving would be good or bad for jobs.

Table 1 Perceived Economic Consequences of Leaving the EU by Referendum Vote Intention

Do you think that Britain would be better or worse off economically if we left the European Union or would it make no difference?		
	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
Better	59	4
No Difference	32	13
Worse	3	73
<i>Gap</i>	+56	-69

Do you think it would have a good or bad effect on British jobs if we left the European Union, or would it make no difference?		
	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
Good	45	4
No difference	44	17
Bad	3	68
<i>Gap</i>	+42	-64

*Gap = Difference between % saying better/good and % saying worse/bad
Those saying, 'Don't Know' not shown,
Source: YouGov 20-24.11.15*

As we might anticipate (see Table 1), those who are inclined to Leave and those who wish to Remain take very different views of the economic consequences of leaving the EU. Few of those who back leaving think that withdrawal would be disadvantageous for either the economy in general or for jobs in particular. Equally, very few who wish to Remain think that leaving the EU would be beneficial. The economic debate would appear to be playing an important role in persuading people to vote in one direction or the other.

YouGov's poll also covered a number of other issues (albeit, alas, not immigration). On no other do Remain and Leave voters take such polarised points of view. This lower level of polarisation on other issues is evident in Table 2, which shows for all of the questions included in the poll a 'gap' statistic, that is the difference between the proportion that take a favourable view of withdrawal and the proportion taking an unfavourable one. The bigger this gap for both sets of voters, the more the two camps can be said to be polarised. We can observe that on no other issue is the pair of gaps as large as it was on the two economic questions that we first addressed in Table 1. True, Remain voters are quite heavily inclined to believe that leaving the EU would reduce Britain's influence in

the world, while Leave supporters are similarly inclined to think that getting out of the EU would be good for the NHS. But in both cases those on the other side of the referendum divide are not especially convinced of the opposite argument, while on other issues there is a relatively mixed pattern of response amongst both sets of supporters. Note that amongst the items to which this latter observation applies is a question on whether respondents think they personally would be financially better or worse off as a result of withdrawal. It seems that for most voters the economic debate is more about what would be the better option for Britain as a whole rather than what it might mean for them personally.

Table 2 Differences of View Between Leave and Remain Voters

Gap statistic for	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
Economy	+56	-69
Jobs etc.	+42	-64
Britain's influence	+21	-68
NHS	+56	-18
Personal finances	+34	-32
Pensions	+31	-25

Gap = Difference between the % saying leaving the EU would have a beneficial and the % who say it would have a harmful effect.

Source: YouGov 20-24.11.15

At the same time, however, we should also note one other pattern. There appears to be an asymmetry of perspective on the economic debate between those who say they will vote to Leave and those who would prefer to Remain. Most Remain voters take the view that leaving the EU would actually be deleterious. Around 70% of them adopt that position in respect of both questions included in Table 1. However, Leave voters do not necessarily feel that opting out of the EU would be beneficial. Less than three-fifths (59%) express that view so far as the economy as a whole is concerned, and well under half (45%) do so when it comes to the implications for jobs. Rather, many Leave voters appear to take the view that leaving the EU would not make much difference either way, and especially so, when it comes to the implications for jobs. It would seem that, important though it is overall, the debate about the economic implications of being in or out of the EU matters more to Remain voters than it does to those who wish to Leave.

IMMIGRATION

But how important are the arguments about immigration? One thing is clear. Those who are inclined to vote to Leave are especially concerned about immigration in general and, at the same time, are less sympathetic to the plight of refugees. Table 3, which is based on an especially large poll conducted by Lord Ashcroft in November and early December 2015 (Ashcroft, 2015), shows that nearly three-quarters (73%) of those who want to Leave feel that immigration has been bad for Britain.¹ In contrast nearly two thirds (68%) of those who wish to Remain feel that it has been

¹ In this poll, people's propensity to vote Remain or Leave was ascertained by asking them to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 meant, 'I will definitely vote for the UK to remain a member of the EU', while 100 meant, 'I will definitely vote for the UK to leave the EU'. Those classified as Remain voters are those who gave themselves a score of anything between 0 and 49, while Leave supporters are those with a score of between 51 and 100.

good for the country. Meanwhile, as Table 4 shows, around three quarters of those who wish to leave the EU feel that Britain should be admitting fewer refugees from either Syria or from other troubled parts of the Middle East than it is at present, whereas around two-thirds of those who wish to remain are either content with the current level of admissions or believe that more should be admitted.

Table 3 Attitudes towards Immigration by Referendum Vote Intention

Which statement do you most agree with, even if you don't completely agree with it?		
On the whole immigration into Britain has been....	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
A good thing for the country	27	68
A bad thing for the country	73	32
<i>Gap</i>	-46	+36

Source: Lord Ashcroft Poll 20.11-2.12.15

Table 4 Attitudes to Refugees by Referendum Vote Intention

Britain has let in some refugees and migrants fleeing areas of war, persecution and other local hardships but fewer than some other European countries. Do you think Britain should admit new refugees/ migrants in each of the following categories?		
	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
Refugees fleeing the war in Syria		
Higher/Same numbers	24	68
Lower numbers/none	72	25
<i>Gap</i>	-48	+43
Refugees fleeing conflict or persecution in other countries like Libya, Iraq or Eritrea?		
Higher/Same numbers	16	61
Lower numbers/none	79	32
<i>Gap</i>	-63	+29

Those saying, 'Don't Know' not shown
Source: YouGov 20-24.11.15

But do voters think that being in or out of the EU would make a difference to the level of immigration? On this the best evidence that we have to date comes again from Lord Ashcroft. He finds that around two-thirds (65%) of Leave voters believe it will be impossible to bring immigration ‘under control’, while over half of their Remain counterparts (56%) feel that immigration will not be brought under control even if we did leave the EU. If we compare the pair of associated ‘gap’ figures for this question with those in Table 2, it seems that voters are more polarised on this issue than on most of the items in Table 2, that is, other than in the case of the two on perceptions of the economic consequences at the top of that table.² Immigration it seems matters a lot to voters too, though perhaps it does not divide Leave and Remain voters quite as sharply as does the debate about the economic consequences of being inside or outside the EU.

Table 5. Perceptions of the Impact of Being In or Out of the EU on Immigration

When it comes to immigration into Britain, which of the following do you think lies closest to the truth?		
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
We will never be able to bring immigration under control unless we leave the EU	65	11
We won't be able to bring immigration under control even if we leave the EU	22	56
<i>Gap</i>	+43	-45

*Those saying ‘Don't Know’ or that immigration is already under control not shown.
Source: Lord Ashcroft Poll 20.11-2.12.15*

At the same time there once again appears to be something of an asymmetry between the two sets of voters – but in the opposite direction to that in the economic debate. In all of Tables 3 to 5, those who wish to Leave are more in agreement with each other than are those who would prefer to Remain. Indeed, nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the pattern of responses to a further question that Survation posed to its respondents in a poll that it conducted last autumn.³ This found that no less than 92% of Leave supporters believe that immigration from the EU should be limited ‘by introducing an Australian points based system’, a position that is, of course, in direct conflict with the EU’s freedom of movement provisions. Remain voters, in contrast, were not only divided on the issue, but a majority (64%) actually supported the idea too. Although many Remain supporters hold what is seemingly a relatively liberal provision on immigration, this does not necessarily mean that their support for EU membership is rooted in enthusiasm for the Union’s freedom of movement provisions. If anything, the opposite may well sometimes be the case.

² Though we should bear in mind that the question on immigration did not have a middle option, which may have served to increase the size of the recorded gap.

³ Poll conducted 16-17.11.15 by Survation for Leave.EU

RISK

It appears, then, that while both the debate about the economic consequences of migration and that about immigration matters to voters, they both matter more to some voters than to others. Remain voters are more comfortable with their side's arguments in the economic debate, while for Leave voters it is what their side says about immigration that has the greater resonance. This duality indeed is also reflected in the overall balance of opinion on these subjects amongst voters as a whole. Thus, for example, in its November poll YouGov found that amongst voters as a whole rather more (33%) believed that Britain would be economically worse off outside the EU than reckoned it would be better off (27%). Meanwhile, Lord Ashcroft found that slightly more (39%) thought that immigration would only ever be brought under control if Britain left the EU than stated that immigration would not be brought under control by making such a step (37%).

If both sides are thought to have good arguments, then perhaps voters will find themselves making up their minds by assessing how safe or risky overall each option appears to be. Some of those considering voting to Remain, for example, may balance what they think are the economic benefits of remaining against the apparent risks so far as immigration is concerned. Others inclined towards Leave may be wondering whether the benefit of having greater control over our borders is worth the risk of the economic consequences that might flow from leaving.

Table 6 Perceptions of Risk by Referendum Vote Intention

Which do you think carries the bigger cost or risk to Britain – remaining a member of the EU, or leaving the EU		
	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
Remaining a member of the EU	77	13
Leaving the EU	23	87

How safe or risky do you think it would be for Britain to leave the European Union/remain part of the European Union		
	Vote Intention	
	Leave	Remain
	%	%
Leave the EU		
Safe	78	8
Risky	13	86
Remain Part of EU		
Safe	17	89
Risky	74	6

Source: Lord Ashcroft Poll 20.11-2.12.15

Source: YouGov 20-24.11.15

As we might expect (see Table 6), most of those who propose to vote to Leave regard remaining in the EU as the bigger risk, while Remain voters mostly feel that leaving looks like the riskier path to take. Both sides largely feel comfortable with the choices they have made. Yet there is also something of an imbalance. Remain voters are more likely to regard leaving the EU as a risk than Leave voters are inclined to consider remaining in membership as a risk. This proves to be the case irrespective of whether voters are asked to say which is the bigger risk (as in the top half of Table 6) or whether they are asked to evaluate the two options separately (see the bottom half). True, the difference is not a large one, but even so it would appear that Leave voters are a little more inclined (rightly or wrongly) to accept that their option carries with it a degree of risk. This suggests that if the persuasive power of the main substantive arguments in the debate remain as evenly balanced as they currently are, the outcome of the referendum may well turn on whether or not the Leave side can persuade voters to give it their backing, even if they might believe it comes with a degree of risk.

CONCLUSION

At its core, the debate about Britain's membership of the EU is primarily about two issues - the economy and immigration. No other substantive issue seems to matter more in persuading voters to back one option or the other. Yet their pull for voters is currently an asymmetric one. Remain voters are more likely to be convinced of their side's case in the economic debate, while Leave voters are more likely to be at one with their side's position on immigration.

There are, of course, two ways in which the campaigns can respond to this evidence. One is to work harder at explaining the virtues of their argument in that debate on which they are currently seemingly weaker. The other is to try and focus the campaign on the issue on which it tends to be regarded more favourably. If they adopt the latter strategy we may well find that the referendum campaign is one in which the two sides talk past each other rather than argue out the merits of their respective cases across all of the issues. In that event voters are likely to be left with the task of working out for themselves which of two seemingly imperfect cases apparently represents the more acceptable risk.

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Contact us

NatCen
Social Research

020 7250 1866

35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX

www.natcen.ac.uk

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ECONOMIC
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RESEARCH
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