NatCen
Social Research that works for society

Understanding attitudes to the European Union: an intra-household perspective

Working paper

Authors: Alina Carabat, Kirby Swales and John Curtice
Date: December 2017

At **NatCen Social Research** we believe that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people's lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not for profit organisation we're able to put all our time and energy into delivering social research that works for society.

Table of contents

1 Introduction and background

This paper analyses intra-household patterns of voting in the EU Referendum and how they compare with those in the 2015 General Election. It is based on data from waves 7 and 8 of Understanding Society, which was released early by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (ISER) at the University of Essex in 2017. By releasing these data early, ISER were aiming to contribute to the discussion and debate about the EU Referendum.

For the most part voting patterns in the UK have usually been analysed using survey data obtained by interviewing individual respondents. Relatively little attention has been paid to the role that within-household relationships have on how people vote. The Understanding Society survey, however, interviews all members of each household that is sampled, and so offers the opportunity to ascertain the pattern of within-household voting. This paper analyses that pattern.

The aims of the research are to:

- Analyse patterns of intra-household voting in the EU Referendum, and in particular the extent to which members of the same household tend to vote similarly.

- Compare and contrast intra-household patterns of voting in the EU Referendum with those in the 2015 General Election

- Identify the demographic characteristics of households that are associated with greater or less similarity of voting between household members.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, we say a bit more about why intra-household patterns of voting are important, and why they are of particular interest in the referendum. We then describe individual patterns of voting in the EU Referendum and the 2015 election. We then identify the extent to which (a) partners, and (b) parents and children voted similarly in the two ballots and the extent to which the levels of the agreement varied according to demographic backgrounds. Finally, we present some overall conclusions and suggestions for future research.

1.1 About the data

The data used for this paper are interim files of Waves 7 and Wave 8 of the Understanding Society survey that have been released early for the purpose of analysing voting behaviour in the EU Referendum. Understanding Society is the UK's Household Longitudinal Study. It follows up to 40,000 households and 100,000 individuals every year through face to face and web interviews. Fieldwork is conducted over two years, with Wave 7 data being collected

between 2015 and 2016, and Wave 8 data being collected between 2016 and 2017. Further details can be found at www.understandingsociety.ac.uk.

The Wave 8 interviews that are the source of the data analysed here were conducted before and after the referendum was held. Thus, rather than being based on reports of how people actually voted in the EU Referendum, our analyses are of reported attitudes to UK independence from the European Union. Respondents were asked, 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?". Inevitably some people may have changed their minds between when they were interviewed and referendum day, with potential implications for the level of agreement within our dyads (i.e. comparisons between two parties). In contrast, in analysing voting behaviour in the 2015 election we are analysing respondents' reports of how they voted.

1.2   Identifying and understanding intra-household patterns in voting and political attitudes

It is widely accepted that those living in the same household tend to vote in the same way. As Zuckerman and Kotler-Berkowitz have written:

> 'Persons who live together, especially if they are kin, are particularly likely to depend on each other for material and emotional support, to engage in conversations with each other, and to exchange cues about their mutual expectations….[with the result that] members of the same family and others who live together are especially likely to take political cues from one another and to display high levels of political agreement'[1]

Recent research in the UK by Johnston et al. has largely confirmed this picture. Indeed, they find that not only do people living in the same household tend to vote the same way, but also that if one member of a within-household dyad (i.e. comparison) changes the way they vote, the other member often does so also. As they note, 'people who live together vote together'[2].

There are two main reasons why we might expect members of a household to vote similarly. First, partnerships tend to be formed by people from a similar demographic background, not only in respect of age but also, for example, education and social class. At the same time, children are disproportionately

---

[1] Zuckerman, A.S., Kotler-Berkowitz., 1998. Politics and society: political diversity and uniformity in households as a theoretical puzzle. Comparative Politics Studies 31, 464-497
[2] Johnston, R et all (2005) 'A missing level in the analyses of British voting behaviour: the household as context as shown by analyses of a 1992–1997 longitudinal survey' in Electoral Studies 24, 2001 to 2005

likely to share the same educational and occupational background as their parents. This in so far as demographic background (most notably in British elections, social class) influences vote choice, we would expect those living in the same household to be more likely to vote the same way than any two voters chosen at random.

The second reason why members of the same household might well vote the same way is that they influence each other. Ever since the seminal work of Butler and Stokes, it has been recognised that, as they grow up, children are often socialised by their parents into supporting the same party as themselves.[3] This 'socialisation' is a continuing process whereby an individual acquires a personal identity and learns the norms, values, behaviour, and social skills appropriate to his or her social position. Partners may influence each other too – though, at the same time, similarity of political outlook may have been part of the explanation of why they were attracted to each other in the first place. Kan and Heath[4] have suggested that in particular types of marital relationship, the attitudes of one individual with a different background operate as a dominant influencer.

Intra-household relationships may help explain instances where individuals vote differently from those with similar characteristics as themselves. It may be that some of the individuals whose political preference is different from that of most people in their social group are individuals who follow the views of a partner who belongs to a different social group.

In summary, intra-household relationships have been shown to play a role in explaining voting behaviour. However, relatively little quantitative research has been undertaken on how and when this political socialisation takes place. This study does not aim to look at the longitudinal aspects of intra-household voting; we do not have the data on attitudes towards the EU over a long period of time that would be needed for such an analysis. What we can examine is the extent to which there is intra-household agreement about vote choice in the EU Referendum and the 2015 General Election irrespective of how exactly it arises.

1.3 The theory of intra-household voting in the EU Referendum

As far as we are aware, there has been no previous quantitative research on intra-household voting in a UK referendum, not least because no household level survey was undertaken at the time of the first EU referendum in 1975, and no appropriate data collection was done on the 2011 Alternative Vote or

---

[3] D. Butler and D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, 2nd end., Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1971.
[4] Kan, M.-Y, health, A. 2003 The Political Attitudes and Choices of Husbands and Wives. Centre for Research into Electoral and Social Trends.

Scottish Independence referendums. Yet it is far from clear that the relatively high level of intra-household agreement that has been observed at previous general elections will necessarily be in evidence in a referendum.

There are a number of theoretical arguments as to why there may be *less* agreement in a referendum. The referendum was on a specific issue about which voters had to make up their minds during a relatively short period of time. In contrast, in general elections voters are largely presented with the same set of choices from one ballot to the next. Thus, in so far as within-partnership agreement is the product of within partnership socialisation, there was relatively little time in the EU Referendum for that socialisation to take place – a difference that is compounded by the fact that most of the data we are analysing was related to attitudes rather than actual voting behaviour. Moreover, party identification was a relatively weak cue in determining how people voted in the referendum[5]. Thus, perhaps even partners of the same party political persuasion might well vote differently from each other in the referendum.

On the other hand, there are counter-arguments. Because voters were being asked to make a choice that (leaving aside the 1975 referendum) they had not been invited to make before, they might be thought to be more open to persuasion, including from other members of their household. Meanwhile, age was an important predictor of vote choice in the referendum, much more so than in the 2015 election at least (though perhaps not in 2017). Partnerships are more likely to be formed by people of a similar age and thus partners (though not parents and children) might have made the same choice, even without any persuasion or discussion between them.

There are a range of other factors at play, for example other demographic associations. Levels of education were also an important driver of the referendum, but social class typically plays more of a role in general elections. Moreover, the role of the news media and campaigning messages operated differently in the referendum and could have had an impact on the intra-household interactions. The analysis that follows specifically looks at the demographic factors that we would expect to influence peoples' voting behaviour and attitudes to independence from the EU, particularly age, education, and social class.

---

[5] Swales, K (2016) Understanding Vote Leave, National Centre for Social Research

2 Voting behaviour in 2015 GE and EU Referendum attitudes

First of all, however, we look at how the individuals in the *Understanding Society* survey voted in the 2015 election and the EU Referendum. The data are weighted so that the sample is representative of all individuals in Great Britain.

Table 1 below shows how the full sample of respondents to the survey voted in the 2015 General Election. It shows that the sample is reasonably though not perfectly representative. At four points the Conservative lead over Labour is a little below the seven point lead that the party actually enjoyed in the 2015 election, while, at 9%, the estimate of the level of UKIP support is four points below what the party secured.

Table 1: General Election voting pattern (wave 7 weighted)

	Percent
Conservatives	37
Labour	33
Liberal Democrat	9
Scottish National Party	5
Green Party	3
UK Independence Party	9
Other party	4
Total	100
Unweighted base	10,149
Weighted base	6,074

Meanwhile, Table 2 presents how the full sample of respondents said that they would vote in the EU Referendum. Here, in contrast to the outcome of the referendum itself, there is a large lead in favour of Remain. Thus, rather than evidence of significant bias in the sample, these figures are a reminder that our data consist of attitudes vote registered both in advance and after the referendum itself, and overall attitudes are different to voting behaviour. This is similar pattern to what is found in the British Social Attitudes survey series (i.e. more people voted Leave in the referendum than said their underlying attitude was in favour of leaving the EU.)

Table 2: EU attitudes (wave 8 weighted)

	Percent
Remain a member of the European Union	56
Leave the European Union	44
Total	100
Unweighted base	19,213
Weighted base	12,115

3 Couple voting patterns

First of all, we look at the extent to which partners voted the same way in the EU Referendum and the 2015 General Election.

This necessitated creating 'couple-level' data files, containing one record for each husband-wife relationship. Therefore, for the EU Referendum, this involved selecting people in a husband-wife relationship where both partners had been asked the relevant question, and both had given a valid answer (i.e. Remain or Leave). For the general election analysis, the same process was carried out, but it should be borne in mind that only those interviewed after the election date were asked these question, and that we additionally had to exclude non-voters.
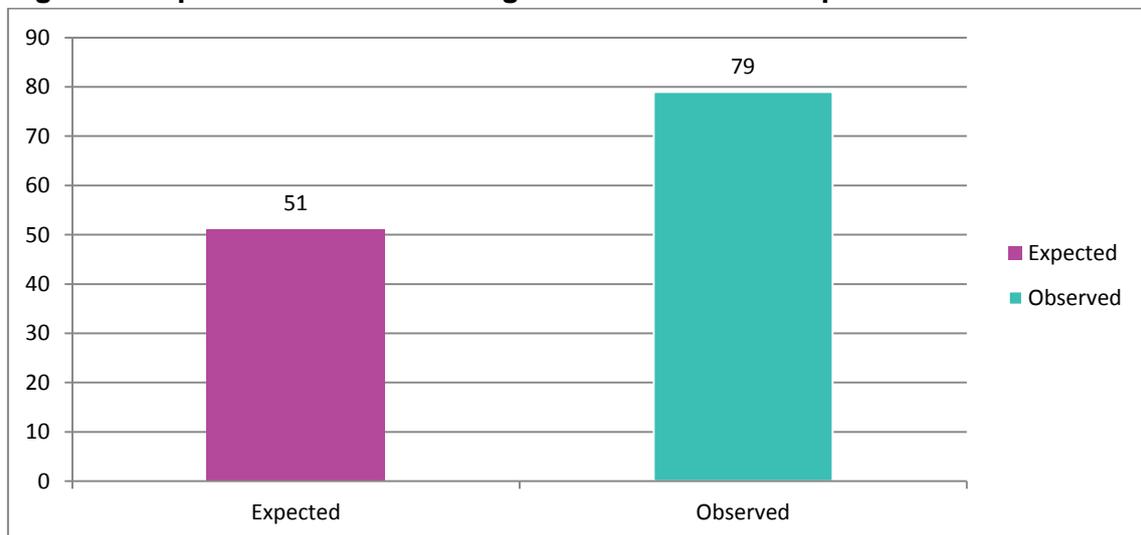
Our analysis is based on unweighted data. A 'couple weight' would be necessary to ensure that our data was representative of all couples, but such a weight was not available at the time the analysis was carried out. To determine the possible impact of using unweighted data, we looked at the demographic estimates on the full sample unweighted and the full sample weighted for wave 7 and wave 8 separately. Following this, unweighted and weighted estimates were also produced for those asked the relevant General Election and EU Referendum modules. The unweighted demographic characteristics of those asked the relevant modules in in both wave 7 and wave 8 were mostly similar to the full sample weighted demographics.

3.1 Patterns of couple voting patterns in the EU Referendum

In order to assess whether the level of intra-household agreement is greater or less than we might expect we need, first of all, to establish a benchmark of comparison in the form of 'expected agreement'. This is the probability that any two individuals drawn at random from those who voted, were likely by chance to have voted the same way. In the EU Referendum, the probability that any two voters will have voted Remain is the square of the proportion of the sample that said they voted Remain, while the probability that any two voters will have voted Leave is the square of the proportion which voted that way. Thus, the total level of agreement between any two voters selected at random is the sum of these two figures. In the case of the EU Referendum, this calculation is as follows[6]: 57.7^2+42.3^2/100, which is 51.18%.

Therefore, the expected agreement between two randomly drawn people from the population would be 51%. This figure can then be compared with the actual level of agreement observed in the responding households. As Figure 1 shows, in the case of partners this proved to be as high as 79%. In short, nearly four in five couples were inclined to vote the same way in the referendum, well above the half or so that we would have expected to do so by chance.

Figure 1: Expected and Observed agreement between couples

Base Observed: 4,181

---

[6] Please note that the estimates used for this calculation are based on unweighted data, to be consistent with the other couple-level analysis.

3.2 Patterns of couple voting in the 2015 General Election

For the purpose of understanding the voting behaviour of couples this part of the analysis only looked at couples (by marriage or civil partnership) where both partners had answered the 2015 GE module.

The EU Referendum was a binary choice between Remain and Leave. In contrast, as Table 1 shows, in the 2015 General Election, six parties secured substantial shares of the vote. This inevitably means that there was a much lower probability that any two voters would have voted the same way by chance. Given the data in Table 1, expected agreement in the general election vote proves to be no more than 23%.

However, as Figure 2 below shows, at 69%, the actual level of agreement between couples was three times as high as this. Although this figure is below the equivalent figure in the EU Referendum (79%), it would appear to differ from the expected level of agreement (by chance) to a much greater extent than it did in the EU Referendum.

Figure 2. Expected and observed levels of agreement in couples voting
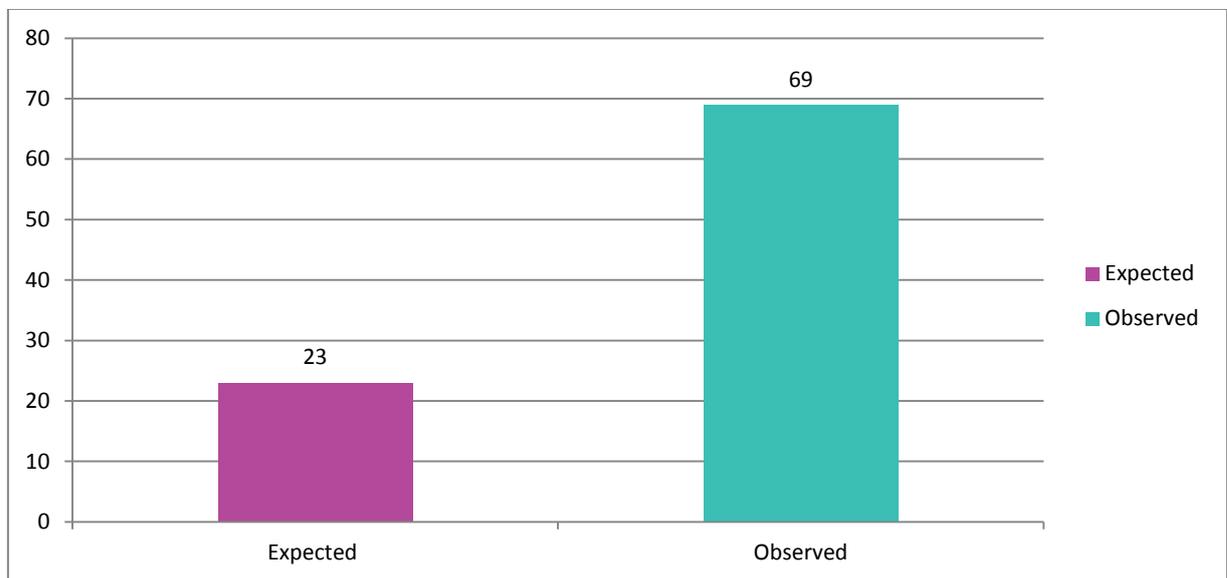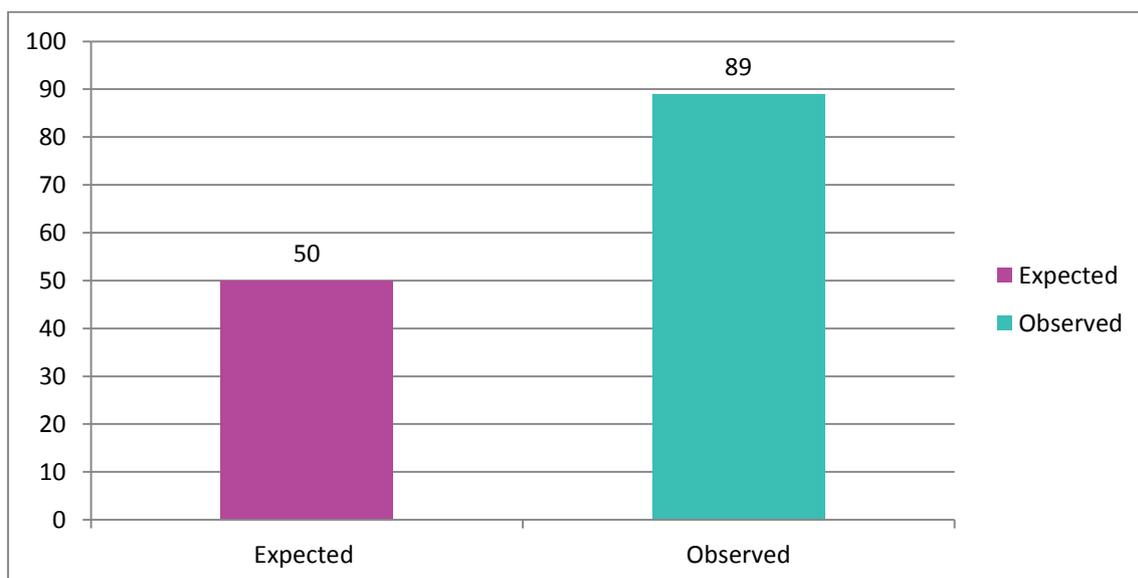

Base observed: 2,377

However, levels of agreement vary depending on the party for which the couples vote. Couples who voted for SNP were most likely to vote the same way; no less than 68% did so. Couples that voted Conservative and Labour also showed high levels of agreement of 64% and 60% respectively. In contrast only 37% of Liberal Democrat and 39% of UKIP voters voted the same way.

However, this reflects differences in the sizes of the parties – the SNP dominated the 2015 election in Scotland while the Conservatives and Labour were by far the most popular parties in England and Wales. However, the level of agreement for those voting Liberal Democrat or UKIP are still well above what they would have been by chance (i.e. 23%). Therefore, even those voting for a smaller party are still more likely to have a partner that votes the same way than we would expect by chance.

3.3 Couple voting patterns for Conservative/Labour in the 2015 General Election

To facilitate a more direct comparison between the extent of intra-household agreement in the EU Referendum and that in the 2015 General Election, we can confine our analysis to whether people voted Conservative or Labour in the latter, thereby turning the general election also into a binary choice. This step helps make it clear why there was less agreement within couples in the general election than in the EU Referendum. By chance there is just a 50% chance that two partners would either both vote Conservative or both vote Labour, similar to the 51% chance in the EU Referendum. However, no less than 89% of couples voted the same way, well above the 79% who said they intended to do so in the EU Referendum.

Figure 3. Expected and observed levels of agreement in couples voting Conservative/Labour

Base observed: 1,344

3.4 The Demographics of Couple Agreement and Disagreement

Are some kinds of couples more likely to vote the same way than others? In particular, we might anticipate that partners are more likely to vote the same way if they share the same demographic background and especially so in respect of those demographic characteristics that are related to vote choice amongst individual voters. Thus, for example, in the EU Referendum, where graduates and non-graduates voted differently, we might expect couples who share the same educational background to be more likely to vote the same way. In the case of the 2015 election, perhaps, sharing the same occupational class is more important. In so far as such differences are not in evidence then this would be *prima facie* evidence that the process of socialisation has served to reduce the level of disagreement.

Table 3 below presents the level of agreement within couples in the EU Referendum by demographic characteristics. Three points stand out. First, even though age was strongly related to vote choice in the referendum, younger couples were noticeably less likely to have voted the same way. Such couples are, of course, more likely to be in partnerships that were formed relatively recently, and where there has been less time for discussion and persuasion to have taken place between them. Second, although those of a similar social class and occupational background were slightly more likely to have voted the same way, the differences are small and are generally not significant. Third, sharing the same employment status seems not to have promoted greater agreement at all; if anything couples were more likely to vote the same way if only one member was working, with the other therefore potentially financially dependent on their partner. However, for the most part it would seem that the existence of a partnership is more important than the background of the individual partners in promoting agreement in how to vote in the EU Referendum.

Table 3: Couple demographics by EU Referendum attitudes

	Agree (%)	Unweighted base
Age difference		
5 years or less	79	3,239
5-15 years	79	865
15 years or more	77	77
Educational qualification		
Different educational level	78	2,206
Same educational level	81	1,975
Employment status		
Both working	77	1,930
Both out of work	80	964
One working	81	1,287
Standard occupation level		
Different occupation level	75	1,083
Same occupation level	80	847
Mean age of the couple		
Under 35	73	334
35-44	78	833
45-54	78	940
55-64	80	892
65 and higher	81	1,182
Total Agreement	79	4,181

*information on tenure not included for the GE vote due to a high number of missing cases.

Table 4 overleaf undertakes the same analysis for the 2015 General Election. Once again, we see that older couples are more likely to have voted the same way than younger ones – indeed here there are signs of a more gradual linear relationship between the two than in the case of the EU Referendum. However, in this instance those who share the same occupational or educational background were no more likely to vote the same way than those that did not do so. These two findings point to the apparent importance of socialisation in fostering agreement. Meanwhile, the couples where only one member was working were again more likely to agree with each other, suggesting that financial dependency makes agreement more likely too. The results are much

the same (not shown) if we confine our attention to those who voted Conservative or Labour.

Table 4: Couple demographics by General Election vote

	Agree (%)	Unweighted base
Age difference		
5 years or less	68	1,841
5-15 years	72	498
15 years or more	68	38
Educational qualification		
Different educational level	70	1,300
Same educational level	68	1,077
Employment status*		
Both working	66	1,071
Both out of work	71	495
One working	73	811
Standard occupation level		
Different occupation level	65	585
Same occupation level	66	486
Tenure		
Owner occupiers	69	2,116
Private renters	71	143
Social renters	61	118
Mean age of the couple		
Under 35	64	153
35-44	66	421
45-54	66	506
55-64	70	487
65 and higher	73	810
Total Agreement	69	2,377

4 Agreement between parents and their children

We have seen, then, that partners are much more likely to vote the same way than would be the case as a result of chance. Moreover, even partners who do not share the same demographic background often vote the same way as each other, and older couples are particularly likely to do so. However, the extent of agreement appears to have been smaller in the EU Referendum than in the 2015 General Election when looking at those who voted Conservative/Labour.

But what of parents and children (who still live in the parental home)? In the same way as the couple analysis, we created 'parent-child' files, with one record for each parent and child relationship. Please note that this creates multiple relationships within the same household. For example, it means that a one parent, two children household would create two records (one for each child and parent)[7].

Once again, as Figure 4 overleaf shows, they agree much more on their attitudes to the EU Referendum than we would anticipate by chance. On the latter basis, we would expect only 55% to have voted the same way. (This figure is higher than for couples because the subset of respondents who belong to a parent-child dyad was more pro-Remain than respondents in general.) In practice, 71% did so. That said, the level of agreement was evidently rather less than it was within couples (79%) – a finding that perhaps is not surprising given that younger and older voters voted very differently in the EU Referendum.

---

[7] Please note that this analysis includes 16/17 year olds, who were not eligible to vote in the EU referendum but nevertheless asked the question in the EU referendum. However, there was no difference in the overall level of agreement when the analysis was re-run excluding this younger group.

Figure 4: Expected and observed agreement in EU attitudes amongst parent-child relationships
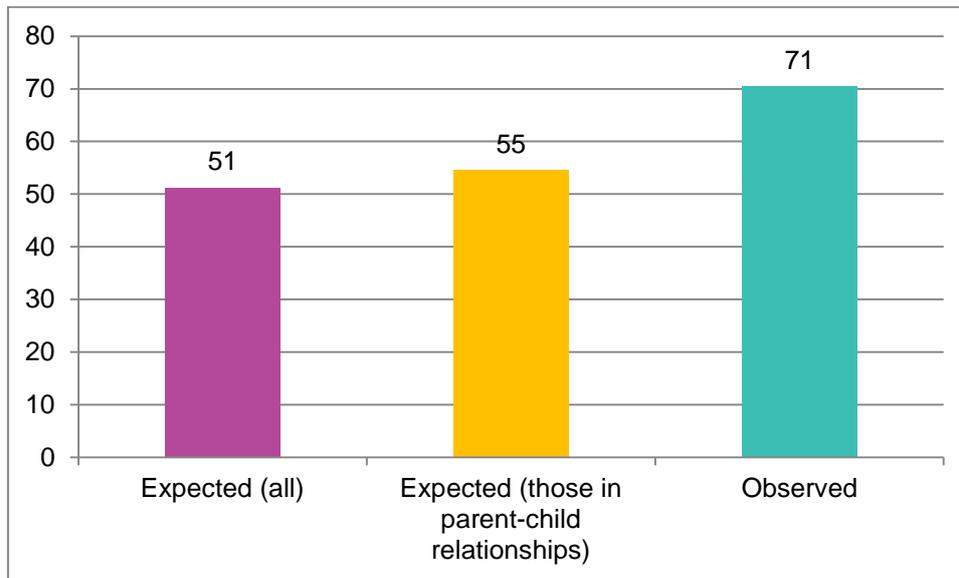
Base: i) expected: 31,238 individuals, ii) expected (those in parent-child relationships): 6,562 individuals, iii) observed: 3,278 relationships.

Children were also relatively likely to vote in the same way as their parents in the 2015 General Election. Given the overall distribution of the vote amongst those who belong to a parent-child dyad, just one in four (25%) would have been expected to have voted the same way. In practice 61% did so. Again this is rather less than the equivalent figure for couples – but represents a much bigger divergence from the expected figure for parents and children than in the case of the referendum. This last point is underlined if we look at just those voting Conservative or Labour, amongst whom there is 86% agreement, well above the 71% registered for the binary choice in the referendum. Indeed, in this instance the figure is only slightly below the equivalent figure for couples (89%).

Figure 5: Expected and observed agreement in 2015 General Election voting behaviour amongst parent-child relationships
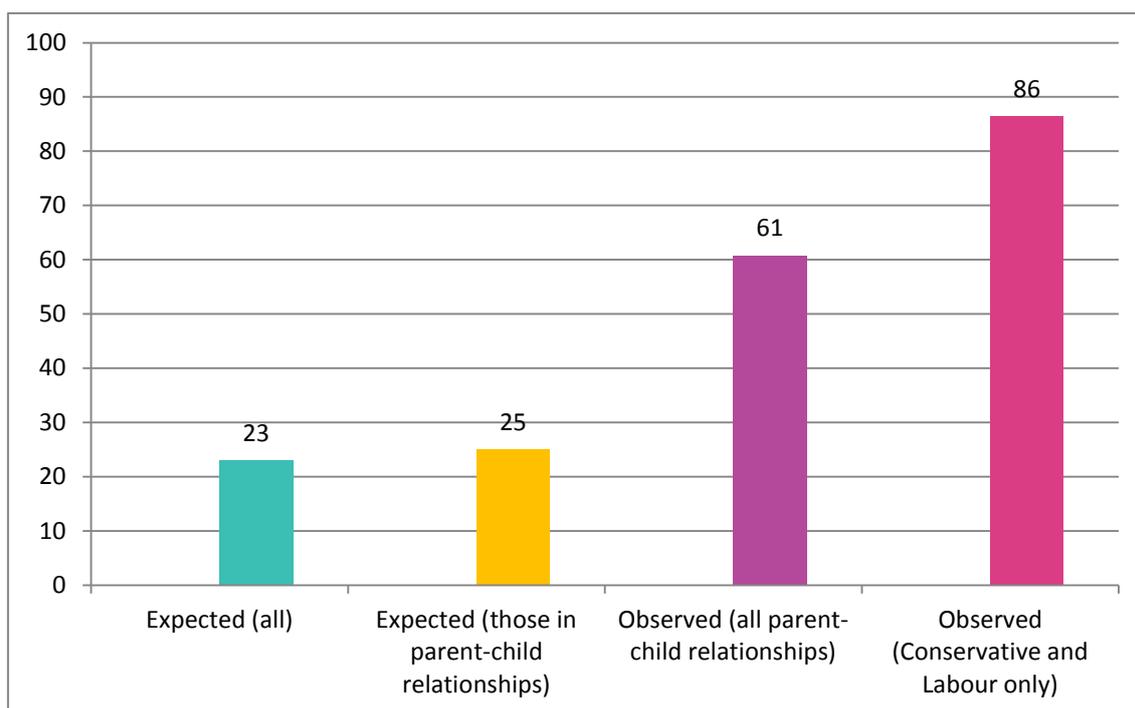
Base: i) expected: 19,213 individuals; ii) expected (those in parent-child relationships): 2,127 individuals; iii) observed: 1,108 relationships; iv) observed Conservative and Labour only: 582

Thus, parents and children are more likely to vote the same way than we would expect by chance. However, the level of agreement tends to be less than in the case of couples. And perhaps, what is of most interest here, the level of agreement appears to have been lower in the EU Referendum than in a general election – in line with what we also found for couples.

4.1   The Demographics of Parent/Child Agreement and Disagreement

We might anticipate that parents and children would be more likely to share the same voting preference if they have a similar occupational and educational background, or indeed given recent voting patterns, if they are not so far apart in age. However, Table 5 below suggests that there is little sign of these patterns so far as preferences for the EU Referendum are concerned. Indeed, the only marked (and near significant) difference that we identified is that parents and children with different educational status were more likely to agree with each other, the very opposite of what we might have anticipated. In addition, daughters also seem more likely to agree with their mothers than sons

with their fathers (i.e. all male relationships), though the difference is not statistically significant.

Table 5: Levels of agreement in EU attitudes amongst resident parent-children relationships

	Agree (%)	Unweighted base
Average age of the parent and child		
Under 35	69	1311
35-44	72	1534
45-54	68	271
55-64	77	103
65 and higher	66	59
Age difference between parent and child		
Under 20	68	79
20-25	69	435
25-30	71	971
30-35	69	1078
35-40	73	505
40 and higher	72	210
Highest educational qualification		
Different education level	72	1528
Same education level	67	768
Standard occupation level		
Different occupation level	70	925
Same occupation level	71	391
Employment Status		
Both in employment	69	1176
One in employment, one not in employment	72	1605
Both not in employment	71	479
Gender relationships		
Both male	67	691
Mixed	71	1607
Both female	73	980
Total Agreement	71	3,278

Much the same conclusion emerges from Table 6, which looks at levels of agreement in the 2015 General Election. There is a suggestion that children born to older parents are less likely to agree, but this is not significant. The same applies to fathers and sons who again are somewhat less likely to agree than mothers and daughters, but the base sizes are smaller than for the General Election analysis than when looking at the EU Referendum.

Table 7: Levels of agreement in the 2015 General Election amongst resident parent-children relationships

	Agree (%)	Unweighted base
Average age of the parent and child		
Under 35	60	233
35-44	61	628
45-54	59	152
55-64	63	57
65 and higher	62	39
Age difference between parent and child		
Under 20	62	39
20-25	64	159
25-30	63	355
30-35	62	339
35-40	54	155
40 and higher	55	62
Highest educational qualification		
Different education level	60	526
Same education level	60	260
Standard occupation level		
Different occupation level	60	387
Same occupation level	64	141
Employment Status		
Both in employment	63	467
One in employment, one not in employment	58	500
Both not in employment	63	139
Gender relationships		
Both male	58	209
Mixed	61	548
Both female	62	351
Tenure		
Owner occupier	58	902
Private renter	78	138
Social renter	59	56

Total Agreement	61	1108

Therefore, it seems that the extent to which parents and children agree with each other in their voting preferences – both in the EU Referendum and in a general election owes little to the similarity or otherwise of the demographic background of parents and their children. Perhaps this reflects the fact that children living at home are still in many ways financially dependent on their parents and that this encourages them to see political issues similarly. Or, perhaps more likely, it is an indication of the extent to which political agreement between parents and the children is a consequence of a socialisation process through which parents transmit their preferences to their children, irrespective of their children's early career trajectories.

5 Conclusions

This study had three main aims. Firstly, we wanted to describe and quantify levels of intra-household agreement and disagreement in the EU Referendum. Secondly, we wanted to see if the level of intra-household agreement in the EU Referendum was different from what we might expect in a general election. Lastly, we wanted to assess whether the extent of agreement depended on whether the household was demographically homogenous or heterogeneous. We have addressed these questions by looking at both couple (husband/wife/civil partnership) and parent-child relationships (where the child is over 16 but still resident in the parental home).

We have established that the level of agreement amongst couples in preferences for the EU Referendum was much higher than would occur by chance (79% against 51%). Parents and children were also relatively likely to hold the same view about the EU Referendum, though, unsurprisingly, the level of agreement was rather less (71%).

However, we have also shown that, once we take into account the fact that voters faced a wider array of options in the General Election, the levels of agreement were lower in the EU Referendum than in the 2015 election. When we restricted the analysis of voting in the election to a binary choice between Conservative and Labour, as many as nine in ten (89%) couples voted the same way, as did 86% of parents and children. It seems that the fact that in the referendum voters were being faced with a new question rather than a familiar one meant that the various processes that foster intra-household agreement about politics had less force during the EU Referendum.

For the most part the levels of agreement, both in the EU Referendum and in the 2015 General Election, did not vary according to the demographic similarity of household members. If anything, the one consistent finding was that couples were more likely to agree with each other in both ballots if only one of them was working. Meanwhile, what we also find is that older couples are rather more likely to vote the same way as younger ones, a finding that is consistent with the proposition that agreement between couples is partly a consequence of the discussion and persuasion that takes place between them. Meanwhile, there is even less of a hint that the demographic background of parents and children makes any difference to the level of agreement between them – which is not surprising if that agreement is primarily the product of within family childhood socialisation.

Overall, the high-levels of within-household agreement serve to illustrate why political attitudes can appear very stable. For example, 18 months after the referendum, there has been little evidence of a shift in people's attitudes towards Brexit. For voters to change their views on Brexit, it needs to be remembered that often two people to be persuaded at the same time.