

Brexit was not the voice of the working class nor of the uneducated – it was of the squeezed middle



Lorenza Antonucci, Laszlo Horvath, and André Krouwel challenge the popular view of Leave voters as those left behind educationally and financially. They explain why it is individuals from an intermediate class, whose financial position has been declining, that represent an important section of the Brexit vote.

Over the past year or so, Brexit has been interpreted as the symbol of a historical shift to anti-establishment politics, kicking off a surge in the ‘outsider’ vote across Europe and the United States. In line with this narrative, initial interpretations of the vote depicted Leave voters as [marginalised segments](#) of the population – both educationally and economically – who had channelled their discontent through the referendum.

Another popular view that emerged is that Brexit was the unified response of the [working class](#) which finally found its long-lost voice. Yet subsequent, [rigorous analysis](#) showed that the profile of Brexit voters is more heterogeneous than initially thought, and that it includes voters with high education and ‘middle class’ jobs. If Brexit is really connected to socio-economic factors, how do we make sense of this apparent contradiction?

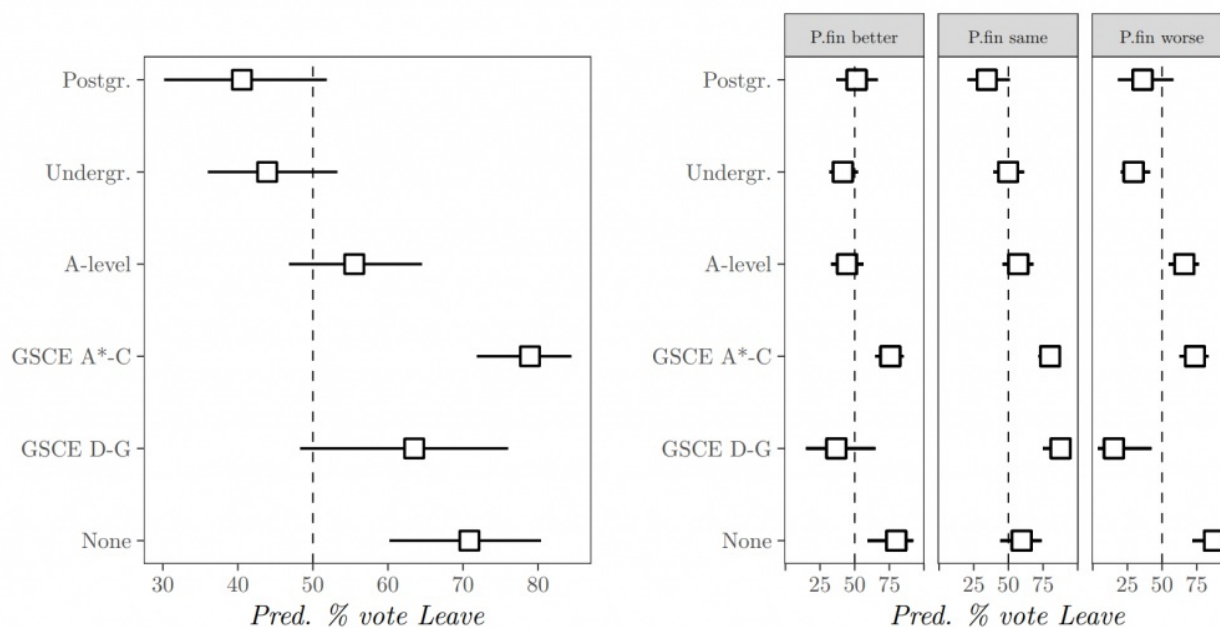
For our own study, we implemented a unique set of questions in a post-referendum survey, focusing on the ‘ordinary Brits’ – the intermediate class. This intermediate class refers to ‘ordinary’ families with intermediate or upper-intermediate levels of education, stable jobs, and median levels of income, but which nonetheless face an increasing challenge in maintaining their life-style. This term is preferred to the popularised understanding of class in the UK, which opposes the ‘working class’ to the ‘middle class’. Echoing what Joan Williams has stressed in [her analysis of Trumpism](#), public debates discussing the popularity of populism amongst the working class in most cases refer to the impoverished middle class, rather than the poor and the left behind. Our argument is that, rather than representing the ‘left out’, Brexit was the voice of this intermediate class who are in a declining financial position. This category of voters represent a group of high sociological relevance also labeled as [‘the squeezed middle’](#).

Brexiters: the least educated voters?

The [left-out argument](#) has been constructed around voters whose low levels of education render them unable to compete with those with a university degree in the globalised economy. Academic research has already argued against this. For example, Goodwin and Heath [show](#) that voters with A-level education from low skilled communities had similar pro-Leave voting profiles to those with no education. With this in mind, the first set of our models looks at the probability of voting Leave within a number of educational categories, and also explores the combined effect of education with financial circumstances.

In all specifications of our regression models, we also include gender, age, and 2015 GE vote as individual level predictors, as well as cluster respondents within 11 UK regions to account for the geographical variability in the Leave vote. Samples sizes vary for these models between $N=1,473$ and 1,382.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities by education (left panel) and by perceived change in financial situation (right panel).



Solid lines reflect 95% prediction intervals, dashed lines are placeholders for 50% vote share.

Our findings confirm a negative relationship between education and voting Leave: the higher the level of one's education, the lower the likelihood of them voting Leave. Our findings, however, reject the dichotomous view of the low-educated Brexiter vs the high-educated Remainer, by showing that two groups with *intermediate* levels of education (voters with good GSCEs and A-levels) were more pro-Leave than the low-educated (those with no formal education and with low GSCE grades).

Looking into how personal finances have changed within these education categories, we find an interesting dynamic (Figure 1). While worsening financial conditions increased the probability of voting Leave, the effect of stagnation is ambiguous. In our model, respondents with A-levels slide towards a Leave vote as their economic conditions worsen. Our model also predicts that those with lower grade GSCEs would vote Leave *only* if their economic conditions had not changed.

Challenging the myth of Brexit as a working class vote

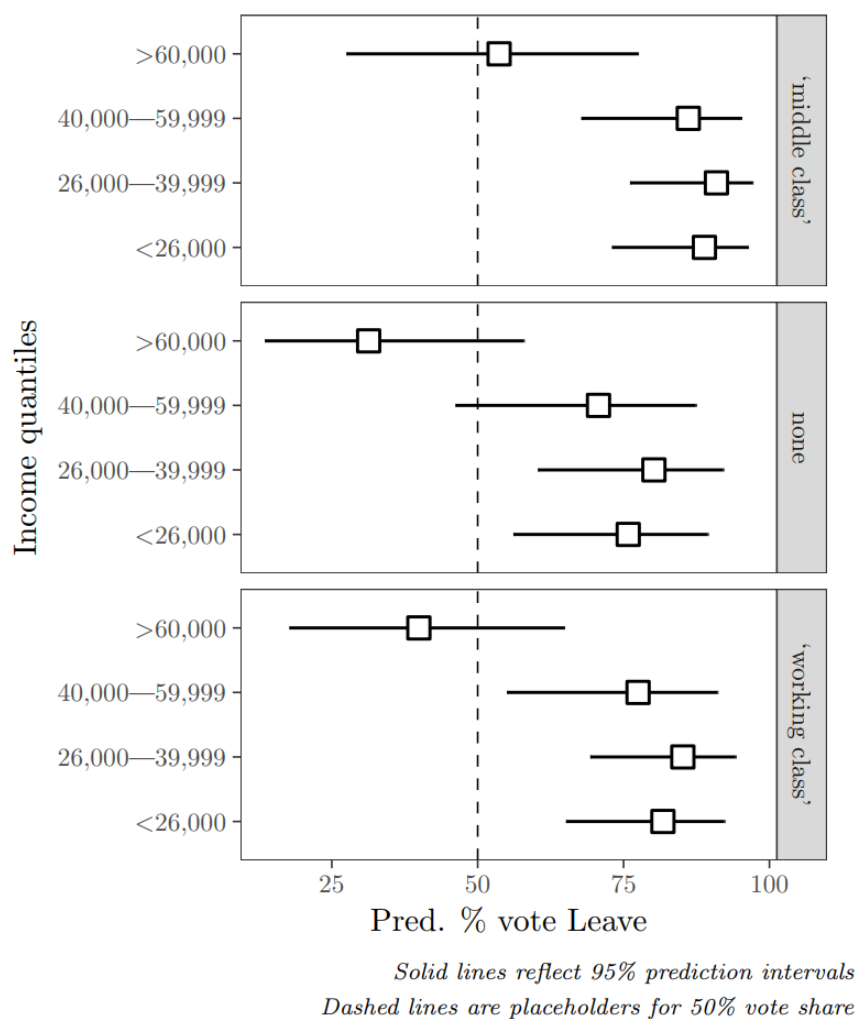
A second set of models presents the impact of self-assessed social class membership and income on voting Leave. In other respects, these models are identical to the previous by controlling for individual-level demographics as well as geographical clustering. Our sample sizes, however, drop significantly as we had to recover these variables from previous waves of data collection, down to 279, meaning these results must be read with caution.

Looking at class first, we find the Leave vote to be associated with middle class identification and the more neutral 'no class' identification. But we find no evidence of a link with working class identification.

Self-assessment of class presents obvious limitations, but our findings become even more relevant if we consider that Britons tend to [identify themselves](#) as working class – even when holding middle class jobs. This analysis does not rule out the popularity of the Leave vote within particular working class communities, but it aims to show that the Leave vote is far from being the expression of a singular and conscious working class, as [commentators assume](#). It instead confirms that the middle class support was very relevant to the Brexit outcome – perhaps the predominant group behind Brexit, as argued by [Dorling](#).

We then turn to analyse whether Brexit has been supported by an intermediate group in objective terms. In order to do this, our models tease out the proportion of Leave voters within income categories. The result is partly similar to previous reports in that higher income would link to the Remain vote. Still, it is only the top quantile – the richest respondents – who slant significantly towards Remain. But we do not find enough evidence to show that the effect of income is incremental: that the intermediate class would be more likely to vote Remain than the poorest groups (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities by income quantiles and class identification.



So, based on the above, the Leave vote was not more popular among the low skilled, but rather among individuals with intermediate levels of education (A-Levels and GCSE high grades), especially when their socio-economic position was perceived to be declining and/or to be stagnant. These findings point to an alternative narrative to that of the left behind.

This argument of the squeezed middle being behind Brexit raises new questions about how the new politics of inequality influences voting, for it shows that Brexit was the expression of a widely felt social malaise that affects ample segments of the population.

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