

Voters might be fed up with politicians, but they will listen to people 'like them'

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The EU referendum campaign has made it apparent that a large number of voters are reluctant to trust politicians and experts. But who do they trust? Based on a unique study of 3,000 British voters, Sara Hobolt, Thomas J. Leeper and James Tilley conclude that a largely overlooked factor is the influence of the behaviour of people from the same social group. They show that informing respondents of the intention to vote of those 'like them' has a clear impact on their opinion about the referendum.



Many voters have had enough of politicians and experts telling them what to think and how they should vote in today's referendum on EU membership. A recent YouGov Poll (13-14 June) showed that 81 per cent of Leave supporters and 67 per cent of Remain supporters do not trust politicians on the EU referendum. They are equally unlikely to trust the media (76 per cent do not trust newspaper journalists). But who do voters listen to if they have no faith in politicians and experts when it comes to the EU referendum?



Evidence from a unique study of over 3,000 British voters shows that voters can be persuaded to vote the same way as other people 'like them'. People who identify as working class, for example, are more likely to vote Leave if they are told that other working class people are voting against EU membership. Similarly, young voters are swayed by information that younger people are more pro-Remain than older voters, and voters who feel English are more likely to vote Leave when told that other people with a predominantly English national identity will also do so.



People like me – the impact of social identity cues

Much of the commentary on how people make up their minds in this referendum has focused on the power of politicians and experts to shape vote intentions. Is Boris more persuasive than Dave? Will Obama's plea for Britain to stay in the EU make a difference? Do letters from directors of big companies, economists or historians to newspapers backing one side or the other actually matter?

Certainly evidence shows that politicians and experts can make a difference in referendum campaigns. Partisan supporters listen to their party when it comes to deciding on complex issues such as EU membership. And expert assessments of the risks and opportunities of staying in, or leaving, the EU provide important and often credible information. Yet, the survey evidence also shows that a large number of voters are reluctant to trust politicians and experts, and feel confused and even frustrated with the opposing arguments, information and misinformation that have been presented to them during the campaign. So how else do people make up their minds?

An often overlooked aspect of how people form their opinions on complex political issues is that people listen to (or 'take cues') from the social groups they identify with. These social groups might be based on class, age, race or ethnicity. Even when social identities do not form a salient part of the political debate, priming social identities can have a powerful impact on people's attitudes, as their opinions shift in the direction of the view held by the group. We show that this is also the case in this referendum.

Class, age and national identity matter

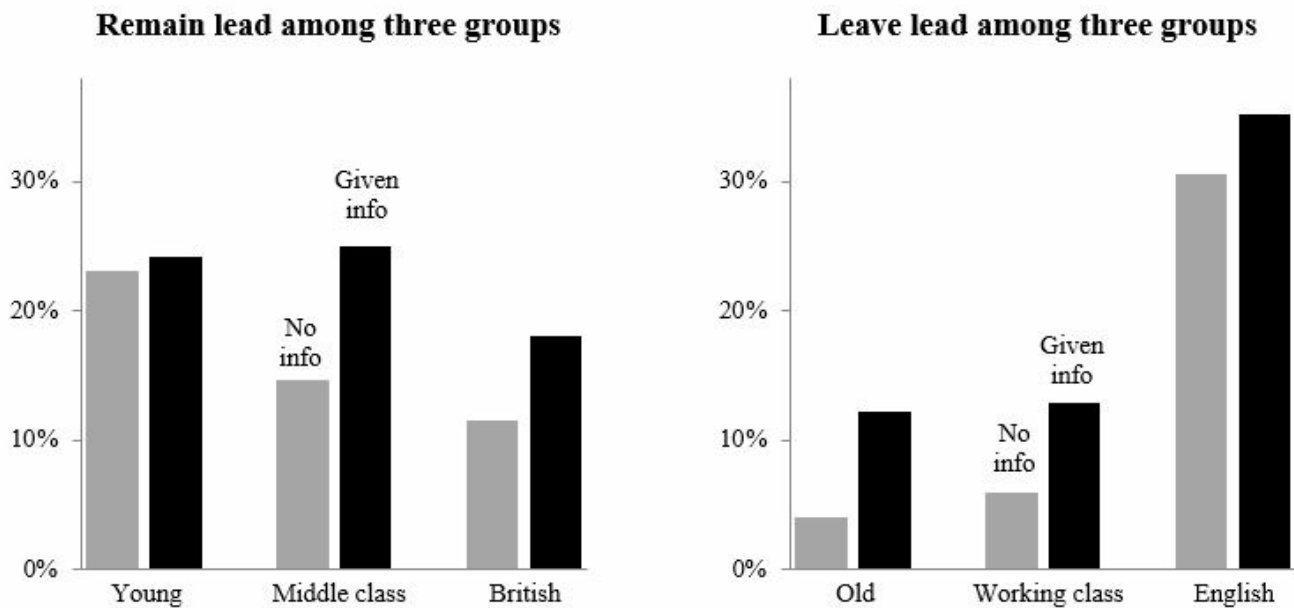
We designed a unique survey of a representative sample of over 3,400 British citizens, conducted by YouGov, to

examine how such in-group identities matter in shaping opinion on UK membership of the EU. We focus on three social identities: class, age and national identity. Using an innovative experimental design, we show that social identity cues are just as powerful as party messages on how people should vote. People given information about their group's preference are more likely to conform with that group's majority view and vote the same way.

In our experiment we started by asking respondents about their social identities (age, class or national identity). One third of our sample was asked about their social class, specifically: 'Most people think of themselves as either working class or middle class. What do you think of yourself as?'. Another third were asked whether they considered themselves as young or old, and the final third whether they thought of themselves as English or British.

Half of the people asked the social class question were simply asked their vote intention in the referendum. The other half were first told what the vote intentions of other people given their social class. Specifically, we (accurately) told people that 'most working class people say they will vote to leave in the EU, whereas most middle class people say they will vote to remain the EU'. Similarly, we gave people who were asked about their age group information on how age-groups will vote ('most older people will vote to leave and most younger people will vote to stay'), and people who were asked about their national identity were given information on how English and British people are likely to vote ('most people who think of themselves as English will vote to leave and most people who think of themselves as British will vote to stay'). What effect did this subtle cue about the views of social groups have on vote intentions? We find clear effects across all three social identity groups.

Figure 1: Effects of being given information about different social groups on the Remain or Leave lead among people in those social groups



Source: Survey by Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, conducted by YouGov (18-19 April 2016).

Figure 1 shows the lead that Remain has among people that identify as young, middle class and British, and the lead that Leave has among people who identify as old, working class and English. Clearly there is a strong link between these identities and vote intention. A majority of younger, middle class people who think of themselves as British want to remain, while a majority of older, working class people who think of themselves as English want to leave. This is well known.

What Figure 1 also shows is the effect of being given information about what your social group is likely to do. The light grey bars are people given no information, and the darker bars are people given the information about how groups are likely to vote. All the pro-EU groups become more pro-EU when told they are members of a group that is likely to vote Remain. For example, Remain has a 15 per cent lead over Leave for middle class people given no information. This rises to 25 per cent when people are told that most middle class people will vote to stay in the EU. Similarly, when more Eurosceptic social groups are given information about their group they become even less favourably disposed towards the EU. Leave has a 6 per cent lead among working class people given no information, but a 13 per cent lead among people told that most working class people are likely to vote to leave.

These are not huge effects, but they are as large, if not larger, than similar studies that give people expert or party information. In other words, people are more likely to be swayed by the vote intention of people 'like them' than they are to be persuaded by politicians, such as Cameron, Corbyn and Johnson. A conversation with a friend, a neighbour or a family member may therefore be as influential in changing minds as a campaign leaflet or TV debate. Given how close the referendum result looks likely to be, such perceptions of what other people 'like us' vote might just make the difference between Brexit and continued British membership of the EU.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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