

Activity 2 - Explaining the Results

How do we explain these results? The link between education and voting behaviour may be influenced by a wide array of factors, and teasing out their relative significance is not easy.

Age

One factor we cannot ignore is the distribution of educational qualifications by age group. Older voters are far less likely to hold a university degree than younger voters. This is partly a result of the rapid expansion of higher education provision, especially since the 1990s. It is also partly a result of changes in the demands that employers make on prospective employees. Many more professions now require higher education qualifications in addition to traditional forms of vocational training. For these reasons, those in younger age groups are proportionally more likely to possess A Levels or a degree.

1. What significance might this have for understanding the 'education gap' in voting behaviour?

Populism

There is a longstanding tendency in western political philosophy to valorise education, and to argue that societies are best governed when they are ruled by the best educated.

Education, it is supposed, is the key to wisdom. The Greek philosopher [Plato](#) famously suggested that only where philosophers became kings would justice rule:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>

Many subsequent writers have held a similar opinion. In the nineteenth century, liberals such as [John Stuart Mill](#) argued that representative democracy could only work if those who were better educated were given more say in the government of the country than everyone else: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill/>

Such ideas are flattering to those who enjoy higher levels of education, but deeply disparaging to those who do not. Following the Brexit Referendum, it has been tempting for disappointed 'Remain' voters to take comfort in the idea that 'educated opinion' was on their side. The 'Remain' campaign had relied heavily on the tactic of mobilising professional bodies and 'expert' opinion to warn of the dangers of leaving the European Union. Those who voted to 'Leave', it was suggested, did not understand the issues, or were misled by dishonest promises. 'Leave' campaigners by contrast quickly fastened on to a suspicion of 'elites', who were, it was suggested, defending the status quo out of self-interest. The 'Leave' campaigner, and Conservative cabinet minister, Michael Gove, famously claimed that the British people ['have had enough of experts'](#):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA>

One way of making sense of this kind of rhetoric is to describe it as drawing on the vocabulary of 'populism'. This is a term political scientists use to analyse a variety of political movements, on both right and left, that have in common a tendency to define themselves against 'elites' in politics, the media and the professions, and to blame social and political problems on elite corruption and self-interest. Against the elites stand 'the people'. This might be an 'inclusionary' concept, referring to everyone in a state who is not identified as a member of 'the elite'; or it might be an 'exclusionary' concept, identifying specific groups, such as ethnic or religious minorities, as objects of suspicion in their own right.

Task 1

Populism is a complex phenomenon. Have a read of Ben Margulies' 'field-guide':

<https://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/news/populism-field-guide>

1. Can the concept of populism help us understand the rhetoric of the 'Leave' campaign in the Brexit Referendum? How might it help us understand the appeal of 'Leave' to less educated voters?
2. Which British political parties make use of 'exclusionary' rhetoric? How does this correlate with voting patterns amongst more and less well-educated voters?
3. Margulies notes that populism can be found on the left of the political spectrum as well as the right. Is it helpful to think about Jeremy Corbyn as a kind of left-wing populist? Does the distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism help here?

Trust

Pollsters Ipsos MORI have found that 'Leave' voters were more likely to trust the judgement of the British voting public as a whole, even for complicated political decisions; whereas 'Remain' voters tended to place more trust in experts.

Task 2

You can study the data [here](https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/analysis-interaction-between-leaveremain-and-conservativelabour-supporters) (scroll down to the box headed 'And have more trust in people's judgement on complex issues'): <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/analysis-interaction-between-leaveremain-and-conservativelabour-supporters>

1. What conclusions might we draw from these findings?

Social Attitudes

Some commentators have suggested that British politics is increasingly coming to resemble American politics, with voters divided less by social class, than by social and cultural attitudes. In America, political analysts often speak of a [culture war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_war) between traditional or conservative attitudes and liberal or progressive attitudes:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_war

American debates have tended to focus on attitudes to women's rights, to sexuality and gender identity, to racial discrimination, and, increasingly, to immigration.

Many of these debates seem increasingly divisive in Britain, too. Immigration, particularly, played a very important part in the 'Brexit' debate (just look again at the findings from Ipsos MORI). Much of the debate about the value of Britain's membership of the European Union came to focus on the question of the free movement of people within and between the member states. Leave campaigners blamed the EU for what they regarded as excessively high levels of immigration. Cultural change, pressure on resources and on housing were all cited as negative consequences. Remain campaigners by contrast tended to emphasise the importance of immigration to economic growth, and the cultural value of a more diverse society.

It has long been supposed that education is linked to more cosmopolitan values and to liberal attitudes towards gender, sexuality and ethnic and cultural diversity. One explanation for the tendency of more highly educated voters to vote Remain may be that the European Union had come to be associated with these values.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that in modern British society, education is often the key to social mobility and provides opportunities denied to those less qualified. People with a degree are more likely to live and work in multicultural cities, to meet a more diverse range of people, and to work abroad. They are more likely to be the beneficiaries of economic opportunities provided by an open economy. Conversely, it has been noted that some of the areas most hostile to immigration have seen relatively limited immigration.

1. Look again at the [Ipsos MORI findings](https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/analysis-interaction-between-leaverremain-and-conservative-labour-supporters): <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/analysis-interaction-between-leaverremain-and-conservative-labour-supporters>
What differences in social attitudes seem to have been particularly important in determining voting behaviour? Is this what you expected to find?

Bubble, bubble...

One last factor worth considering – the impact of social media. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter play an increasingly important role in political campaigning. In the last few years, analysts have repeatedly noted that use of social media is changing the way that voters receive and consume information. More and more of us get the majority of our political information via social media platforms rather than through traditional media such as newspapers, the radio and television. However, whilst broadcast media in the UK have a duty to be impartial, and newspapers, whatever their political leanings, generally air a range of views, the same need not be true of social media sites.

With social media, we can seek out news sources and views that appeal to us, and exclude those that do not. If I do not like negative coverage of my favoured party, then I do not need to engage with it. This tendency is re-enforced by our tendency to associate online primarily with like-minded people. If my 'friends' share the same opinions I do, they are likely to make use of the same online news sources. The algorithms that govern the information I see on sites such as Facebook are generally designed to take note of what I like to look at and what my friends look at, and then serve up more of the same. I can end up living in a self-enclosed information 'bubble'...

Have a look at this [article](https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/may/13/internet-confirmation-bias) by Professor Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic:
<https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/may/13/internet-confirmation-bias>

1. What consequences does the article suggest may follow from our increasing use of social media?
2. What is 'confirmation bias'? Why might it be dangerous for democratic politics?
3. What implications might this have for thinking about the 'education gap' in British politics?