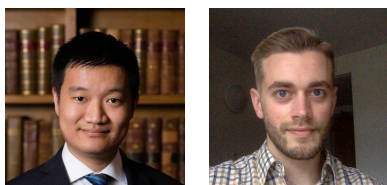


# Are PPE graduates ruining Britain? MPs who studied it at university are among the most pro-Remain



*Since the referendum, there has been much speculation about the relationship between MPs' undergraduate degree subjects and their stance in the Brexit referendum. **Yuan Yi Zhu** (Oxford) and **Noah Carl** (Cambridge) observe that MPs who studied PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) at university are among the most pro-Remain.*

Are PPE graduates ruining Britain? In recent years, the ever-popular degree, which has produced a disproportionate number of senior British politicians, has come under criticism from all sides of the political spectrum. On the Left, the journalist Nick Cohen (himself a PPE graduate) [argues](#) that the degree's design encourages superficial thinking, producing "world-class bullshitters", and "the largest single component of the most despised generation of politicians since the Great Reform Act". On the Right, the polemicist James Delingpole [wrote](#), scarcely less colourfully, that "all the worst Remainers read PPE at Oxford". PPE is not the only degree that has been linked to MPs' stances on Brexit. Writing in *The Spectator*, Greg Hall [notes](#) that many leading Brexiteers read History at university, while several leading Remainers studied Law. However, all these claims are based on selected samples of just a few prominent MPs, whereas there are 650 seats in the House of Commons. Do MPs' educational backgrounds matter when one considers the House in its totality?

Academic literature on the topic is rather scarce. In a 2015 [study](#), Mark Goodwin found no link between possessing a scientific training and voting behaviour on the science-heavy Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill 2008 (a result which somewhat undercuts calls to increase the number of scientist MPs as a way to improve decision-making). On the other hand, educational attainment is closely associated with social class, and there is [evidence](#) that MPs' class backgrounds do affect their policy positions. But as far as we are aware, there has been no systematic investigation of how MPs' degree subjects relate to their policy stances, despite the widespread assumption (as shown by the case of the PPE) that the two might indeed be linked.

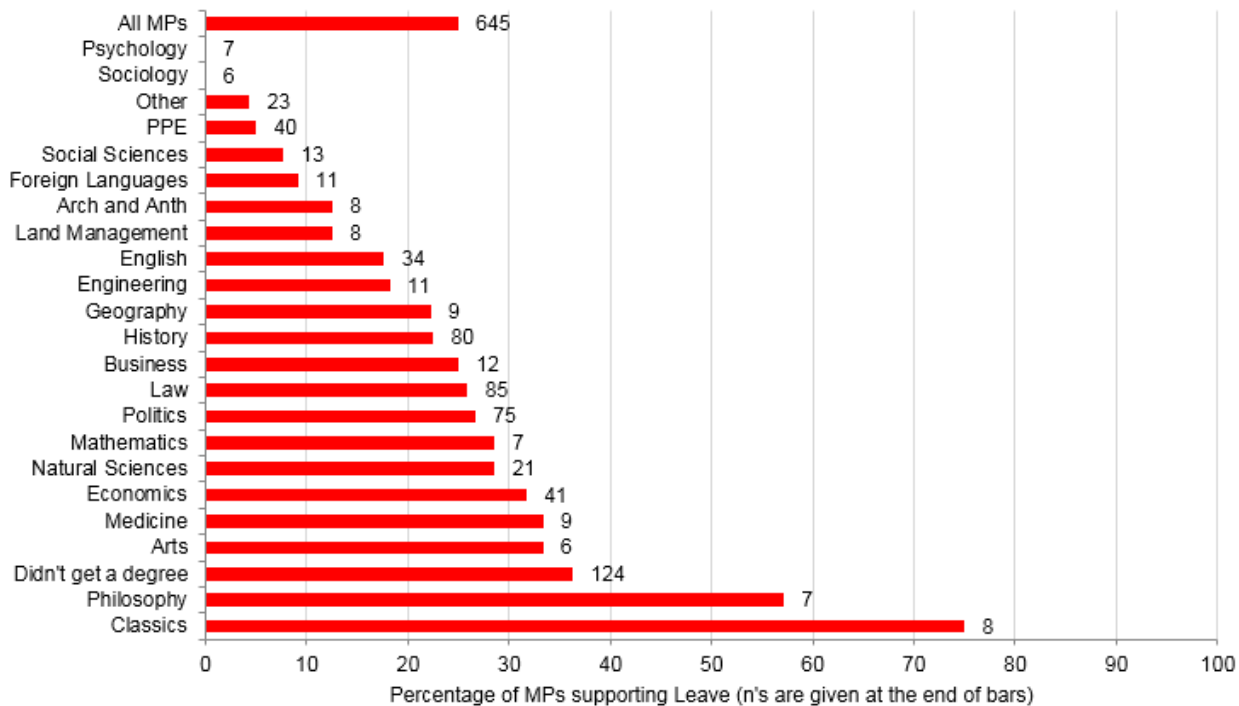
To test this assumption, we examined whether there was any relationship between MPs' higher education background and their public stance on Brexit prior to the referendum. We assembled educational data on every MP in the Commons at the time of the referendum, using public domain sources such as *Wikipedia*, *Who's Who* and *Dod's*, as well as MPs' personal websites. For the sake of consistency, only undergraduate degrees and above, and only completed degrees, were included. MPs' pre-referendum stances on Brexit were taken from the [list](#) compiled by the BBC, and then supplemented with [the list](#) compiled by *Guido Fawkes*. Given the perceived dominance of Oxbridge over public life, we also coded whether an MP ever attended one of the two ancient universities. And considering the importance of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism in the debate over Brexit, we coded whether an MP obtained any degrees from a foreign university. Finally, we recorded MPs' age, gender, ethnicity, and political party.



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What did we find? Overall, 75% of MPs supported Remain, while 25% backed Leave. Consistent with the [pattern](#) in the general population, MPs who did not complete a university degree were somewhat more likely to support Leave (38%) than those who possess an undergraduate degree or above (22%). Interestingly, however, MPs who hold a master's or PhD were not substantially more likely to back Remain (19%) than those who only possess an undergraduate degree (23%).

When it came to MPs' degree subjects, our results were rather interesting. The chart below shows the percentage of MPs supporting Leave, broken down by undergraduate degree subject. The figure at the end of each bar corresponds to the absolute number of MPs who studied the subject in question (e.g., 7 studied Psychology). At one end of the spectrum, 75% of those who read Classics supported Leave (although it should be noted that there were only 8 Classicists in the sample). At the other end of the spectrum, none of those who studied Psychology or Sociology backed Leave. Despite the fact that PPE has come in for some [abuse](#) from Remainers such as Sir Ivan Rogers, PPE graduates heavily backed Remain, with a mere 5% declaring their support for Leave. And contrary to the trend Greg Hall detected among leading Brexiteers, only 22% of Historians supported Leave, which was close to the sample average.



Although one could object to calculating significance levels for these differences on the grounds that our dataset comprises the full population of MPs, we have provided them anyway in a [supplementary file](#), along with our data and Stata code. (As it turns out, when we use Classics as the reference category, most other subjects do have a significant negative 'effect' on support for Leave. Most of these effects become smaller, and some are rendered non-significant, when we include MPs' age, gender, ethnicity and political party in the model.)

What about MPs that went to Oxford or Cambridge? The two ancient universities are often criticized, depending on one's ideological leanings, as being biased to either the Left or the Right. Both cities voted heavily for Remain in the referendum, and Brexit-backing students there [reported](#) being shunned by their peers. Overall, however, MPs with an Oxbridge education were only slightly (and non-significantly) more likely to support Remain. When we controlled for MPs' political party, however, the difference increased from 4 percentage points to 13 percentage points (and reached a high level of statistical significance). This is because Conservative MPs were both more likely to have an Oxbridge education and more likely to back Leave. Finally, possession of a degree from a foreign university had only a small (and non-significant) effect on MPs' Brexit support (with the caveat that only 26 MPs within the sample possessed one).

In conclusion, the distribution of support for Leave versus Remain was not uniform across MPs' undergraduate degree subjects: Classicists were the most pro-Leave, while Psychologists, Sociologists and PPE graduates were the most pro-Remain. It is perhaps noteworthy that the four most pro-Remain subjects were all social sciences (although note that economists were slightly more pro-Leave than the sample average). An important qualifier is that our results are of course purely associational. While it could be that studying PPE actually makes you more pro-Remain, it is equally possible that those with a pro-Remain disposition were simply more likely to choose the subject at university. But whatever the truths surrounding this issue, the British public's fascination with their representatives' educational backgrounds is unlikely to abate anytime soon.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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