

The generation gap: How young voters view the UK's referendum

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Opinion polls on the UK's upcoming referendum have consistently shown a clear generational divide, with younger voters more likely to support staying in the EU than older citizens. Using recent survey data, [James Sloam](#) assesses the factors underpinning this split, noting that if young people have such a distinct position on the EU, it is important that their voice is heard in the campaign.



Young people have become increasingly disenchanted with electoral politics. This is particularly true in the United Kingdom, where the percentage of 18 to 24 year olds voting in general elections has fallen from over 60% in the early 1990s to an average of just 40% in the last four general elections. This problem was exacerbated by the introduction of the Individual Voter Registration System before the 2015 general election, which has led to over a million people falling off the electoral register – according to [Toby James and Oliver Sidorczuk](#), 'the number of attainers, our next generation of voters, fell by 40%'.

Research [has shown](#) that young people are still engaged in politics. They have turned away from electoral politics to issue-based forms of engagement: from international campaigns against global poverty, to initiatives to save parks and youth centres in their local communities. In this respect, referendums present an interesting test of young people's participation in democracy. The Scottish independence vote showed how a referendum could capture the minds of younger voters. This engagement was carried forth into the 2015 general election, when young Scots were [much more likely to vote](#) than their peers to the south of the border. Whilst it would be hard for the EU poll to generate such a buzz, it still has the potential to enthuse young people on key issues that affect their everyday lives.

Nevertheless, a [recent YouGov poll](#) shows that 18 to 24 year olds are much less likely to vote than older generations: only half of younger voters say that they are certain to vote in the EU referendum compared to more than two-thirds of the whole adult population. Younger voters were much less interested in David Cameron's 'EU deal' – only a third of 18 to 24 year olds followed it closely compared to two thirds of the over 65s – and were split over the content of the deal: for example, 44% of 18 to 24 year olds supported the emergency brake on benefits to migrants (compared to 67% of all adults and a massive 80% of the over 65s).

This last result tells us that younger voters have very different priorities to older voters regarding Britain's membership of the EU. Indeed, regarding the central question of whether we should remain in or leave the Union, the position of 18-24 year olds is distinct. Excluding the undecided and those unlikely to vote, three quarters of younger voters want us to stay in the EU. This is by far the largest figure for any age group. In deep contrast, only 44% of 50 to 64 year olds and 33% of over 65s support British membership.

Table: Opinion polling on the UK's EU referendum by age group

	18-24 (%)	25-49 (%)	50-64 (%)	65+ (%)	All Ages (%)
Turnout, Support for staying in EU					
<i>Certain to vote in the referendum</i>	50	51	67	69	68
<i>In favour of staying in the EU</i>	75	54	44	33	44
Cameron's EU deal					

<i>Closely followed Cameron's EU deal</i>	34	38	55	66	48
<i>Support emergency brake on benefits for immigrants</i>	44	63	75	80	67
Issues that will have a 'significant influence' on vote choice					
<i>Britain's right to act independently / co-operation with other countries</i>	20	27	40	47	33
<i>Jobs, investment and the economy</i>	39	32	25	17	28
<i>Immigration</i>	17	10	16	19	21
Best things about the EU					
<i>Protecting Human Rights and Freedom</i>	28	17	17	10	17
Worst things about the EU					
<i>Interferes in how members run their own affairs</i>	28	31	43	53	38
Economic Impact of Brexit					
<i>Britain economically better off / worse off after Brexit</i>	12 / 40	19 / 33	26 / 29	33 / 23	27 / 29
<i>Brexit good / bad for jobs</i>	13 / 38	17 / 29	19 / 29	21 / 23	18 / 29

Source: YouGov 2016

The distinctiveness of young people's views on EU membership relates to their prioritisation of key policy areas. Only one in five of 18 to 24 year olds said that 'Britain's right to act independently' would be a significant influence on how they voted, compared to a third of all adults and almost a half of all over 65s.

The most important issue for 18 to 24 year olds is the effect of British membership (or exit) on 'jobs, investment and the economy': 39% claimed that this would influence how they voted in comparison to 28% of the whole adult population and only 17% of over 65s. In this regard, younger voters clearly see Brexit as a threat: 40% thought that Britain would be economically worse off (only 12% thought we would be better off) and 38% thought it would be bad for jobs (only 13% thought that Brexit would be good for jobs).

Another major difference between younger and older generations was that 28% of 18 to 24 year olds thought that the protection of human rights and basic freedoms was one of the best qualities of the EU. Only 17% of all adults – and just 10% of over 65s – agreed. The subject of immigration was more finely balanced across the generations – with older generations only marginally more likely to cite this issue as a significant influence on their voting intentions – but perhaps surprisingly (given the nature of the public debate) it was not the top issue for any generation.

So, younger voters are more interested in jobs and the economy, and also the human rights and basic freedoms provided by the EU. Older voters are more interested in British 'independence', the capacity of the country to run its own affairs, and (marginally) the issue of immigration. Some of these results are unsurprising, but they do illustrate the issues that both campaigns should focus on if they wish to attract younger voters to their cause. They also provide some indication for non-partisan groups wishing to bring out the youth vote of how to connect with younger voters.

If young people have such a distinct position on the EU, it is important that their voice is heard in the campaign. After all, they are the generation that has most to lose or gain from Brexit. Although the EU vote clearly does not have the same pull as the Scottish referendum, it also (as yet) lacks the ground campaign – on the street, in schools and universities – that enthused many young Scottish voters. In this regard, the decision not to extend the vote to 16 and 17 year olds should also be questioned.

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

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About the author

James Sloam – *Royal Holloway, University of London*

James Sloam is Co-Director of the Centre for European Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London.



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