

# What young Britons really think about Brexit and their prospects outside the EU



*In the immediate aftermath of the EU referendum, much was made of how devastated young people were by the result. A survey by Lord Ashcroft [suggested](#) that over 70% of young people aged 18-24 voted Remain, while almost 60% of over 55s voted to Leave. In her ongoing research, **Avril Keating (UCL)** found that this view is too simplistic: in practice, young people's reactions and views are much more diverse and tricky to categorise.*

Between March and September 2017, my colleagues and I talked to young people around England about their [attitudes towards Brexit and aspirations after the referendum](#). Our fieldwork took us to London, the south coast, the west of England, and greater Manchester. Along the way, we spoke with 73 young people aged between 16 and 29, including university students, sixth formers and further education students, young people in their first jobs, as well as those struggling to find work.

During our interviews, we came across young Brexiteers, who were predominantly male and think the country will be better off outside the EU, as well as Europhiles, often bright middle-class young women, who feel betrayed but still hope to pursue careers in the EU.

But we also found that just as many young people were disinterested in the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. These young people often had little interest in politics, a low level of qualifications, or were more focused on more immediate challenges in their lives, such as trying to find work, homes, or deal with health problems.

## Cosmopolitan youth



Students celebrate One World Week at the University of Sussex, 2015. Photo: [Daniel Hadley](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Another widespread assumption about the referendum was that youth support for the Remain campaign owed much to young people's cosmopolitan and idealistic outlook. Our previous [research](#) had actually found that young people in Britain are less tolerant of immigration than you might expect and so one of the aims of this new project was to examine whether young people's attitudes towards Brexit were really driven by idealism and cosmopolitanism.

We found that this was only true of some of the young people we interviewed: just as many voted Remain because they viewed remaining in the EU as the safest option, and the outcome that would have had the least negative impact on their lives. Leavers provided equally varied reasons for their decision, including concerns about democracy, sovereignty, the wastefulness of the EU as well as immigration. Others believed that Brexit would bring greater economic opportunities.

William, a white, middle-class, university-educated Londoner, told us he believes Brexit will not limit his job opportunities: "I voted to vote Leave and take control." He even persuaded his parents – lifelong Tories – to vote Leave.

Then there was 17-year-old Polly, a middle-class A-level student at a selective school in the west of England. A self-professed Europhile who describes her friends and family as "ardent Remainers", she still intends to live and work in the EU, but is worried this will be made much harder by Brexit.

By contrast, some of those we spoke to were completely disengaged from the Brexit debate. Take Jason, a 21-year-old white British man living in the south of England. He has few qualifications and is struggling to find a job. "I don't really think about Brexit that much," he told us. "I am not a political person, so I am not that bothered."

In between these positions, there are also more nuanced views, with some of those who voted Leave admitting to nervousness about what will happen, or Remainers resigned to the result and pragmatic about the need to get on with Brexit and get a good deal. Much like the wider adult population, young people hold a wide range of views about Brexit.

## Aspirations and identities

Most young people we spoke to thought Brexit was unlikely to affect their short-term and long-term aspirations. Many already had a clear plan about what they would like their career and life to look like, and they were largely optimistic that Brexit would not prevent them from achieving these goals.

Few reported feeling less European since the referendum, in part because few felt European in the first place. Most were also just as attached to and proud of Britain as they had been before the referendum. A minority, however, felt more proud of Britain for standing up for itself and a similar minority felt more ashamed of being British, believing the referendum result suggested Britain was not inclusive.

There were two groups for whom Brexit is having a clearer effect on their identity: young Europhiles – who had a stronger European identity and concrete plans to study and work abroad – and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds. For example, Maria, an 18-year-old first generation immigrant raised in London by eastern European parents, told us that after the referendum, she:

Felt like I had to be less European. All I heard was a lot of the reasons why people voted was because of immigrants... I think that kind of made me feel 'wow', I think I need to like emphasise that I'm British-British, and not even mention anything else.

And this sense of exclusion was not limited to young people with a European heritage. Mariam, a 19-year-old young British-Asian woman living in south-east England, said that Brexit had made her feel "less, definitely less [British]. 100%", adding: "Some people think if you are not white, you are not British. This is how I look at it, this is how I have experienced it."

Although the young people we spoke to held a wide range of views about Brexit, we heard a palpable sense of resignation that nothing could be done to change the result. While there was a [youth surge in voting](#) at the 2017 general election, a general sense of powerlessness to reverse the course of Brexit may end up reinforcing the disengagement of young people that has troubled British politics since the early 1990s.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It was originally published at [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).*

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