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**The EU referendum Vote in Northern Ireland:
Implications for our understanding of citizens' political views
and behaviour**

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In this policy briefing paper, I examine voting behaviour in the EU 'Brexit' referendum in Northern Ireland. Using data from a large scale survey conducted at the time of the referendum I explore different interpretations of why people voted the way they did. To what extent did referendum voting behaviour map onto underlying ethno-national divisions in Northern Ireland, with Protestants/unionists voting 'leave' and Catholics/nationalists opting to 'remain'? Quite aside from this ethno-national dimension, is there evidence that people in Northern Ireland who are 'left behind' by the process of globalisation (the economically vulnerable and less educated who hold socially conservative, anti-immigrant and anti-politics views), voted to leave while highly educated liberal cosmopolitans voted to remain? I also examine the effect of partisanship, assessing the extent to which party supporters rowed in behind their party stance on the referendum. As well as seeking to shed light on who voted to leave and who voted to remain, and why they did so, I also examine the extent to which the decision to vote or not vote had an impact on the result: If everyone had voted which side, leave or remain, would have benefitted?

Ethno-national factors

Was vote choice in the referendum largely driven by the deep underlying ethno-national divide in Northern Ireland politics? Table 1 suggests that it was. Catholics overwhelmingly voted to stay by a proportion of 85 to 15 while Protestants voted to leave by a proportion of 60 to 40. Similarly, two thirds of self-described 'unionists' voted to leave while almost 90 percent of self-described 'nationalists' voted to remain (Table 2).

Table1

Religion brought up in…

	Catholic	Protestant
	%	%
Stay	85	40
Leave	15	60
	100	100

Table2

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a…

	unionist	nationalist	neither
	%	%	%
Stay	34	88	70
Leave	66	12	30
	100	100	100

When identity is examined very similar results emerge. Sixty-three percent of British identifiers voted to leave compared to only 13 percent of people who describe themselves as 'Irish'. Interestingly those who identify as 'Northern Irish' tend to vote to stay, with almost two thirds doing so. And the same strong patterns emerge when attitudes to the constitutional future of Northern Ireland are compared to referendum voting: 85 percent of those in favour of Irish unity voted to stay while only two fifths of people in favour of Direct Rule did so.

Table3

Which of these best describes the way you think of yourself…?

	British %	Irish %	Ulster %	Northern Irish %
Stay	37	87	30	64
Leave	63	13	70	36
	100	100	100	100

Table 4

In terms of the long term future of Northern Ireland…

	Remain in UK : Direct Rule %	Remain in UK: Devolution %	Unify with Republic of Ireland %
Stay	40	58	85
Leave	60	42	15
	100	100	100

These results very clearly show that how people behaved in the referendum on voting day is very strongly predicted by their core ethno-national characteristics. The referendum divided leavers from remainers; equally, it divided Protestant unionists from Catholic nationalists.

Globalisation and the 'left behind'

Some commentators and analysts in Britain have characterised the differences between leavers and remainers in terms of how well equipped different citizens are to either embrace the opportunities of, or be vulnerable to the threat of, economic globalisation and the EU economic integration project.[i] It is argued that citizens who have low education levels and limited occupational skills are not well able to avail of the advantages of the free movement of labour and capital associated with globalisation and regional integration. In contrast citizens who are highly educated, and hold sought-after transferable and adaptable skill sets, are well placed to benefit from economic changes flowing from globalisation and integration. Low education and limited skills are argued to be related to certain political attitudes such as being anti-immigrant, socially conservative and disenchanted with and alienated from the political system, all of which adds up to voting to leave an EU perceived as a distant liberal project enabling the mass movement of cheap labour. I examine this argument empirically in the Northern Ireland case.

It emerges (see Table 5) that educational qualification is strongly linked to vote choice. Eighty percent of citizens with a postgraduate degree voted to stay while under 50 percent of people with no qualification or gcse or less voted to stay. This is a large educational effect on vote choice. The same pattern emerges when we consider whether people went to a grammar school or not. There is almost a 20 percentage point differential: 71 percent of grammar school attenders voted to remain while only 53 percent of non-grammar school attenders did so.

Table 5

Highest level of education…

	P.Grad %	Degree %	btecH %	'A' %	btecN	gcse	cse	none
Stay	80	71	57	59	52	49	48	49
Leave	20	29	43	41	48	52	52	51
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table6

Ever attend a grammar school…

	Yes %	No %
Stay	71	53
Leave	29	47
	100	100

When we examine occupational skill level, the 'left behind' argument is also supported. Almost 80 percent of professionals voted to remain while approximately half of manual workers and those on state benefits did so (Table 7).

Table 7

Social .class group…

	Prof-essional %	Middle Manager %	Junior Manager %	Manual Skilled Skilled %	Semi Benefits manual %	State %
Stay	78	75	60	48	51	53
Leave	22	25	40	52	49	47
	100	100	100	100	100	100

Citizens' views of immigrants is a very strong predictor of vote choice. As reported in Table 8, 85 percent of those who strongly agree that immigration to Northern Ireland is positive vote to remain while less than a quarter of those who strongly disagree voted to remain. A very strong linear pattern emerges as one compares responses across the five categories of agree/disagree. There is also a strong relationship between holding morally conservative views and voting to leave, and being liberal and voting to remain. Only a quarter of those who strongly agree with same sex marriage voted to leave while over 70 percent of those who strongly disagree voted to leave (Table 9).

Table 8

Immigration to Northern Ireland has been good for the economy and society…

	Strongly Agree %	agree %	neither agree/ disagree %	disagree %	strongly disagree %
Stay	85	76	52	32	24
Leave	15	24	48	68	76
	100	100	100	100	100

Table 9

Same sex and heterosexual couples should enjoy the same rights to marry…

	Strongly Agree %	agree %	neither agree/ disagree %	disagree %	strongly disagree %
Stay	73	67	59	41	29
Leave	27	33	41	59	71
	100	100	100	100	100

It also emerges that respondents who express alienation from the political system are more likely to vote to leave: Half of citizens who strongly agree that they can't understand politics and government voted to leave while only 29 percent of those who strongly disagreed with the idea that it was too complicated for them voted to leave.

Table 10
Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on…

	strongly agree %	agree %	neither agree/ disagree %	disagree %	strongly disagree %
Stay	50	60	63	63	71
Leave	50	40	37	37	29
	100	100	100	100	100

In short there does seem to be evidence supporting the idea that there is a cluster of traits (low education and skill) and beliefs (anti immigrant, socially conservative, alienated from politics) associated with the leave vote in Northern Ireland that is consistent with the 'left behind by liberal globalisation' argument elaborated in the rest of the UK.

Partisanship

In Table 10 a very strong relationship emerges between party support and vote choice in the referendum. The variation ranges from 9 percent of TUV supporters voting to stay, right up to 95 percent of SDLP supporters voting to stay. The difference between the DUP and UUP is interesting to note, given the parties' differing stances on the referendum. The DUP and UUP are much more different (in terms of how their supporters behaved) than the SDLP and Sinn Fein. The Alliance and the two nationalist parties' supporters are overwhelmingly remainers, while the most evenly balanced party is the UUP.

Table 11

Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one of the following parties…?

	TUV %	DUP %	UUP %	Alliance %	SF %	SDLP %
Stay	9	25	42	83	84	95
Leave	91	75	58	17	16	5
	100	100	100	100	100	100

What would have happened if everybody had voted?

After most electoral contests there is much speculation as to the extent to which the result that occurred was determined by turnout levels. If the people who did not vote in the referendum had indicated their views on voting day which side would have benefitted. To investigate this, I compared voters to non-voters in terms of their responses to a question in our survey which measured respondent's attitudes to the EU on a scale running from 1= leave to 5=work towards a unified and fully integrated Europe. As reported in Table 12, abstainers are significantly more pro-EU than people who voted in the referendum. This suggests that the leave campaign was more successful than the remain campaign in actually getting their supporters out to vote on referendum voting day.

Table 12

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What effect did abstention have on the result?

	Mean score on 1-5 EU attitude scale: higher score indicates more pro-EU
People who voted in the referendum	2.1
People who did not vote in the referendum	<u>2.4</u>
Mean difference	0.3

Conclusion

This analysis is preliminary in the sense that it is the first attempt to use a large scale data set that has just become available.   However, these results do clearly indicate a very strong ethno-national nature to this vote. The results also indicate that a set of economic traits and a set of beliefs about the world (which may well be a product of how well or badly people are able to respond to free market, free trade, pro-globalisation forces) determine vote choice also.

Further analysis of this data will be able to tease out these effects and their relative importance in shaping behaviour in the Northern Ireland Brexit referendum.

Note: The data used in this report was collected by Ipsos-MORI who were commissioned to carry out a face-to-face survey with over 4,000 adults in Northern Ireland by the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study' project at Queen's University Belfast. Fieldwork was conducted from 6 May to 9 August 2016 and the sample is representative of the population of Northern Ireland. This study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK, and Professor John Garry is the Principal Investigator of the project. John Garry is Professor of Political Behaviour in the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics in Queens' University Belfast, and is the Director of Research in the School. For full details of the team on this project see: https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/NIAES2016/AbouttheStudy/ or contact Professor Garry: j.garry@qub.ac.uk Also note that the number of respondents in Tables 1 to 11 reported in this paper ranges from 2529 to 2416. The vote choice variable was constructed using responses from respondents who indicated that they had voted or that they intended to vote. All analyses reported here are statistically significant at the p=.001 level.

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i https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities