**Resources, Values, Identity: Young Cosmopolitans and the Referendum on British Membership of the European Union**

***Abstract***

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, we have witnessed a resurgence in nationalism, Euroscepticism and populist politics in Europe and the United States. Young people have borne the brunt of this crisis. Yet, in the 2016 UK referendum, the vast majority of younger citizens voted for Britain to remain in the European Union. But why did they do so? Drawing upon a bespoke survey of 1,351 18 to 30 year olds, this article investigates the relative importance of socio-demographic factors, post-materialist values and primary self-identification. It finds that positive views about cultural diversity and being a full-time student were the greatest predictors of a young person voting Remain, whilst no significant association is found between higher educational attainment and voting Remain at the multivariate level. Setting the EU referendum within the broader context of youth politics, the article also identifies the existence of cosmopolitan values amongst young Remainers. This has major implications for both our understanding of the success of Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party amongst young voters in the 2017 general election, and the challenges the Conservative Party faces with regard to establishing support among Britain’s young cosmopolitans for future elections.

***Keywords***

Cosmopolitanism

European Union

Populism

Voting

Young People

The June 2016 referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union (EU) provided a major shock to the political establishment. The decision to leave the EU represented a rejection of what the vast majority of political and business elites considered to be in the country’s best economic interests, in preference to returning sovereignty over political decisions to the United Kingdom (UK) and reducing net migration. The *Leave* campaign was characterized by populist appeals to national identity and the (supposed) cultural threat posed by European integration. It also sought to capitalize on strong anti-establishment sentiment towards the British political elite.

In recent years, we have witnessed a resurgence in nationalism and populist politics in the United States and much of mainland Europe: from the campaign and election of Donald Trump in 2016, to the achievement of Marine Le Pen in reaching the second round run-off in the 2017 French Presidential election (Oliver and Rahn 2016; Stockemer 2017). In Europe, this resurgence has the added dimension of fuelling scepticism towards the EU (Mudde 2016).

Young people have disproportionately suffered in the aftermath of the financial crisis through a hostile labour market and large cuts in public spending (OECD 2016). Yet, in many established democracies, they have proved to be more resistant to *authoritarian* forms of populism than older citizens (Pilkington and Pollock 2015). In the UK, support for the UK Independence Party at its highpoint in the 2015 general election reached only 8% amongst 18 to 24 year olds, compared to 13% of the general population and 17% of over 65s (IpsosMori 2017).

The 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union provided a unique test of public opinion. Although it would be too simplistic to characterize all Leave Voters as authoritarian and nationalist, the Leave campaign’s appeal was largely founded on negative attitudes towards immigration and cultural diversity, and ‘loss of sovereignty’ to the EU (Curtice, 2016). This brand of Eurosceptic populism is by no means unique to the UK. The existing literature establishes a clear link between Euroscepticism and the populist right, crystallizing around the issues of immigration, and ‘a lack of economic opportunities and anger with the political class’ (Hobolt 2016: 1260). Several studies have, furthermore, demonstrated that previous national referendums on European integration affairs have provided fertile ground for populist parties and social movements (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005).

In the 2016 referendum, two thirds of over 65s voted Leave. On the other hand, our survey shows that the vast majority of young people – 69 percent of 18 to 30 year olds and 76 percent of 18 to 21 year olds – voted for the UK to remain in the EU. But why did they do so? Which groups of young people were most likely to support EU membership? Using a bespoke representative survey of 1,351 18 to 30 year olds (conducted in the run-up to the referendum), this article investigates the relative importance of demographic factors, support for underlying issues and values, trust in, knowledge about and interest in politics and the question of Europe. It begins by exploring the existing research on youth political engagement, the growth of competing populist and cosmopolitan politics, and recent analyses of the EU referendum vote.

In this sense, this article aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of the cosmopolitan values (most prominent within younger cohorts), which has had a powerful impact upon British democracy. Despite the defeat of this (pro-European) group in the referendum, the increase in political activism amongst these younger cohorts of voters provided a springboard for the surge in support for the Labour Party in the 2017 UK general election. This, in turn, led to the weakening of a Conservative Government, which was overwhelmingly supported by older voters.

**Populism, Cosmopolitanism and Political Participation**

Over the past twenty years, a number of academic studies have highlighted the decline in electoral participation of younger citizens (Wattenberg 2002; Franklin 2004). In established democracies, younger cohorts are usually less trusting of mainstream politics, politicians and parties than previous generations (Foa and Mounk 2017). This is particularly true in Western Europe, where they are less likely to vote and much less likely to become a member of a political party than was the case forty years ago (Van Biezen et al. 2012). In the UK, the turnout of 18 to 24 year olds in general elections fell from 60 percent in 1992 to an average of 40 percent between 2001 and 2015 (IpsosMori 2017).

At the same time, we have witnessed the growth and proliferation of non-electoral forms of political engagement (Norris 2002; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Dalton 2008; Sloam, 2014). from higher rates of participation in activities such as petitions, boycotts and demonstrations that have been with us for tens if not hundreds of years, to new forms of participation that have been made possible by advances in communications technology. Today, for example, the majority of young people obtain political news from online sources (Reuters Institute 2017).

The recent financial crisis provided a further jolt to our political systems. Mainstream political parties have been held responsible for worsening economic conditions and austerity in public spending. Dissatisfaction with the political establishment has been particularly prevalent amongst young people, who have borne the brunt of the economic downturn (OECD 2016; Erk 2017) – faced by a hostile Labour market, cuts in education budgets, increases in university tuition fees, and a fall in standards of living (Verick 2009; Willetts 2011; Pew Research Centre 2016).

If this dark cloud has a silver lining, it may be that economic hardship has made young people more politically active – albeit through anti-establishment movements and parties and mostly non-electoral forms of political engagement. In 2011, we witnessed the rapid spread of youth-inspired protests across the Western World and beyond – from the Spanish Indignados, to the Arab Spring, to the Occupy Movement – against economic inequalities, political corruption, youth unemployment and public spending cuts (Castells, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). In most post-industrial democracies, this wave of protest had a left-libertarian and internationalist core, stressing the importance of individual freedoms and international solutions to international ‘problems’ (such as capitalism and climate change).

Norris and Inglehart (2016) write of the increasing importance of a cultural axis in liberal democracies – from populism, conservatism and nationalism at one end, to cosmopolitan liberalism at the other end. Whilst the left-right economic axis remains significant, they argue that the saliency of this cultural cleavage has further accelerated over the past ten years since the onset of the global financial crisis (Norris and Inglehart 2016). In the UK context, Sanders and Twyman (2017) divide the electorate into four ‘tribes’: ‘liberal left’, ‘liberal centre-right’, ‘centrist-moderate’, and ‘authoritarian-populist’. This article focusses on the *cosmopolitan-liberal* and *liberal left* groups who Sanders and Twyman (2017: 4) claim represent 37 percent of all British adults and 43 percent of 18 to 29 year olds. These young cosmopolitans have both a leftist belief in state intervention to address economic inequalities and provide well-funded public services (including free education), and a cosmopolitan belief in human rights, outward-looking and inclusive societies, and a relaxed attitude towards immigration (Norris and Inglehart 2016: 7; Sanders and Twyman 2017: 3).

Efforts to categorise emerging political and cultural cleavages are not without their critics (Bean and Papadakis 1994; Duch and Taylor 1994). The aggregation of individuals into broad groups may overlook important intra-group differences. And, axes of political and cultural values may gloss over the nuanced reality of anti-establishment parties and movements. Young people may, for example, advocate protection of the environment, but favour tough action against terrorism. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan-left in Greece or Spain tends to be Eurosceptic – given the tough austerity measures imposed by the EU in recent years. But the same group in the UK was overwhelmingly supportive of British membership of the European Union in 2016. National political and social contexts are, therefore, crucial in determining how cosmopolitan-left values translate into political action.

Although a number of studies have examined the increasing importance of new cultural cleavages in established democracies, they mostly investigate the rise of a nationalist-authoritarian brand of populism (Berlet and Lyons 2000; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Ansell 2016): from the Tea Party in the United States (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (Ford and Goodwin 2014).[[1]](#footnote-1) When academic attention has turned to the *cosmopolitan-left*, it mostly deals with protest movements, such as Occupy and the Spanish Indignados (Castaneda 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Della Porta 2015), rather than the manifestation of these movements in electoral politics (Della Porta et al. 2017 is one notable exception).

Nevertheless, there are a number of examples of where the cosmopolitan-left has had a direct and significant impact upon electoral politics, championing issues of social justice, individual freedom, cultural diversity and environmental protection. Three examples are PoDemos in Spain, Bernie Sanders’ candidacy for the Democratic Party nomination in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party in the UK. And, these economically left-wing and socially liberal movements are particularly attractive to students and college-bound youth (CIRCLE 2016; IpsosMori 2017).

There is already a good deal of literature that explores voting patterns in the EU referendum (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Jennings and Stoker 2016; Clarke et al. 2017). These studies depict those who voted Leave as the ‘losers of globalization’ or the ‘left behind’, who or most likely to be over 50, male, working class, with a low level of educational attainment (Hobolt 2016; Clarke et al. 2017). This can be contrasted with Remain voters, who are described as the ‘winners of globalization’, who are most likely to be young, female, and highly educated.

This article provides a more detailed examination of the demographic profile of young Remain voters, the issues and values that drove them to vote Remain, and the extent to which their attitudes, values and behaviours were consistent with existing descriptions of the cosmopolitan-left in established democracies. It also seeks to understand the extent to which “wider-reaching” British and European identities which were associated with voting Remain among Britain’s young people, in comparison to more “nation-based” English, Welsh and Scottish identities.

**Theory and Hypotheses**

Upon reviewing the existing literature on cosmopolitanism, populism and youth political participation, it is important to theorise the main hypotheses which will be tested. The three hypotheses look at the role of socio-economic resources, post-materialist values and “wider-reaching” identities in young British people voting Remain in the referendum on EU membership.

There are clearly some definitional challenges relating to these hypotheses. This is most obviously the case with *cosmopolitanism* for which there are several competing definitions (Rumford 2005; Archibugi and Held 2011). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to enter into this discussion. For the purposes of this study, we adopt Norris and Inglehart’s (2016: 7) broad definition of cosmopolitanism as ‘the value of open national borders, shared multicultural values, diversity of peoples and lifestyles in outward-looking and inclusive societies’.

Much of the existing research on the EU referendum associates low ownership of socio-economic resources – lower educational attainment and being of a lower social grade – with voting Leave. But, if the Leave vote was founded on long-term economic dissatisfaction, to what extent did the opposite hold true? Could (young) Remain voters be characterized as the *winners of globalization*? By prioritizing ideas about the *winners and losers of globalisation*, one would expect that those young people who are “well-resourced” – better-educated and of a higher social grade – were more likely to vote Remain.

Existing literature on cosmopolitanism documents the association between ownership of socio-economic resources and holding “cosmopolitan” post-materialist values. Results from the 2005-8 World Values Survey show that those who are more educated and wealthier in advanced liberal democracies such as the US, UK, France and Germany tend to be more post-materialist (Dalton, 2013; Henn et al. 2017).

 By virtue of being more affluent and being freer from material concerns, they are better able to “indulge” in more ‘social’ values such as appreciation of cultural diversity (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Therefore, both education and wealth ‘frees’ individuals from the constraints of material grievances, enabling greater concern to be afforded to post-materialist issues such as environmental protection.

The saliency of immigration-related issues among those who voted Leave in the UK referendum on EU membership is well understood (Curtice 2016). The Leave vote in the EU referendum was closely associated with concerns over “mass immigration” following the 2004 Eastern Enlargement and the perceived intensification in the “competition for resources” (Norris and Inglehart 2016). Well-resourced individuals may be less likely to view “cultural backlash” issues, such as immigration, as both an economic and a socio-cultural threat by virtue of being economically secure and appreciating the cultural diversity that comes with immigration – ultimately being more likely to vote Remain as a result.

This article also explores the role of “primary identity” in vote choice for the EU referendum, which is less developed than resource-based explanations. Cosmopolitanism, as a subject of study, touches upon the most pressing of questions surrounding globalisation, nationalism and identity (Kendall et al. 2009). As well as being poorly resourced and having social values which are detached from the broad adoption of multiculturalism, civic citizenship, social liberalism and globalised arrangements, the marginalised “left behind” also tend to frame nationality in shared ethnic and ancestral terms – viewing themselves as “defenders” of this distinct ancestral identity from foreign cultures, ideas and peoples (Ford and Goodwin, 2014).

There are existing studies which have drawn an association between Brexit and euroscepticism with English nationalism and identity (Gifford, 2006; Gifford, 2008; Wellings, 2012; Henderson et al. 2016; Calhoun, 2016; Ashcroft, 2016), even though this relationship has been contested (Kenny, 2016). While English identity is traditionally associated with ideas of shared Anglo-Saxon ethnic and ancestral heritage, British identity has increasingly been linked to being part of a ‘multicultural state’ where citizenship has been revised in more civic, inclusive terms (Parekh, 2000; Meer, 2010; Modood, 2013). If primary identities, which are more “nation-based” and framed in more exclusionary terms, are associated with voting Leave, it is not unreasonable to expect that more civic, inclusionary, “wider-reaching” cosmopolitan identities are associated with support for EU membership.

Based on this existing literature, we formulate three interrelated hypotheses:

**H1:** Prioritizing ideas surrounding the “winners and losers of globalisation” thesis, it is expected that “well-resourced” young people who are highly-educated and of a higher social grade, were more likely to vote Remain

**H2:** Young people who can be characterised as *“cosmopolitan”* citizens due to their positive views on cultural diversity, prioritization of post-materialist issues, and a lack of concern with “cultural backlash” issues such as immigration and asylum, were more likely to vote Remain

**H3:** Young people who hold more “wider-reaching” cosmopolitan primary identities (primarily European and British) were more likely to vote Remain

**Methods**

The three hypotheses will be tested through analysis of a representative survey of 1,351 18 to 30-year olds conducted four weeks prior to the EU referendum on 23 June 2016 (6-13 May). The survey was commissioned by UK-based advocacy group Hope Not Hate, with YouGov carrying out the data collection. The relatively large sample of young people provided an opportunity to examine the intra-generational aspects of youth support for British membership of the EU. What were the key socio-demographic characteristics of young Remain voters? What were the underlying issues and values that motivated young people to vote Remain? And what were the kind of identities which were significantly associated with supporting continued membership of the EU?

The analysis section includes a multivariate model which predicted for Remain (against voting Leave) among young British people – one which tests all three hypotheses simultaneously. This naturally lends itself to using a dependent variable encoded on a Leave/Remain basis (Leave = 0; Remain = 1). Therefore, it was decided that binary logistic regression was the most suitable quantitative analytical method to use.

*Measurement of key variables*

To provide a fine-grained analysis of the in-group characteristics of 18 to 30-year olds, we examine the relative importance of socio-demographic factors, post-materialist values and attitudes, and (trans)national identities in vote choice among young British people for the referendum on EU membership.

To investigate the hypotheses, we divided the analysis into three sets of variables which are directly matched with the hypotheses: socio-*demographic factors, post-materialist values and primary identification.*

*Socio-demographic variables*

There are five conventional socio-demographic variables considered in the upcoming analysis: gender, ethnicity, education, social grade, and work status. Education is measured through a variable sectioned into three levels of educational attainment: low = 1, medium = 2 and high = 3, with lowly-educated young people set as the reference category. While educational attainment could be viewed a proxy for greater age due to the nature of the sample, there is no reason for us to believe that increased age fundamentally undermines this measure of education. Indeed, there is existing research which shows that 21-24-year olds are no more likely, and in some cases **less likely** to be politically active than 18-21 year olds (STUDIES NEEDED JAMES).

In the multivariate analysis, gender is coded as male = 0, female = 1. Ethnicity is coded as white = 1, non-white = 2 and respondents who preferred not to say = 3. Young white people are set as the reference category for the logistic regression model. Social grade is coded as ABC1 = 1, C2DE = 2, with the lower C2DE social grade set as the reference category in the multivariate analysis. The work status variable is recoded into 4 categories: Full-time work = 1, Part-time work = 2, Full-time student = 3 and other/not working = 4.

*Post-materialist values*

In this article, post-materialism is measured by considering attitudes towards cultural diversity, cultural backlash issues in the form of immigration and asylum, and the prioritization of environmental protection (which is a classic post-materialist concern).

The survey question for cultural diversity asked respondents:

*Do you think that having a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures is a positive or negative part of modern Britain?*

Respondents were given five options to choose from: “very positive”, “fairly positive”, “fairly negative”, “very negative” and “don’t know”. For the analysis, the first two options are merged into a “Positive” category, with the third and fourth responses being merged to create a “Negative” category. The coding for the new variable is Negative = 0, Positive = 1 and Don’t Know = 2.

Survey questions asking respondents what they feel are the most important issues facing the country will be considered to measure prioritization of environmental issues and unconcerned attitudes towards “cultural backlash” issues such as immigration and asylum.

The survey question of interest asked respondents: *Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country? Please tick up to three.* The policy issues available for selection were immigration/asylum, the environment, health, the economy, housing, Europe, education, defence/terrorism, tax, crime, family life/childcare, pensions, transport (or “none of these”).

The two variables of interest – “environment” and “immigration/asylum” – are coded on a Yes/No basis (“yes” being those who selected it as an important issue facing the country, with “no” representing those who did not select the issue).

It is expected that holding a positive view of cultural diversity, considering environmental protection as an important issue facing the UK, and viewing immigration/asylum as a non-important issue for the country as a whole, are all associated with voting Remain.

*Primary identification*

This article also examines how primary national and transnational identities are associated with support for EU membership among young British people.

Survey respondents were asked:

*Which of the following best describes your identity?*

The primary identity variable is coded as English = 1, British = 2, Scottish = 3, Welsh = 4, European = 5, None of These = 6, Don’t Know = 7.

Given the influence of English nationalism and identity on Brexit and euroscepticism in the UK, primary English identity is set as the reference category. This will allow for potential significant findings to be reported between English and the wider-reaching cosmopolitan British and European identities. It is expected that young people who reported primary British and European identities were more likely to vote Remain.

**Analysis**

The analysis section is split into two parts. The first part presents bivariate analysis of the relationship between socio-demographic factors, post-materialist values and attitudes, and primary identity, and voting Remain. Analysis of each of the three relationships are presented through odds ratios which are depicted using bar charts (with the odds of the average 18 to 30-year-old voting Remain equalling 1.00). The second part of the analysis draws these strands of analysis together by testing all three relationships through multivariate analysis in the form of a single binary logistic regression model.

**Insert Figure 1 here…**

All analyses in Figure 1 are at the 5% confidence level (p <0.05), and exclude ‘Don’t Knows’ and ‘Wont Votes’.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the relationship between various socio-demographic characteristics and voting Remain among young British people. The bivariate analysis lends support to Hypothesis 1. Young people who have achieved a “high” level of education were more likely to vote Remain than the average 18 to 30-year-old (OR = 1.14), with this also being the case for young people who belong to the higher ABC1 social grade (OR = 1.11). The strongest predictor for voting Remain was being in full-time education (OR = 1.19). Figure 1 shows that young women and non-white citizens were also more likely to vote Remain at the bivariate level (OR = 1.10 and OR = 1.08, respectively). The analysis also presents intra-generational differences based on age, with those aged 18-21 being more likely to vote Remain than the average 18-30-year-old included in the analysis (OR = 1.11).

**Insert Figure 2 here.**

All analyses in Figure 2 are at the 5% confidence level (p <0.05), and exclude ‘Don’t Knows’ and ‘Wont Votes’.

Figure 2 presents a bivariate analysis of the relationship between post-materialist values and attitudes and voting Remain among young British people. The odds ratios reported are in relation to the overall odds of an 18 to 30-year-old voting Remain. It shows that young people who held a positive view of cultural diversity in modern-day Britain were much more likely to vote Remain than the average 18 to 30-year-old (OR = 2.03). Young people who reported that the environment is an important issue facing the country were also considerably more likely to vote Remain (OR = 3.25), as were those who **did not** view immigration and asylum as important issues (OR = 1.91).

**Insert Figure 3 here.**

All analyses in Figure 3 are at the 5% confidence level (p <0.05), and exclude ‘Don’t Knows’ and ‘Wont Votes’.

Figure 3 presents an overview of the relationship between primary (trans)national identity and voting Remain. The analysis unsurprisingly reveals a very strong association between holding a primary European identity (which was very uncommon) and voting Remain among young British people (OR = 5.26), with young people reporting a primary British identity also more likely to vote Remain than the average 18 to 30-year-old (OR = 1.27). Of the national identities, only those who report a primary Scottish identity were **more likely** to vote Remain than the average young person (OR = 1.35). Young British people who reported a primary Welsh and English identity were **less likely** to vote Remain (Welsh OR = 0.47; English OR = 0.66).

The second part of the analysis tests the three main hypotheses through multivariate analysis. In the form of binary logistic regression, this multivariate model includes all variables of interest, allowing us to develop a better understanding of the relevant importance of variables predicting for the likelihood of young people voting Remain. The binary dependent variable for the binary logistic regression model is Leave = 0, Remain = 1.

**Table 1: Binary Logistic Regression Model predicting for voting Remain among young people**

Model Specification:

Log (estimated odds for voting Remain) = 

**Insert Table 1 Here**

Notes for Binary Logistic Regression Model: N = 1,044. Chi-square: 362.245. Degrees of Freedom: 19. P-value for model <0.05 (.000). -2LL: 855.138. Nagelkerke R Square: .434. Source: EMBES 2010. \*p<0.10. \*\*p<0.05. \*\*\*p<0.01. Don’t Know/Won’t Votes excluded from the base. Predicted classification: 80.6%.

Table 1 finds that, controlling for all other variables, young women are more likely to vote Remain than young men (b = .778). This significant gender effect is at the 1% confidence level. There are no significant ethnic effects to report from the model. Looking specifically at socio-economic resources, there are no significant education effects to report. However, controlling for all other factors, young people who belong to the higher ABC1 social grade were more likely to vote Remain (b = .672), with this finding being at the 1% confidence level. And, young people who were in full-time education were more likely to vote Remain than young people in full-time employment (b = .490). This is at the 5% confidence level.

There are statistically significant associations between post-materialist attitudes and a higher likelihood of voting Remain in the model, providing support for Hypothesis 2. Young people who hold a positive view of cultural diversity were more likely to vote Remain than young people who report a negative view (b = 1.955). This is at the 1% confidence level. Young people who were unsure of cultural diversity were also more likely to vote Remain (b = .735) at the 5% confidence level. Young people who reported the environment as an important issue facing Britain were more likely to vote Remain (b = 1.110), with those who **did not** report immigration/asylum as an important issue also being more likely to vote Remain (b = 1.048). Both of these findings are at the 1% confidence level.

Regarding primary identity, only one significant difference can be reported. Unsurprisingly, young people who report a primary European identity are more likely to vote Remain than young people who express a primary English identity (b = 1.718). This is at the 1% confidence level.

**Discussion**

The UK referendum on EU membership provided a unique test of British public opinion. On the one hand, young people were overwhelmingly in favour of the UK remaining in the EU – in the end, around three quarters of 18 to 24 year olds (and 70 percent of 18 to 30 year olds) voted Remain. In this context, this article has attempted to draw the contours of the *cosmopolitan* attitudes and values, which characterized young Remainers in the UK, and reflects a trend in youth political engagement across many established democracies.

From the findings, we are able to develop a profile of the typical young person who voted Remain in the June 2016. The conventional socio-demographic characteristics most strongly associated with voting Remain were holding a job classified as in the higher ABC1 social grade and being in full-time education (as opposed to being highly-educated). This supports the findings of Henn and Foard (2014) and others, who emphasize the importance of *educational status* rather than educational attainment in shaping political attitudes. In this regard, the article lends a degree of support to the *winners* and *losers* of globalisation thesis - differentiating itself from much of the previous research which finds a significant association between higher educational attainment and voting Remain.

There are interesting findings to discuss regarding the relationship between primary self-identification and EU referendum vote choice among young people. At the bivariate level, young people who expressed a primary European, British or Scottish identity were more likely to vote Remain than the average 18 to 30 year old. But young people who held primary English and Welsh identities were less likely to vote Remain. The Scottish case shows that the “left behind thesis” is also contingent upon national and regional contexts within the UK.

While previous research found that holding a stronger British identity was associated with a higher likelihood of voting Remain when traded-off against English identity (Ashcroft, 2016), this paper found no significant differences between primary English and British identity when predicting for voting Remain among young people. Holding a primary European identity can be considered a signifier of post-materialism as it suggests a clear internationalist outlook. British identity, on the other hand, is far more complex. While it can imply a more civic, inclusive framing of identity, it can also harbour a certain nostalgic, fundamentally nationalist sentiment.

The findings of the article suggest that post-materialist values and attitudes are, collectively, the strongest predictors for voting Remain among young British people. This provides strong support for Hypothesis 2. The results of the multivariate analysis (all at the 1% confidence level) suggest that young people who held positive views on the culturally diverse nature of modern British society, felt that environmental sustainability is an important issue facing the country, and were relatively unconcerned by “cultural backlash” issues such as immigration and asylum, were much more likely to vote Remain. Perspectives on cultural diversity and the perceived importance of various areas of public policy highlight the cosmopolitan-populist divide between younger and older citizens (Norris and Inglehart 2016) and young Remainers and young Leavers. Young people who viewed the culturally diverse nature of British society positively were more likely to vote Remain by some margin. Alternatively, young people who placed relative importance on immigration, asylum national defence and terrorism were much more likely to vote Leave by a large margin.

The demographic and attitudinal profile of Britain’s young Remainers resembles that of other social movements across the world. These include the youthful, energetic Occupy Wall Street movement and the Spanish Indignados, which manifested themselves into electoral success for Podemos in Spain and the stronger-than-expected showing of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 race of the Democratic Party presidential nomination. The emergence of the young, cosmopolitan-left as a force in electoral politics was even more powerfully demonstrated in the case of Labour’s performance in the 2017 UK general election. To the great surprise of the political commentariat, the Labour Party – spearheaded by Jeremy Corbyn and campaigning on a manifesto which championed cultural diversity and a stronger role for the state in addressing economic inequality. The Labour Party made significant gains amongst all age groups under 45 (Sloam et al. 2018), which together prevented the Conservative Party from winning a parliamentary majority. In fact, the intergenerational differences in voter choice were so large that it was widely proclaimed that age had replaced class as ‘the new dividing line in British politics’ (YouGov 2017).

Last year’s youthquake has been disputed due to a relatively marginal increase in youth turnout from 2015 (Curtice, 2018), with a British Election Study labelling youthquake as a “myth” on the basis of turnout. However, these conclusions have been reached due to a narrow conception of youthquake – failing to recognise that it is a complex multi-faceted phenomenon involving fundamental social, political and cultural shifts (Ehsan et al. 2018). The credibility of the findings of the BES paper have also been questioned due to issues surrounding its relatively small sample size of those under the age of 25 (Kellner, 2018).

Although there is disagreement about the increase in youth voter turnout in the so-called ‘youthquake’ election of 2017 (Prosser et al. 2018; Stewart et al. 2018), there is agreement that gap in support for the Labour and Conservative parties is – at 35 percentage point – unprecedent in modern political history (Sloam et al. 2018). It is, therefore, interesting to note the parallels between the profile developed of the archetypal young British “Remainer” in this article, and the socio-demographic profile of young people who boosted Labour’s popularity at the last election. The analysis reveals that gender was a strong predictor for vote choice in the referendum, with young women more likely to vote Remain when controlling for a range of factors. This is also the case for young people in full-time education, those who belong to the higher ABC1 social grade, prioritise environmental issues and are relatively relaxed by immigration and the cultural diversity it creates. All of these characteristics, with the exception of high social grade, were also associated with a higher likelihood of voting Labour among young people.

In policy terms, it is important that mainstream politicians better understand this large segment of the electorate and pay attention to their policy priorities. In the aftermath of the 2017 UK general election, the Conservative Party has reflected on the strength of the youth vote for Labour. Damian Green MP, Government minister and close confidante of the Prime Minister, Theresa May, proclaimed that the Conservative Party must do more to ‘win over’ young voters, who backed the Labour Party in the election – and promised to review policy on university tuition fees and housing (BBC Online, 1 July 2017). Whatever the policy responses, it is clear that the electoral manifestation of the cosmopolitan values provides a powerful antidote to the authoritarian-nationalist forms of populism.

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1. The common features of these groups include the depiction of the political establishment as untrustworthy and corrupt, and opposition to immigration and cultural diversity in our societies (Inglehart and Norris 2016), as well as negative attitudes to those who are seen as ‘scrounging’ off the state (state support is often portrayed as having an anti-white, pro-ethnic minority bias). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)