Voters have punished the 'elite' – and this is not just a British phenomenon

blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/24/voters-have-punished-the-elite-and-this-is-not-just-a-british-phenomenon/

The UK has voted to leave the European Union. Sara Hobolt writes that although the result has come as a shock to Britain and the rest of Europe, the signs were there that the Leave campaign could win and the discontent among British voters is mirrored in many other countries across Europe. Voters took the opportunity to 'stick it to the elite' and punish mainstream politicians for their reluctance to address concerns about migration.

There is a sense of shock both in Britain and across Europe in response to the Brexit vote. But it should not come as a shock. The polls had consistently suggested that this would be a very close race and many had put the Leave side ahead in the days and weeks leading up the vote. We also know that referendums are highly unpredictable, and that voters often vote against proposals put to them by the government and supported by mainstream political parties and experts.

Vote Leave social media poster. Public domain

The Brexit vote also represents a victory for the populist forces that have gained ground in electoral contest across Europe and the United States in recent years, generally fuelled by worries about immigration, a lack of economic opportunities and anger with the political class.

Why did British voters reject the EU?

One reason why referendum outcomes are particularly unpredictable is that they present ordinary citizens with an opportunity to "stick it" to the political establishment. A division found in many referendums, including this one, is thus one between "the ordinary people" and "the elite". This populist argument was successfully exploited by the Leave camp who portrayed the referendum as a chance for ordinary citizens to "take back control" from the elites in Brussels.

This has strong appeal especially to voters, particularly those who feel disaffected with the political establishment and threatened by the forces of globalisation and European integration. A particular source of this disaffection was growing concerns about immigration, which have long been one of the most salient issue for British voters, but which the mainstream political parties have failed adequately to address.

The Leave side presented the referendum as a unique opportunity to vote leave to regain control of British borders and restrict immigration. Survey evidence suggests that this was a core concern among Leave voters, and

ultimately outweighed the fear of economic insecurity that the Remain camp had argued would follow from a Leave vote.

Who voted to leave?

Such fears of immigration are more pronounced among voters in a more vulnerable position in the labour market. The survey data shows that it was the so-called "losers" of globalisation, those with lower levels of education and working class occupation, who voted decisively for Leave, whereas the "winners" of globalisation – e.g. highly educated professionals – were overwhelmingly in favour of Remain.

This is not a uniquely British phenomenon. We see the same divisions when we study Euroscepticism across Europe, and in many countries such concerns about the EU and immigration have been translated into a boost in the electoral support for rightwing populist parties, such as the Front National in France, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands and the Danish People's Party in Denmark. Indeed, these are the very parties that are now calling for referendums on their countries' membership of the EU after the Brexit vote. There was also a stark generational divide in the UK referendum. Polling evidence suggests that the over-45s voted to leave while the under-45s voted to stay in the EU.

A divided country

The results of this referendum portrays a deeply divided country, not only along class, education and generational lines, but also in terms of geography. While both England and Wales voted 53 per cent Leave, Northern Ireland and Scotland voted Remain (at 56 and 62 percent respectively). The only region within England to vote Remain was London, and it did so decisively with 60 per cent of the vote.

Map of the results of the referendum by area

Yellow indicates that Remain won in the area while blue indicates Leave won
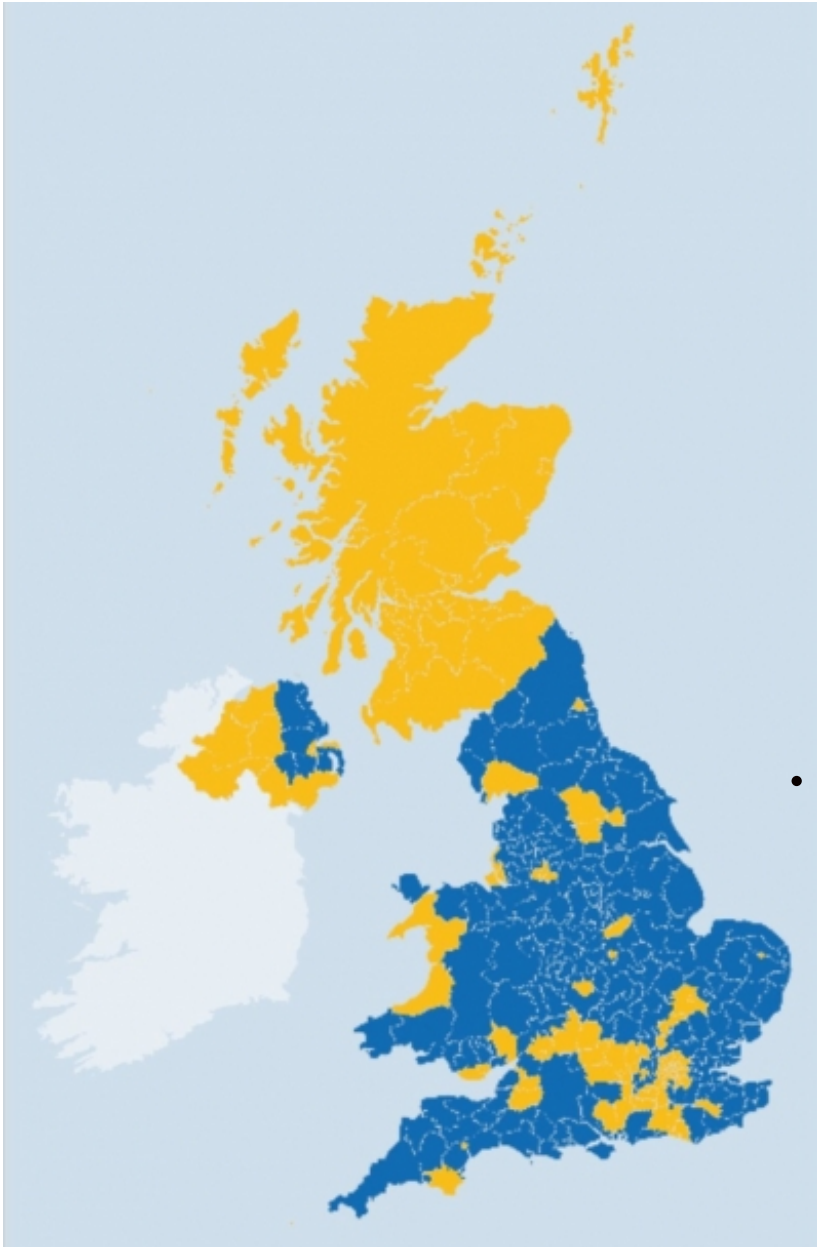
Generally, the Remain side did better in the larger multicultural cities and where there were more graduates, whereas the Leave side was strongest in the English countryside and did better than expected in the post-industrial Northeastern towns with larger working class populations. Again, these divisions reflect wider inequalities and differences in British society that are likely to persist in a Britain outside the EU.

This post represents the views of the author and not of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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