

# Britain and Europe: not black and white but grey

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## Summary

*A Global Counsel/TNS poll of British public opinion three weeks ahead of the European Parliamentary elections suggests a fine balance between supporters and opponents of UK membership of the EU. There is a marked generational split. Britain's quintessential Eurosceptic is a man over 55, working class, living in the South East of England and no longer in employment. By contrast, many younger voters still support EU membership, most often for economic reasons. The full poll results are available [here](#).*

A Global Counsel poll conducted between 24-28 April in collaboration with TNS paints a picture of a finely balanced and indecisive tie between Britain's Eurosceptic and pro-Europeans. Set against a surge of support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) ahead of the May 22 European Parliament elections these results offer some insight into where that support is coming from. Rather than suggesting that Britain is becoming more uniformly Eurosceptic, they suggest a country of demographic, geographic and generational peaks and troughs of euro-doubt. And a very large measure of genuine uncertainty over how to think about Britain's future in the EU.

The poll asked British voters for their views on a possible exit from the EU and tested those views against certain opinions on the costs of and benefits of leaving. Broken down by age and gender in particular, the results suggest a sharp generational divide between younger

more pro-European Britons and an older generation of convinced Eurosceptics. Older British voters are much less persuaded of the case for European membership, much less concerned about the personal financial impacts of exit and also much more committed to their views. However, this polling also suggests that where British men have relatively settled views on Europe, there is a significant pool of female voters who remain to be convinced.

## In, out and undecided

British attitudes to leaving the EU are almost evenly divided between those in favour of exit (35%), those in favour of staying in the EU (34%) and a third of voters who do not know (21%) or who would not vote in a referendum (10%). This support for EU membership or exit in the UK breaks down in a range of ways. In party political terms, almost half of Conservative voters (47%) say they would support full exit from

the EU, along with 86% of supporters for the UK Independence Party (UKIP). But both the Labour party and the Liberal Democrat party retain pro-membership majorities - 55% for Labour and 62% for the historically pro-European Liberal Democrats.

Scotland is the most pro-European region of the UK with 43% support for membership, falling to 31% in the South of England, with 36% of Greater Londoners in favour of continued membership. This is a remarkable reversal from the referendum of 1975, in which the South East and East of England were the most enthusiastic supporters of joining the European Common Market - with more than seven in ten voters in favour. This also suggests that support for EU membership in Britain is weakest in some of its most economically prosperous areas.

	Scotland	North	Midlands	South	Greater London	ABC1	C2DE
Stay in the EU	43%	38%	33%	31%	36%	39%	26%
Leave the EU	33%	34%	32%	39%	32%	33%	39%

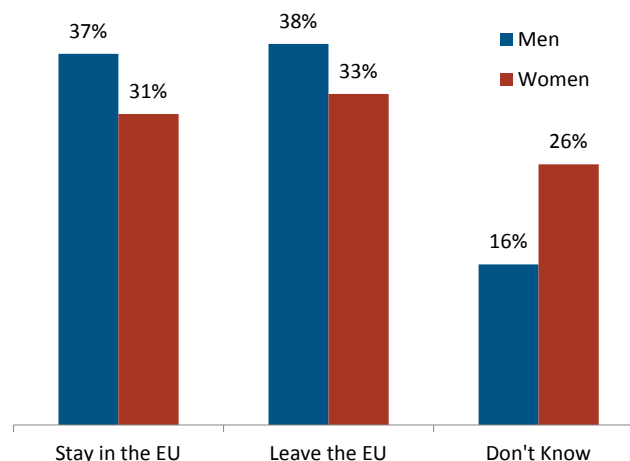
**Table 1: EU membership or exit by region and social band**  
Source: Global Counsel/TNS poll

There is also a clear gap between the views of middle class and working class voters, with 43% of middle class men and 36% of middle class women favouring membership of the EU in contrast to 27% of working class men and 26% of working class women. Concerns about migration show up clearly as among the strongest reasons for wanting the UK to leave and are consistently stronger among these social groups in the UK. Employment also seems to play a role in shaping views: men who are not working are almost a third more likely to support EU exit (48%) than those who are (33%). A large margin also separates support for EU exit among women who work (29%) and women who do not (37%). In both cases this is likely to reflect the sharply higher levels of support for exit among retired Britons over 65.

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	UKIP
Stay in the EU	55%	37%	62%	6%
Leave the EU	25%	47%	22%	86%

**Table2: EU Membership or exit by political party**  
Source: Global Counsel/TNS poll

Gender also seems to play a role. British men are marginally more in favour of exit (38%) than women (33%), but the sharpest distinction between British men and women is in the extent to which they describe their view as settled. British women appear to be more open to continued debate than men: 26% of British women do not have a final view on which way they would vote in a referendum, in contrast to 16% of men.



**Fig 1: EU membership or exit by gender**  
Source: Global Counsel/TNS poll

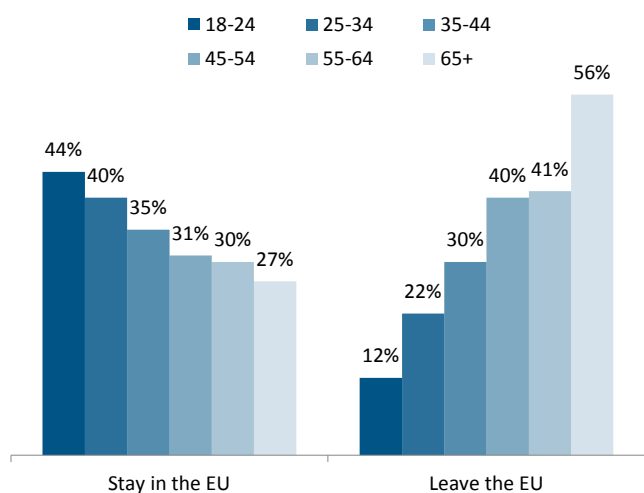
Conviction also appears to rise sharply with age. A quarter (24%) of under-35 year olds do not have a fixed position on membership of the EU, falling to 14% for over 65s. This is particularly marked for men: 22% of men under 35 are willing to admit to uncertainty about their view, falling to just 7% for men over 55. 25-26% of women remain to be convinced across all age ranges. There is a similar correlation between age and likelihood to vote, with 16% of under-35s stating they would not vote, but just 3% of over 65s.

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This generational spread of British views on the EU is marked and striking. The quarter of the British population aged over 55 are much more Eurosceptic and much more convinced in their Euroscepticism than average British voters, and more sceptical than younger voters in particular. Indeed, support for exit rises consistently with age. 18% of under-35 year olds support the idea of Britain leaving the EU, while 56% of over-65 year olds take the same view.

Older voters also have more strongly held views on the negatives of EU membership for the UK. A fifth of over 65s 'strongly agree' that the UK has less influence in the EU than Germany or France (10% of under 35s); and 55% of over 65s 'strongly agree' that the EU interferes too much in domestic British

politics (14% of under 35s). Only 28% of over 65s agree that the EU is beneficial to the UK economy, compared to 38% of under-35s.



**Fig 2: EU Membership or exit by age**  
Source: Global Counsel/TNS poll

Older voters are a lot more sceptical of the British government’s strategy of basing a referendum on a renegotiation of the British terms for EU membership. 59% of over 65s are ‘not at all confident’ that the British government will be able to negotiate a better deal for the UK inside the EU in contrast to 41% of the population as a whole and 25% of under-35s. Older Britons are also a lot more confident than younger ones that leaving the EU would not harm them financially. 69% of over-65s believe that an EU exit would leave them better off financially or unaffected - compared to 38% of under-35s.

	Under 35	Over 65
Strongly Agree that...		
...The UK has less influence in the EU than France or Germany	10%	20%
...The EU interferes too much in British politics	14%	55%
Am not at all confident...		
...that the UK Government will be able to negotiate a better deal for the UK	25%	59%
Believe that leaving the EU...		
...will have a positive or neutral effect financially for me personally	38%	69%

**Table 3: views on the EU by age**  
Source: Global Counsel/TNS poll

This generational gap in antipathy to the EU is the single most striking feature of British popular opinion on EU membership. The one in four Britons

over 55, and particularly men over 55, appear to be highly sceptical about the costs of leaving the EU and the continued economic and political benefits of EU membership. A quintessential British Eurosceptic might be said to be a man over 55, probably from a working or lower middle class background, living in the South East of England and no longer in full time employment. By contrast, younger voters still seem to see merit in EU membership in much larger numbers, especially younger active workers. This raises an interesting and important political question about the role of older Eurosceptic voters in shaping Britain’s future role in Europe for their more pro-European younger compatriots.

Despite the apparent hardening of Eurosceptic sentiment in Britain, this poll suggests a more varied political landscape in which attitudes to ‘Brexit’ are a function of age, and where gender and social class appear to play a role both in the formation of views and the openness to debate the issue. There is also a large part of the British electorate that is still to be convinced either way. A large part of this swing voter is women of all ages, a quarter of who are still open to convincing. This undecided cohort will clearly be a key battleground for the evolution of British views of the EU.

The full Global Counsel/TNS poll can be seen here.

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