



Research Update

Our future – no vote: Attitudes to Brexit among children and young people

Dirk Schubotz, Katrina Lloyd, Martina McKnight and Paula Devine

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, a referendum was held on Brexit – the exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU). Just over half (52%) of adults in the UK who participated in the referendum voted to leave the EU and 48 per cent voted to remain. However, larger majorities in Northern Ireland and in Scotland voted to remain (56% and 62% respectively). Early in 2017 the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, began the withdrawal process agreeing a leaving date of 29 March 2019. However, at the time of writing, the UK Government has, on three occasions, failed to ratify the withdrawal agreement negotiated with the EU. The latest deadline for leaving is 31 October 2019 and, under the new Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the prospect of leaving without a deal has become more likely.

While the repercussions of Brexit will be keenly felt across the UK and EU, the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland in terms of its troubled history and geographical location mean that it has played a critical role in debates and negotiations. The inclusion of special arrangements (referred to as the backstop) in the proposed withdrawal agreement to protect the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and ensure that an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland remains have proved particularly divisive. Concerns that Brexit could raise tensions between Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland have resulted in renewed discussions about a border poll in Northern Ireland. Therefore, understanding the unique perspectives of those living and growing up in Northern Ireland toward Brexit is particularly important.

It is clear that Brexit has been a seismic event in UK politics. However, should the June 2016 referendum decision be implemented and the UK leaves the European Union, Brexit’s real implications will be felt most by future generations. Once the immediate political drama is over, it is today’s young people who will live in the new reality of life outside the EU. Yet this is the very section of society excluded from the political process. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the right for children to have a say in matters that affect them – and this clearly applies to politics and Brexit. Given that those under the age of 18 years cannot vote, ways must be found to ensure that their voices are heard and taken note of.

To this end, in 2018, questions on attitudes to Brexit were included in two annual surveys carried out by ARK – **Young Life and Times (YLT)**, a postal survey of 16 year olds and **Kids’ Life and Times (KLT)**, an online survey of 10/11 year olds which is completed in school. While the questions in the two surveys differed slightly to reflect the age of the respondents, nonetheless they provide an opportunity for the voices of children and young people to be heard on an issue

which has dominated the political debate for three years. In the 2018 surveys, 1169 16 year olds responded to YLT and 2678 10/11 year olds completed the module on Brexit in KLT. This Research Update presents the findings from the two surveys, and considers the influence of national identity, family affluence, and, in the case of YLT, religious affiliation on attitudes to Brexit – factors that reflect the split on voting preference among adults in Northern Ireland.

Attitudes towards Brexit

YLT respondents were asked whether they were in favour or not in favour of the UK leaving the EU, and children in KLT were asked whether they felt it was a good idea or a bad idea for the UK to leave the EU. As Table 1 shows, only 11 per cent of YLT respondents and 13 per cent of KLT respondents were in favour of the UK leaving the EU. In comparison to their older counterparts, more of the younger participants in KLT were not sure whether the UK should leave the EU; however, in both surveys there was more support for remaining than leaving.

Table 1: Attitudes towards the UK leaving the EU

	%	
	YLT	KLT
In favour (YLT)/Good idea (KLT)	11	13
Not in favour (YLT)/Bad idea(KLT)	62	47
Not sure (YLT)/Don’t know (KLT)	27	40

Respondents to YLT were also asked how they would vote if the referendum was held again tomorrow and 16 year olds were entitled to vote. The majority (73%) said they would vote to remain, 12 per cent would vote to leave, 4 per cent would not vote and only 10 per cent said they did not know. Overall, the results from YLT and KLT suggest that children and young people would be more in favour of the UK remaining in the EU, although this is particularly noticeable among the older age group.

National identity and religion

The results of the 2016 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey of adults suggested that voters in the Brexit referendum were divided along national identity/religious lines (Gormley-Heenan et al., 2016). For example, 90 per cent of adults who identified as Irish and 68 per cent who identified as Northern Irish preferred to stay in the EU compared with only 39 per cent who identified as British. Furthermore, 88 per cent of Catholic participants compared with 43 per cent of Protestant participants were in favour of the UK staying in the EU.

Respondents to both YLT and KLT were asked about their national identity, with YLT respondents also being asked about their religious affiliation; their attitudes towards Brexit were analysed by these variables. Table 2 presents the percentages of children and young people who identified as Northern Irish, Irish, British and Ulster. As can be seen, just over one half of KLT (53%), and 34 per cent of YLT, respondents identified

Figure 1: Attitudes towards leaving the EU by national identity (YLT)

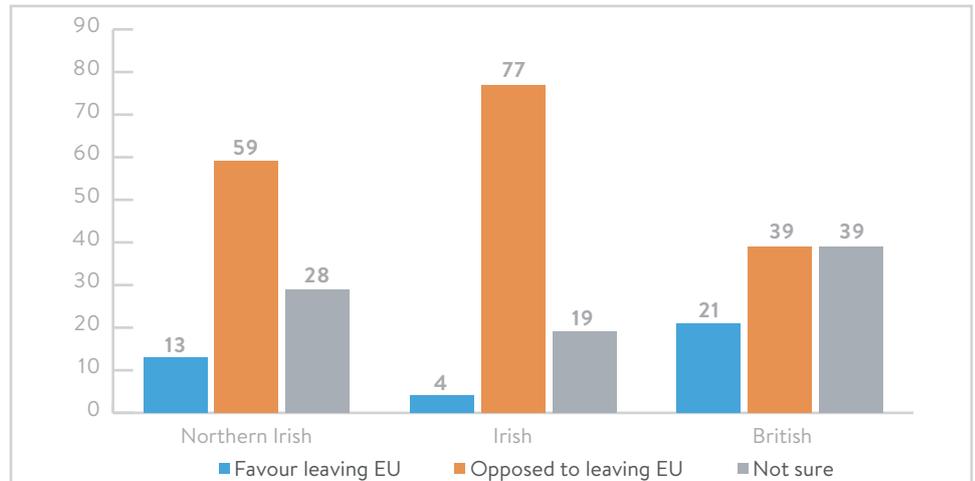
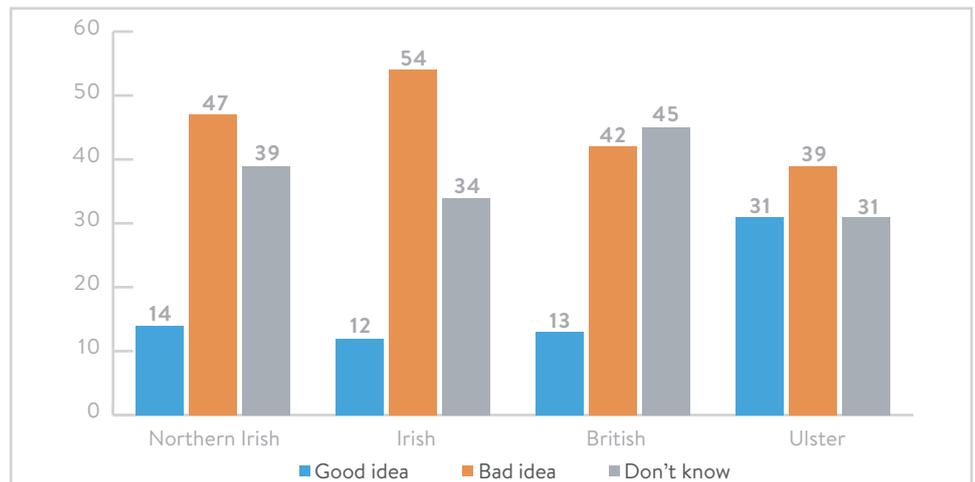


Figure 2: Attitudes towards leaving the EU by national identity (KLT)



as Northern Irish. However, as the percentage of YLT respondents who chose an Ulster identity is very small (1%) they have not been included in further analysis of the data.

As Figure 1 shows, the pattern of YLT responses largely reflects the findings from the 2016 NILT survey. While 77 per cent of the 16 year olds who identified as Irish and 59 per cent who identified as Northern Irish were opposed to leaving the EU, only 39 per cent who identified as British expressed this opinion.

Similarly, over half (54%) of KLT respondents identifying as Irish thought that leaving the EU was a bad idea, followed by 47 per cent of those who identified as Northern Irish (Figure 2). Among this age group, children who identified as Ulster were least likely to think that the UK leaving the EU was a bad idea (39%). Conversely, KLT respondents identifying as Ulster were by far the most likely to say that leaving the EU was a good idea (31%). This was more than the proportion of those identifying

Table 2: National identity

	%	
	YLT	KLT
Northern Irish	34	53
Irish	39	19
British	20	12
Ulster	1	3
Other/Don't know	7	13

Table 3: Attitudes towards leaving the EU by religion (YLT)

%				
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
In favour of UK leaving the EU	5	24	9	11
Opposed to UK leaving the EU	76	39	63	62
Unsure if the UK should leave EU or not	19	37	28	27

Table 4: Attitudes towards leaving the EU by how well off family is (YLT)

%			
	Not well-off	Average	Well-off
In favour of the UK leaving the EU	10	11	13
Opposed to the UK leaving the EU	59	60	70
Unsure if the UK should leave the EU or not	31	30	18

Table 5: Attitudes towards leaving the EU by family affluence (KLT)

%			
	Low affluence	Medium affluence	High affluence
Good idea	14	13	13
Bad idea	37	45	54
Don't know	49	42	33

as Irish (12%), British (13%) or Northern Irish (14%). Figure 2 also shows that amongst those identifying as British, the highest proportion of children expressed uncertainty.

Turning now to religion and, as Table 3 shows, in line with the NILT findings, nearly one quarter (24%) of YLT respondents who said they were Protestant were in favour of the UK leaving the EU compared with 5 per cent of Catholic respondents and 9 per cent of those with no religious affiliation. Nonetheless, even among Protestant respondents, more were in favour of the UK remaining in the EU (39%) than were in favour of the UK leaving the EU (24%). Moreover, the proportion of those who were unsure

(37%) was larger than the proportion advocating that the UK leave the EU.

Family affluence

Analysis of the British Election Survey carried out by Goodwin and Heath (2016) showed that households with incomes of less than £20,000 per year were much more likely to support leaving the EU than the wealthiest households with annual incomes of over £60,000. While the YLT and KLT surveys did not ask about household income, the two surveys included subjective measures of family financial circumstances; Family Affluence Scale (FAS) in KLT, and how well-off respondents think their family is in YLT. The findings from YLT and KLT are

presented in Tables 4 and 5 and suggest a similar pattern to Goodwin and Heath (2016): opposition to the UK leaving the EU was highest among children and young people who perceived their family to have high affluence (KLT) or to be well-off (YLT).

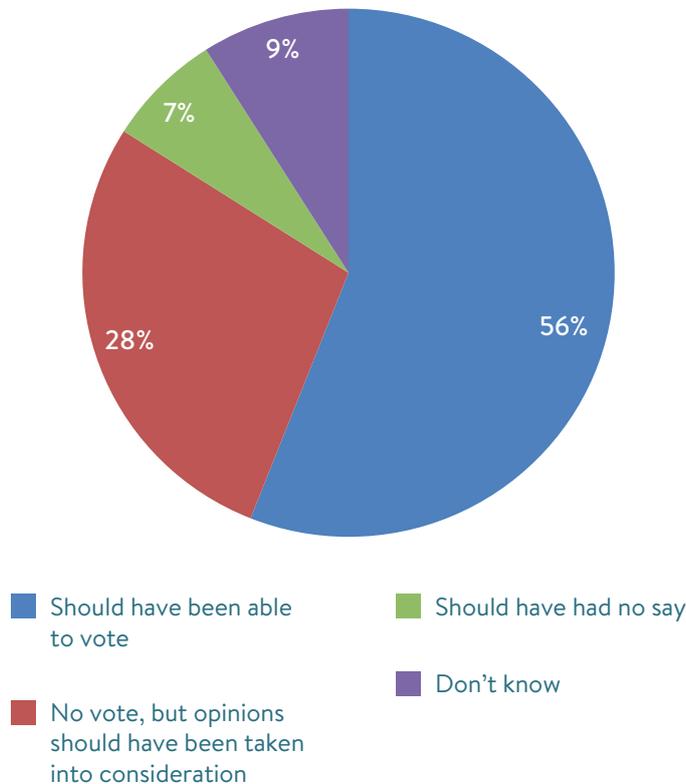
Voting at 16

Respondents to YLT were asked if they thought 16 year olds should have had a say in the Brexit referendum. Over half (56%) said they should have been able to vote, 28 per cent felt that 16 year olds should not have had a vote but should have had some say in that decision, whilst 7 per cent felt that 16 year olds should not have had any say (Figure 3).

Discussion

The strength of opinion on Brexit voiced by respondents to the 2018 YLT and KLT surveys highlights the importance of eliciting and disseminating the views of children and young people on social and political issues on which their opinions are often marginalised or excluded. Moreover their views are, arguably, of particular importance given the potential ramifications that Brexit may have for those living and growing up in Northern Ireland. The findings from the two surveys suggest that more children and young people living in Northern Ireland would support the UK remaining in the EU although, as might be expected given their age, there was more uncertainty among the 10/11 year olds than their older counterparts. What is also evident is that, to a large extent, the findings mirror those reported from surveys of adults and suggest that factors such as national identity, religion and socio-economic status are related to attitudes towards Brexit. Perhaps most noticeable is the continued salience of national identity in Northern Ireland reflecting traditional positions that persist across the generations.

Figure 3: How much say do you think 16 year olds should have had in the Brexit referendum?



Key Points

- 62% of YLT and 47% of KLT respondents thought the UK should remain in the EU.
- 40% of KLT respondents did not know if the UK should remain in the EU, compared with 27% of 16 year olds taking part in YLT.
- Children and young people who identified as Irish were most likely to think the UK should remain in the EU.
- Among YLT respondents, there was much more support for remaining in the EU among Catholics (79%) compared to Protestants (39%) and those with no religion (63%).
- Opposition to Brexit was highest among children and young people who perceived their family to have high affluence (KLT) or to be well-off (YLT).
- 56% of YLT respondents thought that 16 year olds should have been able to vote in the referendum with a further 28 per cent saying they should have had a say in the referendum but not a vote.

References

- Goodwin, M. & Heath, O. (2016) *Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-of-opportunities>
- Gormley-Heenan, C., Aughey, A. and Devine, P. (2016) *Waking up in a different country: Brexit and Northern Ireland*. Research Update Number 116. Belfast: ARK. <https://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update116.pdf>
- The authors are based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast.
Dirk Schubotz is a Senior Lecturer and Director of YLT.
Katrina Lloyd is a Lecturer and Director of KLT.
Martina McKnight is a Research Fellow on YLT and KLT.
Paula Devine is Co-Director of ARK, and Director of NILT.
- The Young Life and Times (YLT) and Kids' Life and Times (KLT) surveys are carried out annually. They are joint projects of the two Northern Ireland universities and provide an independent source of information on what children and young people think on a wide range of social issues. For more information, visit the survey websites at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt and www.ark.ac.uk/klt.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Jordanstown Campus, Ulster University
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB

Tel: 028 9036 6339
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk