Goodwin, Matthew and Milazzo, Caitlin (2017) Taking back control?: investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit. British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 19 (3). pp. 450-464. ISSN 1467-856X

Access from the University of Nottingham repository:
http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/42452/1/Taking%20Back%20Control%20FINAL%20SUBMISSION%2028%20April%202017.pdf

Copyright and reuse:
The Nottingham ePrints service makes this work by researchers of the University of Nottingham available open access under the following conditions.

This article is made available under the University of Nottingham End User licence and may be reused according to the conditions of the licence. For more details see:
http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end_user_agreement.pdf

A note on versions:
The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact eprints@nottingham.ac.uk
Taking Back Control?
Investigating the Role of Immigration in the 2016 Vote for Brexit

Matthew Goodwin
University of Kent
Canterbury, CT2 7NZ
m.j.goodwin@kent.ac.uk

Caitlin Milazzo
University of Nottingham
Nottingham NG7 2RD
caitlin.milazzo@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract
The 2016 referendum marked a watershed moment in the history of the United Kingdom. The public vote to leave the EU –for a ‘Brexit’- brought an end to the country’s membership of the European Union (EU) and set it on a fundamentally different course. Recent academic research on the vote for Brexit points to the importance of immigration as a key driver, although how immigration influenced the vote remains unclear. In this article, we draw on aggregate level data and individual-level survey data from the British Election Study (BES) to explore how immigration shaped public support for Brexit. Our findings suggest that, specifically, increases in the rate of immigration at the local level and sentiments regarding control over immigration were key predictors of the vote for Brexit, even after accounting for factors stressed by established theories of Eurosceptic voting. Our findings suggest that a large reservoir of support for leaving the EU, and perhaps anti-immigration populism more widely, will remain in Britain, so long as immigration remains a salient issue.

Keywords
European Union, Euroscepticism, immigration, Brexit, referendum, voting
Introduction

On June 23 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union (EU). Though a majority of Members of Parliament supported remaining in the EU, 51.9 percent of the British electorate opted to leave. Nine months later, the Conservative government triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, setting into motion the nation’s exit from the EU. The British people had thus brought to an end a relationship with Europe that they had first approved at a referendum in 1975 (Butler and Kitzinger 1976).

The result of the 2016 referendum raises the obvious question of why people voted for Brexit. Drawing on the Essex Continuous Monitoring Surveys (ECMS), the most comprehensive study to date of the vote for Brexit demonstrates how public concerns over immigration were not only central to explaining why people voted to leave the EU but had also shaped longer-term volatility in British public attitudes toward EU membership (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). Similarly, analysis of survey data by Swales (2016) suggests that the Leave victory was not about objective demographics alone. ‘Matters of identity were equally, if not more strongly, associated with the Leave vote – particularly feelings of national identity and sense of change over time’ (Swales, 2016, 2). For instance, among those who felt that during the preceding ten years Britain had gotten ‘a lot worse’ the average Leave vote was 73 percent, compared to 40 percent among those who felt the country had gotten ‘a lot better’.

That concerns over immigration and how Britain is changing were at the core of the Brexit vote is not surprising when we consider three observations. First, that immigration was a core motive is consistent with earlier research on the drivers of public support for the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP), which assumed a prominent role in the 2016 referendum (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Cutts, Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). This research shows how, in the period before the 2016 referendum, public hostility toward immigration and anxiety over its perceived effects was a major predictor of support for Nigel Farage and the populist right. Second, that citizens were influenced by concern over immigration is also consistent with a larger academic literature on the drivers of anti-EU sentiment across the continent. Numerous studies have demonstrated the significance of identity-related concerns to explaining hostility to the EU, integration and further enlargement (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Kuhn 2012; Lubbers and Scheepers 2007; McLaren 2002 – for a recent review of this literature see Kentmen-Cin and Erisen 2017). Third, that immigration is important to understanding the outcome of the 2016 referendum is further underlined by the political context of the vote. Immigration was a highly salient issue throughout the referendum. From 2004, following the accession of Central and East European states, British voters became increasingly concerned about the economic and cultural effects of immigration (Heath and Tilley 2005; McLaren and Johnson 2007). By the time of the 2016 referendum immigration was ranked by citizens as the most important issue in the country – a concern that was likely sharpened by the continuation of historically unprecedented levels of net migration and the arrival of a pan-European refugee crisis in 2015.¹

Yet the question of how immigration influenced the vote for Brexit remains unclear and needs further research. One area that has received only limited attention concerns the role of ethnic context,
and how this might have impacted on the vote. Was support for leaving the EU stronger in communities that were predominantly ‘white’ and where, as a consequence, citizens had little direct experience with immigration and the arrival of non-UK EU nationals? Or, was support for leaving notably stronger in communities that had experienced above average rates of demographic and ethnic change, and where the 2016 referendum vote offered an ‘outlet’ for concerns over how local areas were changing? The answers to these questions are contested. In the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, for instance, some commentators suggested that support for Leave was strongest in communities that had little experience of ethnic diversity, pointing for example to the fact that of the twenty places with the largest proportions of non-UK EU nationals eighteen voted to remain in the EU, while of the twenty places with the lowest proportions fifteen opted to leave. Some drew on data from the Labour Force Survey and 2011 Census to argue that high proportions of Leave voters ‘were overwhelmingly more likely to live in areas with low levels of migration’ (Lawton and Akrill, 2016). Yet such claims have been challenged by aggregate-level research which demonstrates that while support for Brexit tended to be stronger in local authorities with larger than average numbers of pensioners, low skilled workers and less well educated citizens, it was also stronger in areas that had experienced a sharp rise in the number of EU nationals during the preceding ten years (Goodwin and Heath, 2016).

Our aim in this paper is to contribute to this debate about the 2016 referendum, and the vote for Brexit more generally, by exploring how immigration influenced the vote. Drawing on aggregate and individual-level data, we first corroborate how it was changes in immigration at the local level which exerted a particularly strong influence on the referendum outcome, helping to deliver a victory for Leave. Public support for Brexit was strongest in communities that had experienced higher rates of ethnic change in immediate years prior to the 2016 vote. Second, at the individual-level we then show that while citizens who felt the most strongly negative about immigration and its effects were most likely to vote to leave the EU, it appeared to have been perceptions regarding changes in immigration – and the ability of a ‘post-Brexit Britain’ to reign in those changes – that were the strongest drivers of support for Brexit. Finally, we demonstrate how shifts in perceptions regarding demographic change also increased support for Brexit amongst Remain supporters in the years prior to the referendum. Taken together, our findings suggest that the public vote for Brexit was not simply driven by hostility towards immigration, but was also entwined with a general desire to ‘regain control’ over an issue that remains at the heart of Britain’s political debate.

**Immigration, Demographic Change and Brexit**

Drawing on past research, we argue that perceptions of the changing nature of Britain’s communities were an important factor in explaining support for Brexit. As noted above, previous work at the local authority level, conducted in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, provides tentative evidence to suggest that support for leaving the EU was strongest in areas that during the preceding ten year period had experienced the most significant influx of EU nationals (Goodwin and Heath, 2016). This pattern
is consistent with research elsewhere, which demonstrates the significant role that ethnic change can play in shaping voting behaviour and public attitudes.

In the United States, studies show how relatively sudden demographic shifts at the local level can motivate anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviour (Green, Strolovitch and Wong 1998). Hopkins (2010) has similarly demonstrated that whereas the level of ethnic diversity might escape notice, changes are less likely to do so. Citizens pay special attention to change as sudden ethnic changes ‘can reshape local politics, destabilising shared conceptions of the community’s identity and future’ (Hopkins, 2010, 42-43). It is the emphasis on change that is crucial. Areas that have long been ethnically diverse are able to absorb additional immigration with little change in the perceived diversity of the area. However, in areas where there were previously few migrants, increases in immigration will have a more noticeable effect – and will be more likely to influence political behaviour.

Two illustrative examples in Britain are the communities of Corby and Derby. Between 2005 and 2015, both of these local authorities saw a comparable increase in the non-UK born population of 10,000. However, Derby had an immigrant population of 28,000 in 2005, so the additional influx increased the non-UK born population in Derby by one third. Corby, however, had a non-UK born population of just 4,000 in 2005. The arrival of an additional 10,000 immigrants in Corby meant that the non-British population was 3.5 times higher in 2015 than in 2005. Though the final overall number of migrants is smaller in Corby, the rate of change in immigration would have appeared far starker in Corby, possibly shared conceptions of identity and encouraging a political backlash.

Table 1. EU Referendum Areas by Rate of Change in the Non-British Population

| Non-British population | Leave areas (%) | Remain areas (%) | All areas (%) |
|------------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| Decreased              | 7.4            | 6.2              | 7.0          |
| Increased by 1-1.99x   | 54.9           | 72.6             | 60.3         |
| Increased by 2-2.99x   | 28.0           | 18.6             | 25.1         |
| Increased by more 3x   | 9.7            | 2.7              | 7.6          |

Source: Office of National Statistics

To examine how immigration influenced the vote for Brexit we will proceed in three stages. First, we can start with an aggregate-level analysis of the predictors of the Leave vote by local authority. We expect to find that public support for Brexit was strongest in areas that had experienced higher rates of demographic change. Table 1 presents the distribution of Leave and Remain areas by the rate of growth of the non-UK born population between 2005 and 2015. In seven per cent of local authorities, the non-UK born population declined during this period, and a relatively equal number of Leave and Remain areas fall into this category. However, in the vast majority of areas, the foreign-born population increased, and in some cases, significantly so.Nearly three-quarters of Remain seats and just over half of Leave seats experienced relatively modest increases in non-UK born population. However, in nearly one third of all seats the foreign-born population more than doubled, and a larger share of Leave seats
fall in this category. In more than one quarter of all Leave seats, the foreign-born population doubled in the ten-year period before the vote, compared to an equivalent figure of 20 per cent of Remain seats. In a further 10 per cent of Leave seats the non-British population more than tripled. Taken together, the data presented in Table 1 suggest that local areas that experienced sharper rates of demographic change were subsequently more likely to vote to leave the EU at the 2016 referendum.

A more systematic test of the predictors of the vote for Brexit confirms the relationship between demographic change and support for Brexit. In Table 2, we present results of three OLS regression models, where the dependent variable is the percentage of the local authority population that voted to leave the EU. In the first model, we explore the effect of the rate of change in the non-UK born population on support for Leave. The coefficient associated with the growth of the non-UK population between 2005 and 2015 is positive and statistically significant, indicating that communities which saw the foreign-born population grow more rapidly registered stronger support for Brexit. This relationship holds when we control for the overall level of ethnic diversity of the area, as well as other well-known predictors of support for Brexit, including age, education, and changes in unemployment during the same period. These results provide further evidence to suggest that, in terms of explaining support for leaving the EU, what appeared to matter most was not the ‘static’ level of immigration but rather the rates of demographic change that communities were experiencing. As an additional robustness check, we also consider the effect of the absolute change in diversity – that is, the difference between the percentages of the area’s population that was non-UK born in 2015, and in 2005. Here again, areas that were more ethnically diverse than they had been in 2005 were more likely to support Brexit.

Table 2. OLS Regression Model of Leave Vote

|                           | DV = Leave vote (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Rate of change in non-UK population, 2005-2015 | 1.01** (0.28) |
| Change in Non-UK population, 2005-2015 (%) | 0.89** (0.14) |
| Change in unemployment rate 2005-2015 | 1.30** (0.35) |
| No qualifications (%) | 1.10** (0.07) |
| Aged 65+ (%) | 0.36** (0.11) |
| Scotland | -21.64** (1.10) |
| London | -4.22* (1.56) |
| Constant | 22.55** (2.95) |
| N | 0.72 |
| R² | 369 371 |

Source: Office of National Statistics, NOMIS (Official Labour Market Statistics), Electoral Commission.
Note: The dependent variable is percentage of local authority that voted for Brexit in in 2016 EU Referendum. Standard errors are given in parentheses. * p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Using the coefficients from the first model in Table 2, we can illustrate the substantive effect of demographic change on support for leaving the EU. Table 3 presents the expected difference in the Leave vote for ten seats that experienced the greatest rates of change in the non-UK population between 2005 and 2015. The final column indicates how much support for leaving the EU would be expected to
decline had those areas experienced the average rate of change in their foreign-born populations, as opposed to their actual and more substantial shifts. Boston in Lincolnshire, for example, experienced a particularly high rate of change in the period prior to the 2016 referendum and subsequently went on to deliver the highest vote for Brexit in the entire country, of slightly more than 75 per cent. Boston was also an area where voters had experienced dramatic demographic change. In 2015, Boston’s non-British population was 16 times larger than it had been in 2005 (rising from 1,000 in 2005 to 16,000 in 2015). Based on our model estimates, had Boston experienced only average rates of demographic change then support for Brexit would have been nearly 15 points lower. Similarly, in West Lancashire, the non-British population was nine times larger in 2015 compared to 2005 (up from 1,000 in 2005 to 9,000 in 2015). While the predicted effects of change on support for Brexit are more modest, the implications of the change are more significant. Our model indicates that support for Brexit would have been nearly 8 points lower had that area experienced average rates of demographic change. Taking into account that the Leave vote was 55 per cent, this model would suggest that West Lancashire might have favoured Remain had the rates of democratic change been less dramatic.

Table 3. Difference in the Expected Leave Vote

| Name            | Region      | Rate of change in non-UK population (2005-2015) | Leave vote (%) | Difference in Leave vote if average rate of change |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Boston          | East Midlands | 16.0                                          | 75.6           | -14.7                                        |
| West Lancashire | North West  | 9.0                                           | 55.3           | -7.5                                         |
| Mansfield       | East Midlands | 5.5                                           | 70.9           | -3.8                                         |
| Redditch        | West Midlands | 5.5                                           | 62.3           | -3.8                                         |
| Maldon          | East of England | 4.0                                          | 62.6           | -2.3                                         |
| Melton          | East Midlands | 4.0                                           | 58.1           | -2.3                                         |
| Forest of Dean  | South West  | 4.0                                           | 58.6           | -2.3                                         |
| Malvern Hills   | West Midlands | 4.0                                          | 52.2           | -2.3                                         |
| Taunton Deane   | South West  | 3.8                                           | 52.9           | -2.0                                         |
| Corby           | East Midlands | 3.5                                          | 64.3           | -1.8                                         |

Note: Table 3 presents the ten local authorities that experienced highest rates of demographic change between 2005 and 2015. Column 3 indicates the rate of change, while column 4 shows the percentage of the population that voted to leave the EU. In the final column, we give the predicted difference in the leave vote had the area experienced the average rate of change in the non-UK born population.

Drilling down: Immigration and the Brexit vote

Our analyses above provide further evidence that the experience of demographic and ethnic change was associated with greater support for leaving the EU. In this section, we drill down to the individual level and investigate why this was the case.

Drawing on past research, we argue that there are two ways that immigration might influence the vote for Brexit. First, immigration may create identity-based hostility towards the EU and European integration. A significant strand of literature argues that the strongest predictor of negative attitudes
toward the EU, or support for leaving the EU entirely, is if citizens feel that their national identity or position is threatened by EU integration and/or immigration (Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Luedtke, 2005; McLaren, 2006). For example, at the Dutch referendum in 2005, Lubbers (2008), like others (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005), found that the strongest predictors of voting against the EU included public opposition to Turkey joining the EU but also a perception that the EU and integration threatened national culture, leading to the conclusion ‘that Euroscepticism is to a large extent related to attitudes toward immigrants’ (p.81).

There is similar evidence in Britain, where public opposition to immigration became particularly more pronounced after the post-2004 accession of Central and East European states to the EU, which was followed by higher rates of migration into the UK under the ‘free movement’ rule (Goodwin 2011). Then, from 2015 onward, such concerns were most likely sharpened by the arrival of a pan-European refugee crisis. That during this period the issues of immigration and the EU ‘fused’ in the minds of many voters is supported by research on support for Eurosceptic parties like the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which reveals how anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment were key predictors of this support (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015). Such concerns were then actively targeted throughout the 2016 referendum, with various Leave campaigns devoting much resource and effort to amplifying public concerns over immigration, claiming for example that Turkey would soon join the EU, that immigration was exerting pressure on public services, and that the refugee crisis had led the EU to ‘breaking point’. Therefore, drawing on this literature, we hypothesise that (H1) individuals who are more pessimistic about the effects of immigration were more likely to vote for Brexit.

An alternative possibility, however, is that the relationship between immigration and support for Brexit will be driven more by a desire to establish control over a salient issue. Between 2010 and 2016, Prime Minister David Cameron and the Conservative Party consistently failed to meet their manifesto commitment to return net migration back to the ‘tens of thousands a year, not hundreds of thousands’. Shortly before the referendum, the Office of National Statistics confirmed that net migration had risen to a near record high of 333,000 per annum and that there had been a sharp rise in the number of Bulgarian and Romanian nationals entering the country. Public discontent was reflected in weaker evaluations of how the main parties were seen to have managed the issue and the fact that, by 2016, a plurality of voters felt that UKIP was the ‘best party’ on this issue (Dennison and Goodwin 2015). It was thus no surprise that the theme of immigration control dominated the Leave campaign.

Surveys conducted in the shadow of the referendum suggested that the message of control resonated with the public. One of the first, conducted by Lord Ashcroft (2016), suggested that whereas nearly half of those who voted for Brexit did so because of their desire for ‘decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK’, one third saw leaving the EU as offering ‘best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders’. Though in the wider debate these public concerns over immigration and a perceived loss of national sovereignty are often presented in isolation from one
another, subsequent analysis of an open-ended question by the British Election Study (BES) team warned against this interpretation: ‘The clear picture we get from this analysis is that leavers are concerned primarily about sovereignty and immigration. In fact, reading responses shows that many respondents mention both sovereignty and immigration together, showing that these two issues were closely linked in the minds of British voters’ (Prosser, Mellon and Green, 2016). Our second hypothesis, therefore, is that (H2) individuals who believe leaving the EU will establish control over immigration will be more likely to vote for Brexit.

Testing the Arguments

We test these hypotheses using data from waves 8 and 9 of the 2014-2017 British Election Study (BES) Internet panel. The sample includes all 632 parliamentary constituencies in England, Scotland and Wales, with an average of 44 respondents per constituency and a weighted total sample size of 27,555 respondents included in both waves of the survey. The BES is ideal because respondents were asked a wide range of questions that were designed to capture their attitudes on key issues, such as the EU, immigration and the economy, as well as questions about their party identification and socio-demographic characteristics. BES questions also allow us to better account for the diverse motivations of Leave voters.

Figure 1. Anti-immigration sentiments by EU referendum vote choice (%)

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study Internet panel
Notes: Figures represent the weighted percentage of those who voted to leave the EU versus those voted to remain in the EU.

The BES contains three questions that allow us to measure the intensity of anti-immigration sentiment and whether this stemmed from fears about the effects of immigration on the economy, national culture, and/or access to social services. Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents who viewed immigration as having negative effects in all three areas – the economy, national culture and
the welfare state. There are significant differences in attitudes toward immigration once we also take account of people’s views toward Britain’s EU membership. For all three questions, there is more than a 40-point gap between those who voted to Leave the EU and those who voted to Remain. The same is true when we look at the percentage of each group that is intensely opposed to immigration – that is, respondents who express negative attitudes toward immigration on all three of these questions. More than half of the Leave voters are intensely opposed to immigration, compared to just 13 per cent of Remain voters. Such differences reveal how immigration and the EU are often closely connected in the minds of many voters and how many of those who supported leaving the EU felt significantly more hostile toward immigration. Consistent with the emerging literature, therefore, we find that those who voted for Brexit were significantly more hostile toward immigration and anxious about its perceived effects on the economy, culture and the welfare state.

We also find support for the idea that perceptions of demographic change – and Brexit’s ability to control that change – were associated with support for Brexit. Data from the BES supports the idea that the public was cognisant of the changing nature of Britain’s communities. In the weeks prior to the 2016 referendum, 75 per cent of BES respondents indicated that they thought levels of immigration were rising. And, while nearly six in 10 Remain voters said they thought immigration was rising, among Leave voters it was more than nine in 10. Moreover, there was a clear sense that Brexit would provide a measure of control over the issue. Six in 10 respondents thought that leaving the EU would lower immigration into the country, but more than eight and in 10 Leave voters expressed this sentiment.

These descriptive analyses provide preliminary support for both our hypotheses. But do the effects persist when we control for alternative explanations for why citizens intend to vote to leave or remain in the EU? Clearly, there are other competing explanations of anti-EU attitudes, including theories that variously stress the role of economic marginalisation among the so-called ‘losers’ of European integration and cues from political elites (Wilson, 2017). Some have seen the vote for Brexit as a by-product of economic marginalisation among an economically deprived ‘white underclass’ that was pushed to vote leave by their lack of educational qualifications, low incomes and bleak economic prospects. Others suggest that during this national debate over a complex question citizens were influenced by their national politicians and ‘followed their parties’, responding to cues given by their chosen party (e.g. see Lubbers 2008; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Hooghe and Marks 2005). We can now model the effects of all of these predictors simultaneously to shed light on the drivers of the vote.

Table A1 presents the operationalization and measurement of the variables used to capture the alternative explanations. Table 3 reports results of two multivariate models, where the dependent variable is the self-reported vote choice at the 2016 referendum. Because the dependent variable is comprised of two unordered categories – a respondent could vote to remain in the EU or vote to leave – we estimate logistic regression models. Coefficients represent the likelihood that individual with the given trait or attitude would vote to Leave as opposed to voting to Remain in the EU.
Table 4. Logistic Regression Models of EU Referendum Vote Choice

| Variables                                          | DV = Vote Leave (ref: Vote Remain) |
|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Levels of immigration getting higher               | 0.41** (0.06) 0.46** (0.06)         |
| Brexit would reduce immigration                    | 0.71** (0.06) 0.72** (0.06)         |
| Immigrants burden on welfare state                 | 0.27** (0.06)                    |
| Immigration bad for economy                       | 0.09* (0.05)                     |
| Immigration undermines cultural life               | 0.16** (0.04)                    |
| Intensity of anti-immigration sentiment            | 0.43** (0.04)                    |
| Social class (ref: Higher managerial/professional) |                                    |
| Lower managerial/professional                      | 0.02 (0.12) -0.01 (0.12)          |
| Intermediate occupations                          | -0.04 (0.14) -0.05 (0.14)         |
| Small employers/self-employed                     | 0.08 (0.19) 0.06 (0.19)           |
| Lower supervisory/technical                        | -0.14 (0.18) -0.14 (0.18)         |
| Semi-routine                                       | 0.02 (0.20) 0.03 (0.20)           |
| Routine                                            | 0.28 (0.20) 0.30 (0.20)           |
| Education (ref: Left school after 18)              |                                    |
| 16 or younger                                      | 0.43** (0.11) 0.46** (0.11)        |
| 17-18                                              | 0.17 (0.12) 0.20 (0.12)           |
| Age (ref: Aged 18-34)                              |                                    |
| Aged 35-54                                         | 0.31 (0.26) 0.32 (0.26)           |
| Aged 55+                                           | 0.43 (0.26) 0.46 (0.26)           |
| Economic pessimism                                 | 0.11* (0.05) 0.11* (0.05)         |
| British identity                                   | 0.09* (0.04) 0.09** (0.03)         |
| English identity                                   | 0.10** (0.02) 0.11** (0.02)        |
| European identity                                  | -0.59** (0.03) -0.61** (0.03)      |
| Eurosceptic newspaper reader                       | 0.37** (0.09) 0.38** (0.09)        |
| Party identification (ref: Other/none)             |                                    |
| Conservative                                       | -0.04 (0.15) -0.04 (0.15)         |
| Labour                                             | -0.52** (0.16) -0.54** (0.16)      |
| Liberal Democrat                                   | -0.43 (0.22) -0.49* (0.22)         |
| Nationalist                                        | 0.01 (0.24) -0.03 (0.23)           |
| UKIP                                               | 3.41** (0.60) 3.58** (0.61)        |
| Female                                             | -0.09 (0.09) -0.08 (0.09)          |
| Constant                                           | -4.95** (0.41) -4.25** (0.41)      |
| McKelvey/Zavoina R²                                 | 0.68 0.67                          |
| N                                                  | 9,263 9,263                        |

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study

Note: The reference category is voting to remain in the EU, so coefficients represent the effect that a given trait has on the likelihood that an individual would vote to leave to EU vs. voting to remain. Standard errors are given in parentheses. * p<0.05 ** p<0.01

The analyses confirm the patterns observed in the descriptive section. In the first model in Table 3, we examine the effects of different anti-immigration sentiments. Consistent with H1, individuals who express concern about the perceived effects of immigration are more likely to vote for Brexit. For all
three variables – i.e., the perceived effect of immigration on the Britain’s culture, the economy and the welfare state – the coefficients are positive and statistically significant, indicating that those who believe that immigrants are a burden on the welfare state, and those who feel that immigration is undermining Britain’s culture and is bad for the national economy were more likely to cast their vote to leave the EU. We also find support for H2. Those who believed that Brexit would deliver control over demographic change were more likely to vote to leave the EU. Individuals who perceived demographic change – that is, those who believed levels of immigration were rising – were more likely to support Brexit, as were those who believe that Brexit would decrease immigration into the country.

In order to compare the effects of our key immigration variables, we also calculate, for each variable, the effect of a minimum to maximum shift on the probability that an individual would vote to leave versus remain, holding all other variables constant. The predicted effects of this model are summarised in Figure 2. When we compare the effects of all of our key immigration variables, we see that it is perceptions regarding control over immigration that emerges as the strongest predictor of support for Brexit. Even when we control for attitudes regarding immigration and their perceptions of change, an individual who believes that Brexit will have a significant effect on levels of immigration increases their likelihood of voting for Brexit by +50 points. The effects of anti-immigration sentiment are more modest. Individuals who feel that immigrants are a burden on the welfare state increases their likelihood of voting for Brexit by +23 points, while those who believe that immigration undermines Britain’s culture or is bad for the economy increase their likelihood of supporting Brexit by +22 points and +13 points, respectively.

Figure 2. Change in the Predicted Probability of Voting to Leave the EU

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study Internet panel
Note: Figures represent the effect of a minimum to maximum shift in the variable on the probability that an individual with the given trait would vote to leave the EU vs. voting to remain, holding all other variables at their medians.
In the second model presented in Table 4, we include a variable that captures the intensity of each respondent’s anti-immigration sentiments across all three dimensions. Once again, we see that individuals who expressed more intense anti-immigration sentiment are more likely to support Brexit. But, when we compare the effect of perceptions of control against the general intensity of anti-immigration sentiment, we see that while both anti-immigration sentiment and perceptions of control have a positive effect on support for Brexit, the effect of control over the issue outweighs the effect associated with concerns regarding the perceived effects of immigration.

We also find support for many of the alternative explanations. First, we find strong support for the idea that the Leave vote was driven by identity concerns. Those who feel more strongly attached to a European identity are significantly less likely to vote for Brexit while those who have a strong British or English identity are more likely to vote to leave the EU. Second, our multivariate analyses suggest that elite cues – particularly cues from political elites – exert a strong influence on support for Brexit. An individual who supported UKIP and those who read Eurosceptic newspapers were more likely to vote for Brexit. Finally, we find some evidence that utilitarian motives predict support for Brexit. Respondents with low levels of education and those who believe that the economy has ‘got a lot worse are more likely to support Brexit, which is consistent with the idea that those who are more likely to feel or be under threat from economic competition and the free movement of EU migrant workers are more inclined to cast a Eurosceptic vote.

Changing Perceptions, Changing Voters

Finally, we consider how changing attitudes on immigration altered support for Brexit prior to the 2016 referendum. As noted above, immigration was consistently rated the most important issue facing the country from June 2015 through to the referendum. These figures suggest that, overall, citizens were becoming more anxious about immigration and its effects on the country prior to the referendum. Furthermore, the analyses above indicate that demographic change was an important predictor of support for Brexit, more so than sentiments regarding the perceived effects of immigration. Therefore, we expect that (H3) Remain voters who became more aware of demographic change will be more likely to switch to support Brexit prior to the referendum.

To test these arguments, we exploit the panel component of the BES survey. Specifically, we look at how changes in the attitudes on immigration altered support for Brexit amongst Remainers between early 2014 and the final months of the referendum campaign altered their chances of casting a leave vote. Table 5 presents the results of two multivariate logistic regression models where we look only at those respondents who said they planned to vote to remain in the EU when they were interviewed in early 2014. The dependent variable is coded ‘1’ if the respondent reported that they had cast their ballot for Brexit when interviewed after the referendum, and ‘0’ if they had continued to support Remain. Of these 2014 Remainers, 17 per cent indicated that they voted to leave the EU.
### Table 5. Logistic Regression Models of EU Referendum Vote Choice

| Variables                                                                 | DV = Change to leave (ref: Stay vote remain) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Intensity of anti-immigration sentiment, 2014                              | 0.33** (0.09)                               |
| Change - Intensity of anti-immigration sentiment, 2014-2016                | 0.52** (0.09)                               |
| Levels of immigration getting higher, 2014                                 | 0.85** (0.13)                               |
| Change - Levels of immigration getting higher, 2014-2016                   | 0.70** (0.14)                               |
| Social class (ref: Higher managerial/professional)                         |                                            |
| Lower managerial/professional                                               | -0.02 (0.20)                                |
| Intermediate occupations                                                   | 0.14 (0.23)                                 |
| Small employers/self-employed                                              | 0.11 (0.31)                                 |
| Lower supervisory/technical                                                 | -0.27 (0.30)                                |
| Semi-routine                                                               | 0.01 (0.31)                                 |
| Routine                                                                    | -0.32 (0.40)                                |
| Education (ref: Left school after 18)                                      |                                            |
| 16 or younger                                                              | 0.13 (0.24)                                 |
| 17-18                                                                     | -0.11 (0.20)                                |
| Age (ref: Aged 18-34)                                                      |                                            |
| Aged 35-54                                                                 | 0.09 (0.49)                                 |
| Aged 55+                                                                   | 0.10 (0.54)                                 |
| Economic pessimism                                                         | 0.12 (0.09)                                 |
| British identity                                                           | 0.19** (0.06)                               |
| English identity                                                           | 0.05 (0.04)                                 |
| European identity                                                          | -0.64** (0.06)                              |
| Eurosceptic newspaper reader                                               | 0.29 (0.16)                                 |
| Party identification (ref: Other/none)                                     |                                            |
| Conservative                                                               | -0.13 (0.27)                                |
| Labour                                                                     | -0.66** (0.25)                              |
| Liberal Democrat                                                           | -0.52 (0.43)                                |
| Nationalist                                                                | 0.33 (0.37)                                 |
| UKIP                                                                       | 2.02* (0.89)                                |
| Female                                                                     | -0.31 (0.16)                                |
| Constant                                                                   | -3.91** (0.55)                              |

| McKelvey/Zavoina R² | N          |
|---------------------|------------|
| 0.46                | 3,178      |

Source: 2014–2017 British Election Study

Note: This model includes only those respondents who said they were voting to remain in the EU, as of January 2014. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent ended up switching and voting for Brexit, and 0 if they did not switch their vote. The reference category is supporting remain in both W1 and W9, so coefficients represent the effect that a given trait has on the likelihood that an individual would switch their vote to leave to EU between waves 1 and 9. Standard errors are given in parentheses. * p<0.05 ** p<0.01

In order to capture how perceptions of demographic change evolved during this period, we calculate a variable that captures the difference between a respondent’s perceptions of the levels of immigration in
2016 vs. 2014. Higher values indicate that a respondent was more likely to say that levels of immigration were increasing in 2016. According to this measure, roughly 30 per cent of 2014 Remainers were more cognisant of rising immigration by 2016. To ensure that we are controlling for any changes that these same individuals may have experienced in their attitudes about the effects of immigration, we also calculate a variable that captures the difference in the intensity of a respondent’s anti-immigration sentiment. Here, higher values indicate that a respondent was more intensely opposed to immigration than they had been in 2014.

The results presented in Table 5 provide support for H3. Even when we control for changes in sentiments about the effects of immigration and initial perceptions of the level of immigration, we see that those who became more cognisant of rising immigration between 2014 and 2016 were also more likely to vote Leave in the referendum. Imagine an early Remain supporter who thought that levels of immigration were ‘about the same’ when asked in 2014. If, by 2016, this Remain supporter now thought that levels of immigration were ‘getting a little higher’, they would be +4 points more likely to switch their support to Brexit. If that Remain supporter now thought that levels of immigration were ‘getting a lot little higher’, they would be +10 points more likely to switch their vote from Remain to Leave.

**Conclusion**

The historic decision taken by British voters in June 2016 to end their country’s EU membership marked a significant moment in both the history of the country and the EU. In this article, we have explored the underlying drivers of the vote for Brexit and contributed to the wider literatures on attitudes toward the EU, integration and enlargement.

Our evidence confirms that strong public concerns over immigration, and its perceived effects on the country and on communities, were central to explaining the 2016 vote for Brexit. Public support for leaving the EU was significantly stronger in local communities that had experienced higher rates of ethnic change in the period preceding the vote, underscoring how relatively sudden demographic shifts can trigger significant political reactions among voters. Most of those who voted for Brexit were aware of these local changes and felt negatively about how historically unprecedented levels of immigration were impacting on the national economy, culture and the welfare state. Furthermore, we demonstrate how citizens who became more cognisant of rising levels of immigration were more likely to switch their vote from Remain to Leave, further underlining the centrality of this issue to the vote. When seen as a whole, these findings suggest that the decision taken by the Leave campaigns to focus heavily on the immigration issue, particularly during the latter part of the referendum campaign, helped to drive public support for leaving the EU while also complicating the ability of Remain campaigners to ‘cut through’ and galvanise support for continuing EU membership. Anti-immigration messages clearly had a stronger emotional resonance among voters who were already concerned about how migration was not only impacting on their country but also, in some areas, producing visible changes within their local
communities. In terms of the wider literature on public attitudes toward the EU, our findings provide further evidence of the power of identity-related factors in mobilising public opposition to the EU.

What are the implications of these findings? One interpretation is that so long as concerns over immigration remain salient then voters will remain instinctively supportive of a policy that distances Britain from the EU. Another is that, due to past migration flows, a significant section of the electorate will likely remain dissatisfied not only with future reform of free movement, which is unlikely to yield the dramatic reductions in immigration that some of these voters’ desire, but also with how ethnic change more generally is impacting the country and communities that surround them.
## Appendix. BES question wording

| Variables                          | BES wave | BES question wording and coding                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EU referendum vote                | 9        | Which way did you vote?                                                                                                                                         |
| Level of immigration               | 8        | Do you think that each of the following are getting higher, getting lower or staying about the same? [Level of immigration] 0 – ‘Getting a lot lower’ to 4 – ‘Getting a lot higher’ |
| Brexit would reduce immigration   | 8        | Do you think the following would be higher, lower or about the same if the UK leaves the European Union? [Immigration to the UK] 0 – ‘Much higher’ to 4 – ‘Much lower’ |
| Immigrants burden on welfare state| 8        | How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Immigrants are a burden on the welfare state. 0 – ‘Strongly disagree’ to 4 – ‘Strongly agree’ |
| Immigration bad for economy      | 8        | Do you think immigration is good or bad for Britain’s economy? 0 – ‘Good for economy’ to 6 – ‘Bad for economy’                                                   |
| Immigration undermines cultural life| 8        | Do you think that immigration undermines or enriches Britain’s cultural life? 0 – ‘Enriches for Britain’s cultural life’ to 6 – ‘Undermines for Britain’s cultural life’ |
| Social class                      | --       | National Statistics Socio-economic Classification                                                                                                            |
| Education                         | --       | At what age did you finish full-time education?                                                                                                               |
| Age                               | --       | What is your age?                                                                                                                                              |
| Economic pessimism                | 8        | Do you think that each of the following are getting better, getting worse or staying about the same? 0 – ‘Getting a lot better’ to 4 – ‘Getting a lot worse’ |
| British identity                  | 8        | Where would you place yourself on these scales? Britishness 0 – ‘Not at all British’ to 6 – ‘Very strongly British’                                                   |
| English identity                  | 8        | Where would you place yourself on these scales? Englishness 0 – ‘Not at all English’ to 6 – ‘Very strongly English’                                                                                                 |
| European identity                 | 8        | Where would you place yourself on these scales? Europeanness 0 – ‘Not at all European’ to 6 – ‘Very strongly European’                                                                                           |
| Eurosceptic newspaper reader      | --       | Which daily newspaper do you read most often?                                                                                                               |
| Favoured party recommendation     | 8        | Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what? Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the parties than the others? If yes, which party? |
| Female                            | --       | Are you male or female?                                                                                                                                          |
References
Ashcroft M (2016) How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday...and why [Online] 24 June 2016 Available at: http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/ [Accessed: 05 April 2017].
Boomgaarden HG, Schuck ART, Elenbaas M and de Vreese CH (2011) Mapping EU Attitudes: Conceptual and Empirical Dimensions of Euroscepticism and EU Support. European Union Politics 12(2): 241–66.
Butler D and Kitzinger U (1976) The 1975 Referendum. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.
Carey S (2002) Undivided loyalties: Is national identity an obstacle to European integration? European Union Politics 3(4): 387–413.
Clarke H., Whiteley P, and Goodwin MJ (2017) Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Cutts D, Goodwin M and Milazzo C. (2017) Defeat of the People's Army? The 2015 British general election and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Electoral Studies.
De Vreese CH and Boomgaarden HG (2005) Projecting EU Referendums: Fear of Immigration and Support for European integration. European Union Politics 6(1): 59–82.
Dennison J and Goodwin MJ. (2015) Immigration, issue ownership and the rise of UKIP. Parliamentary Affairs 68(1): 168-187.
Ford R and Goodwin MJ (2014) Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain. Routledge.
Ford R, Goodwin MJ and Cutts D (2012) Strategic Eurosceptics and polite xenophobes: support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2009 European Parliament elections. European Journal of Political Research 51(2): 204-234.
Gabel MJ. (1998) Public support for European integration: An empirical test of five theories. The Journal of Politics 60(2): 333-354.
Gabel MJ and Scheve K (2007) Estimating the Effect of Elite Communications on Public Opinion Using Instrumental Variables. American Journal of Political Science 51: 1013-1028
Goodwin, M.J. (2011) New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Party. Routledge
Goodwin MJ and Heath O (2016) The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result. The Political Quarterly 87(3): 323-332.
Goodwin M and Milazzo C (2015) UKIP: Inside the Campaign to Redraw the Map of British Politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Green, DP, Strolovitch DZ and Wong JS (1998) Defended Neighborhoods, Integration, and Racially Motivated Crime. American Journal of Sociology 104(2): 372-403.
Heath AF and Tilley JR (2005) British National Identity and Attitudes Towards Immigration. International Journal on Multicultural Societies 7(2): 119-132.
Hooghe L and Marks G (2005) Calculation, community and cues: public opinion on European integration. *European Union Politics* 6(4): 419-443.

Hopkins DJ (2010) Politicized places: Explaining where and when immigrants provoke local opposition. *American Political Science Review* 104(1): 40-60.

Kentmen-Cin, C and Erisen C (2017) Anti-Immigration Attitudes and the Opposition to European Integration: A Critical Assessment. *European Union Politics* 18(1): 3-25.

Kuhn T and Stöeckel F (2014) When European Integration Becomes Costly: The Euro Crisis and Public Support for European Economic Governance. *Journal of European Public Policy* 21(4): 626-641.

Lawton, C. and Ackrill, R. ‘Hard evidence: how areas with low immigration voted mainly for Brexit’, *The Conversation*. July 8 2016

Lubbers M (2008) Regarding the Dutch ‘Nee’ to the European Constitution: A Test of the Identity, Utilitarian and Political Approaches to Voting ‘No’. *European Union Politics* 9(1): 59-86.

Lubbers M and Scheepers P. (2007). Explanations of Political Euro-scepticism at the Individual, Regional and National Levels. *European Societies* 9(4): 643-669.

Luedtke A (2005) European Integration, Public Opinion and Immigration Policy: Testing the Impact of National Identity. *European Union Politics* 6(1): 83-112.

Maier M, Maier J, Baumert A, Jahn N, Krause S, and Adam S (2015) Measuring citizens’ implicit and explicit attitudes towards the European Union. *European Union Politics* (online early version)

McLaren LM (2002). Public Support for the European Union: Cost/Benefit Analysis or Perceived Cultural threat? *Journal of Politics* 64(2): 551-566.

McLaren L (2006) *Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

McLaren L and Johnson M (2007) Resources, group conflict and symbols: explaining anti-immigration hostility in Britain. *Political Studies* 55(4): 709-732.

Prosser, C, Mellon J, and Green J (2016) What mattered most to you when deciding how to vote in the EU referendum? British Election Study News [Online] 11 July 2016. Available at: http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-mattered-most-to-you-when-deciding-how-to-vote-in-the-eu-referendum [Accessed: 05 April 2017].

Swales K (2016) *Understanding the Leave vote*. London: NatCen Social Research. Available at: http://natcen.ac.uk/media/1319222/natcen_brexplanations-report-final-web2.pdf [Accessed 5 April 2017].

Wilson G (2017) The UK, USA and Brexit. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (forthcoming).

Young H (1998) *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair*. London: Macmillan.
Notes

1 Data taken from the Ipsos-MORI Issues Index. In the June 2016 edition of the index 48% of the sample ranked immigration/immigrants as the most important issues facing Britain today, followed by the NHS/healthcare on 37% and the EU/Europe on 32%. Available online: https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3748/Concern-about-immigration-rises-as-EU-vote-approaches.aspx (accessed April 3 2017).
2 Migration data are taken from the ONS Local Authority Migration Indicators. Data are available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/migrationwithintheuk/datasets/localareamigrationindicatorsunitedkingdom (Accessed 12 February 2016). In contrast to Goodwin and Heath (2016) we focus on all immigration, rather than just immigration from the EU.
3 Leave (Remain) areas are those where the vote for Brexit (Remain) exceed 50 per cent.
4 Higher values indicate that a larger share of the area’s population was comprised on those born outside the UK in 2015, compared with 2005.
5 On average, the non-UK born population was 1.8 times larger in 2015 than it had been in 2005.
6 ‘Net migration to UK rises to 333,000 – second highest on record’, BBC News May 26 2016. Available online: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36382199 (accessed April 3 2017).
7 Details about the BES study can be found at www.britishelectionstudy.com. Fieldwork for wave 8 was conducted between 6th May 2016 and 22nd June 2016 and fieldwork for wave 9 was conducted between 4th June 2016 and 4th July 2016.
8 We use the full weight for wave 7, 8, and 9.
9 Question wording and coding are presented in Table A1 in the appendix. For consistency, the responses from all immigration questions have been recoded such that higher numbers denote more anti-immigration responses.
10 It is important to note that perceptions of changes in levels of immigration are not simply a proxy for anti-immigration sentiment. Even amongst those who expresses very little concern about the effects of immigration, nearly 80 per cent said they thought that levels of immigration were rising.
11 Where possible we measure respondents’ attitudes prior to the EU referendum – i.e., we take our measures from wave 8 of the 2014-2017 BES Internet panel. We do so in order to ensure that our measures of citizens’ attitudes are unbiased by events that occurred after the vote. For example, respondents’ assessments of the economy might be affected by the fall of the British pound immediately following the referendum. Such events might lead respondents to have systemically different views of the economy than they did when they voted in the referendum. Thus, the relationship between assessments of the economy and EU referendum vote choice might look very different if we were to use data from the post-referendum survey (wave 9), and these assessments would be based on information that was not available to respondents at the time they cast their ballot.
12 Continuous variables are fixed to their means, while ordinal variables are fixed to their medians.
13 The two questions measuring respondents’ attitudes on the perceived effects of immigration on Britain’s economy and the culture are measured on a 7-pt scale, where lower number correspond to more negative views. Any respondent who selected ‘1’, ‘2’ or ‘3’ was coded as having negative views on immigration. The question that captures respondents’ views on the effects of immigration on the welfare state is a 5-pt scale. Those who indicated that they ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with the statement ‘Immigrants are a burden on the welfare state’ were coded as having negative views on immigration. The final variable ranges from 0 (the respond did not given an anti-immigration response on any question) to 3 (the response gave anti-immigration responses on all three questions).
14 There are five newspapers in Britain that favour a Eurosceptic narrative – The Express, The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Daily Telegraph and the Times. The classification of Eurosceptic newspapers is taken from Startin (2015). While the EU coverage of these papers is deemed to be predominately Eurosceptic, this classification should not be taken to mean that all the messages from the newspaper are anti-EU.
15 The fieldwork for wave 1 took place between 20th February 2014 and 9th March 2014.
16 Unfortunately, the question about Brexit’s ability to control immigration was not asked in early waves of the panel, and therefore, we were not able to explore changes on this issue.